

U2 AND THE MYTH OF AUTHENTICITY IN ROCK

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I'

Definitions of stylistic categories as inclusive as 'rock' are problematic. In a previous work (Moore 1993) I adopted what might be called an immanent definition, in terms of consistencies of stylistic practices viewed across a span of forty years. Such a definition is adequate for straight musicology, but becomes problematic when discussing rock in a larger cultural context. It appears to me that this larger context necessitates consideration of the issue that is 'authenticity'. This is not to make any gross equation between, for instance, 'rock' and 'authenticity' on the one hand, and 'pop' and 'commerciality' on the other, but is to recognise that rock music is, in part, defined by its constant engagement with the issue. It is this that forms the underlying motivation for this essay. My approach will endeavour to respond to Simon Frith's suggestion that "The most misleading term in cultural theory is ... 'authenticity'. What we should be examining is not how true a piece of music is to something else, but how it sets up the idea of 'truth' in the first place..." (Frith 1987:137).

Following a contextualising preamble, I shall focus on the music of the Irish rock band U2, analysing in particular the song 'With or without you' to discover the ways in which it might be perceived as setting up an idea of the 'authentic'. In this, I believe that the test of my approach should lie in its plausibility rather than its predictability, because the actions of the individual

'wills of participating listeners are heavily implicated. I shall not be broaching the issue of 'authenticity' as it applies to performance practice, although I am not thereby claiming that the two applications of the term are unrelated.

II

In praising the institution of the English folk song revival at the turn of the century, the composer Hubert Parry noted that folk songs had 'no sham, no got-up glitter, and no vulgarity', thereby making plain both his, and the movement's, disdain for the music of the urban working-class (Boyes 1993:26). For Michael Pickering, this marks the conception of a folk aesthetic as equivalent to that of high culture, both being marked by their freedom "from commercial imperatives and influences, and thus authentic and good" (Pickering 1986:205). The opposition between 'authentic' and 'commercial' is not, therefore, a new one. It will be an underlying theme of my discussion that the concepts are, nonetheless, inseparable.

Moving forward to the mid-1950s, we should immediately note some terminological confusion: many US writers refer to 'rock' when dealing with the music of Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley, early Elvis Presley, Eddie Cochran and the like, music which in the UK tends to be labelled unequivocally 'rock'n'roll'. On the other hand, many a band throughout the 1970s and 1980s, using a style far removed from that of their early forebears, would still refer to themselves as a 'rock'n'roll band', from the Rolling Stones to Guns'n'Roses, particularly for the connotations of rebellion which have accrued to the term. Those connotations are predicated upon a construction of authenticity in opposition to established values, a construction which dates from social changes which took place in the USA particularly, in the aftermath of the Second World War.

The US cultural critic Lawrence Grossberg identifies three important features of social life in the USA at this time: the redistribution of wealth, the growth of new communications media and the increasing commercialisation of leisure. All of these encouraged the belief that prosperity was available, or was becoming available, to all (Grossberg 1992). In the UK particularly post-1957, full employment, the increase in levels of consumption, and the development of the welfare state suggested that class divisions were no longer relevant: indeed, the notion that individuals could be identified in terms of their class became largely replaced by the notion that individuals could be identified by their generation: thus the cult of the 'teenager'. Even Dick Hebdige accepts the importance of the development of 'youth culture', although he situates it still "within the broad confines of class experience." (Hebdige 1985:74).

The British cultural critic Dick Bradley suggests that the very coining of the term separated off the teenager from other aspects of life: by naming disaffected youth, and by calling attention to the teenager as a consumer, rather than any particular sort of worker, the establishment (the media, educators, politicians) worked to neutralise the perceived danger. The term was, for Bradley, filled with "discourses of affluence, classlessness, juvenile delinquency, promiscuity [etc.]" (Bradley 1992:84). Because this new teenager was not only different, but separate, his social identity could not be found within established structures, but had to be created anew. Iain Chambers reminds us that the "sense of isolation in which British culture was immersed in the immediate post-war years is often forgotten" and that, for the teenager, the "borrowings by British male youth from the darker America ... offered ... the chance, however fleeting, to break with inherited limits. The hope, the symbolic gamble, that behind the accumulated mirrors of a nullifying common sense there must be something else..." (Chambers 1985:32-3).

The detail of Grossberg's analysis is different, since his focus is the USA, but he reaches the same conclusion. For him, the growth of new structures of technological, economic and social practices tended to prevent many (particularly working-class, adolescent males) from taking part in this new social enterprise, engendering an alienation which was nurtured by the spirit of optimistic liberalism which repressed social and cultural differences. This alienation, of course, was articulated by the emergence of the mind-numbing beat, the lascivious hips and the narcissistic gaze of rock'n'roll. Grossberg identifies this as a key moment: the 'authenticity' which its fans found in this music was defined by its ability to articulate for them a place of belonging, an ability which distinguished it from other cultural forms, those which promised 'mere entertainment', or those belonging to hegemonic groupings. I shall refer to this 'place of belonging' as a 'centredness',² calling attention to the experience that this cultural product offered a certainty, a cultural identity in the face of accelerating social change, in large part because it itself had no apparent history. This accepted lack of history is important for at least two reasons. Firstly, it helps to explain how UK teenagers so readily accepted an imported cultural style in which to invest their emotional capital. Secondly, it emphasises that authenticity was not simply nostalgia in another form, as it so nearly became a decade later with the search, undertaken particularly by British middle-class guitarists, for the 'roots of the blues'. For Bradley, not only did the size of the US entertainment industries enable their colonisation of the British working-class market, but the traditionalism of the British media, from which British teenagers were alienated anyway, meant that 'American' was identified as 'new' and, since we were 'new', as 'ours'.

Grossberg further suggests that this 'authenticity' requires the "ability to articulate private but common desires, feelings and experiences into a shared public language. It demands that the performer have a real relation to his or her audience" (Grossberg 1992:207) in terms of shared, or at least analogous,

experiences, and that the music must both transcend that experience and, in some sense, authenticate it by providing visual clues to its reality (e.g. the facial expressions which validate the emotional work carried on in the voice). All this, it seems to me, is at the heart of the equation of 'authenticity' and 'rock'.

As the development of rock'n'roll proves crucial, I shall illustrate the issue briefly here through one concrete example. Elvis Presley found ready acceptance in the UK as he articulated this new 'centre'. A vital contributory factor in this is the instrumentation he employed: a song like 'Mystery train', for example, replaces the remnants of the Big Band which were used to accompany popular singers of the time with a more accessible, simple rhythm section: bass, guitar and drums in addition to his acoustic guitar. Moreover, not content simply to 'sing' a song, Presley explicitly intervenes, thus carving out a sense of possession. 'Mystery train' is, indeed, a good example, for Presley's developing possession of the song, articulated within the song, can be read as a metaphor for the transition from 'loss' to 'reacquisition' of his 'baby', which is the overt subject matter of the lyrics. These lyrics originated in a song by the Carter family, a group of white gospel-cum-country singers, while the tune comes from blues singer Junior Parker's earlier version of the song.³ What Presley gives us is a conventional twelve-bar blues, articulated at double speed (hence twenty-four bars), where most lines are extended from four to five bars (see example 1). Philip Tagg notes that such uneven periodicity often marks 'folk' music (for example, the country blues), and thus readily suggests concomitant 'authenticity' (Tagg 1991:61). Presley intervenes in the song not only through these extensions, but also by inserting repetitions at the ends of verses two and three, and then throughout the final verse, and especially through shortening the second line of that verse by entering early with a particularly audible guitar attack, taking total control of the song and,

hence, his 'baby'. To anticipate a term I shall employ later, we might say that Presley 'appropriates' the song.

In recent years, the identification of 'authenticity' has become more complex. Robert Walser, in his elucidation of the cultural positions of heavy metal (Walser 1993), has suggested that there are two sorts of 'authenticity'. The first is upheld by critics who have equated technological mediation with artifice (in other words, they have decried the reliance on signal modifiers, ever more powerful means of amplification, and even technical mastery), while the second is upheld by other critics who have equated commercial mediation with ideological compromise (these have decried the reliance on recording contracts with major record companies and the ensuing big distribution deals). Indeed, Walser insists that the most plausible identification of heavy metal with authenticity is in terms of the Romantic vision of the artist as hero, an identification which is frequently overplayed, and thus compromised, by the phenomenon of heavy metal as visual spectacle. This is interesting because, while U2 are not a heavy metal band, their music is highly subject to both technological and commercial mediation. Thus, to take seriously the critical positions discussed by Walser, there should be no space in which U2 might exercise any authenticity.

A more systematic approach to the issue is taken by the musicologist Richard Middleton. In his analysis, any 'culturalist' approach to music must foreground discussion of 'authenticity'. Since all such approaches suggest that a music and its culture are related structurally, he says this "... encourages a stress on the notion of 'authenticity', since ... honesty (truth to cultural experience) becomes the validating criterion of musical value" (Middleton 1990:127). In the mythology of rock, this validating criterion is reinterpreted as 'unmediated expression', by which I mean the communication of emotional content untrammelled by the difficulties inherent in the encoding of meaning within

verbal discourse. Middleton originates the idea of authenticity within constructions of the music of the 'folk', with which I began: here, it becomes a refuge of meaning within the bourgeois Romantic critique of industrial society. Middleton argues that within this construction hide real processes - he focuses on what he calls 'continuity' and 'active use' (which combine as 'tradition') and which suggests that "from the debris of 'authenticity'" (Middleton 1990:139) we may rescue the notion of 'appropriation'. He argues further that, as listeners, we have a variety of avenues open to us in our encounters with styles, stretching from 'appropriation' at one extreme, through the milder 'acceptance', 'toleration' and 'apathy', ultimately to 'rejection'. The music we declare to be 'authentic' is the music we 'appropriate'.

Middleton further notes that those attempting to differentiate folk from popular musics frequently encounter some difficulty, a difficulty founded, I think, in partial analysis of the notion of 'authenticity' itself. The ethnomusicologist Philip Bohlman for example, discussing the relationship between authenticity and change within folk repertoires, suggests: "When the presence of the unauthentic [sic] exhibits imbalance with the authentic, pieces cease to be folk music, crossing the border into popular music instead" (Bohlman 1988:11). Bohlman's understanding of the 'authentic' requires the "consistent representation of the origins of a ...style" (Bohlman 1988:10). Thus, he maintains a different sense of the 'authentic' to that of either Grossberg or Middleton. For Bohlman, authenticity marks an 'uncontamination of practice', what we might call an 'authenticity of the old', while for Grossberg, authenticity marks an 'honesty to experience', an 'authenticity of the new'⁴ or what I am calling a 'centredness'. While Middleton is right to situate early concerns for 'authenticity' within the ideological construction of the folk, within popular music, the authenticity of the old has evolved strongly towards the authenticity of the new.

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This 'truth' has itself been very much the subject of appropriation again in the last decade. Middleton notes that, "in the context of the synthesiser bands prevalent in popular music in the early 1980s, the work of committed guitar-based performers, like Big Country, U2 and Bruce Springsteen, was actively taken to signify commitment to the 'classic' values of rock tradition" (Middleton 1990:90), re-inscribing the 'authenticity of the old'. Grossberg argues that the distinction between 'authentic' and 'entertainment', or 'commercial', underpins the history of popular music over the last forty years, and that such a history proceeds as a pendulum, swinging from one extreme to the other, with much disagreement among fans and critics about which term to apply to which subsequent music. Indeed, one such problematic moment came in the late 1960s, when the term 'rock' was actually first coined. Some practitioners, notably the Beatles, but also the 'underground' and 'progressive' movements, tried to distance themselves from what became 'pop'.⁵ In the work of Eric Clapton, in particular, the search for the musical soul of blues singers like Robert Johnson was propelled by a desire to appropriate the 'unmediated expression' which was thought to be the preserve of the country blues style (Moore 1993:64-5).

Another problematic moment has arisen in the wake of punk: cultural theorist Steve Redhead argues that some constructions of 'authenticity' are no longer made by denial of commercial processes, but consciously, and in celebration, within them (Redhead 1990). Whereas in the late 1960s, authenticity was the preserve of the counter-culture, he argues that in the late 1980s there is no counter-culture, and thus 'authenticity' becomes allied with constructions of 'innocence', and an unreserved embrace of the 'pop' to which it was so antithetical twenty years ago. While I shall return to this in my conclusion, we should note that it is true not only within mainstream styles. Aaron Fox has recently argued that, with respect to country music, authenticity does not

operate as resistance through a marginalised music, but by reworking the paradigms of dominant discourses (Fox 1992:64).

Historically, the band U2 came to the fore on the back of an earlier problematic moment, that of the rise of the punk movement. These days more convincingly read as a 'constructed' movement, the punk aesthetic was nonetheless directly opposed both to the 'commerciality' of mainstream 'pop' and the elitist 'inaccessibility' of 'progressive rock' prevalent at the time. As Middleton suggests, punk's emphasis on guitar work was indeed read as a return to an earlier, authentic reporting of experience, very much in line with the prevailing ideology: "the continuing core of rock ideology is that raw sounds are more authentic than cooked sounds" (Frith 1986:266).⁶ The very title of Stokes' fan biography of U2 makes this plain, in its elision of 'honesty to experience' ('the TRUTH') with the streetwise, inverted snobbery of punk's musical ambitions (just 'three chords'). The phrase is taken from singer Bono's interpolations within their live recording of the classic 'All along the watchtower', which alone would suggest that U2 are willing parties to this interpretation.

It is possible to argue, then, that U2 are inheritors of an ideal of 'authenticity' which, bypassing that argued by Redhead, can be traced back at least to the rock'n'roll era.⁷ I intend to argue that their 'authenticity' can also be interpreted as inscribed in their music, claiming thereby that U2's audience is not simply being deluded by media delineations. But, in order to argue how the music of U2 attracts 'appropriation', I shall not be making use of ethnographic detail. In recent times at least, ethnography of music has seemed to degenerate into the sort of anecdotalism that Cultural Anthropology, as a positivistic science, was originally invented to avoid. Sara Cohen has recently argued for more ethnographic work, acknowledging that it must be based on sound theory (Cohen 1993), but this lack of emphasis has, for me, obscured

the musical potential of her study of rock culture in Liverpool (Cohen 1991),⁸ to name but one widely read example of popular music ethnography. I have recourse instead to the concept of affordance originally introduced by the psychologist James J. Gibson. While forgoing any attempt to chart the sense people say they actually make out of a particular musical experience, this allows me to posit the senses which are there to be made, and also helps avoid the pitfalls of essentialism and interpretational relativism so fashionable in pop writing. This article will attempt to elucidate the value of the concept of affordance; the inevitably complex relationships between it and such concepts as 'relative autonomy' and 'negotiated meaning' will have to await treatment elsewhere.

In his foundational definition, Gibson suggests the following: "When the constant properties of constant objects are perceived (the shape, size, color, texture, composition, motion, animation and position relative to other objects), the observer can go on to detect their affordances. I have coined this word as a substitute for values, a term which carries an old burden of philosophical meaning. I mean simply what things furnish, for good or ill" (Gibson 1966:285). To cite simple examples, we might talk of the object 'fork' affording 'eating', the object 'car' affording 'travel' (or, perhaps, 'status' or even 'manslaughter'), or the object 'river' affording both swimming and drowning, prior to any activity which might take place in the river.⁹ I have previously suggested (Moore 1993) that some music may afford a 'concept of authenticity', but I now think that is a slightly skewed interpretation. With respect to the act of listening, Gibson suggests that a "wave front is specific to the direction of the source ... [it] affords orientation and localization [while a] train of waves is specific to the kind of mechanical disturbance at the source ... [it] affords discrimination and identification" (Gibson 1966:81). To propose a probably unwarranted divorce within our mental life, Gibson's citations tend always to imply involvement and action, rather than passive reflection. This is

why I introduce the concept 'centredness', which implies an active lifting of oneself from an unstable experiential ground and depositing oneself within an experience to be trusted, an experience with centre. The opposition to a postmodern characterisation of 'decentred' experience is intentional, and I shall return to it in my conclusion. My point is that, no matter what an individual listener may bring to the music of U2, and no matter what experience he or she may leave with, that experience will afford 'centredness', among other things. Note that I shall therefore be arguing less that the listener will perceive the music as "authentic" (in the sense we conventionally mean), than that the experience of listening will aid the listener in constructing him- (and rarely her-, in this case) self as authentic.¹⁰ In the case of U2, this affordance is based on specific musical techniques.

III

My focus on U2 begins with the song 'With or without you', the third track on the album *The Joshua Tree* (see example 2).

The first thing to point out is that the song is far removed from any conventional verse/refrain structure. Instead, it falls quite easily into six phases which create a single emotional arc achieving the archetypal pattern arsis-climax-catharsis, with the climax coming in phase four. The coherence of these phases is assured by the harmonic structure: the song is totally open-ended, with an ever-present, nominally ionian I-V-VI-IV ostinato, over which the guitar initially arpeggiates I.¹¹

The first phase consists of twelve introductory bars: the first four utilise a 'dead' (non-resonant) kit, arpeggiated guitar and sustained synthesiser line. In the next eight bars the bass guitar is added, while the electric guitar gains in intensity. The subsequent entry of the voice suggests a 'verse', of eight bars

