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ARTICLE

'You Just Haven't Earned It Yet, Baby': Authenticating Popular Music Tribute Shows

Colin James Outhwaite

Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA), Edith Cowan University (ECU), Perth, WA, Australia
Email: colino@our.ecu.edu.au

Abstract

This article forwards an alternative perspective on how authenticity can be constructed through popular music tribute show performances. It adopts Edward Bruner's (1994, *American Anthropologist*, 96, 397–415) categorisation of authenticity in relation to the replication of 'historical sites' in museum exhibitions. It argues that rather than focusing on sonic and historical 'accuracy', tribute musicians strive to curate their history and personal experiences with the music they play to prove their 'authority' as cultural ambassadors. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Perth, Western Australia, and a case study of a UK-based international touring tribute to The Smiths, this article highlights how some tribute musicians may purposely 'put themselves in the music' to conjure a sense of legitimacy and connect with audiences.

Keywords: authenticity; ethnography; music performance; popular music; tribute shows; identity

1. Introduction

Authenticity is a contested term in popular music research (Fornäs 1995; Moore 2002; Shuker 2012; Taylor 1997; Weisethaunet and Lindberg 2010). Many of the ideological frameworks that analyse authenticity in popular music would automatically deem authenticity as being inherently void in tribute or cover-based music (Groce 1989; Homan 2006a; Meyers 2011; Shuker 2012), yet it is frequently employed throughout tribute music scholarly discourse and in day-to-day conversations among its practitioners. Authenticity in tribute music performance is often stated as a measure of how closely a band imitates a chosen artist, that is, the sonic and historical elements that comprise the 'essence' of the original (Bennett 2006, p. 21; see also Homan 2006c, p. 46; Meyers 2011, p. 5). Such elements, however, can differ in meaning from one individual to the next, making critical assessments highly subjective. Indeed, John Paul Meyers (2011, p. 73) asserts that while tribute artists are all committed to the 'faithful' representation of musical history, they can 'arrive at this goal in different ways'. To address these ambiguities and highlight an area of the authenticity spectrum that is often overlooked, this article adopts Edward Bruner's (1994) categorisation of authenticity, specifically in relation to the replication of

Current address: Zwaansteeg 11G, 3511VG Utrecht, The Netherlands.

'historical sites' in museum exhibitions. For both Bruner and Meyers (2015), a historical site entails a modern replication of an aspect of history that enables individuals to engage with and construct cultural meaning. Rather than focusing on the imitation of sonic and historical attributes, the portrayal of 'authority' appears in some cases to be a prevalent aspect of tribute music performers/performances. As representatives of history, not only do tribute musicians strive to curate popular musical history, but also – and more importantly – many may aim to curate their history, that is, their personal experiences. Such a practice highlights how the identities of tribute performers are intrinsically intermeshed with the music they play. The 'site' in question is the nexus between performer and text, as opposed to the text itself.

To illustrate how tribute musicians interweave personal and band narratives with(in) the music they play, this article uses The Smyths – a UK-based tribute to the fabled 1980s indie pop band, The Smiths – as a case study. It draws on an ethnographic analysis of a specific performance in Perth, Western Australia, in 2020, as well as an online teleconference interview with lead singer, Graham Sampson.[1] This is supplemented with a review of selected materials from the band's website (fan mail) and an interview between Graham and revered UK music journalist, Paul Morley.[2] The decision to employ a case study approach to investigate the thoughts and feelings of a specific tribute act or musician aims to provide a focused analysis of the complex and multifaceted nature of authenticity construction in a socio-musical context. Rather than examining a broad spectrum of tribute music performance approaches, this study narrows its focus to a particular approach and attitude that, while occasionally hinted at in the existing literature, has received limited direct attention.[3] Section 2 provides theoretical context with an overview of the scholarly landscape pertaining to authenticity and tribute music performance. Section 3 focuses on Graham and The Smyths and emphasises how authenticity is generated socially, a collaborative process between performer and audience, initiated by the performance and recognition of shared taste and experience.

2. Authenticity and tribute music performance

To understand how authenticity is constructed in tribute music performance, it is necessary to look beyond the term's use in popular music discourse to free it of its theoretical constrictions and contextual bias. The contested nature of the term's usage throughout music history, as well as the apparent need for scholars to define it for use in popular music, is perhaps a substantiation of its malleability. It is for this reason that Bruner (1994, p. 408) suggests that authenticity should be viewed 'as a struggle, a social process, in which competing interests argue for their own interpretation of history'. Allan Moore (2002, p. 210) extends this viewpoint, stating that authenticity is 'a matter of interpretation which is made and fought for from within a cultural and, thus, historicised position'. Hence, while the manner in which scholars apply and define the term has shifted and changed to suit different musical idioms, authenticity is generally understood to be 'ascribed' rather

[1] While this article does not explicitly draw on or reference other materials from my PhD research, the findings are supported by a broader study described within the thesis titled, 'Performing Britishness: Identity and popular music tribute shows in Perth, Western Australia'.

[2] Morley (b. 1957) is an English music journalist, cultural critic, and writer who gained popularity working for New Musical Express (NME) in the late 1970s/early 1980s. His interview with Graham for *The Guardian Music* in 2011 grapples with both the cynical and positive perspectives of tribute music in a bid to understand its role in popular music and society.

[3] The primary limitation of this approach is that it centres on a single act dedicated to tributing one specific artist and style of music. However, in refining the scope in this way, the study establishes a foundation for future tribute artist research spanning a wider range of artists, styles, and eras.

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than 'inscribed' (Moore 2002, p. 210), and is dependent on 'who "we" are' (Rubidge 1996, p. 219).

Bruner's (1994) discussion concerning how modern-day museums strive to authentically replicate 'historical sites' is not only a significant addition to discussions surrounding authenticity but also is pertinent to music performance on several levels. Certainly, while the methods and delineations are not directly linked, they have a substantial bearing upon tribute music, particularly considering Meyers' (2015, p. 70) assertion that tribute shows are also historical 'sites' to be interpreted, and which are loaded with 'historical weight and depth'. Bruner (1994, pp. 399–401) outlines four 'meanings' of authenticity: 'verisimilitude' (how convincing the reproduction is), 'genuineness' (historical accuracy), 'originality', and 'authority' or 'who has the right to tell the story of the site' (Bruner 1994, p. 400). This four-pronged approach to categorising the meaning and means of affirming authenticity in historical replication provides a valuable framework in which to consider tribute music performance. It not only sheds light on the multiple criteria that can constitute an interpretation of authenticity but also highlights the previously ambiguous nature of the term's use in tribute music thus far, where many of the categorisations mentioned above are applied interchangeably or in place of authenticity.[4]

3. Authority

The success of a tribute show depends on the relationship between audience and performer, and it is for this reason that the notion of 'authority' is of the utmost concern to this research. While this idea is presented throughout tribute music literature, it is regarded generally as a by-product of a tribute band's commitment to historical and musical knowledge, expressed chiefly through sonic accuracy. Shane Homan (2006b, p. 70) draws on the work of John Fiske (1992, p. 42) to state that tribute musicians and audience members are 'excessive readers' who require 'an intimate knowledge of the songs to satisfy their own and audiences' satisfaction about the fidelity of the copy'. In this sense, historical accuracy and the emphasis on subtle sonic or historical details give validity to the performers and serve to authenticate them as worthy curators of the historical site. However, Bruner (1994, p. 400) asserts that it is important to consider the social implications of such a process. He says, 'The more fundamental question to ask here is not if an object or site is authentic, but rather who has the authority to authenticate'. The acquisition and ascription of authority is an ongoing and generative process that is tethered to the social world and requires musicians to engage in 'dialogic interplay' with the audience (Bruner 1994, p. 403).

Individual perceptions and representations of sonic details in tribute music are highly subjective. Such details hinge on the limitations, tastes, and social agenda of *who* is doing the perceiving and representing.[5] Therefore, each band, whether subconsciously or not, to some extent, performs its own version of history (see Bennett 2006). Yet, as Homan (2006c, p. 45) exemplifies, many scholars of tribute music consider that 'the tribute performance, at its

[4] Bruner's (1994) case study focuses on the historical site of New Salem, Illinois, the birthplace of Abraham Lincoln. Compared with the current study, it presents a much more contested space in terms of how authenticity is socially constructed. This is due to a greater temporal distance, as well as institutional and governmental influence, commercial and tourism interests, and the need to manage public expectations and social narratives. Bruner's framework is therefore adopted here to highlight various constituents of authenticity that may have been overlooked, and to emphasise how new meanings are formed through social interaction.

[5] See, for example, Stephen Cottrell (2004) who uses the term, 'conceptualising sound' to refer to the ways in which an individual perceives, internalises, and articulates musical sounds. How an individual conceptualises particular sounds is a product of personal and vicarious social experiences, framed by their constantly evolving core values, musical priorities, abilities, knowledge, limitations, and social agenda (Cottrell 2004, p. 48).

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centre, is not derived from subjectivity, but objectivity (in search of the perfect copy). The individual tribute musician's personal and musical history collapses within the broader historical project'. Drawing on Moore (2002, p. 215), Homan concludes that 'the tribute cannot state "this is what it's like to be me"'. In contrast, this article suggests that a tribute musician's personal history is enmeshed intrinsically with the music they play, and thus the outcome of the music's (re)construction is inherently influenced and limited by everyone involved. While the intention of some tribute bands is doubtless to 'erase the individual in favour of a faceless franchise' (Homan 2006b, p. 45), some practitioners feel there is value in accentuating a sense of individuality.[6]

This is not to suggest that the aforementioned scholars ignore or are unaware of the influence of personal identity and experience; rather, it tends to be hinted at indirectly and not explored in detail. Andy Bennett (2006, p. 28) alludes to the benefits of building rapport with audiences through self-deprecating humour and local knowledge. Similarly, Georgina Gregory (2013) explores how female hard rock tribute bands challenge gender expectations and subvert the genre's entrenched masculinist tropes. By performing the repertoire of male artists, female tribute musicians enable audiences to connect with a sense of power and agency through resistance to dominant cultural stereotypes. In this way, individuality and identity generate new and alternative meanings that are both socially expressive and collectively binding. Chris Richards (2006, p. 116) draws similar conclusions when discussing The Hamsters, a British middle-aged tribute to Jimi Hendrix. He notes that the band reconfigures Hendrix's music within a British rock tradition, asserting their own 'musical authenticity'. By treating the music as a '"source" rather than as the object of pastiche', they avoid 'degrading' it, and celebrate its relevance in a more culturally viable manner suited to both performer and audience (Richards 2006, p. 116). Straying from historical accuracy does not 'de-authenticate' the band but instead imbues them with a context-specific sense of 'honesty', 'sincerity', and 'integrity', terms closely linked to the notion of authenticity (Moore 2002, p. 209). Here, authenticity is being *authentic to oneself* rather than to the musical text.

The studies mentioned above highlight that many tribute musicians often, strategically, or otherwise, locate themselves in relation to the music to resonate with the audience. Instead of solely seeking to project an accurate impression of musical history, some tribute musicians strive to project their own history and relationship with the music to legitimise themselves as 'truthful' ambassadors of it. Authority, or 'who has the right to tell the story of the site' (Bruner 1994, p. 400), is therefore both a constituent and expression of authenticity. To contextualise the discussion so far, the following ethnographic vignette describes a Smyths performance in Perth, after which I explore the myriad ways in which Graham and The Smyths purposely put themselves *in* the music.

4. 28 February 2020, The Smyths, Bar1, Hillary's Boat Harbour

My first physical engagement with The Smyths was on a Friday night in February 2020, at the Bar1 nightclub in Hillary's Boat Harbour that would prove to be the band's last gig until the

[6] These approaches are, of course, not strictly binary nor mutually exclusive. Indeed, much like Thomas Turino's (2004, p. 9) assertions of how individuals have the 'ability to manipulate signs of identity in daily life and in art', the ways in which tribute musicians approach the construction of a show 'can vary and shift along a foreground-background continuum' depending on context and social agenda. The range and approaches to the tribute music performative medium are also broad, nuanced, and diverse, with some musicians perhaps occupying multiple points of the imitative continuum (Gregory 2012; Homan 2006a; Meyers 2015). However, rather than delving into these complexities here, it is necessary to focus solely on the construction and transmission of authority to offer a concise contribution to the overall scholarly understanding of tribute show performance and authenticity.

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United Kingdom's temporary easing of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions 9 months later in November.[7,8] To some extent, the gig signified my first 'real' tribute band experience. I had played in a Stone Roses tribute band named The Stoned Posers for nearly 4 years until that point and witnessed many local or Perth-based tribute performances. Yet, none of these experiences seemed to match the calibre that one would expect from a tribute band that tours internationally. For me – and, I imagine, for many people intrigued about the tribute phenomena and its socio-musical implications – it prompted questions such as: 'How "good" does a tribute band need to be to tour or gain recognition on an international level?' and 'What does "good" mean in this context?' Moreover, the very idea of a touring tribute band signified another level of tribute membership, suggesting that the members are fully committed to one band and tour relentlessly as a means of financial income. This contrasts with many of the tribute bands I had witnessed and played alongside in Perth, who function primarily as social outlets that are prioritised for the recreational benefits of band members. With this performance occurring prior to the commencement of my fieldwork into tribute shows, my instinctual preconception – not so much of The Smyths in particular, but of the *idea* of a touring tribute band – aligned with many of the more cynical scholarly assessments. It is difficult not to ignore notions of 'insincerity' and 'deception' that are assumedly involved in a band making a living out of someone else's music. Nevertheless, due to being a huge Smiths fan since my teenage years, the convenient geographical proximity of the gig, my general curiosity about tribute music, and my interest from the standpoint of being involved in a tribute band, I attended the gig with great anticipation.

The band members came out on stage, swaggering to the raucous drum rhythm of 'The Queen Is Dead' (1986) filling the room. It was instantly clear that the act was experienced and musically accomplished. However, any initial enjoyment I was reaping from the live sound was underpinned by an unnerving sensation that I could not quite put into words. In hindsight, and to put it bluntly, the lead singer, Graham, unnerved me. Loping around the stage with his shirt undone, dyed quiff and thick-rimmed glasses, Graham looked, moved, and sounded *too* much like Morrisey, the iconic lead singer of the band to which I had spent hours listening in my bedroom while reading guitar magazines as a teenager.[9] Sonically speaking, I refrain here from attesting that the band sounded 'just like the real thing' as I have never experienced the original act in a live setting. Nonetheless, I will say unreservedly that the band sounded 'convincing' and, more importantly, they sounded like a good live band. Considering how accurately Graham was 'performing' Morrissey, and how uncomfortably convincing he was as the frontman of one of my favourite musical acts, I admit that the whole situation was somewhat unsettling.

But this was not the case for the whole performance. Graham proved to be an accomplished frontman, with a charismatic personality that shone through the act, inspiring a sense of comfort and relatability in the audience. As the gig progressed, Graham gave glimpses into 'himself' and his own life. For example, he mentioned his wife of Irish origin and the torment he receives from her for the United Kingdom's abandonment of the

[7] Hillary's is located among the northern coastal suburbs (around 20 km north of Perth), which in recent years have gained a reputation for harbouring a large number of British expats (Moulton 2012), no doubt attracted to the area for its proximity to Perth's pristine beaches and relaxed and family-orientated lifestyle.

[8] Western Australia's COVID-19 landscape was particularly unique compared to other states in Australia and indeed around the globe. Through the restriction of interstate and international travel, WA dramatically reduced the spread and impact of the virus, meaning that its residents were relatively free of limitations within the state.

[9] In retrospect, my experience was in some ways reminiscent of Sigmund Freud's (1919) concept of the 'uncanny'. Furthermore, while outside the scope of this article, Masahiro Mori's (1970) notion of 'uncanny valley' could provide further theoretical grounds for examining the social construction of authenticity in tribute shows and the reciprocal dialogue between performer and audience.

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European Union due to Brexit. He then alluded to how the very man he was portraying is a staunch 'Brexiteer', saying, 'it's probably best if we all ignore Morrisey's more recent political statements'.[10] Such stories and insights ultimately served to distance Graham and his fellow performers from the band they were tributing and drew light to himself as an individual musician and human being. As the audience got to know *him*, and as we were gradually made aware that the band members were on an equal footing with the audience in terms of fandom, any sense of discomfort and awkwardness slid away. It was almost the reversal of how a tribute show normally unfolds: rather than the tribute musician intermittently and strategically providing cues and links to feed the audience's desire and align with their musical knowledge and perception of history, Graham seemed to work backwards in purposely displaying more and more of himself and his situation in relation *to* the music. As I later found out, Graham's approach to performance centres around a process in which he puts himself into the music, or perhaps more fittingly, is unable to remove himself because his identity is inseparably informed and constituted by it.

5. 'More Than a Tribute – The Smiths Experience'

My first correspondence with Graham took place a year after my attendance at The Smyths' gig at Bar1 in February 2020. He was helpful in organising the meeting, an experience I did not share with all the non-Perth-based tribute bands that I reached out to during my research. I was also thankful that Graham is a self-assured and experienced speaker. He not only employs delicate and sophisticated prose but constructs his thoughts logically, concisely, and imaginatively. I imagine this ability to be almost a social necessity for someone who is the frontman of a successful tribute to a well-respected band such as The Smiths, especially if that band has existed for over 17 years (not to mention the idiosyncratically barbed personality traits of Morrissey that one would assumedly be expected to acquire). Indeed, Graham's arduous interview with Morley (2011) is possibly a substantiation of the grit and quick wittedness required of a person in his situation. While he stated that many people felt he was unfairly grilled by Morley in the interview, Graham did not hold the same view and saw Morley's probing as a blunt exemplification of society's general cynicism towards tribute music. Nonetheless, Graham rose to the challenge with a humble demeanour and seemed to relish the opportunity to portray an alternative viewpoint of the role of tribute musicians in popular culture. In fact, afterwards, he was rather positive about the whole experience, and in metaphorically taking on a temporary role as a union representative for tribute musicians worldwide, felt he had somewhat 'fended him off'.

To demonstrate how Graham and The Smyths highlight their relationship to the music they perform to conjure a sense of authority, it is necessary to briefly delve into their history. Like many tribute bands, yet contrary to how they are often recognised in scholarly debate, The Smyths grew out of individual original projects, and, even today, the band functions alongside projects that are, as Graham puts it, 'thriving and very active'. Graham states that this facet of the band's history and identity is important because it signifies why the band members are involved in the music industry in the first place. Graham says, 'We don't do the tribute band because that's all we can do, we do the tribute band because we choose to, because it's our passion'. Rather than the tribute enterprise being reserved for those musicians who lack creativity or functioning as a 'musical apprenticeship' to develop skills for use within original projects (Morrow 2006, p. 191), the members of The Smyths

[10] Anyone familiar with The Smiths would understand that Morrisey is a unique figure in many regards – not only his vocal style and mannerisms but also his political bent, which has perplexingly seen him go from a leftist torchbearer of neglected youths in the late 1980s to an outspoken rightist provocateur in more recent times (Jonze 2019).

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choose tribute music performance out of their personal investment and interest in the music of The Smiths.

In divulging the band's roots, however, Graham almost concedes that they had, to some degree, fallen back on tribute music. Yet, rather than framing this in a light that could suggest a lack of creativity or musical aptitude, Graham emphasises how their circumstances primed the band for undertaking such a musical task. He states, 'We found ourselves in our earlier thirties with all this energy and nowhere to go with it. We wanted to be a really great live band with all the swagger and swerve of an [original] indie band'. Consequently, the tribute show platform gave the band a medium to harness and express their unrequited musical desires. But rather than sounding like a 'last resort', it is more like a calling. Graham's comments allude to how the band's musicality, musicianship, and musical experiences are inextricably tied to their performative style, as opposed to the common understanding that tribute and cover-based opportunities serve as means to acquire such musical traits for more purposeful use in original projects.

Being emotionally invested in a particular music artist or style to the extent of wanting to form a tribute band entails taking on considerable responsibility. Graham discusses how, as a fan of the music, a performer not only works to convince the audience that he is worthy of the position he has assigned to himself, but he is also trying to meet the audience's standards as an avid listener. Such a sense of responsibility is further intensified when the tribute in question focuses on a band with a short yet revered musical career, with Graham acknowledging that The Smiths are 'almost viewed in a quasi-religious way'. Indeed, Morley (2011) furthers this, questioning if tributing a band like The Smiths contradicts the original 'spirit' of the band and the movement. He states, 'The spirit was originality, newness, creating something new out of the past, [or] interacting with the past but wondering what next. Whereas to an extent you're interacting with the past full stop'. The perception of a band with such a reputation for originality and 'newness' is understandably a theoretical hurdle for a tribute act. Yet, as fans of the music, Graham feels they are appropriately positioned and therefore sympathetic to the demanding nature of Smiths fans:

> We knew [the audience] would not tolerate a pantomime version. I think that's why we were so po-faced. Because we were being The Smiths, we had to be authentic and genuine to pass the test: to pass the test of cynicism. I think that's what shaped our philosophy of the band. We're a tribute band to the Smiths because we love The Smiths. We want to give to [our audiences] something that we would want to be given to us. Because we knew what the expectations were, it gave us seriousness and a genuine responsibility, and an understanding of that combined with a light touch and a bit of wry humour which is kind of like Morrissey himself. He can be earnestly serious about suicide and loneliness but in the next minute can sing 'Some Girls Are Bigger Than Others'.

While there is a technical and musical standard to be upheld in tribute music, there is a certain fallibility of focusing only on the text itself. It is the acquired knowledge through experiencing the original band's music which Graham emphasises, exemplified by a perceived understanding of Morrissey's personality. The band embraced a certain responsibility, motivated by and reliant upon a genuine connection to and love of the band and the music. Graham's use of the terms 'authentic' and 'genuine' in this context thus appears to serve a dual function: convey the music accurately yet do so with a sincere and truthful understanding and emotional investment in the band and the music.

The duty of being stylistically accurate or convincing while also striving to project musical and personal genuineness is apparently a fine line in tribute music performance.

Graham explains the potential pitfalls that tribute musicians face in such an undertaking. He states that:

> There's plenty of videos of Harry Hill pretending to be Morrissey, and that is the trap you can fall in.[11] Morrissey would be quite easy to lampoon. Morrissey is very funny, he makes me laugh out loud, he is a great comedian; it would be wrong to ape and mimic too much on stage. And because I grew up as a Smiths fan and was affected by them, being Morrissey on stage is really just an extension of my own personality anyway.

Graham's affiliation with the artist he tributes displays a sincere and empathetical nature. Rather than striving for accuracy at the risk of performing a parody or ridiculing the artist, he expresses a desire for his audience to experience and value the artist as he does.

In fact, it is how Graham performs Morrissey that exudes a certain amount of genuineness. Graham does not see the performance of Morrisey as a role but as a facet of his identity, influenced and generated through real-life experiences with the music. Or, in other words, an introspective process rather than striving to 'play a role'. Indeed, a problematic element of being true to one's own character is that it can at times contradict the historical 'accuracy' of the performance. Graham said:

> Sometimes I have to check myself because Morrissey wouldn't do that, or maybe I'm acting a bit like Jarvis Cocker and I start being a sort of flamboyant dandy on stage, and I vacillate between Morrissey and Jarvis Cocker. But I think that's naturally me anyway.

Here, different meanings of authenticity work against one another to constitute an overall impression of authenticity. Although his performance may waver in accuracy, Graham is ultimately being true to himself and his own character traits. This is reminiscent of Richards' (2006) findings, in that by re-configuring the performance through his own personality, Graham is expressing a more sincere performance, being authentic to himself.

Despite the acknowledgement that his performance can at times be inaccurate, Graham endorses his approach and connection to the music by contrasting it against performers who do not share the same attachment to the music. Graham alludes to how he has generated a sense of authority due to his personal experiences:

> We went to the gigs, bought the CDs the day they came out, lived through the band's existence, and absorbed it as teenagers. But for people who didn't, they would have to study lots of videos and that would give you more of a kind of mannered way, you would be a hostage to a pose. I have freedom because I sort of adopted Morrissey through osmosis, more organically.

Graham views his performance as an extension of his personality. He feels his identity and life experiences are intermeshed with the original band to the extent that he is inseparable from it. His personal experiences, therefore, inform an organic approach that other performers may not be afforded, meaning that they can only rely on accuracy alone, which may appear contrived or insincere. Rather than striving strategically to play a role, Graham's life experiences enable his engrained attachment to shine through his personality.

When tribute artists have only technical proficiency and musical accuracy to hand, they may struggle to connect with audiences and reap the necessary authority needed to fulfil a

[11] The video that Graham is alluding to here is the 1999 celebrity special 'Stars in Their Eyes', in which Hill performed 'This Charming Man' (1984) by The Smiths.

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performance role. Graham alludes to this lack of authority in relation to another, now defunct, Smiths tribute band in the United Kingdom, appropriately named, Other Smiths. He says, 'A friend of ours went to one of their gigs and said that they didn't deserve that audience'. The derision of musical competition should of course not be viewed as impartial observations, especially as musicians and bands are ultimately striving continually to legitimise their own positions and practices. Nonetheless, this notion of 'deserving' an audience is a strong indicator of Graham's stance on the significance of authority in tribute music performance. Graham attributes this to the very fact that the Other Smiths lack the vital relationship with the music, which he believes is an imperative conduit for connecting with audiences. He adds, 'I later found out that the leader of the band wasn't even a Smiths fan, but a promoter. So, we were everything that band wasn't, we weren't doing a tribute for the sake of a tribute'. It is difficult not to sympathise with Graham and perceive a certain amount of insincerity in tribute musicians playing music they are not personally invested in. Considering that a tribute show is 'exceptional in having fans on both sides of the stage' (Homan 2006b, p. 78; see also Gregory 2012, p. 138), it is often assumed that the ones on stage should have the necessary requirements to have earned that privilege, and therefore be perceived as an authoritative and authentic voice of the original band and their music.

The success of a tribute show evidently functions on performers and audience members occupying a shared space in terms of taste, personal experience, and musical and cultural understanding. While authority is more commonly assumed to be conjured through 'mastery and deep knowledge of the music genre (and its boundaries)' (Homan 2006a, p. 3), it can also be signified by perceived personal affiliation with the music. In this sense, imitating the original text too closely suggests an element of 'sterility' (Morley 2011) as opposed to having 'life' or, to put it another way, not invested with 'emotion' or 'feel'. Homan (2006b, p. 74) echoes this sentiment, stating how focusing on accuracy and technical proficiency may lead to some performances being considered 'too good'. Graham believes that audiences in fact prioritise the tribute band 'putting themselves in the music'. 'When I've heard about other Smiths tributes, people have said, "It was a little bit too much like the record, there wasn't enough life"'. However, Graham states that a tribute band must be authorised by audiences to deliver the performance in this way:

> I'm glad people have allowed us to put ourselves into [the shows], they're almost saying they want us to do that and not just come out and be a lampoon. It's really heartwarming when people say that we tick all the boxes but acknowledge that you're also *you* as well.

One cannot ignore the complexity of this process, where authority is simultaneously authenticated by a genuine performance, yet being genuine is only affirmed and enabled by the audience 'allowing' it to happen. Bruner (1994), pp. 402–3) attests that 'the professional's and the public's view are not independent, for each shape and is shaped by the other, in dialogic interplay'. What is considered authentic, or who is given authority, is not only generated through social interaction but, more significantly, is generated collaboratively between fans of the music, highlighting the participatory role of audiences.[12]

Much of what has been said until now may appear trivial without any hard data to back up Graham's self-validating remarks or, equally, my own subjective assumptions about 'what audiences desire'. However, having studied the fan testimonials available through The

[12] The broader PhD thesis (of which this case study forms a small aspect) specifically emphasises the participatory role of audience members at tribute show events. It looks at the myriad ways in which audiences contribute to the construction and performance of a socially expressive liminal identity group (see, e.g., Gregory 2012; Turino 2008; Turner 1979).

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Smyths' website, it is clear that the processes highlighted above can have considerable weight in the transmission of authority. There is not enough space to list or dissect the many messages from adoring fans of the band and stories of their experiences. So, below I transcribe a snippet of a message from one fan conveniently placed at the top of the list, which I believe accurately captures what I have spoken about throughout most of this section:

> You did something incredible and moving on Friday night. You took the music I have loved for 32 years and breathed new life into it, allowing me to experience it in a whole new, vital way. Your performance wasn't about nostalgia. It was about the here and now, about dancing my legs down to the knees with some of the people I love most in the world. It was about being totally lost in the power of great songs brought so vividly to life. Of course, you achieved this through being incredibly accomplished technically – all four of you. That is just the springboard though. Your mastery of the songs allows you to make the leap into creating something truly special in a live context. Your performance of 'I Know It's Over' exemplified this. In a canon of great Smiths recordings, to me the live rendition of this song on the 'Rank' album remains one of the most powerful and emotionally charged of all Smiths songs. Big boots to fill! You took this song on and made it your own – you owned its power for yourselves. This wasn't watching a tribute act. It was witnessing a great song meeting a great performance to create something truly memorable. (The Smyths n.d.)

Apparent throughout the above excerpt is the strong emotional attachment that the fan ascribes to the original act. Yet, rather than reaping gratification on a purely nostalgic premise, the main pleasure in the tribute experience was the creation of a 'new memory'. It is not so much their connection to the past and their relationship with the music but more how experiencing the music again has enabled it to generate 'new meaning' (Bruner 1994, p. 409). Through social activity, the music is (re)weaved into the fabric of the social landscape, not only serving to perpetuate the band's ties to the music but also binding them with the audience in the process.[13]

The transaction of authority is perhaps better understood here as an act of reciprocal exchange. While tribute musicians must be authenticated as authoritative voices of original acts, for the bestowal of authority to be legitimate, it must come from a place of authority itself. In the example above, the audience member brings to light and perform their connection to the music, generating the required sense of authority to deem The Smyths' tribute performance as authentic. The fan intimates this by expressing their deep knowledge of specific albums and recordings, their personal and emotional affiliations with certain songs, and their self-attributed ability to recognise musical mastery. This dynamic is reflective of Fiske's (1992) concept of 'enunciative productivity', where audiences actively create meaning through their interpretations and expressions, enabling them to 'interact meaningfully with peers' (Gregory 2012, p. 145). It includes singing, wearing band T-shirts or culturally specific clothing, dancing in a stylistically correct manner, and so on. But ultimately, this process is grounded in the expression and recognition of shared understandings and experiences with the music and its historical context (Fiske 1992, p. 43). By authenticating The Smyths as a genuine and memorable experience in a public manner, the

[13] This is reminiscent of Michael Jackson's (2002, p. 16) use of the term, 'storytelling', a process that enables individuals to reweave past experiences into social existence so as to restructure and ascribe them with symbolic significance. Storytelling is essentially a means for making sense of our 'journey' and conjuring a sense of rootedness by converting private experiences into public ones and therefore becoming connected to a larger social whole (see also Arendt 1958; Connerton 1989).

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fans are not only affirming the performance but also validating their own authority and connection to the music. Inadvertently or otherwise, they are actively writing themselves into the overarching socio-musical narrative.

Both the context of a performance and the approaches of a performer have a significant bearing on how meaning is constructed by audiences (Gregory 2012, p. 135). But this notion is also significant for the band members themselves, because even though they are performing the same songs on a regular basis, the musical texts can still develop new meaning. Indeed, an obvious example of this is the song, 'There is a Light That Never Goes Out' (1986), which acquired added significance after being scribed onto pavements around St. Anne's Square in Manchester, United Kingdom, in mourning of those killed or affected by the Manchester arena bombings in 2017 (Fitzgerald 2017). Yet, despite having performed the music of The Smiths on a regular basis since 2003, Graham spoke of how the songs can garner new meaning on a personal level:

> There'll be a song that you play countless times and then one night you play it and it catches fire and it's like hearing it for the first time, and you never appreciated it as much as you did in that moment. And that's what happens with us, there's only 70 odd songs but we still have moments where we're like 'that was the best version we've done of that song'.

The relationship between the performer and the music is continuously (re)constituted and layered with added depth through socio-musical activity. Whether audiences pick up on the subtle nuances of a particularly good performance of a song is not central. What is more important is how the band's own perception of their authority is reinstated and constantly reinvigorated through the songs garnering added personal significance *in situ.*

The performer–audience relationship is undoubtedly a significant aspect of tribute music performance. In the interview with Morley (2011), Graham states that the importance of the relationship is not between audience and performer, but between the collective fans and the music being played, therefore dissolving performer–audience distinctions (Turino 2008; see also Gregory 2012). He says:

> When you were a Smiths fan, it polarised you. And when you were teenagers listening to the Smiths we could open the door of the pub, look in, and we would see a particular dress, we would see the quiff, we would see the glasses, and we'd go, 'that's someone I could have a drink with'... We're all Smiths fans here this evening, but I'm the one who's going to be in front of everyone else.

Accordingly, the music is not a text to be performed by musicians *to* an audience, but a medium that coalesces shared understandings and musical tastes to unite performers and audiences. Some tribute performers may therefore actively seek to connect with the audience by embracing shared experiences and musical affiliations.

6. Conclusion

The relationship between performer and text is an integral and often unavoidable aspect of tribute music performance. In scholarly criticism, it is often taken for granted that tribute musicians and audiences strive for sonic and historical accuracy, which subsequently imbues the performance and the performers with a sense of authority. However, tribute music performers can also attain authority through displaying a genuine connection to the music. For Graham of The Smyths, his identity is inseparable from the music he performs due to having 'lived through it'. The act of 'putting himself *in* the music' rather than retaining an

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objective distance is not merely a ploy to connect with audiences, but also, he feels, an unavoidable symptom of his personal experiences. His life experiences are intrinsically enmeshed with the artist he imitates, which becomes evident through the course of the performance. Being authentic to oneself can therefore, at times, override a close imitation of the original text, as the former portrays a sense of honesty and truth which resonates among audiences and binds them as fans of the music. Thus, identity plays a vital role in the expression and perception of authenticity, causing individuals to unite through shared understandings, musical values, and lived experiences of the music being performed.

The inadvertent recontextualisation of the music, or the act of 'putting oneself in the music', can also serve to (re)weave the original text into the fabric of socio-musical activity. This enables audience members and performers to become bound by the production of new meaning and added cultural significance, taking the focus and role of tribute music away from a mere nostalgic longing (Gregory 2013). Hence, tribute performances are not only a presentation of shared personal and musical experiences but also sites for the performance and construction of new experiences. As Simon Frith (1996, p. 109) states, it is the process of the 'self-in-progress', the production of a bound identity group *through* musical activity or 'musicking' (Small 1998). Ultimately, this investigation allows one to veer further away from the commonly taken-for-granted 'performer-audience' binary of tribute music performance. Instead, we can view the medium for its empathetical and participatory nature, one that does not require audiences to go along with the 'trick of the illusion' (Bennett 2006, p. 21), nor performers negotiate their identity within the framework of the tributed act in a strict sense (see Gregory 2012). It is not an audience's role to be swindled consensually by mimicry, but to connect with the performers through shared values, histories, and experiences, and contribute to the performance of collective identity.

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Author biography. With an interest in the ways people make music meaningful, Colin James Outhwaite's research focuses on ethnography, identity, community music making, and popular music. He has researched topics as diverse as Kendrick Lamar to tribute shows and is currently investigating reciprocal gift exchange and cultural patronage in grassroots arts communities in Utrecht, The Netherlands. He splits his professional time between research and writing, lecturing music and research, and playing guitar in a variety of original and cover based settings.

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