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ARTICLE

Alone in the Crowd? Live Music Audiences and Individual Experience

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Abstract

Academic inquiries into the motivations and experiences of live music audiences have typically focused on the communal and social experience of concerts and festivals, whereas the experience of individual concertgoers has been relatively unexplored, especially in popular music contexts. In this article, qualitative interviews and focus groups were undertaken with self-declared progressive rock fans to understand their often-individualised engagement with the live music experience. The findings demonstrate the importance of live music performance and appreciation, attentive listening, and detailed personal evaluation of the musicians and their performances to these fans. The co-presence of others in the live music setting served to legitimise not only these fans' tastes in music but also their individualised way of engaging with, experiencing, and enjoying the concert experience: their preference for the 'text' over 'context'.

Keywords: audiences; authenticity; grounded theory; live music; progressive rock

> ...music has an effect on me. It's not something to put on while you're doing the ironing, while you're cooking your dinner, you know, it has a physical effect on me, and I think that is one of the reasons why I absolutely adore seeing music played live. (Interview with Oliver)

> We were sort of that ilk that went right up to the edge of the stage to watch them very closely to see what they were doing and how they did it. (Interview with Charlie)

Academic inquiries into the motivations and experiences of live music audiences have typically focused on the communal and social experience of concerts and festivals. Simon Frith (2007, p. 14) notes how concerts are 'public celebration(s) of musical commitment, a deeply pleasurable event at which our understanding of ourselves through music is socially recognized', and numerous studies have, alongside other motivational factors, examined notions of togetherness, belonging, and socialisation in a variety of genre and venue settings (Anderton 2019; Brown and Knox 2017; Crompton and McKay 1997; Larsen *et al.* 2010; Pitts and Burland 2013; Tjora 2016; Wilks 2011).

Academic research into popular music concerts is beginning to grow (Baxter-Moore 2016; Guibert and Guibert 2016; Kruger and Saayman 2015; Mulder and Hitters 2021) as part of a broader expansion of the emergent field of live music studies (Anderton and Pisfil 2022), while studies into jazz and classical music events are somewhat more advanced (see Burland

and Pitts 2010; Dobson and Pitts 2011; Pitts and Burland 2013; Radbourne *et al.* 2014; Sloboda and Wise 2016; Wald-Fuhrmann *et al.* 2021). Existing studies of live music audiences for pop, rock, jazz, and classical music draw from fields such as musicology, ethnomusicology, psychology, sociology, and media studies. These studies have principally focused on audience-performer dynamics (see the chapters collected in Tsioulakis and Hytönen-Ng 2017; Reason and Lindelof 2017), real-time subjective physiological responses (Egermann *et al.* 2011, 2013; Silverberg *et al.* 2013; Stevens *et al.* 2014; Stupacher *et al.* 2017; Swarbrick *et al.* 2019), and the use of technologies of production and consumption (such as live streaming, holography, and social media usage) in relation to issues of liveness, authenticity, and engagement (see Bennett 2022, Bennett 2012, 2014, Danielsen and Helseth 2016, Forbes 2022, Lee and Kao 2023, Onderdijk *et al.* 2023, Tsangaris 2020, and Vandenberg and Berghman 2023, and the chapters collected in Jones and Bennett 2015 and Reason and Lindelof 2017). However, our understanding of concert audiences and their experiences and valorisations remains a comparatively underdeveloped area within popular music (Baxter-Moore 2016; Mulder 2023; Pisfil 2020; Riom 2022; Walmsley 2021), and especially within progressive rock.

In this article, we examine fans of progressive rock using a grounded theory methodology that seeks to understand their motivations and experiences in relation to live music concerts. Our findings suggest that there is a significant individual element to their motivations and enjoyment as suggested by the quotes that open this introduction. Rather than preferencing communal and social experience, their enjoyment is predicated on a personal relationship with the music itself during a live performance, rather than their relationships with others in the crowd, suggesting the primacy of the 'text' (the music and its performance) over its 'context' (the concert setting). This accords with our previous research, which found that listening practices with regard to progressive rock albums were also highly individualised (Anderton and Goodge 2024).[1] More broadly, this relates to progressive rock's historical lack of a broad-based subcultural, scene-based, or spectacular grouping (Macan 1997), with its adherents not only being comfortable with but actively preferring what is often a solitary pursuit and interest (Anderton and Goodge 2024; Goodge 2023). Moss *et al.* (2019, p. 8) have noted that 'the construction of the individual concertgoer's experience at pop concerts remains largely unexplored', and we argue that an examination of progressive rock fans offers an interesting way to begin addressing this point. Their relationship with the music and their motivations for concert attendance offer a different perspective from those studies that have previously focused on aspects of socialisation and communal experience in the popular music context. There are some consonances with the work of Pitts and Burland (2013) who suggest that the listening practices of jazz fans at live events consist of both individual and social acts, yet they nevertheless prefer the social element in their conclusions. Our interviewees made it clear that their individual engagement with the music and their valorisations of the experience as a whole remained largely individual, and it is to this individualised experience that we pay attention. However, we acknowledge that there is always a social framework in play. For instance, in Adam Behr *et al.*'s (2016) study of a concert given by the rock band They Might Be Giants, they noted that sharing 'the same physical space as like-minded strangers is an important part of the experience' for concertgoers (p. 12).

This article proceeds by discussing the methodology adopted in the research, before introducing our main findings. These findings explore the importance of the live music experience for the progressive rock fans studied, and the roles that are played by authenticity and the broader social experience.

[1] The research interviews cited in this article were conducted as part of Paul Goodge's PhD thesis at Southampton Solent University, Southampton, UK.

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1. Methodology

Prior live music audience research has adopted a range of methodologies (Kulczynski *et al.* 2016), which encompass pre-event, mid-event, and post-event strategies, or all three in some form (see, e.g., Behr *et al.* 2016; Mulder 2023; Mulder and Hitters 2023). Pre-event strategies typically involve questionnaires or focus groups (Tsangaris 2020), while post-event strategies add follow-up interviews (Pitts and Burland 2013) and social media questionnaires (Bennett 2012). Attempts have also been made to investigate continuous audience responses during specific events (Stevens *et al.* 2014), including smartphone feedback (Mulder 2023) and physiological readings (McAdams *et al.* 2004; Swarbrick *et al.* 2019), or to make use of ethnographic or participant observation strategies (Riom 2022). A weakness of studies that focus on researching specific events is that the response of the audience is largely predicated on their anticipation, experience, and review of the particular event attended, rather than on their more general feelings towards the live music experience as a whole or on the valorisations and motivations that they feel towards live music.[2] One way to move beyond this issue has been to use audience questionnaires posted to online forums (L. Bennett 2014, 2017; Deller 2011), yet this privileges the views of live music audiences who engage with those forums, particularly those who are more vocal in doing so. This leads to a self-selecting group that is not necessarily representative of the audience as a whole and is likely to miss the experiences and beliefs of those who do not engage. This is especially pertinent for the research presented in this article, as few of the people interviewed were active users of online fan forums.

All of the research participants were self-declared progressive rock fans recruited through a snowball technique that led to fifty-one one-on-one semi-structured interviews of at least an hour in length, followed by 6 hour-long focus groups. The sample included forty-five men, five women, and one non-binary, ranging from 23 to 68 years in age, though with a mode of 57 years. With one exception, all were long-term fans who confirmed that they had been listening to the genre for at least 15 years, with a mode of 45 years. This skew towards older, long-term, and male interviewees is unsurprising, given the history of the genre. It first emerged in the late 1960s and saw its primary peak of commercial interest in the mid-1970s, before revivals in the 1980s and late 1990s (*Anderton forthcoming*; Macan 1997). It has long been associated with a primarily male audience that valorises musical technique, attentive listening, and album-oriented music (Anderton and Atton 2020; Goodge 2023; *Hill forthcoming*; Macan 1997), as well as with male musicians who significantly outnumbered female musicians during its 1970s heyday (Hegarty and Halliwell 2000, p. 203). Since the 1980s, there have been successive waves of re-releases, band reunions, archival boxed sets, and heritage tours, cruises, and festivals (Atton 2014; Dowd 2014), which demonstrates the ongoing demand of an ageing audience and the continued success of this form of popular music, termed a 'popular avant-garde' by Bill Martin (1998, p. 2).

A grounded theory approach was adopted due to its emphasis on developing theoretical insights derived from the views expressed by participants, rather than testing hypothetical models upon them. Interviewees were invited to talk about their experiences of progressive rock, with most choosing to discuss the topic of the live experience. The key advantage of this research approach was that it allowed the respondents to focus freely on those aspects of their experiences that they felt were of most importance to them. In such a process, the researcher adopts an 'iterative process of moving back and forth between empirical data and emerging analysis' (Bryant and Charmaz 2007, p. 1). The interviews and focus groups were

[2] Studies that examine the experience of live performance in other fields, such as theatre, sports, media, and fandom have adopted this broader approach to the discussion of the live experience, but it is less common in popular music studies (Barker 2017; Walmsley 2021).

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undertaken between November 2020 and June 2021, which coincided with the COVID-19 lockdowns. This prevented the preferred face-to-face approach from being possible, so an online videoconferencing platform was adopted instead. This pivot to online allowed for a much wider geographical scope, which was especially useful in relation to the focus groups, which were organised to fit availability across relevant time zones. Participants were based in the United Kingdom, the United States, France, Austria, Canada, Argentina, and Australia, though all had a preference for Anglophonic progressive rock. Online platforms can potentially disrupt the rapport between interviewer and interviewee, but it was found that the participants enjoyed their engagement in the experience. In particular, for a type of fandom that is often individualistic in nature, the opportunity to talk openly and at length about the object of their personal passion was highly welcomed (Anderton and Goodge 2024; Goodge 2023). Indeed, in sharp contrast to the 'extreme metal' fans discussed by Keith Kahn-Harris (2007), for example, who resisted 'being drawn into detailed, quasi-psychoanalytic discussions of music, emotion and feeling' (p. 54), the participants were 'very keen to "delve into" their reactions to progressive rock, and [to] share their views on meaning-making' (Goodge 2023, p. 50). The follow-up focus groups allowed participants to discuss their views with each other, with the aim of seeing whether such interactions revealed new ways of thinking about their views. It was found, however, that the discussions underscored rather than contradicted the findings of the one-to-one interviews. Unless otherwise stated, the quotes given in this article derive from the interviews rather than the focus groups.

The research was conducted following the ethical practices and policies of Southampton Solent University, and all participants are anonymised in the findings that follow.

2. Discussion of findings

2.1. Valorisation: The importance of the live concert experience

> [T]here's something wonderful about loving music and hearing it at home and then seeing the people that made that [music] perform it in front of you. (Walter)

Walter went on to refer to its 'primal feeling', while Charlie talked about how the concert experience 'took you out of yourself. Certainly it was really quite an amazing feeling [...], the music entering your body and just playing itself through you'. Such comments echo Nick Prior's (2008) observation (in an article on the electronic music sub-genre of glitch) that '[t]o witness the live performance is to assume privileged access to an originary and un-automated materiality – Benjamin's "aura", if you like, or what Antoine Hennion calls the "primitive scene"' (p. 311).

The primitivity, aura, or quasi-spiritual nature of the live event has been discussed further by Michael Anthony (2012) (in his work on rock fandom) who suggests a contrast between 'the "lightness" of a gig, marked by its brief temporal duration, and its "weight" in the lives of those who have been moved by it' (p. 67). This 'weight' is evident in the following quote from Phil: 'Oh, incredibly important. I can't, I can't tell you how important it is... there is something *different* about the live experience'. This notion of difference was stressed by Phil and other participants for whom the live concert has great meaning. We will return to questions of authenticity, viscerality, and personal meaning in later sections, but here we will unpick some aspects of the live experience that the participants foregrounded in both the interviews and the focus groups.

First, appreciation of the music itself was paramount, and perhaps more so than the musicians producing it. For example, while only one participant explicitly referred to the opportunity to see his 'heroes' in the flesh, the following terms were used by many others, 'mind-blowing', 'awesome', 'incredible', etc., to refer to their experience of seeing, hearing,

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and appreciating the music in live performance. One participant, Walter, specifically discriminated between 'great music' and 'great musicians', and how he attended not necessarily to see the latter but to hear the former. This accords with the typically individualistic approach of progressive rock fans to listening to album recordings, where close attention is paid to the music, and the act of listening is part of their personal identity formation (Goodge 2023). It also accords with common tropes of progressive rock, namely, that it is band-oriented music with relatively little consideration for image and that excellent musicianship is regarded as a given. The focus, therefore, is on the compositions themselves and on the quality of their performance.

In relation to these performance aspects, it is worth noting how the interviewees talked of paying close attention to the way that particular musicians played the music. Long-time Yes guitarist Steve Howe attracted the most comments among participants:

> One or two things he was doing on the guitar were just so, so much more explosive in front of you than listening to the album. (William)

> Most of the time, I'd be watching the guitar, not because I could play it, but just because I could, I knew enough about it to recognize it when it was being done well and I was fascinated by the people doing it and couldn't take my eyes off them. (Fred)

> It was that combination of the volume, actually *seeing them* play, [and] wondering at how good they were playing their instruments. (Frank, original emphasis)

This is our second point of analysis – that the appreciation given to the music and the musicians playing it demonstrated notions of respect and of attention to detail. For instance, George commented that the attention he gave to the performances was an example of paying due respect to the 'craft and musicianship' that goes into making this form of music. Other participants similarly drew attention to the ability of the musicians to replicate the recorded versions of the songs and to improvise on their instruments, while they also noted their own abilities to discern differences and nuances between recorded and live versions, or between different instances of hearing the music live. It is an attention to detail that marks their private listening practices in relation to album recordings and was inwardly focused in a similar way, rather than something that was rooted in discussion with others (see Goodge 2023) – an attitude to knowledge acquisition that has more in common with aficionados and collectors than with social fandom. For instance, Julie commented on how Steve Hackett would vary his solos from gig to gig, and tour to tour, and was actively listening for those differences each time she attended one of his concerts, while Mark spoke of Martin Barre's guitar solos in a similar manner. Others spoke of the intricacies of the music and of the close attention paid to the musicians both in the live concert itself and on live recordings (whether officially released or bootleg recordings of them). For Geoff:

> You hear the music rather than just the sound... you hear the intricacies of the keyboard [laughs], and you have to hear everything that's going on [laughs]; otherwise it's not prog rock, you know. It's the skill of the person that's doing it [...] there's more to it than just noise and vibration. (Geoff)

Barry commented that he would be 'looking at what they're doing to the extent that maybe actually I need to sort of sit down and chill a bit. So that's quite personal, isn't it really?'

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Close and attentive listening is a key element of the respect given by progressive rock fans to the musicians and music that they hear in concert settings:

> The bands would perform [songs] differently in concert, and in another concert, 10 years later, they might perform differently again. Maybe there's been a personnel change, or maybe the song has as well, their playing of it has developed and I just found that progression interesting, and the fact that there were different versions of the same core song. So very often, as I say, I'd collect [live recordings of] those different versions. And there's no particular interest other than, I don't know, hearing how different it could be. (William)

> It was hearing the music but in a slightly different context, so it was a contextual thing rather than just a straightforward experience. *This*, I want to hear *this* in how they're presenting it *now* kind of thing, is the best way I can answer. (Alan, original emphasis)

Similarly, Derek described how bands such as King Crimson would vary both their setlists from gig to gig and their song arrangements, with subtleties and nuances that attracted him. These differences, whether actual or perceived, provided another layer of attraction for participants: Focus Group 1, in particular, described how hearing the live version revealed depths previously not appreciated, and led to them re-visiting those tracks once back in the home environment. This is the interchange between William and Hugh:

> We were fairly close to the front, and actually seeing what was going on, as well as listening to it gave me an extra layer and I went back and listened later and then understood a bit more because I was actually watching Steve Howe and what he was doing. And I was watching the interplay going on, which gave me a bit more depth than I'd had from years of listening to those albums without actually ever having seen Yes before. (William)

> I was lucky enough to see the Wall at Earls Court – Pink Floyd again – and I'd had the album for probably seven or eight months by the time I'd seen the show. But [...] when I went back to listen to it at home [...] the interpretations – and some songs which I didn't really think much of to begin with – having seen the show I thought 'wow' [...] you have a different interpretation of it, once you see it being played live. (Hugh)

The quotes above underscore not just an attentiveness to detail in the live environment, including at times a close scrutiny of how the musicians were performing the music, but also reinforce the agentic aspects suggested by various authors. For instance, in a wide-ranging study, Lars Eckstein (2010), a professor of anglophone literature and cultures, sees live performance as an opportunity to make sense of song lyrics (p. 87), while the music theorist and musician Marilyn Nonken suggests that the 'physical situatedness' of the live performance 'affirms the agency of the audience as active listeners rather than passively hearing subjects' (cited in Klett and Gerber 2014, p. 286). Interviewee Mark compared this dynamic to classical music, and the ability of conductors to draw out 'different textures'. There was also a self-reflexivity within the participants' responses as a whole that recognised that the subtle differences and nuances of performance and meaning are typically only of interest to them on a personal level. The respect given to the music and the varied performances of that music were important to building their own worlds and cultures: what we have elsewhere referred to as 'mea cultura' (my culture): an approach to music appreciation and valorisation that is highly individualised and internalised rather than rooted in social approbation or the

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opinions of others – a further manifestation of the primacy of 'text' over 'context' as noted in the Introduction (Anderton and Goodge 2024; Goodge 2023).

When comparing the above findings to prior studies of concert motivation in popular music, such as Kulczynski *et al.* (2016) and Brown and Knox (2017), we see that the principal motivations and valorisations are focused most clearly on those aspects directly related to the music: uniqueness, novelty, proximity (Brown and Knox 2017), and concert-specific music and aesthetics (Kulczynski *et al.* 2016). Other factors, including nostalgia, escape, and status enhancement, went largely un-commented upon. Pitts and Burland (2013) also noted, with regard to a jazz audience, that close watching of players is an 'individual act of listening' (p. 14), but went on to describe this 'inwardly absorbed' process as being 'reinforced in turn by the presence of other listeners doing the same' (p. 15). Our findings also suggest that, for the progressive rock fans interviewed, the presence of others is less to do with socialisation than that the concert setting and behaviour of the audience gives a form of validation to listening in this 'inwardly absorbed' way; that it is not deemed unusual in progressive rock concerts, but is an acceptable and appropriate response to hearing (and seeing) the music being performed.

2.2. *Authenticity*

Simon Frith (2007) has referred to the live concert environment as being the 'truest form' of expression, whereby all actors can assess how 'real' the musicians' abilities are (p. 8). When talking about musicianship with participants, some interesting comparisons were made regarding progressive rock bands. Phil commented upon Pink Floyd:

> The only way they could eventually recreate stuff they did in the studio was by bringing in, like an army of guitarists and keyboard players and backing singers and orchestras, you know. It was ridiculous. (Phil)

His views were echoed by other participants for whom the ability to reproduce the music without additional assistance was a key aspect of a band's authenticity. In this sense, it was also a key element of 'liveness', which connects to Philips Auslander's (2008) argument that technological interventions of one kind or another, such as the use of backing tapes or pre-programmed synthesiser parts, and vocal autotuning, undermine the authenticity of live performance. This was the typical position of the participants who valorised the authenticity of the musicians as performers in reproducing complex studio-based arrangements in concert.

Following on from the points discussed above, comparisons were often made regarding musical proficiency, both in the compositional and performative roles, vis-à-vis more mainstream popular artists. The live concert can be seen therefore as the ultimate opportunity to demonstrate the truth of this belief, for fans to authenticate the authenticity of the performers in real time. In the process, it allows those fans to validate their own musical tastes and to reinforce their own sense of self as reflected through their discriminations and tastes. As Tim commented:

> [T]hese guys can *really* play. They're not, you know, they're not just turning up and miming, they can actually do it. And that's our credibility as a generation. Well, that's a bit of a statement, but somehow it felt like that. It was validation that these were worth listening to, 'cause these were, you know, these people were competent and were expressing ideas that we wanted to hear. It sounds a bit pompous to be honest, but there we go. (Tim, original emphasis)

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Robert drew an explicit link between ability and authenticity: 'I think what it meant to me was also authenticity [...]. These people were just *really, really good* at what they were doing' (Robert, original emphasis). The Canadian band Rush figured prominently in relation to live performance, with Connor (echoed by Rebecca and Ash) stating the following:

> Neil Peart [drummer of Rush], when I was 15, 16, and one of the big things he said was that they never recorded anything they couldn't reproduce live.... the stuff that interests me is where you put together a complex piece of a complex album and being able to reproduce that thing in front of people. [...] I think there's a real skill in reproduction of the recorded art in the live environment. However, I don't think everyone appreciates that. (Connor)

Klaus commented that the live experience is 'very important 'cause I think it can't be replaced by any technology, because you don't have the same vibe like you would have in a real stage experience. You can feel it differently'.

The use of technology as an aspect of live performance had two primary dimensions: these were the ability to see, and marvel at, the instruments that the musicians played; and also how concert hall technologies provided an opportunity to hear aspects not easily appreciated at home. As Colin said, with regard to Rick Wakeman:

> 97 keyboards all around him. You know it was quite dramatic because somebody who was just used to a record player, or a little tape cassette... You know the technology that you saw on the stage was awesome, you know, Moog synthesizers and all the rest of it, it was 'just far out' as they used to say in those days. And you came away thinking 'great value for money'. (Colin)

Participants also commented upon 'technology' in the sense of the venue's sound system:

> It was so clear, and you could pick out the individual instruments. It sounded different to the record, but at the same time it was still the same as the record, if that makes sense. But the fact you could pick out the individual instruments more clearly, and it was *so loud*, and it went through you. I love that. (Wayne, original emphasis)

The role of tribute bands represented an interesting dynamic in participants' perspectives on authenticity, with some positively embracing them and others feeling a strong antipathy. The following quote exemplifies the latter: 'I have a personal relationship with music, I have a personal relationship with the artists. I don't ever want to see somebody else's re-enactment of that personal relationship' (Phil). For Phil, tribute bands are by their very nature inauthentic; yet other participants were more equivocal in their opinions, viewing the tribute band experience in more dispassionate terms: 'it all constitutes entertainment' (Mark), and 'it's only a tenner, why not' (Colin). Most participants, including Colin, qualified their comments with observations on the expected standard of musicianship, which relates back to notions of authenticity and authentication:

> The musicianship was equal to the originals, they played the music exactly as it was. I mean, one thing a tribute band can't do, is go off piste you know. I mean, otherwise there's no point. So, they have to be equal, and they are, they were equal in musicianship and playing it as it was, you know, and then you can appreciate it. (Colin)

> If you're trying to emulate a band like Rush or, you know, any good prog rock band, you've got to be bloody good, you know, if you're not good, you're gonna get criticized. (David)

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This was a key point for participants, with little latitude given for what they perceived as sub-standard musicianship.[3] For Fred, one moment was sufficient to almost offset the whole experience:

> I remember when we saw The Musical Box [a Genesis tribute band], the keyboard player hadn't quite got that right [the introduction to 'The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway'] and it *really grated.* And it, it's so almost, it's good when it's good. But the problem is when there is a gap, you notice it, and it almost feels a bit painful... I just can't, from those opening bars it just got better, but I remember those opening bars, thinking, 'oh God, that's disappointing'. [...] I can cope when somebody can't quite reproduce a *really difficult* keyboard solo or guitar solo [...] so no complaints. It was just that I remember that bit. It's one of the things I remember about the night. (Fred, original emphasis)

A further aspect of authenticity to discuss here is one that is rarely noted in terms of factors motivating attendance and the enjoyment of live concerts: the physicality and viscerality of the performance itself, as noted earlier by a participant who referred to live music's 'primal feeling':

> It was very visceral and had a looseness to it. I love music when it feels like it's just collapsing over the edge. (Phil)

> The sheer scale, the volume of it all... it was quite an overwhelming experience. (Fred)

This primality is related to the sheer physicality and loudness of the music – a view that may be somewhat at odds with journalistic perceptions of progressive rock as fey and pastoral, as orchestral in its presentation, or as lacking in 'rock'. Indeed, it is more in keeping with Chris Welch's (1983) description of 1970s progressive rock as 'universally loud, fast and flashy and driven by the kind of physical lust that even Heavy Metal has yet to match'. While Welch was undoubtedly overplaying things for the youthful *Kerrang!* magazine audience that he was introducing to progressive rock at that time, it was a description that chimed with the beliefs and comments of the study participants. Clearly, this viscerality appealed to the body as well as the mind, with Ewan observing that the music could inspire bodily movement. For him, the metrical changes that are seen as a definitional part of progressive rock led naturally to bodily participation:

> You would go from 1234 1234 to a 123 123 123 and go back to 1234. Those time signatures, just naturally, organically, kind of influence the way you would move, you know, the way we would jump around or the way we would groove. (Ewan)

For the participants of this study, the focus on the music was the paramount objective; hence, the authenticity of a live performance was judged largely on the ability of the band (whether a tribute act or an original group) to perform the music in real time and in accordance with the audience's expectations of how that music should sound. The live experience consequently excites the participants on many levels, and in many dimensions: the visual, the physical, the musicological, and as a perceived unique event with a personal connection. Ideally, the musical performance should move them, appealing to both the body and the mind, while the demonstration of musicianship engendered through live performance

[3] This point was discussed in both focus groups and individual interviews, and the differing opinions of fans in relation to tribute bands is an interesting area for future study.

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acts both as a validation of the music and of themselves as listeners to that music. This suggests that at least some progressive rock music may outlive the bands that originally made it – that the power of the music and its authentication as meaningful music is rooted primarily in the music itself.[4]

2.3. The social context

Participants' views on the social aspects of concert attendance were of particular interest, given that many previous studies, as noted in the Introduction, have given such precedence to social engagement with others as both a motivating factor and a key element of the concert experience in popular music. There was approximately a two-to-one split in favour of those attending in a group (typically with one or two friends or a partner) and those attending alone. Regardless of whether attending in a group or solo, the dominant view was that there would be minimal, if any, direct engagement with other attendees during the concert itself. Even when attending with friends, the experience was frequently characterised by a solitary engagement with the music:

> I don't think that I interact with any of my friends when I go ... I don't think it's extremely important that my friend is next to me when I'm looking at the live performance. I enjoy the sounds. (Miguel)

> I don't get involved at all, and no, no necessity to really.... If I go to a gig, I keep myself to myself. (Jeremy)

> I like going to gigs with people, but you know, I guess I'm so into the music once the music starts that's kind of it. And it's not that I'm sort of antisocial, it's just that, you know, the music is what I've come to see so, you know, I'm perfectly happy going to a gig on my own and I've been to many gigs on my own. (Oliver)

Focus Group 6 spent some time discussing this aspect, as well as how post-gig interaction and review were occasional. This solitary enjoyment of the music and live experience was echoed by others, who talked about being there 'just in the moment' and oblivious to whoever was around them. If they were aware, then this would likely be for negative reasons, as with Lily who stated that the 'only time I would interact with people is probably to tell them to put the camera down if they're stood in front of me, [laughs] which I do frequently' (Lily).

The essential immateriality of others' presence reinforces the personal, 'mea cultura' (Anderton and Goodge 2024), dimension to meaning-making: that others' appreciation and interpretation of the experience is of minor importance. Nevertheless, there was an acknowledgement that the audience contributed to the atmosphere and experience of the event, and that the co-presence of others who share the same tastes in music and who validate and engage with it in similar ways was important:

> I felt part of a community whilst we were there because the number of people in the auditorium who really knew all of the solos and even their children who were young knew the songs and the solos [...] Although you don't know anyone in the auditorium, you've got this wonderful sense of collective enjoyment and spirit, which adds to the ambience. (Rebecca)

[4] The ramifications of this observation for the future of progressive rock performance are beyond the scope of this article to consider, though Andy Bennett's (2022) broader work on classic rock is recommended here.

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What is particularly noticeable in the participants' views is that there is a fairly low level of interaction even within such an apparently social context as a live concert performance. For most, community interaction was regarded as passive, yet a feeling of community persisted, linked we would argue to the co-presence of fans who share a common goal and a common attitude towards their appreciation of the music – they are there to listen to the music and to give it their utmost attention. Wayne drew a comparison with football crowds, and said how for him:

> Every now and then you know, I turn around and I see everybody was clapping and jumping up and down and it looked great. I wanted to kind of watch the crowd. [...] I do remember that tension between: how much do I turn around, and how much do I watch the band? [...] I do remember going to gigs and wanting, especially you know, when I was kind of 18, 17 [or] 18, wanting to debate these things and wanting to meet people, but I never seemed to meet people at gigs. (Wayne)

Paul spoke about his interest in seeing others' T-shirts (the wearing of band-related merchandise is not uncommon), while William commented on how seeing those shirts engendered a sense of 'fellowship' with others in attendance. However, they and others remarked upon how this would rarely, if ever, lead to direct interactions, although 'nods of recognition' were cited. As Alan said, 'I'm more into the music than actually watching what's going on around me'. These comments can be seen in the context of secret signals, and Fred commented on how there was 'something about the camaraderie, all these other people you knew were in on the secret'. Indeed, the co-presence of others who share similar attitudes and interests is a crucial point here since it helps to validate further the individual fan's own tastes, and the importance that they give to the music in their lives. They share a 'secret', one that is typically centred on the self rather than externally validated, yet they are not alone. As Stephanie Pitts (2014) noted in her work on classical music audiences, 'feeling at home in the performance venue contributes to the pleasure of concert attendance' (pp. 21–2), and while she discusses this in relation to social groupings at classical events, a more diffuse version of this sense of 'being at home', or of being surrounded by like-minded others remains important even for such an individuated fandom as that seen for progressive rock.

One participant who evidenced a somewhat different approach to gig attendance, and in relation to one artist in particular, is Julie. For her, trips to see Steve Hackett, with half a dozen like-minded fans, are vitally important, and a significant amount of pre- and post-event socialising takes place, although attention to the music is paramount once the concert commences. Group T-shirts are worn, although Julie stressed that these are to act as memory markers for their own personal enjoyment, rather than for display purposes. Such activities are the province of a shared and spectacular fandom (see, e.g., Daniel Cavicchi's 1998 work on Bruce Springsteen fans), yet are relatively uncommon among the people interviewed for the research that underpins this article. This contrast reinforces the individualistic form of concert appreciation that we are drawing out – an individualistic rather than collective or social way to appreciate musical performance in a live setting that has not previously been discussed in any great depth with regard to progressive rock, or to popular music concerts more broadly.

3. Conclusion

Rebecca Bennett (2015, p. 11) states that live concerts 'legitimate the musical experience and membership of a community of people who share the same purpose for being in that space', before referring to such elements as 'outfits, hairstyles, perfume choices, make-up, movements', and so on. Yet, appreciation of the music itself is not listed as one of the key

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elements. It is, however, clear from the research presented in this article that musical appreciation is the principal driver for progressive rock fans and that the co-presence of others serves a different purpose – one of legitimating their tastes in music and their way of engaging with, experiencing, and enjoying that music: one that remains largely individual even within a crowd (the primacy of text over context), yet was one of the few avenues for legitimation given their typically individualised form of fandom and listening habits. As Pitts and Burland (2013) found among the jazz audiences they studied, there is comfort in being among 'like-minded listeners', but the meaning of the event is perhaps, for the progressive rock fans interviewed, more properly understood as a validation of the listeners themselves, of their musical tastes and the close, attentive and discriminating listening that is their preference. This is a preference that pays respect to the music itself, to the musicians who have the musical talent to bring that music alive on the stage in an authentic manner, and to the role that the music plays in their personal fandom.

There are, therefore, many parallels with the domestic listening experience that these progressive rock fans engage in with album recordings (see Anderton and Goodge 2024; Goodge 2023). The private nature of their consumption practices is fundamentally similar within the public setting of the concert in that they are actively engaging with the music, in listening to and understanding it better, and making comparisons with other recordings and concerts of the same music that they have knowledge of. This deepens their engagement with music that has significant personal meanings to them as individuals. It stands, however, in contrast to studies of live music attendance that focus primarily on the collective experience, and offers a deeper way of understanding 'what exactly the audience member makes of these hours' of live performance (Radbourne *et al.* 2014), at least with respect to progressive rock as a genre focus. The existing live music research discussed in this article hints at similar experiences in other musical genres (such as jazz and classical) where appreciation of the music in its live performance context is given preference – to see and hear the artist creating the music in real time – and it may be that the kind of individualistic listening reported in this article is recognisable in further genre contexts. This is not to downplay the importance of the social in live concerts, but to acknowledge that there are different ways to appreciate the live experience, and different motivations for attendance – ways that became apparent through the application of a methodological approach that allows participants to talk about what is important to them. Such a grounded theory approach could offer interesting insights for future research into both individualistic and collective live music experiences in a range of music and venue contexts.

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