

Philip Auslander

MUSIC AS PERFORMANCE: LIVING IN THE IMMATERIAL WORLD

As a performance scholar and music lover, I find it strange that the fields of theatre and performance studies historically have been reluctant to engage with musical performance. Even as theatrical a musical form as opera is generally excluded from the history of theatre, on the grounds that “the predominant force in opera was the music rather than the words,” as Vera Mowry Roberts, my theatre history professor, puts the case.¹ Roberts points to the nonliterary character of music as the reason for the exclusion; I speculate that the perception of music not only as nonliterary but, more broadly, as nonmimetic may seem to place it outside the realm of theatrical representation. While performance-oriented scholars spurn music, music-oriented scholars generally spurn performance. Traditional musicologists remain focused on the textual dimensions of musical compositions, whereas scholars who look at music from the perspective of cultural studies are generally more concerned with audience and reception than with the actual performance behavior of musicians.

Over the past six years, I have been working in this gap by trying to bring the insights of performance studies to bear on musical performance.² My work in this area is devoted to situating performance studies in relation to other disciplines that engage with musical performance (particularly musicology and philosophy), establishing some basic principles for thinking about musicians as performers, and undertaking performance analyses of musical performances. In addition, I created and cofacilitate the Working Group in Music as Performance, a floating community that originated in the Performance Studies Focus Group of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education and is also affiliated with Performance Studies international.

Along the way, I have found like-minded companions among musicologists (such as Nicholas Cook and Susan Fast), ethnomusicologists

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(Harris Berger), communications scholars (Norma Coates), and others who see the value of studying music as performance. As we celebrate fifty years of the American Society for Theatre Research, it is my hope that we can envision *Theatre Survey* as a venue for work on music as performance. While I have had some success in persuading scholars in other fields of the value of bringing performance studies to music, I want also to convey to theatre and performance scholars the value of looking at musical performances. Although it clearly belongs to the realm of performance, music is different enough from theatre and our other usual objects of inquiry that it opens some of our basic assumptions to renewed investigation. In what follows, I discuss an example that challenges conventional assumptions about audiences and their relationships to the performances they witness.

Over thirty years ago, I saw a documentary film of the Beatles' concert at New York's Shea Stadium in 1965. The film was extraordinary, not least because it was nearly impossible to hear the Beatles play: the soundtrack was completely dominated by a barrage of nonstop screaming from the audience. Shots of the Beatles themselves showed them looking quizzically at one another and attempting to play even though no one was listening and they could barely hear each other over the din. (You can get a sense of the effect by listening to the recordings of the Beatles' concerts at the Hollywood Bowl. Although engineered to be audible, the music is accompanied by a constant, undifferentiated stream of noise emanating from the audience.) Close-ups of the screaming fans showed faces (mostly female) with wide-open mouths and tightly closed eyes.

That image of the self-blinded and deafened fan stayed with me and recurs to me now as a phenomenon in need of some kind of analysis, for the more I think about it, the harder it becomes to account for it. Writing about the performance of classical music, Stan Godlovitch has proposed a list of "integrity conditions" that have to be met before the playing of a piece constitutes a performance of it. He describes one of those conditions as "Continuity of Public Calm," which he views as necessary to maintain the "ritual continuity" and mood of classical music performance.³ There's no reason why an audience for pop music should display the same decorum as a classical music audience, but Godlovitch's stipulation throws the behavior of the Beatles' 1965 audience into sharp relief, for it vitiated the Beatles' performances every bit as much as rowdy behavior at a symphony concert. I can think of no examples outside the world of popular music in which it is conventional for audiences to behave in such a way as to make it basically impossible for the performers to perform. We usually assume that audiences attend a performance in both senses: that of being present at it, and that of devoting attention to it. Furthermore, as Erving Goffman points out, audiences generally will bend over backward to assist the performers in achieving the performance, even to the extent of overlooking errors and missteps.⁴

How does one account, then, for an audience that attends a concert only to deprive itself of the experience and make it uncomfortable for the musicians to perform? One possible response would be to say that identifying the fans as the audience in this case is a misconstruction of the performance situation. In fact, the fans were there to perform for the Beatles, not to listen to them, and the Beatles'

mistake was in thinking that they were the performers rather than the audience.⁵ Although this would be an attractive analysis, it does not entirely fit the facts. The gonzo rock theorist Richard Meltzer, who attended the Shea Stadium concert, reports that the audience began screaming well before the Beatles ever came into view, implying that the fans did not require the Beatles as their audience.⁶

The call for papers for a 2002 ASTR seminar on dematerialized performance suggested a different approach to considering the audience's behavior at Shea Stadium.⁷ The idea of dematerialized performance implies that performance is material (by which I mean embodied, enacted by performers who are physically present before their audience) to begin with. But in the cultural context of popular music, seemingly disembodied performance has been the norm since the popularization of the phonograph that began in the 1890s. The vast majority of the experiences that function as "performances" for rock and pop music fans do not entail the performers' physical presence. Such performances are constructed in the fans' own minds, primarily from listening to sound recordings. The performances on the recordings are themselves simulations: reproductions of performances that never actually took place but resulted from mixing and editing multiple takes. Nevertheless, such recordings are the primary form performances of rock and pop music take. As the veteran popular music scholar Simon Frith puts it, "I listen to records in the full knowledge that what I hear is something that never existed, that could never exist, as a 'performance,' something happening in a single time and space; nevertheless, it is now happening, in a single time and space: it is thus a performance and I hear it as one."⁸

Although such performances of popular music are immaterial, they are not truly disembodied; musicologist Susan Fast argues that "the performer's body is very much present" in the musical sounds on recordings, which always imply the physical actions and presence of the human beings who produced them no matter how manipulated they may be.⁹ Additionally, listening to recorded music seems to promote a desire to see the performer, if only in the imagination. As Frith says, "to hear music [on recordings] is to see it performed, on stage, with all the trappings."¹⁰ In most cases, this imaginative performance image is not wholly imaginary. Although rock culture, criticism, and scholarship frequently reflect a misguided antiocular prejudice,¹¹ it is indisputably the case that fans' experiences of the virtual performances described by Frith are informed by what they glean about the performers from the artifacts of the material culture that surrounds the music, which includes sound recordings as a central component, but also videos, photographs, cover art, collectibles, hair and makeup styles, fashions, and so on. It is worth noting that the material culture of popular music is not just an archive for remnants of performances past but also a generative source for the central experience of performance in the present. The cultural artifacts of popular music not only record and preserve performances that took place elsewhere: they are the raw materials from which fans actively construct performances, and the musicians' presence, in the present.

Therefore, the image one has of a performer while listening to her recording is not usually so innocent as to be a pure product of the imagination. More likely, it is an image of the performer constructed from the various artifacts

of that performer's performance, production, and promotion. The fan nevertheless has considerable freedom to manipulate those images imaginatively and form various relationships to them. Meltzer describes the experience of "listening to a standard guitarist on record" by saying that what is "required is a mental picture of the guy facing you and occasionally moving around; in conjunction with this you visually change the situation and sit behind him or turn the stage around, or you put yourself right in his shoes."¹² As he implies, the listener is free to construct her relationship to the performer from various spectatorial vantage points or by identifying with the performer.

Although the Beatles were not unique in eliciting a powerful emotional reaction from their fans (rather, they belong to a lineage that includes Caruso, Rudy Vallee, Frank Sinatra, and Elvis, to name but a few earlier figures), they did enjoy an exceptionally strong presence in the minds and daily lives of Americans in the 1960s. For Geoffrey O'Brien,

An illusion of intimacy, of companionship, made the Beatles characters in everyone's private drama. . . . It is hard to remember how familiarly people came to speak of the Beatles toward the end of the '60s, as if they were close associates whose reactions and shifts of thought could be gauged intuitively. . . . That presumption of intimacy owed everything to a close knowledge of every record they made, every facial variation gleaned from movies and countless photographs. The knowledge was not necessarily sought; it was merely unavoidable.¹³

While it is probably true that most of the spectators at Shea Stadium had never attended a Beatles concert before, it is not the case that they had never seen the Beatles perform. They had: in films, on Ed Sullivan's television program the year before,¹⁴ and every time they had listened to the Beatles' recordings. They were, in short, as fully acquainted with the virtual Beatles on those recordings as they were unfamiliar with the actual bodies soon to stand before them.

Meltzer's description of the event is suggestive concerning the relationship between the virtual Beatles and the ones who were physically present when he notes that the fans "created an uproar that was unending and in fact prevented all participating in the audience from hearing a single word actually sung by the Beatles. Only memory of past aural experience of the Beatles was needed to sustain this new outburst with the group now present."¹⁵ By screaming and closing their eyes, the fans obliterated the sound and sight of the tangible Beatles and thus made certain that their experience of the Beatles' corporeal presence would be identical with their previous experience of the (virtual) Beatles as performers. Thus, in an essay on Sir Paul McCartney's 1999 Webcast concert at the Cavern Club in Liverpool, Mark Duffett quotes Ray Connolly, a journalist, to the effect that the reconstructed club "evokes memories, whether real or imagined" and points to "the whole, impossible idea of 'imagined memories.'" ¹⁶ My analysis here indicates, however, that something very much like imagined memory (remembered imaginings, perhaps) underpinned the audience's experience at Shea Stadium, since the audience was drawing on its memory of its

own imaginings of the Beatles even while in their physical presence. The spectators' memories of the concert, therefore, would be memories (perhaps imagined) of remembered imaginings.

I propose that the fans' behavior at the Beatles' 1965 concert functioned to ensure that the dematerialized experience of the Beatles—the primary experience in a cultural context in which virtual performance is the norm—retained its primacy. Inasmuch as the audience rendered the Beatles inaudible, a concertgoer could hear them only by recourse to the memory of their virtual performances, as Meltzer suggests. The soundtrack for the concert thus became the recordings with which the fans were familiar; by closing their eyes, the fans assured that whatever images of John, Paul, George, and Ringo they already possessed were the images that they saw during the concert, not those of the four harried men attempting to play for them.

In *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, I argue that rock fans need to *see* the performers produce the sounds on their recordings live in order to believe that those sounds are the authentic products of those performers, authenticity being a key issue in rock ideology.¹⁷ Godlovitch makes a similar argument with respect to classical musicians, though he considers the relationship of live and recorded performances only in terms of the integrity of live performance: his claim is that musical performance is not just about the production of certain sounds, but crucially about the display of musical skill.¹⁸ But the audiences for pop music (as distinct from rock) are not concerned with the authenticity of the performances they witness in the way that rock, classical, and purist jazz audiences are. The Beatles in 1965 were essentially a boy band, and their audience was a pop audience, not a rock audience. Those fans did everything they could to ensure that the live performance would not differ from, complement, or authenticate the dematerialized performances with which they were already familiar. The live performance served primarily as an occasion on which to enjoy a particularly intense experience of the Beatles as virtual performers.

That last statement partially answers the question of why the Beatles' fans went to the concert at all, an obvious but nevertheless serious issue that merits further consideration. In a cultural context dominated by reproduction and simulation, the value of live performance resides in its use as symbolic capital.¹⁹ To be able to say that one has seen a rock performer live garners greater prestige than only being able to say that one has heard a recording by the same performer. (Having lived through Beatlemania, I can say from firsthand experience as one of the unlucky Beatles fans who did not get to see the group perform live that attendance at their concerts was worth considerable symbolic capital among fans.) The fact that the live performance is worth greater symbolic capital than the recording may seem to belie the idea that the recording is the dominant cultural form, but I don't think it does. The very fact that one can compare the relative symbolic values of live and mediatized performances shows that they carry the same kind of value—the kind Walter Benjamin calls exhibition value.²⁰ Like old wines and old masters, live performances of popular music are of greater symbolic value than recordings because they offer an experience that is more rare and less accessible than do recordings, not because they offer a fundamentally

different kind of experience. Would an exceptionally rare recording necessarily carry less symbolic capital than attendance at a comparably desirable live event? It is not self-evident that the live event is more valuable. Again, the most salient point may be that live and mediatized performances are commensurable in terms of symbolic value.

But symbolic value is hardly the only kind of value that the Beatles' fans derived from attending the concert. Writing about her own experience as a British fan of the Bay City Rollers in the mid-1970s, Sheryl Garratt notes that the kind of behavior for which Beatlemaniac audiences were famous is a staple experience of growing up female in the industrialized west: "most women go through 'that phase.' Most of us scream ourselves silly at a concert at least once. . . ." ²¹ Her explication of such fan behavior is psychosexual; a pop star is a "safe focus for all [of a girl's] newly discovered sexual energy, and a scream can often be its only release" in a culture that doesn't acknowledge the legitimacy of female desire (401). ²² "It is the sound of young women, not 'hysterical schoolgirls' as one reporter would have it—a scream of defiance, celebration, and excitement" (401). It is also an expression of female solidarity:

We were a gang of girls having fun together. . . . Women are in the minority on demonstrations, in union meetings, or in the crowd at football matches: at the concerts, many were experiencing mass power for the first and last time. . . . Our real obsession was with ourselves; in the end, the actual men behind the posters had very little to do with it. (401–2)

Although the Beatles' audience at Shea Stadium did not consist exclusively of pubescent girls (witness Meltzer's presence, for instance), Garratt provides an important description of a focal component of that audience. My analysis here is entirely harmonious with hers. Arguably, it is precisely because dematerialized performance is the normative form in the realm of pop music that young women can participate in pop music in the ways that Garratt describes: the performers' immateriality allows fans to construct the performers for themselves in ways that meet their own needs. Indeed, it may be more important that analyses of such concepts as (de)materialization, (dis)embodiment, (in)corporeality, and virtuality in performance focus on audiences and how they construct performers and performances than on performers and how they construct their own presence.

In the final analysis, the Beatles' physical presence at Shea Stadium was almost incidental to the kinds of value the audience extracted from the event, but the audience's physical presence as a large-scale collective most assuredly was not. That is obviously true for the psychosexual value of the event to its young female fans and for its value to them as an experience of female solidarity. It is less obvious that the Beatles' physical presence was incidental to the concert's value as symbolic capital. But I wonder: as valuable as attendance at a Beatles concert is as symbolic capital, wouldn't having been present at the one concert where the Beatles failed to appear before a huge assembled audience also have considerable value, perhaps even more value?

By screaming and closing their eyes at the concert, the young women prevented the Beatles from materializing, so to speak. They forced the Beatles to retain their identities as the virtual poster boys who provided the girls with safe opportunities to express their sexuality and prohibited the Beatles from stepping out from behind the posters to reveal themselves as actual men.

One thing theatre and performance studies might glean from this consideration of audience behavior in the realm of popular music is that, in the context of performance, materiality and immateriality are not necessarily ontological conditions: they can be socially and contextually constructed states. To borrow Godlovitch's terminology,²³ I submit that the Beatles' concert at Shea Stadium was characterized by a complete disassociation of the *agent performance* (what the Beatles were doing) from the *phenomenal performance* (what the audience experienced). While the Beatles as agents were physically present in their own persons doing their best to play under difficult conditions, the audience obliterated their phenomenal presence and chose (at least in the story I've told) to perceive a performance by the virtual Beatles they had constructed for themselves through the consumption of the artifacts of material culture.

The young women at the stadium made sure that they would not experience the corporeal presence of the real Beatles differently from the performances of the virtual Beatles with which they were already familiar. In that sense, their public experience at the stadium was not all that different from listening to the recordings alone or with a group of friends. The experience of mass female power that Garratt describes was also implicit in the girls' consumption of the Beatles' recordings. Writing on the incursion of the phonograph into American life, William Howland Kenney observes:

Recorded music's power to resound musical patterns does much to fortify circles of shared popular experience. . . . Not simply solitaries, phonograph record lovers listened "alone together," discovering in mediated engravings of past musical expressiveness parallel avenues to shared social and cultural circles of resonance. . . .²⁴

In other words, the young women in the audience at Shea Stadium already constituted a community—structured through their common consumption of Beatles recordings—before they arrived at the concert. What happened at the stadium was the materialization of that virtual community as a huge gathering of young women screaming themselves silly, as Garratt puts it. For a moment, they were no longer "alone together" but, simply, together. By obliterating the Beatles' sound, they enabled themselves to experience the music only as memories of recordings, as Meltzer indicates, and thus to celebrate the experiential basis of their communal identity. The value of the concert as an experience of psychosexual liberation and female solidarity depended equally on the fans' maintaining the Beatles' virtual identities in the face of their corporeal presence and on the real corporeal presence of a mass audience assembled in the same place at the same time. For those effects to occur the Beatles had to remain virtual, but the audience had to be fully, and loudly, corporeal.

ENDNOTES

1. Roberts, *On Stage: A History of Theatre*, 2d ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 108.
2. To date, this work has yielded four published articles, evenly divided between music journals and theatre or performance studies journals, and *Performing Glam Rock: Gender and Theatricality in Popular Music* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006). The articles are “Good Old Rock and Roll: Performing the 1950s in the 1970s,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 15.2 (2003): 166–94; “Performance Analysis and Popular Music: A Manifesto,” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 14.1 (2004): 1–13; “I Wanna Be Your Man: Suzi Quatro’s Musical Androgyny,” *Popular Music* 23.1 (2004): 1–16; and “Musical Personae,” *TDR* 50.1 (2006): 100–19.
3. Godlovitch, “The Integrity of Musical Performance,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51.4 (1993): 573–88, at 577.
4. See Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), especially the section on “protective practices” and “audience tact” (229–37).
5. As Laurel Sercombe shows in an essay on the group’s appearance on Ed Sullivan’s television program on 9 February 1964, the critical response to that show and to Beatlemania in general often held that the audience should be understood as performing, and that the audience’s performance, not the musicians’, was the most distinctive aspect of the phenomenon. See “‘Ladies and Gentlemen . . .’ The Beatles: *The Ed Sullivan Show*, CBS TV, February 9, 1964,” in Ian Inglis, ed., *Performance and Popular Music: History, Place and Time* (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 2006), 1–15.
6. Meltzer, *The Aesthetics of Rock* (New York: Da Capo, 1987), 27.
7. The seminar, “De-materialized Performance,” organized by Jill Lane and Jon McKenzie, met on 17 November at the 2002 meeting of ASTR in Philadelphia. I am grateful to the organizers for having included me. The present essay is a revised and expanded version of the paper I contributed to the seminar, “Living in the Material World: Beatlemania at Shea Stadium.”
8. Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 211.
9. Fast, *In the Houses of the Holy: Led Zeppelin and the Power of Rock Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 114.
10. Frith, 211.
11. For a discussion of the antiocularity prevalent in rock discourse, see my *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 64–73.
12. Meltzer, 229.
13. O’Brien, *Sonata for Jukebox: Pop Music, Memory, and the Imagined Life* (New York: Counterpoint, 2004), 150–1.
14. See Sercombe for a discussion of this appearance and its impact.
15. Meltzer, 27.
16. Duffett, “Imagined Memories: Webcasting as a ‘Live’ Technology and the Case of Little Big Gig,” *Information, Communication & Society* 6.3 (2003): 307–25, at 319.
17. *Liveness*, 73–85.
18. Godlovitch, 579–86.
19. *Liveness*, 57–60.
20. See Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” trans. Harry Zohn, in Hannah Arendt, ed., *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1969), 224–6.
21. Garratt, “Teenage Dreams,” in Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin, eds., *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 400; subsequent citations are given in the text. I am interested in the mechanisms of cultural reproduction at work here: How does each generation learn this behavior and its appropriate cultural contexts? For that matter, how is audience behavior generally transmitted as cultural reproduction? Who was the first person to flick a lighter at a rock concert, and how do the generations of rock concertgoers that have appeared on the scene since know to do that and in what contexts it should be done? Sercombe identifies such a

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mechanism in the case of the Beatles: she argues that “American teenagers learned Beatlemania from local media coverage of their British counterparts. . . .” (11).

22. Richard Smith points to a specific aspect of this phenomenon in a discussion of female audiences’ apparent attraction to “unmanly men,” a tradition he traces from Valentino to Liberace, Johnnie Ray, and Barry Manilow. Although he does not discuss the Beatles, they were perceived in the mid-1960s to be soft and androgynous rather than manly. See Smith, “Housewives’ Choice: Female Fans and Unmanly Men,” in Andy Bennett, Barry Shank, and Jason Toynbee, eds., *The Popular Music Studies Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 377–81.

23. Godlovitch, 585.

24. Kenney, *Recorded Music in American Life: The Phonograph and Popular Memory, 1890–1945* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 4; 22.