

# In the Spotlight and Underground – Constructing (Anti)Stardom in Popular Music

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While providing various reference points through which a multitude of publics can identify themselves, the star images present a world in which the idea of individual identity is possible in the first place. This is how David Chaney (1993: 111, 146) describes the function of stardom through which the focus is put on the individual. Similarly in popular music, the works are linked with their authors and performers. When the same song is performed by two separate artists, the listener hears the song in two diverging ways. It is not only a question of listening to a piece of music, but listening to music *performed by a specific artist*. We may, thus, understand that the interpretation of musical texts is biased by the artist's public image and aura. As Rosemary J. Coombe (1994: 104) remarks, the images and auras of popular music artists and other celebrities have become commodities that are used in order to sell products that would otherwise be indistinguishable. It is, then, the artist's public image that makes the musical product (at least appear) unique and original.

In this article, I approach the question of popular music stardom – and the rejection of its conventional constructions – through a number of themes and case studies. While the ideas of single originating authorship strengthen the artist's status in the spotlight, there are also artists who prefer to keep their personal identities undercover. The anonymous identities of certain artists and the manner of emphasizing the social aspects of creativity may be regarded as some of the characteristics that have extended our ideas of musical stardom. What is also discussed in the article is the question whether it is possible for an artist to use a faceless star image as a protest against the conventional star system and the visual marketing, or is the use of mysterious imagery merely another way of becoming discerned.

## The Romantic Impact

The belief in the single originating artist is linked with the notion of individual author who is seen as the object of aesthetic attention and whose works are valued as true and honest expressions of the artist. The creating subject was placed at the centre already in the works of Romantic poetry. At that time, the poet was seen as an original and originating genius whose work was believed to represent the author's thoughts and feelings. (See e.g. Bennett 2005: 55–71.) When speaking of the Romantic author in popular music, David Brackett (2000) explains the belief in a single unitary vision in terms of the emotional charge of the music and the identification of the listener. Brackett argues that although music is made collectively, it is common to hear the singer as the song's emotional source. This is because the listener associates the words and sounds with the most prominent voice in the recording. As Brackett specifies, the emotional content of the song is associated not only with the singer's voice but with his/her body, public image and biographical details as well. (Ibid.: 2, 14.)

For instance, the songs by the Canadian singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell are often linked to the experiences of the artist's personal life (see e.g. Reynolds *et al.* 1995: 254–255). There is an illustrative extract of a confessional reading of her work on the linear notes of Mitchell's compilation album *Dreamland* (2004):

Like her painting, like her songs, like her life. Joni Mitchell has never settled for the easy answers. [– –] Her songs

belong so powerfully to those who hear them. How could you choose one and leave another behind? And then you realize, it's easy if you think about it. The masterpiece is Joni Mitchell. (Cameron Crowe 2004, liner notes of Joni Mitchell's *Dreamland*.)

Another artist who is known for her original and distinct image is Björk. Also in the media texts, she is described as an artist who defies stereotypes and is in a league of her own (see e.g. Widder 2001; Greenwood 2001). These descriptions seem to be well in accordance with the idea of the Romantic author who is depicted as being “ahead of his time, avant-garde”, and “somehow above or beyond the human” (Bennett 2005: 60). Here is a typical review of Björk's second solo album *Post* (1995):

*Post* breaks all the rules in the music industry and highlights humankind's most important and individualizing quality – the imagination. Bj[ö]rk's music, on all levels, is certainly one of a kind. (Jen Appel in *Nude as the New. Rock Writing for the Musically Obsessed*; Appel 1995.)

Then, even though all people who participate in the process of music making basically work within the same production context and commercial medium, there are artists who are believed to be able to utilize the same medium as a means of expressing their own unique visions, instead of simply carrying out their duties (Shuker 1994: 99–100, 110). This is when the notion of *auteur* is brought into play – to point out the artist's possible extra quality that is believed to supersede the mode of commercialism.

## In Search for Musical Auteurs

The notion of *auteur* may be understood as an evaluative term the use of which proves that the music community has acknowledged the artist's skills and artistic competence. This is how Roy Shuker (1994: 114) summarizes the criteria that critics and fans share in the identification of the *auteur*. The given set of qualities ensures the *auteur* a mythical status among the peer musicians, listeners and the media:

[T]he ability of the *auteur* to break new ground, innovating, crossing or blurring genre boundaries; the ability to perform their own ‘original’ material, especially by writing their own songs. (Ibid.)

As a result, it is often believed that the artist's personality is somehow present in the music he/she performs (Straw 1999: 202). Because of this belief in the artist's confessionalism, *auteurs* are typically judged by their sense of honesty and authenticity. Music made by *auteurs* is, thus, expected to consist of something more than the artist's mere technical competence or simple expression of words (ibid.).

It is not only the critics and listeners who elevate some artists to the status of *auteurs*, but it is also common for artists to show respect and admiration for one another. On the official homepage of Brian Wilson ([www.brianwilson.com](http://www.brianwilson.com)), there are citations by famous artists, including Paul McCartney, Neil Young and Bob Dylan who tell about their personal relation to Wilson and his music without saving glowing words. This is what Billy Corgan, the singer and songwriter of The Smashing Pumpkins, has to say about Wilson and his process of finishing the long-time expected album *SMiLE* (2004):

Brian Wilson the astronaut, peering down from the Heavens, coolly dreaming of California girls. An idealized pop utopia that widens the senses and soothes the ears. [– –] Landing back down for the millennium, our astronaut decided it's time. Time to stop and hear what he's brought back. (Billy Corgan on Brian Wilson's homesite; Corgan 2005.)

In Corgan's quote, Wilson is depicted as a supernatural and talented individual who has managed to create his own way of making music. Wilson is, thus, presented as a mediator whose works are believed to originate from the author's divinely inspired ideas.

Also in the case of Tori Amos, her songs are often interpreted against the artist's personal history (see Reynolds *et al.* 1995: 267–269). Despite the attempts to shift the attention from seeing her music merely as confessional, the reading of Amos's work is usually carried out by looking for similarities between the author's personal experiences and her lyrics. Also in the following album review on Amos's debut album *Little Earthquakes* (1992), the confessional reading of her music becomes evident:

In my mind, there's no one else out there whose work is so intensely personal and emotional. I've always thought of *Little Earthquakes* as the closest thing you can get to pure emotion distilled onto a CD. (Stephen Rauch in *PopMatters Music Review*; Rauch 2003.)

Although auteurism still plays a central role in the evaluation of popular music artists, the influence of the auteur policy has also been called into question. Most often the critique is directed against the auteur theory's belief in a single controlling vision, which diverts the attention away from the collective and social process of music making (see e.g. Gracyk 1996: 95). As Stephan Crofts (1998: 322) remarks, the auteur theory is no longer central when speaking of the legal and contractual basis of production and distribution, but it still has an enormous influence within the cultural discussion.

## Stardom in Disguise

Despite the belief in single authorship there are also artists whose images are not based on the pursuit of public visibility and stardom. In order to explain the increased sense of anonymity, David Buxton (1988: 437) links the decline of the star system with the emergence of computer technology in music. As an example, Buxton mentions the German pioneers of electronic music, Kraftwerk (ibid.). Other groundbreaking bands that are known for images that are based on the artist's nonimagery are the art-rock bands of the 1970s and 1980s, such as New Order and Pink Floyd, who favoured faceless designs for their album covers (see e.g. Goodwin 1992: 113; Den Tandt 2004: 145).

The French duo Daft Punk is another example of an artist with a masked identity. The band made its decision to stay outside the public eye after a photo shooting, the purpose of which was to promote the band's first single release in 1994. Ever since the shooting, the duo has appeared only hidden behind masks, such as robot helmets, or having their faces distorted digitally. (See e.g. Osborne 2001.) Since the release of the band's second album *Discovery* in 2001, the futuristic robot outfits have become Daft Punk's main visual trademark. Daft Punk does not, thus, wish to focus the attention on the band members' personal appearance, but rather on the band's visual image overall. Here is Thomas Bangalter's comment on the matter:

We are completely interested in visual concept on the whole – album covers, videos. How we look is irrelevant. It has always been irrelevant in house or techno music. (Thomas Bangalter in *Montreal Mirror*; Silcott 1997.)

According to Daft Punk, the fictional image does not automatically mean that the band's music would be impersonal. Quite the opposite, the duo claims that the making of personal music does not require that the artist should show his/her face in public. This is how Bangalter describes the band's thinking:

I think that giving people our music to listen to is the most personal thing we can give because it is really us. And showing that is much more of a commitment to our audience than showing ourselves physically. We show instead our taste. (Thomas Bangalter in *Montreal Mirror*; Silcott 1997.)

What Daft Punk is then, first and foremost, opposed to, is the way of marketing music with the help of the artist's personality cult, while the music itself is left aside. The faceless image of the band is not still automatically seen as a way of rebelling against the music industry. Bangalter comments the accusations as follows:

People amaze me. We fought tooth and nail to bring out *One More Time* without any kind of advertising or music video and then people turn round and say 'They've got such a cunning marketing strategy!' [...] I mean, if trying to be innovative and make changes in the record industry is considered 'marketing', then OK let's just say Daft Punk's *all about 'marketing'*! (Thomas Bangalter in *RFI Musique*; Richert 2001.)

According to Bangalter, some people, thus, see that Daft Punk's faceless image is merely another means of attracting attention. Either way, it is sure that despite its use of logos and masks also Daft Punk is dependent on its visual image as a means of marketing its music. The duo's star image seems, then, to be a combination of elements that are believed to be both fact and fiction, personal and fabricated, innate and constructed. While being opposed to the star system of popular music, it is, hence, necessary also for Daft Punk to have some kind of a history and visual image, even though these elements are covered behind masks and fiction. So it seems that in order to operate within popular music culture, each artist needs to have an image – whether it is based on the idea of the artist's facelessness or star appeal. At the same time, the band's masked image brings us a step closer to the poststructuralist view that sees the author's biography as another text to be deconstructed (see e.g. Eagleton 1983: 138).

## Producing and Reproducing – Deejaying and Sampling

Musical works that are based on the material originally made by other artists further question the belief in the originating author. As Lev Manovich (2001: 124) remarks, the user of new media technology, including the one making music, is seen as an author whose task is to select from a menu of predefined elements or choices. It is not, then, only a question of putting pre-existing material mechanically together, but by admitting the creative quality of such authorship, the idea of creative expression is brought along. The music making of DJs and sampling artists seems to go well in this category.

Many times artists who work as DJs also work in some other fields of making or producing music. This is also the case of the Finnish artist Jori Hulkkonen who besides making his own music has worked as an internationally known DJ. Similarly to other DJs, Hulkkonen does not try to give an impression that the played material would be self-expressive. Instead, the manner of combining and mixing material made by other artists is what seems to lie at the centre of attention in Hulkkonen's performances. Yet Hulkkonen argues that the most important thing for an artist of electronic music is to be original and sound different:

Be original. Obviously you need to take influences and follow trends, but only to a certain degree. The only way to get noticed nowadays is to make records with high quality production, original ideas and a personal sound. (Jori Hulkkonen in *Family House*; Dax-DJ 2004.)

The authorship of Hulkkonen and other similar artists stands on the artist's ability to create unique soundscapes without minding to whether the music is self-written or originally made by someone else. The manner of using material made by other artists does not, however, mean that the idea of the artist's originality would have completely lost its meaning. Rather, the question of musical creativity has been redefined.

The notion of musical author becomes confused also in sample-based music in which the authorial voice of several artists is present. One of the groups using samples in their music making is the Australian collective The Avalanches. When asked the band member Robbie Chater about the arguments that sampling is not comparable to the act of composing, but just cutting and pasting, he takes notice to the band's capability to put the samples together in a creative manner:

We consider ourselves writers, you know, and we have a predetermined goal that we want to get to and we find the piece that we need to help us [to] get there. The samples are just what we happen to use. (Robbie Chater in *Synthesis*; Teilmann 2001.)

The practice of music making is also reflected in the way the artist's author image is presented in public. Because of the reuse of the material, sample-based works are not necessarily marketed in the name of the artist and his/her celebrity power. According to Timothy Taylor (2001: 140), the tendency to hide rather than to reveal works as a way of disagreeing with the celebration of the individual musician. Because of their obscure names and faceless images, such artists are believed to draw attention to themselves, not as individuals, but as hidden, mysterious creators. (Ibid.) Darren Seltmann, another member of The Avalanches, comments the faceless marketing of the band's debut album as follows:

[T]his album was more about giving it the feeling of it coming from somewhere else or another time. And that was like to be anonymous, it didn't feel right exposing ourselves when we didn't want to sing on the record. (Darren Seltmann in *Turntable2k*; Garrido 2002.)

Seltmann, then, sees that the creative input of the band members' is not comparable with that of a singer, even though it was the men who put the album together. The mysterious construction of stardom also illustrates some of the effects that the changes in the practices of music making have led up to.

## Images of Stardom

Star images work as classificatory items that gather a certain group of texts together and distinguish them from other existing texts. Through a distinct public image, the artist's star persona is presented as a unique and original figure. In addition to artists whose images are constructed around the artist's personal appearance, there are music makers who wish to keep their personal identities in disguise. The ideas on musical authorship affect what kind of a status the public artist is agreed to have as an auteur, star or a mysterious creator. Yet again, no matter how the artist's authorial status is defined, it is the artist's public persona around which the star image is constructed. Also

the functioning of popular music culture is dependent on the artists and their star images that bring predictability in the market place. Then, even though being opposed to the artist's celebrity status, the use of disguised imagery can still be seen to work as another means of marketing musical products.

Also the notions of musical authorship, creativity and originality must have been reformulated to correspond the current ways of making, distributing and consuming popular music. In the authorships of DJs and sampling artists, it is no longer a question of whether the artist is the originating source of each sample and sound, but it is more a matter of having a control over the used material. The development of studio technology has also made it possible basically for anyone to start making music. The changing ideas of musical authorship are, however, applicable only to some areas of popular music, since the effects caused by the digital music technology do not automatically supersede the earlier ideologies, including the celebration of stardom. Altogether, although it has become more common to regard musical authorship as a collective and social process, the idea of single authorship remains to be present in the way popular music is marketed through public artists and their images of stardom.

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