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Chapter 10

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THE MEANINGS OF THE POPULAR MUSIC CELEBRITY
The construction of distinctive authenticity

The transformations that have taken place in popular music in the twentieth century can be attributed to a number of factors, including the use of new technologies, changes in the size of performance venues, the growth of the recording industry, and the segmentation of the mass market. Discursively, all of these factors have been modalized around concepts of authenticity. At the center of these debates concerning the authentic nature of the music is the popular music performer; how he or she expresses the emotionality of the music and his or her own inner emotions, feelings, and personality and how faithful the performer is to the intentions of the musical score are all part of how the individual performer is determined to be authentic. What follows is an examination of the genealogy of the popular music celebrity and how the focus on the star has shaped debates concerning the authentic quality of popular music. Like the movie industry, the popular music industry has become located primarily in the United States. Aside from a few deviations, the following discussion of the industry-celebrity relationship in popular music is concerned with American popular music.

The industrial construction of the popular music star

The development of celebrity status in the production of popular music is closely connected with the mass reproduction of songs. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, sheet music production and distribution were the economic heart of the music industry. Performers in music halls and vaudeville theaters became the principal means of expanding the market for particular compositions beyond regional boundaries and interests. As vehicles for the promotion of songs, song performers were very important for the music publishing companies. At the same time, poor material—that is, unpopular songs—could hurt singers' performance careers. In the construction of
the sheet music commodity, the singing star was simultaneously developed. Above
the illustration on the cover page of most sheet music productions, the name of the
performer would vie in size with the name of the song. In this way, the buying public
was able to link song with singing star. Million-selling song sheets were not uncom-
mon in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In fact, between 1900 and
1910, one hundred song sheets sold a million copies each and therefore occupied the
very center of the music industry.¹ The audience for popular songs was composed
primarily of the middle class, among whom a popular pastime was to sing the pieces
with piano accompaniment in their own living rooms. The arrangements were quite
simple, so that the singing and playing could be handled by a large amateur population.

Essentially, there were two overlapping markets for song production: the stage
performance and the song publication. The performer, working with elaborate
orchestration and arrangement, created the professional version of the song – the
official text. At the turn of the century, the nascent recording industry built on the
reproduction of these official texts of music and song. To establish a recording’s
authenticity, the most famous performer associated with the song would be enlisted to
sing it. Thus, the recording industry used the system of stars established by the music
publishing business for its foundation.

The industry, centered in New York City, rapidly developed a division of labor in
order to maintain a level of production that could satisfy the primary market of song
sheets and the secondary market of records. This entailed the employment of what were
called “tunesmiths” to manufacture new songs for performers and publication. It was
critical to the organization of the industry that these composers were employees,
because the principal means of revenue/profit accumulation for the industry was the
copyright, which was held by the music publishing company. This gave the company, not
the individual, the recording and publishing rights to any song produced by its
employees for fifty years. The tunesmiths themselves were usually paid a flat rate per
song. For example, Charles Graham, the writer of a popular song of 1891, “The Picture
That Is Turned Towards the Wall,” received about fifteen dollars for that work.² The
writers of Tin Pan Alley remained relatively anonymous for the first two decades of
the twentieth century. Songs were identified either by their titles or by the names of the
star performers associated with them – also employees of the recording industry.

The other critical transformation of musical culture that the music industry
fostered was the active generalization of regional differences. The tunesmiths were
often involved in the appropriation of regional folk music – which was intimately
connected to particular communities’ systems of meaning – and the homogenization
of its appeal. David Buxton connects this transformation to the industrialization and
urbanization of American culture and the new social needs that emerged as people
were divorced from these regional contexts. The songs produced maintained an
abstract stylistic connection to regional folk music, but were new in their appeal to
persons living and working in the cities. The types of songs produced could be said to
contain traces of social memories of regions; these traces, from an array of sources,
were now used to construct differences and variety in popular song production.³

The repetition of an uncopyrighted folk song generated no capital; variations in the
composition and lyrics of folk songs allowed for the application of copyright and
the generation of capital. As many authors have attested, one of the key sources for
appropriation (because it was free) was antebellum black American music.⁴ This
appropriation of black musical style into the mass production of popular music established one of the dominant strains of contemporary popular music.

Singers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were part of this process of generalization for the mass market of regional styles. Buxton describes most vaudeville and music hall singers as local celebrities. They left their home areas to perform in other communities and presented musical styles that were not of the regions in which they performed. Thus, their market reach was somewhat limited. Buxton uses the example of the transformation of country music to detail the changes many performers underwent to appeal to the developing mass market. The original country musicians who recorded in the 1920s were older part-time musicians who had achieved a certain celebrity status within their region playing a particular style of music. Performers like Fiddlin' John Carson and Charlie Oaks were well into their fifties when they first recorded. According to Buxton, record sales and radio play fostered the attribution of distinctive regional style to the personal style of the recording artist. The recording artist, because of the consumption demands of an audience whose use of the music was less connected to the cultural significance of a particular regional musical style and more connected to a general capitalist culture and leisure, quickly depleted his or her traditional repertoire of songs. Because of this different relationship to the music, which had been abstracted from its regional source, the recording artist became the center for production of new songs in a similar style. By the 1940s, a performer's musical style became a resource upon which he or she would draw to construct new melodies and thus new "personalizations." The incorporation of regional style had been completed through the development of the versatile country music artist.

The technology of the popular music celebrity

Through the use of the technologies of reproduction and distribution, the possibility of a fundamentally different relationship of the audience to the pleasures of popular music and their stars became manifest. The breakdown of difference on the basis of region became reconstituted in the urban setting in terms of tastes, likes, and dislikes. New conceptions of authenticity had to be developed in popular music that integrated this new relationship to musical style.

The technology of reproduction problematizes the concept of authenticity. In the development of the popular music celebrity, the recording technology has worked to authenticate the particular and individual performance, partly through the progressive perfection of sound recording and sound reproduction technology. However, the construction of the technological reproduction of songs has also changed the meaning of the live and in-person performance of concerts. The music industry, through its stars, has constructed two sometimes contradictory levels of the "real" and authentic. The recording has become the true representation of the music; the concert has become the faithful reproduction of the "authentic" recorded music. It has become a common experience of concert audiences to sense the inadequacies of the live performance in comparison with the recorded music they associate with the performer. Studio technology and studio sound, with its twenty-four-track editing capability, cannot be matched by the indeterminate acoustics of the concert hall/stadium, the
fallibility of performers, and the inability to produce all of the same recorded sounds within less controlled environments. In some instances, the stars of the concert no longer actually sing or perform; instead they lip-synch and dance to the reproduced sounds of their records in front of the audience. I shall return to the new meanings of the live concert in a subsequent part of this chapter. What I want to deal with specifically here are the different meanings and experiences that are offered by the technology in the production and consumption of records, and how these have constructed the types of celebrity figures that have emerged in popular music in the twentieth century.

First of all, as I have mentioned above, recordings tend to sanctify particular performers’ renditions of particular songs. A song, in essence, becomes a sign of the performer. It has been quite common, therefore, for popular music celebrities to “possess” signature tunes. Roy Rogers’s “Happy Trails,” Sinatra’s comeback “My Way,” Judy Garland’s “Over the Rainbow,” and Paul Robeson’s “Old Man River” are all examples of songs and performers that are inseparable.

The same focus on the correct or original version of a song by a particular star changes the uses made of music by the audience. With song sheets, the audience was involved in their own reproduction of the work. With records, the use of music became oriented toward an audience of listeners, not amateur performers. The record professionalized the means of musical production through its coding of orchestration and the performer’s singing, codes that far surpassed the capacity of the amateur piano player and singer. To hear a particular song in the home increasingly meant listening to it, either on a record or on the radio.

The domestic nature of the technology of reception worked in the reorientation of the perception of the popular music performance and performer. Within their own living rooms, listeners could enjoy the very best and most popular singers and performances. The record player privatized the technology of exhibition. Moreover, the activity of listening permitted the investment of personal experiences into the meaning of the music to a greater degree than did concert performances. In the privatized world of consumption, the listener, by purchasing a record, could sense his or her personal possession of the song and performer. Though distanced through technological apparatuses, performer and audience were brought closer together by the audience’s listening to recorded music, thus domesticating entertainment and the performance of the popular music star.

In successive technological inventions, the private and personal activity of listening has been privileged. The development of the 45 rpm record and record player in the 1950s was a way to increase the sales of smaller format, more portable machines for the rapidly expanding youth market. Middle-class teenagers could potentially have their own record players and singles record collections in their own rooms. Similarly, transistor radios could be produced cheaply in compact, lightweight sizes for personalized uses. Popular music, through the portable transistor radio, became an integral part of a variety of leisure pursuits. Transistor technology was embraced particularly by youth in their attempts to construct distinctive social spaces. Finally, consumer acceptance in the early 1980s of the Sony Walkman, the entirely personalized stereo radio and tape player, articulated the ultimate privileging of private listening practices. With headphones, the Walkman listener isolated his or her pleasure in a manner that the radio speaker never achieved. The tape player also allowed for the personal programming of
taste; the listener, with complete portability, was also independent of radio stations’ programming styles. All of these technological innovations have served to personalize the relationship between the musical artist and the listening public.

Technology and performance

In terms of the technology of musical production, one can identify a trend that has also been configured around the privileging of the personal and the individual. This movement can be seen in the changes in popular music performing styles that resulted from the integration of electronic recording and the use of the microphone.

The first performer to sell in excess of a million records was the opera star Enrico Caruso, in 1901. Caruso possessed the technical perfection of the voice – at least as it was understood in the aesthetics of classical music. In contrast, popular music singers of the past thirty-five years have eschewed the classical perfection of the voice in favor of expressing the emotionality and personality of the voice. The other model of the professional vocalist from the early recording era of popular music – equally rejected by most contemporary performers – was the music hall and vaudeville star. Like the opera singer, the popular singer was able to project his or her voice to the very back of the concert hall. Al Jolson epitomized this early-twentieth-century style of singing, where the power of the voice – its depth and range – qualified the singer for star status. However, the invention of the microphone made the need for such large, full voices less central in popular music. Al Jolson, with his half-singing/half-talking, minstrel/vaudeville style, never adapted to the microphone. Rudy Vallee, the megaphone star, was the first to work comfortably with the microphone in expressing the new possibilities of intimacy that it allowed. Bing Crosby, along with a host of other singers known as crooners, managed to use the microphone as if he were singing quietly to one other person. The relaxed nature of the crooning style became dominant on 1930s radio shows hosted by the leaders of various big bands of the swing era. This movement to intimacy and personal style complemented the development of the receiving technology of popular music. Since the crooners, vocalists have continued to experiment with the “grain of the voice,” the texture of vocal style that can express intimacy, individuality, and a range of emotions.

Popular music’s performance codes

Performance also emerged from the structure of the popular music industry. With specific people employed as composers – the tunesmiths of Tin Pan Alley – there was a complementary network of stars to interpret those songs. The division of labor between stars and the relatively anonymous songwriters was further accentuated by the major Hollywood studios’ purchase of the principal music publishing houses of New York during the 1930s. The movie musical, which served as a promotional vehicle for the introduction of film sound, also aided in the construction of identifiable images and personalities connected to the popular songs that were heard on the radio. The emphasis on the vocalist was in sharp contrast to the big band/swing era’s emphasis on the band leader. In retrospect, it is surprising to learn that Crosby, the
most famous of the crooners, was relegated to the back row of Paul Whiteman’s orchestra and, like other vocalists of the early swing era, was treated like any other musician with an instrument to play.\footnote{13} Film and radio exposure gradually changed the orientation of the music industry toward the star vocalist.

In sharp contrast to the construction of the star vocalist in mainstream popular music, the black popular music tradition of the twentieth century presented the model of the singer-songwriter. But within black blues and jazz, there was a gender division in place from the 1920s to the 1940s that articulated the acceptability of black female performers singing for white audiences and the inacceptability, in most clubs, of black male performers singing for white audiences. Bessie Smith, the renowned female blues singer of the 1920s, was a veritable star. In contrast, black male blues performers such as Blind Lemon Jefferson and Robert Johnson performed and played in relative obscurity, even though their music formed the basis of much of the blues repertoire of singers like Bessie Smith. It was impossible for these musicians to become included in the culture industry’s starmaking machinery.

The integration of this other contrasting tradition in the production of popular music into the mainstream of the industry is connected to two labor and copyright disputes that took place in the early 1940s. First of all, the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP), an organization that represented composers and publishers and collected royalties for the use of songs on radio and by performers, demanded a 200 percent increase in royalty rates in 1941.\footnote{14} The radio networks refused to pay the increase and subsequently organized Broadcast Music Incorporated (BMI), their own copyright organization, and started to play records that were not under ASCAP’s jurisdiction. This led to the use of non-Tin Pan Alley songs, which generally meant country and western and blues music. In 1942, a musicians’ union strike meant that once again radio was without the records it had relied upon for its shows for the previous decade. The radio networks turned to the only non-unionized musical worker – the vocalist. According to Buxton, this led to further reliance on vocal stars in popular music and a decline in the influence of the big bands.\footnote{15} The temporary dependence on marginal musical sources by radio, combined with the fostered maturation of the solo singing star, permitted the development and acceptance of the performance style of the rock and roll of the 1950s.

Several writers consider the singer Johnnie Ray to be the transitional figure in the development of the contemporary popular music performance style.\footnote{16} Ray freely acknowledged that he was not a very good singer; rather, he could be characterized as an expressionist. He integrated the body and sexuality in his often tearful pleas to his audience; his movement was described by one music critic as “writhing” in torment. He gesticulated wildly with his arms, unlike the controlled, virtually unmoving professionalism of Sinatra, whose only bodily gesture of individuality was the snapping of his fingers. Ray often punctuated the finish of a song by falling dramatically to his knees as he caressed the microphone. Elvis Presley’s characteristic roll of the hips and snarl carried on the tradition of expressing individuality in performance through the public codes of sexual gesture. The stance of the male rocker, the guitar as phallic symbol, and the energy and vitality of stage movement and acrobatics have all become codes of rock performance. The rock performance style emerged out of the confluence of black performance style with the need to express the sincerity of personality and individuality of the performer/star.
The rhetoric of performance

Although the integration of sexuality and expressivity into the performer’s style identifies a break with some of the past traditions of twentieth-century musical representation, there is also a continuity of form in performance. The mode of address, unlike in the play or the film, is constructed to be direct. Whether on record or in concert, the vocalist includes the audience in this address. In the love song, the address is quite direct; the audience replaces the lost or newfound love. In the blues song, the address is often one of lament; it remains a story directed at the audience, as if it were another individual in the conversation. Indeed, structured into the blues song is the call and response between guitar and vocals. It is quite common for blues audiences to “respond” in simple affirmations, as if engaged in conversation. The directness of the address of the musical performer has always constructed the relationship between performer and audience at a very personal level. Classical and professional performance codes attempt to distance the singer from the content of the music. In the attempt to express the emotions of the musical and lyrical content of the song, the contemporary popular music performer has worked to authenticate his or her performance through acknowledgment of the direct nature of the address. The personal sentiments expressed in the song’s lyrics are freely exposed in action and voice. Audience participation and response are encouraged in the concert setting during the performance of most songs. In this way, a ritualized dialogue is maintained between performer and audience.

There also exists a rhetorical dialogic relationship between the concert performance and the recording. Audience members’ use of the concert is mediated by their prior use of the records. In the production of popular music, most of the music performed in concert has appeared in recordings prior to the concert appearance. The concert is used by the band or performer and the recording company as a method of promoting the record commodity; it sustains interest in the product beyond its release date in the popular press, in trade papers, and with fans. The concert is therefore not an introduction to the music for the fans, but a form of ritualized authentication of pleasure and meaning of the records through a “lived” experience; it heightens the significance of the records and the pop star. The fan is demonstrating his or her solidarity with the artist’s message and with the rest of the audience. The concert, then, becomes much more a display and expression by the audience member of a personal commitment to and a celebration of the performer than an appreciation of the performer’s skill and technique in performing live.

Youth and the construction of the contemporary popular music star

Central to the construction of the popular music star of the past forty years is the capacity for its sign to express the difference and significance of youth. It has been argued, by Simon Frith and others, that in the postwar years the teenager became a kind of categorization that broke with the usual form of differentiation on the basis of class. Youth was one of the ways in which categories of consumption could redefine the social world, and therefore it became a useful passageway for the elaboration of
a new consumer subjectivity. The potential youth market in most Western societies grew enormously after World War II. In England, teenage disposable income grew by 100 percent between 1938 and 1958; similarly, in the United States, teenagers’ average weekly revenue grew from $2.50 to $10 a week. Without the weight of family obligation, teens could devote their income completely to the construction of a style of leisure consumption. The cues for the construction of a distinctive style were drawn from the movies and popular music, which began servicing the social needs of this new market.

Several authors have interpreted the new divisions in society created by the development of a separate and distinct youth culture in terms of the way the dominant culture viewed the transformation as a threat. The 1950s have been construed as a period of moral panic, when the dominant culture considered the new ethics, the new focus on sexuality, and the emphasis on leisure, entertainment, and pleasure as assaults on the traditional values of hard work and just reward. Teenage films of the period oscillated between depicting the pleasures of the new morality and the dangers of excess. Popular music—specifically rock and roll—stars represented the incarnation of excess, decadence, and pleasure without connection to morality. For parental culture, according to this interpretation, rock and roll stars presented the emulatory material for the corruption of their teenagers. A clear-cut generational opposition is at the center of the moral panics hypothesis, which asserts that the progressive forces of change aligned squarely with youth and its representatives in popular music, and the disciplining nature of the dominant culture was articulated through the category of parents. Popular music, then, became a kind of battleground of ideal representations to include youth. On one side, black performers like Little Richard and—more dangerously, because their turf was the racial and economic center of American culture—white performers like Elvis Presley and Jerry Lee Lewis, who had integrated black performance styles, represented the out-of-control nature of teenage lifestyle. On the other side, the disciplined singing and performing style of performers like Pat Boone, who reinterpreted rock and roll with larger orchestrations and less sexually suggestive lyrics, represented the acceptable form of youth culture for parents and the dominant morality.

What needs to be integrated into the moral panics hypothesis, which continues in various forms to be at the center of the study of contemporary popular music, is the fact that the oppositional structure between parents and youth has been fostered by elements of the dominant culture itself. The 1950s, therefore, represent not only the clear distinctiveness of a youth culture, but a clear-cut emergence of a market segment for the circulation of goods and services. The new threat of youth is the integration of a consumption ethic into the general culture. The clash between a production and consumption ethos, openly displayed in the 1950s and 1960s, is configured through a generational conflict. Implicit in the structuring of a conflict in generational terms is its ultimate resolution through the succession of one generation by the next. Thus, consumption in the succeeding generation can be seen as a positive form of constructing one’s social identity. The division of the social world into patterns of consumption generally configured around the concepts of style and lifestyle has become naturalized and is no longer in opposition to a morality of work and production. The oppositional structure of the 1950s and 1960s was reconfigured by the 1970s and 1980s into
stylistic differentiation. In terms of the market, the differentiation is labeled market fragmentation or segmentation.

Popular music and its celebrities have operated at the nucleus of the production of stylistic differentiation through consumption and leisure. The presentation of the star, his or her musical roots, style of dress, manner of speech, and public display of sexuality are all significant markers for the structuring and differentiating of youth culture. In the 1960s, differentiations of style were modalized around the display of authenticity as a rupture from the performing styles of past generations. The largest and most enduring transformation took the form of a move toward performers' writing their own material and the related celebration of the singer-songwriter. In this way, new artists appeared to the audience to control their own destinies and thereby directly shaped the entire recording industry to reflect specific aspirations and desires. Top stars demanded and received "artistic freedom" partly through the opportunity to produce their own records and partly through the financial rewards of large royalties and record sales that allowed them to experiment. The star's cultural power depended on a very close affinity with a specific and loyal audience. The star, then, was actively engaged in the construction and differentiation of audience groups, in terms of style and taste, and in authenticating their elevated position. The popular music star, more than other forms of celebrity, had to be a virtual member of his or her own audience in order to sustain his or her influence and authenticity, and the commitment of the fan.

In the 1960s, some performers constructed their authenticity around naturalness and the rejection of performance codes. Folk performers such as Joan Baez eschewed the concept of spectacle in dress and appearance to be more closely affiliated with the audience. Barefoot, without makeup, and wearing simple clothes, Baez would sing with only the accompaniment of an acoustic guitar. The stylistic configuration she portrayed was emulated by a generation of women. Rock performers like the Rolling Stones built their authenticity on their musical and lyrical roots. Their musical and performance style of overt sexuality was built on black rhythm and blues. Bob Dylan's authenticity depended on a literary aesthetic code of the genius creator.

Innovation and transformation in the popular music celebrity

A recurring technique for establishing authenticity in popular music performance is the breaking of codes and the creation of new or transformed codes of style. Style may indicate, for example, a different musical code, a new form of dance, or an altered way of dress. The new style is invariably drawn from a particular audience group or subculture and is then rearticulated by the popular music performer. Style represents a statement of difference as well as a statement of solidarity with the particular audience. A change in style indicates a reassertion by the performer of his or her own authenticity. Any style eventually loses its power to represent difference, as the marketplace continuously appropriates the idiosyncrasies of codes of style for commodity innovation. Thus, the popular music performer is also continuously appropriating new representations of individuality through style.

There are two implications connected to the instability of the codes of style of popular music. First, popular musical style is defined through collectivities. The subcultural and marginal origins for the appropriation of style demand an affinity with
the meaning and significance of the subcultural style on the part of the popular performer. It is also relevant that popular music is collective in nature; the dominant structure in rock music is not the individual performer, but the band. A band may have a leader or key figure who comes to represent the band publicly, but the band’s name usually is more widely known than are the names of any of the individual players. Collective forms of identity, then, are central to contemporary popular music. The individual star may emerge from this emphasis on collective identity, but in distancing him—or herself—from the band, the individual draws on codes of performance that are more connected to the conceptions of the singing star of the 1930s and 1940s.

Second, popular music’s attempts to break and remake codes bring the form into closer alignment with movements in modern art than with other culture industries. The popular musician’s play with style can also be thought of in aesthetic terms. Moreover, many of the British popular music groups of the 1960s and 1970s were formed in the art schools opened in the 1950s. Artistic movements such as avant-gardism, dadaism, impressionism, abstract art, surrealism, and, most significant, pop art have entered into popular music partly in the form of album covers and partly in terms of the claims and pretensions of practice that musicians have maintained in their pose as popular artists. A number of romantic connotations of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century artist have been integrated into the posturings and styles of the contemporary popular music celebrity. The pallor of the rock star recalls the consumptive starving artist or the genius whose body has been ravaged by excess and drugs. The litheness and thin frame recall the youthfulness of the romantic poets, who, like the near mythic Thomas Chatterton, died before they were thirty. The experiential lifestyle refers to a number of artistic movements that have emerged out of the twentieth century. The anarchy and nihilism graphically depicted, for example, by the Who’s ritualistic destruction of their instruments, hearkens back to the dadaists. The bohemian lifestyle that surfaced in many European cities in the nineteenth century has served as fecund ground on which to construct the pop star’s public presence. Finally, the ultimate play with the pretensions of artistic posture are articulated in the music videos produced to embellish the image of the popular group. Videos are often filled with surrealism; they represent avant-garde filmmaking that serves to associate the popular star with the style and romantic connotations of the innovative artist.

Summary

The celebrity of popular music is constructed from elements quite different from those that make up the film celebrity. These elements are related to the technology of production and reception, the form of address that is peculiar to the singing of a song, the industrial and commodity configuration of the musical product, and the audience’s collective and individual relationship to the music and performer. Fundamental to the construction of the popular music celebrity is the conveyance of both commitment and difference. Commitment in this context refers to the audience’s close and intimate relationship to the pop star as well as the way in which the artist conveys his or her authenticity in representing the audience. In some cases, authenticity is displayed through emotional sincerity: the performer’s direct and personal address in the song is
further individualized through the private forms of reception. This kind of personal relationship between performer and audience describes the more classical construction of the popular music star to emerge in the twentieth century. In other cases, authenticity is expressed through the performer's communication of solidarity with an audience. The focus in these instances is on the creation and maintenance of codes of difference and particularity by both audience and performer.

The development of this second discourse on authenticity in popular music coincides roughly with the emergence of rock music. Within rock music, the appeal to authenticity has been developed by industry, artist, and audience into the formation of taste cultures, where the expression of a particular consumption style becomes more central to the public presentation of identity. As discussed above, popular music has been at the interstices of the formation of a new consumer subjectivity. Its active work in construction of new collectivities and new social categories on the basis of lifestyle and taste has bestowed on its representatives — its celebrities — social power. Occasionally, the social power that has congealed in popular music has facilitated the organization of social movements opposed to the general organization of the social structure. In a sense, the configuration of power in popular music identifies an elemental risk in the organization of new social identities in consumer capitalism. Differentiation and innovation to create distinction are fundamental parts of commodity production; however, they necessitate an active play with the meanings and social needs that are embodied in the commodity for the consumer. The popular music celebrity represents the continuous reorganization of consumer subjectivities into collective forms of identity.

In the following section, I present an analysis of the group New Kids on the Block in terms of the way the celebrity signs of the group and its members have emerged in the public sphere from the organization of the popular music industry. The discourses of authenticity, commitment, and difference operate in the formation of any popular music group, and the following hermeneutic reveals the particular manner in which these discourses operate in the formation and success of New Kids on the Block.

The construction of a “phenomenon”: New Kids on the Block

An integral part of the lexicon of the popular music industry and its forms of self-promotion is the concept of the “phenomenon.” Because of the 90 percent failure rate of recordings manufactured to generate profit, the industry is organized toward “hitting.”24 The 10 percent of records that actually generate earnings not only subsidize the failures but also account for the substantial profits of the entire industry. Thus, in actual fact, very few of the recordings made generate most of the revenues. As a result, the industry appears to be disorganized; it seems to be incapable of determining with any consistency which records and acts are going to sell well and which acts are going to be financial losses. The industry attempts to solve this problem in three principal ways: by issuing compilations of recordings that have previously sold well (“greatest hits” records); by concentrating on production, distribution, and promotion of established acts (e.g., the Rolling Stones are what is often called a “bankable” act); and by intensely promoting specific new acts with costly videos, tour support, and advertisements.
The popular music industry is often described as volatile and unpredictable. The product the industry deals with is, possibly more than other cultural products, in the domain of affect and outside of the realm of reason and the rational. Music and the uses of music are very much connected to the emotive side of human existence. The recording industry is constantly trying to tap this emotive side through the production of music. In a sense, it is attempting to contain feelings so that, at least temporarily, they can be defined by singers or songs.

The "phenomenon" in popular music is the recording act that has somehow captured a massive audience. In the language of the industry, these phenomena are out of the industry's control. The term phenomenon, which was used to describe the Beatles in a previous era and New Kids on the Block in the late 1980s and early 1990s, borrows from the manner in which nature is described: much like a hurricane or a tornado, the popular music phenomenon is a naturally occurring event that appears to be unpredictable in time, place, or force. It "hits" with incredible power and, if strong enough, may "hit" more than once. A rash of sales statistics chart the power of the phenomenon: in 1989, New Kids on the Block sold more than fourteen million records in North America, composed of ten charted albums and singles; their album Hangin' Tough was the second best-selling album of that year; in terms of concerts, the group made $73.8 million in ticket sales in 1990, which places them second in all-time concert tour revenues. People's cover story on New Kids reveals in the language of powerful nature: "The Kids are riding the crest of the most frenzied pop-music phenomenon since Beatlemania." Integrated with this force-of-nature conception of popular music's construction of the relationship between the audience and the cultural product is the language of warfare. New musical groups "explode onto the scene," and a recent surge in the popularity of dance music was called an "explosion." In the 1960s, the plethora of successful British bands in North America was described as an "invasion." Following the punk "invasion" of the 1970s, there was the "new wave," which in its terminology successfully blends militaristic language with another metaphor from the forces of nature.

This use of natural phenomenon/battlefield terminology by the popular music press and the industry itself has developed over time into a shorthand method of trying to describe the irrationality that is central to the way the industry operates. As well, descriptions of popular music changes and transformations, often referred to in previous decades as "crazes," have functioned as central metaphors in the discourse of cultural change itself, of a culture in constant transformation and upheaval. It is a discourse that, through its emphasis on unpredictability coupled with the inevitability of change, reshapes people's actions into reactions to these various phenomena. The invasive discourse that surrounds popular music is constructed to encourage us to be caught up in the wave of sentiment that affirms the significance of the latest phenomenon. In that affirmation and acceptance of the new musical sound and group, we collectively are encouraged to let the sentiment of the last phenomenon dissipate into history. With New Kids on the Block, the mainstream press explains that the "fever" they have created has "reached delirium status." The framing of popular music discourse in the language of spontaneous and explosive phenomenal change is also constructed to emphasize the cultural products' close relationship to the audience. What is being underlined is that the audience is determining the style of music, the types of personalities elevated to superstar status,
and the timing of change and transformation. The industry becomes in this construction merely a way of channeling the popular will. As it is explained in one of myriad biographies that have accompanied New Kids' emergence, the group's popularity may be accounted for by the fact that "they care about their fans so much." Popular music phenomena such as the New Kids on the Block are pure expressions of popular will, which is represented as pure sentiment.

To describe the nature of these phenomena of popular music, which are organized around personalities and groups, is thus a very difficult process. They are packaged in a discourse of change and are intimately tied to the way in which cultural change is articulated in postwar American society in particular and Western society in general. This discourse of change is elemental in their formation in the culture and elemental in their construction of power. As well, they house formations of collective sentiment and feeling; in other words, they are defined to a degree by the audience that, through a specific array of cultural products, feels connected to the phenomenon. In embodying a form of collectivity, the popular music phenomenon represents the modern crowd in all its irrationality and emotionality. To extend logically from this, the popular music industry, in its perpetual construction of new phenomena, is an apparatus that tries to organize and focus the crowd's intensity into recognizable forms and products of consumption. The industry is an apparatus for the congealing of emotions and sentiments into recognizable sounds, images, and personalities that work to maintain the intensity of emotion. When the emotional intensity dissipates, the industry works to construct new forms of intense sentiments around new images, sounds, and personalities. In many senses, the popular music industry works to manage the contemporary crowd and, in fact, to organize its irrationality.

The established structure

The industry, in its massaging of public tastes, has developed certain patterns or structures in how new popular music celebrities are presented. What appears to be new and is presented as new and different to a large degree is organized around these structures of representation. Thus, New Kids on the Block, in terms of marketing positioning, style of promotion, and industry support, had certain precursors. The group was also positioned by the industry in clear opposition to and distinction from other forms of music and celebrity images. This form of distinction and opposition is also a well-trodden path; apart from differences that emerge from musical style and the contingency and lived experience of the group's core audience, New Kids on the Block followed this structure.

First of all, central to the identity and position of New Kids on the Block was the youth of the group's members. Within popular music, minor differences in age can be constructed as crucially significant. The emergence of any new star is often organized to present his or her youthfulness in contradistinction to established acts. New stars represent the vitality of their music. They also are constructed as a form of initiation for new music buyers. The bulk of the record-buying public is roughly between the ages of sixteen and thirty-two, and is overwhelmingly male. As discussed above, the music industry is involved in the servicing of a youth market that first arose with the growth in disposable income among youth in North America following the
Second World War. Since the 1950s, popular music stars have represented the same age (and generally the same sex) as the central record-buying demographic. However, there have always been some pop stars who have been marketed to appeal to a demographic much younger and more female than the central record-buying public. New Kids on the Block was a group that was positioned to appeal to the neophyte consumer of popular music.

If one looks at the history of pop stars who have been marketed and positioned in the role of "teen idol," it becomes readily apparent that though all are musical performers, music has often been less central to these individuals' profitability as celebrities than have other products. Marketing of the teen idol generally focuses on the image, which is circulated in a number of formats that go beyond the musical product: posters, animated television series, Barbie-sized look-alike dolls, comic and photobiographical books, fanzines, clothing, and lunch pail designs, to name a few of the more visible and successful examples. The intense focus on the image has often been the line of demarcation between male and female audiences, preteen and young adult audiences, and, in terms of musical categories, pop and rock. The teen idol is structured to appeal to the preteen and young teen female pop audience member and children in general. Teen idols are generally scorned by older music buyers as inauthentic and fabricated. For the younger record-buying market, the teen idol is the conduit for the move from the toy market of childhood into the market of youth. Teen idols are positioned as transitional icons for the youthful audience that will ultimately form the future mainstay of recording industry sales. It is because of this transitional quality that teen idols are commodified in forms and images that are relatively non-threatening to this young audience and to the ancillary market of parents. Indeed, the teen idol is himself generally managed and chaperoned as an entirely dependent being throughout his entire career as a teen idol (which is invariably brief). In this way, the teen idol never appears to be autonomous and therefore is never threatening as an adult; he remains, as long as he is popular, perpetually childlike and dependent. The teen idol's image is similarly controlled and works to reinforce his lack of full independence.

The structure I have outlined concerning the teen idol that emerges from popular music varies somewhat with each incarnation. One can see that often the organization of the popular music star centers on the individual's relative autonomy. The less autonomous and independent the star, the more he is structured purely as teen idol. In the 1950s and 1960s, Elvis Presley surfaced as a popular music star of enormous influence and market appeal. However, unlike "pure" teen idols of the same era, Presley cultivated a clearly sexualized image, which constructed a code of independence, adulthood, and autonomy in his celebrity sign. In contrast, stars like Fabian, Frankie Avalon, and, to a degree, Pat Boone represented nonthreatening types of personalities that were constructed to present a harmless form of sexuality. Their predominant musical form was the ballad; Presley's original claim to fame was his raucous treatment of rock and roll songs.

The question that arises from this delineation of type with the larger structural type of teen idol is, Why do these differentiations exist? The teen idol's image is structured to be ambiguous, particularly with reference to rebellion and sexuality. What must be remembered is that the teen idol is a transitional commodity that must in some instances appeal to parents' sensibilities as well as represent the youth culture
and its spirit of difference and sometime opposition to parent culture. For example, there is an ambiguous quality in most teen idols' representation of sexuality. First, there is the clear structural division between predominantly male performer and young female audience. The male performer, though more often than not a young adult and therefore somewhat older than the younger female audience, is constructed not to be an adult. In terms of image, the obvious signs of puberty are underplayed, so that the male performer is seen as a "representationally removed" image of maleness. The male teen idol is overcoded to have a baby face, on which the absence of facial hair is significant in its articulation of nonmasculinity. The Beatles' bobbed long hair, lack of seriousness, and clean, hairless faces when they became famous can be seen as once again a play with sexuality, as they represented maleness and nonmasculinity simultaneously to their young female audience. Similarly, teen idol pop stars of the 1970s, such as David Cassidy, Leif Garrett, and Shaun Cassidy, possessed these same qualities of prepubescent maleness; they were physically slight and possessed boyish looks and wore hairstyles that resembled the predominant feminized fashion of the period. Serious transgressions of these ambiguous codes of nonmasculinity/masculinity would remove the teen idol from the circulation of commodities aimed at this transitional market.

New Kids on the Block built on these patterns of the teen idol music star. The industry operates as the cultural memory of what is effective in this construction of the transitional commodity. The Beatles, the Monkees, the Jackson Five, the Osmonds, and the Bay City Rollers provided the structural framework for the development of the concept of New Kids. It is interesting to see that most types of commodities that were associated with New Kids had been previously tested and marketed for these precursors. Like the Beatles, New Kids had their own Saturday-morning animated television series. The animated series also indicated that these musical groups were positioned to entertain children, and, when defined as commodities, they moved between toy products and promotional products of the recording industry. Their level of rebellion, then, was somewhat muted. The marketing of New Kids produced a plethora of products aimed at school-age children. Folders for school notes, lunch pails, T-shirts, dolls (which came in several sizes and materials), concert videos, television shows, games, and comic books made New Kids into a sign that served to sell a host of commodities beyond their music. The group also expended into new techniques for reaching specific audience groups. For example, in 1989, 100,000 fans were calling a 900 number each week to hear their favorite New Kid reveal a "secret." A sales estimate for the 1990 New Kids line of merchandise was put at $400 million. Over and above this figure were concert earnings and video and record sales. From 1989 to 1992, New Kids were constantly on the covers of preteen magazines in the magazines' efforts to ensure high sales. Their ubiquity through their attachment to a host of commodities made New Kids the most financially successful pop group ever.

Partly because of this ubiquity, and partly because of New Kids members' appeal as clear pop stars, the popular music press has generally considered the group to be the epitome of inauthenticity. Teen idols are therefore significant not only in terms of their core audience, they are also extremely relevant in establishing the authenticity of other forms of music and performers in the music industry. New Kids on the Block established the domain of the authentic in their obvious commerciality, their overt appeal to children, their studied and controlled rebellion, and their generally
nonthreatening masculinity. These qualities provided the binarism that operates throughout the music industry between pop music and rock music, between the banal and the serious. New Kids were declared a contrivance and a marketing scam, the ultimate example of pop music’s commercialism and superficiality.

New Kids’ emergence does provide virtually all of the appropriate markers to indicate that they were a marketing invention that had been fabricated to be teen idols. There is a subtle distinction being made here. In popular music that is usually called rock, the audience is believed to be independent and therefore able to discern what is good music from bad or contrived music. The performers are likewise independent thinkers and creators. In contrast, the audience of groups like New Kids is considered to be manipulated, duped by marketers and promoters. It is for this reason New Kids appealed only to children; anyone else would have recognized the marketing scheme and identified the inauthentic nature of the group. Like their principal audience, this argument goes, New Kids themselves were controlled and managed by a team of marketers and coaches.

The verity of most of these claims is borne out in any study of the group’s formation. But what is missing in such an analysis is that New Kids itself was used as a foil for the legitimation of other forms of music that appear to be less contrived and, in comparison with New Kids, less commercial. In the entire field of popular music and popular music meanings, these comparisons are useful to define the various markets and market fragments that use music to define their social identities.

Briefly, here is the now overcoded story of the emergence of New Kids from the position of a discourse of authenticity. Maurice Starr, a moderately successful singer-songwriter and former member of the group the Johnson Brothers, had by the 1980s begun developing and managing popular singing groups. In the early 1980s, he had conceived and developed a young black group called the New Edition. In the popular press, the New Edition was immediately compared with the Jackson Five of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Songs were organized around the lead vocals of the youngest member of the group, whose voice had not deepened. Starr composed and produced virtually all of the New Edition’s songs, managed their promotional tours, and helped choreograph their stage shows; the members of the group were purely performers. The group was moderately successful. In the mid-1980s, Starr, in association with Boston talent manager Mary Alford, attempted to produce a similar group with white boys. He scoured the racially mixed Boston inner-city schools for white performers who had some interest in black dance and rap music. Starr held auditions for six months before he constructed the right blend of personalities. From that search, he chose the members of New Kids on the Block (originally called Nynuk). The average age of the performers at the beginning, in 1985, was about fifteen. The youngest, Joey, sang lead vocals for the first recordings in a high soprano voice. Once again, Starr wrote and produced all of the group’s original songs. He also developed the group’s highly choreographed concert show. New Kids on the Block, much as the Monkees were originally nonplayers in the 1960s, did not play instruments, and occasionally in their performances they used taped vocals so that they could continue their choreographed dance routines without interruption. However, the use of taped segments in their programs led to a steady stream of criticism in the press and from some parents of fans, who claimed either that they were too manufactured or that they were not really the singers. After an initial album
that did poorly, their three follow-up albums all sold multiplatinum.\textsuperscript{39} The group toured for months on end, hence their appropriated slogan, "the hardest working act in show business."

As is evidenced by this standard history of New Kids, which has been reproduced in magazine profiles, fanzines, and books, they possessed all of the qualities of illegitimacy: they didn’t write their own songs; they didn’t play their own instruments; they were chosen in a talent search and didn’t develop independent of the music industry apparatus; they made a great deal of money; they appealed to preteens; and they were managed very carefully. All of these truths about New Kids underline their illegitimacy in rock music. Their emergence, then, was more clearly in line with the show business origins of singing stars like Frank Sinatra and — to a lesser degree — Elvis Presley than groups like the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, or R.E.M. What makes them doubly cursed is that they had the appearance of being a group that had come together on its own, when in fact its origins were highly planned. The irony of the entire discourse of authenticity that envelopes rock and popular music is that it is dependent on the existence of such examples for the maintenance of the mainstream of what rock means for other audiences. New Kids on the Block operated as a highly successful scapegoat that maintained an equally fabricated sense of purity of the authentic in other examples of popular music.\textsuperscript{40}

Building difference: music celebrities embodying subcultures

In the construction of social identities among youth, music figures prominently. Likes and dislikes are represented through one’s musical taste, which betrays a series of connected tastes. A celebrity who arises from the popular music industry is thus positioned by both the industry and the audience to represent aspects of difference and differentiation. It is a system of celebrities, where each celebrity sign is partially constructed in opposition to, in contradistinction to, or in relation with other popular music celebrities. New Kids on the Block, much like other groups, established a close rapport with their audience through differentiation from other performers. They made their public identities valuable social markers for their audience. Although not entirely synonymous, the fans of New Kids constructed a series of codes based on these celebrity figures that resembled the structures of meaning of a subculture. The level of commitment to New Kids, the level of what is often called fanatical support, determined the level of understanding of the various codes and histories. This loyalty to and solidarity with New Kids among their fans was expressed in a number of ways, most prominent among which were buying their records and videos, knowing the words to all of their songs, attending their concerts, collecting their images in posters and magazines,\textsuperscript{41} buying "officially" produced and authorized New Kids paraphernalia, knowing the "personalities" of all members of the group, and defending their music and its integrity from attackers. The depth of a fan’s commitment to New Kids could be determined by how well she knew the codes.

Although I have generally spoken of the image as being the key variant in the meaning of New Kids, this image must be contextualized in terms of the kind of music they performed, because the music establishes a clear form of delineation of audience groups. The full meaning of music is difficult to conceptualize. It is embedded with the
affective associations of the listener, which makes any reading of its meaning a game of searching for commonalities in idiosyncratic decoding. Nevertheless, music does have social contexts worked into its rhythms, its musical notation, in the words and phrases and topics that are part of any group’s repertoire. New Kids drew principally from three sources: dance music, which has part of its origins in the Motown sound; Western love ballads; and rap/hip-hop music. Each of these origins had a great deal of significance to the sound and meaning of New Kids.

New Kids’ use of dance music indicated that they were not attempting to appeal to some intellectualized aesthetic. This is music for the movement of the body. In their concerts, the performance was very much focused on dance and movement. The group moved often in unison through a song, in the tradition of black groups of the 1960s such as the Temptations and the Four Tops. No doubt this expression of black dance music had been orchestrated to a large degree by their songwriter and manager, Maurice Starr. The use of young white boys to work through music that arose in African American culture has been a common technique of the entertainment industry of the twentieth century, and New Kids furthered this tradition. Like Elvis, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and the Bee Gees, New Kids used this resource to extend the reach of a certain type of music to a suburban American and youthful population. In the biographical details that appeared in the teen magazines, biographies, and various interviews New Kids members gave, there was an emphasis on their intimate connection to black culture or the music of the street, as they often referred to it. Their Boston accents were identified in People as “coming from the wrong side of the tracks.” Donnie Wahlberg, the recognized leader of the group, has said that he thought of his music as being like basketball, because it kept him away from the dangers of the street. There was a degree of celebration of working-class roots that allowed for the public representation that they came to this form of music honestly: once again, the discourse of authenticity is articulated in the meanings of any popular music celebrity. Four of the five members of New Kids went to the same elementary school, and their humble beginnings as children of large, poor Irish Catholic families reinforced their legitimate right to sing music of the street.

The incongruity between their black dance style and song construction and their white American looks was also used to discredit the New Kids. The group was used to articulate various sentiments about the realm of the authentic and the inauthentic. New Kids’ complete commodification buttressed the rock discourse of musical rip-off and sellout of black musical culture. Moreover, their virtual lack of involvement in the writing of their songs made them vulnerable to accusations of the same kind of rip-off that Chappell and Garafalo have chronicled concerning black performers in the 1950s. The vociferousness of the attack on their credibility served not only to galvanize some fragments of youth culture and popular music criticism against them, but to construct a siege mentality among their fans and the ancillary teen press that supported them. The intensity of the discourse of authenticity worked to establish much clearer uses of popular celebrities for the articulation of social identities and distinctions.

The second source of New Kids’ music presented a different line of demarcation for the use of audiences. The popular ballad, which formed one of the three sources of musical style in their recorded and concert performances, follows in the tradition of the Broadway and movie musical love song and is firmly ensconced in Western
European popular music. It identifies a line of demarcation in terms of the principal audience's gender.

Susan McClary has done some work on the way in which music is defined as masculine or feminine that is relevant to the current discussion. Feminine ending is a term used in music criticism to describe a weak or softened conclusion to part of a composition. Principally, the term has been used in a negative sense. Although McClary begins her discussion with an exploration of the way patriarchy inflects the meanings of classical musical texts, she adapts it successfully to the organization of popular music in her treatment of Madonna and Laurie Anderson. Similar readings can be made of the love ballad, although with much greater emphasis on its social uses than on its textual configuration. The feminized popular musical text has been constructed as the love song, which, in its softened sound, its entreaty (male) voice, and its romantic construction of love, works to construct a female listener. Paralleling the development of the romance novel and the soap opera, the female listener has embraced the love song text in a proprietary way. The New Kids' core audience of young adolescent and preadolescent girls took the love song and not only incorporated its general message into their own lives and everyday experiences, but also constructed a close connection to the artists themselves. The bedroom shrines of New Kids images that many female fans created indicate that the celebrity figure himself has been thought of directly as a romantic possibility. In their choice and performance of these love songs, New Kids on the Block were playing within these social constructions of a feminized text. The love song was a willful acknowledgment of their own fans and a way in which to "talk" to their fans' fantasies directly.

Implicit in the relationship between female fan and the boys of New Kids on the Block was the play with proximity and distance. The love song, in its direct appeal to another individual, is an intimate declaration and an indication that the fan is hearing the personal and private realm of the singer. Popular music works quite specifically in the affective realm, where sentiments and feelings are conveyed. In this sense, the New Kids love song broke down the distance between the pop star and the individual audience member at the very least in the level of fantasy for the audience member. Simultaneously, the emotion and intimacy that the song expressed was being conveyed to thousands, if not millions, of other core audience fans. The subjective experiences that developed from listening to the love song, although not identical among all the fans, would be correlative in the play with the fantasy of intimacy and the reality of distance. For the young female fan, the distance from the personal maintains the pop icon as a nonthreatening personality. The sexual innuendo is real at the emotive level but perfectly impossible at the level of the real. It is this wonderful combination of the feeling of intimacy and the structure of distance that makes the teen idol so powerfully appealing at the level of fantasy.

New Kids members typically presented themselves as personally open and intimate while objectively distant and unknown, except through their images and sounds. The bedroom shrine discussed above articulates the way in which intimacy was connected between the images of the teen idols and the private world of the fan's bedroom. The music, then, was coordinated with the various other sources of information the fan could collect about the members of the group. One of these, a glossy photo album of the band members peppered with their commentary on their feelings, provides the typical play between accessibility to the group members' intimate world and the
impossibility of fully entering that world. In this publication, various "bedroom" pictures are juxtaposed beside performance images in the thirty-page section devoted to each member. Superimposed on an image of a performing, shirtless Jordan surrounded by fans' hands trying to reach out and touch him is the question, "How do you feel about all the girls reaching out to touch you at shows?" His reply maintains the possibility of his fans' possessing him: "If I know they can't reach me I love it. I feel in control of the situation, but sometimes times I'd like to get attacked. It seems like it'd be fun."

The anchoring text for an "intimate" photo of Jonathan in a terry bathrobe invites the audience to complete the romantic sentiment in fantasy: "I think romance is very sweet. I don't think there's too much of it out there these days. Men try to be too macho."

Whereas the love song was central to the maintenance and organization of the New Kids audience, its construction as a feminized and preadolescent discourse also served to delegitimate the group in the eyes of others. Heavy metal music, which, it could be argued, is a celebration of the masculine text and is talked about in masculinized terms of power and hardness, operated as the antithesis to much of New Kids music. Rock music in general also functions as a masculinized discourse that in its self-criticism often tries to purge the feminized love song from the lexicon of what constitutes good popular music. Derogatory terms such as bubblegum and teenybopper music are used to separate the female-constructed popular music audience from the mainstream of male rock culture.

What surfaces from this type of audience differentiation is the kind of identification that is central to each audience group. With New Kids there was an emphasis on what I would call a completing identification: the audience did not identify with the group members directly, but rather in relational terms. The performers were male and the audience primarily female, and thus the normative discourse that underplayed this organization was heterosexuality, which in this construction was played out at the level of a fantasy of intimacy. In contrast, the heavy metal performer, the punk rocker, and the thrash metal idol work to construct an emulating identification with audience members. These kinds of performers are predominantly male, and their primary audience is also predominantly male. The performance is meant to empower, so that audience members see themselves as if they were the performers. In a sense, both forms of identification are the invocations of a normative discourse of patriarchy. The relational completion form of identification proffered by New Kids established that social power is derived from the male figure; the emulative form of identification establishes, first, the bond between the male audience and the male performer and, second, that empowerment flows along these gender lines.

A different layer of meaning was constructed through New Kids' use of another musical/cultural source that was simultaneously built on their relational form of identification with their fans. Through the adoption and adaptation of rap music and hip-hop into their performance, New Kids on the Block established a connotational connection. The general social context connected to this type of music - that is, urban street culture and black ghetto culture - provided two principal meanings for the construction of the celebrity signs of New Kids on the Block: authenticity and contemporaneity.

With the use of black urban forms of music and dance, the New Kids underlined their own humble origins and thus their own claim to a discourse of the authentic.
As well, the musical form connected a social text of populism and non-elitism to the members' positions as public personalities. Drawing on the conventions of current street music was a way of connecting to the audience and indicating that there were no barriers to the music and meanings they conveyed through song and dance.

Second, rap music provided a social context of currency and contemporaneity. To position New Kids as in fact something unique to their cultural moment and thereby distance their constructed sign from previous popular music idols, the new currency of musical expression ensured their status as a contemporary phenomenon. In this way, New Kids and popular music have continued to fill the role of constructing a discourse of change and transformation. And each new phenomenon represents a celebration of change itself. Not only does this celebration of change aid in the circulation of new commodities connected to new social constructions of signs, it also works to reconstruct peripheral cultural phenomena as economically valuable forms of innovation for the mainstream of a cultural industry. Thus, New Kids' sign operated as a signal of the successful integration of popular cultural forms previously marginalized as now aesthetically manipulable cultural commodities.

The meaning of the group

On one level, New Kids operated as a cohesive moniker for public identity. As with other popular music groups, New Kids on the Block was a brand name for a commodity. Although there were five members in the group, there was a concerted effort to maintain the cohesiveness and solidarity of the group behind the group's name. The name stood for their distinctive sound and, by implication, a particular audience. Maintaining consistency around the name ensured a degree of brand loyalty among music consumers. Thus, one of the meanings of the group identity was to organize the popular music market.

On another level, group identity for New Kids grafted them onto a tradition of rock music. At least in the romantic connotations, the musical group is a collective, where the various interests of each band member contribute to the musical sound. As mentioned in the analysis of popular music formations above, the group identity also represents a democratic solidarity among the artists and ultimately the fans. New Kids, even though the group was orchestrated in its formation by a manager, connected itself to this collective spirit of rock music. Instead of an emphasis on the individual, group identity became paramount.

New Kids, however, operated under another tradition that often works in contradistinction to the meaning of the group: that of the highly individualized and mediated teen idol or pop star. In fan literature and printed interviews, the members of the group were presented as possessing individual though very typecast personalities. There was Joey, the youngest member, chosen for his youth, to attract younger audience members. Jordan represented the leading boy-man and was constructed as the best-looking member of the group. Donnie, who frequently appeared in the tabloid press — in 1991 for alleged arson — was constructed as the rebel. Jonathan was the quiet introvert, and Danny represented the more mature masculine personality. Photographs and texts reaffirmed and reinforced these constructed categories for the play of relations with their fans. For example, Danny was frequently depicted as a
bodybuilder, thereby evoking a connotation of hypermasculinity. In contrast, Joey was
desexualized; in at least one book (and in a network TV special) he was represented as
a young performer in the mold of Frank Sinatra, and with the image of Sinatra as pop
icon, Joey established his own image as something that predated and circumvented
the overt sexuality of the entire history of rock music. In sum, what was constructed
was a series of rather simplistic caricatures of boy-types that could be reread and
distinguished for use by their predominantly young female audience. Extensive per­
sonal information about each New Kid was presented to help audience members
choose their favorites. In making the choice of a favorite, the female fan played with
the conception of a greater intimacy and empathy with that particular member. The
meaning of the constructed heterogeneous group, then, was not only to establish a
brand name and a connection to the romantic tradition of popular music, but also to
construct a series of celebrity signs within the group that allowed for fans to play with
the notion of a more personal attachment to one of the members.

Conclusion: dissipation of celebrity status

More than any other form of celebrity, the popular music celebrity, and in particular
the celebrity who emerges from the adulation of a preteen or young teen female
audience, demonstrates the rapidity of dissipation of the power and influence of a
public personality. The reason for part of this dissipation is the way in which the
popular music industry has helped to construct itself as a symbol of change and
transformation. Thus, each new popular music star represents virtually simultaneously
the moment of innovation and the moment of replacement. In popular music's
reconstruction of a youth culture, the succession of apparent new images and sounds
constitutes the representation of change that is often used by the culture at large as a
representation of the vitality of the entire culture.

To explain the particularly rapid dissipation of teen idols, one needs to consider
the way in which the audience has been constructed by the various cultural industries.
As mentioned above, the audience of the teen idol is considered to be irrational, in a
frenzy of devotion to the idol. The fan’s relationship to the teen idol can be thought of
as built on an incredible level of emotional intensity. Thus, the economic power of the
pop star is configured around affect. However, the challenge of affective power is that
it is very difficult to maintain; it is by its very nature subject to dissipation. Because the
recording industry has organized itself around the momentary capturing of expansive
affective power, it is also organized around losing the ability of any given commodity
to produce that affective power. The industry’s solution to its own construction of
successive waves of affect is to produce new commodities that allow for the containing
of collective affect. The pop music celebrity, then, is the convertible personality who
can capture youth’s affective intensity.

What we can conclude about New Kids on the Block is that they achieved through
the industry the status of a powerfully affective commodity. Their sales worldwide of
albums alone were truly staggering and indicate the economic clout they wielded.
However, we can also conclude that New Kids on the Block’s power as a commodity
has dissipated. The group has been succeeded by new so-called phenomena that
maintain the discourse of change that is at the center of the popular music industry
and the culture in general. Indeed, by all indications the performer known as Vanilla Ice led many fans of New Kids to pull down their shrines, although he has now disappeared from public consciousness. For a moment, several of the characters from the television series Beverly Hills 90210 overflowed the preteen magazines, while New Kids occupied only the mail-order pages. In 1994, New Kids attempted a reincarnation as a young adult group with varying degrees of facial hair, more hip-hop music, and extensive writing and producing credits on their music to indicate their new autonomy; however, their new album, *Face the Music*, and their new image disappeared rather quickly from the charts and were virtually shunned both by radio stations fearful of stigma and by music magazines aware of the ever-present backlash to the group’s seen-to-be-illegitimate success. The succession of the play with affect continues with the young and temporarily loyal female fan as it migrates to cluster around new identities produced by the entertainment industries.

Notes

6 Ibid., 27–29.
7 Simon Frith has recounted: “A couple of years ago I went to see Al Green in concert in the Royal Albert Hall in London. At one point he left the stage (and his microphone) and walked through the audience, still singing. As he passed me I realized that this was the first time, in 30 years as a pop fan, that I’d heard a star’s ‘natural’ voice!” Simon Frith, “The Industrialization of Popular Music,” in James Lull (ed.), *Popular Music and Communication* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1987), 53.
8 The rapid expansion of karaoke bars in North America and Europe represents the blending of the authentic background track with the personal for the representation of performance. It is an active positioning of a cultural practice in the interstices between the authentic (and the public) and the private (and the personal). A recent example of this revelation of inauthenticity was the confession of the two young men who performed as Milli Vanilli that they did not sing their songs on record or at concerts. They were purely actors of the songs and lip-synchers. The confession resulted in the duo’s being stripped of two Grammy Awards. Likewise, the group New Kids on the Block was accused on many occasions of using a great deal of prerecorded vocals and music in their programs.
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14 Shepherd, Tin Pan Alley, 97.
16 See in particular ibid., 64–68; Shepherd, Tin Pan Alley, 135–38; and Richard Middleton’s discussion of subjectivity in Studying Popular Music (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1990), 266.
17 It is generally acknowledged that most concert tours are money-losing ventures. Thus, in recent years, many rock bands undertaking major tours have done so with the sponsorship of beer or soft drink corporations, in order to defray expenses.
18 Frith, Sound Effects, 182–94.
19 Buxton, Le Rock, 71.
22 Chatterton, who attempted to create a long-lost poet named Rowley from a previous century, committed suicide at the age of seventeen in the late eighteenth century when his faked discovery and his faked poet gained no attention. What makes this otherwise insignificant event one of resonance is how Chatterton’s life (and death) was celebrated and relived by nineteenth-century romantic poets like Wordsworth, Byron, Keats, and even a young Coleridge. See Leo Braudy, The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 421–25.
24 Frith, Sound Effects, 147. In fact, this statistic on the success of records roughly parallels the success rate for the introduction of any new consumer product.
25 Paul Grein, “New Kids Have Blockbuster Year,” Billboard, December 23, 1989, 10; “New Kids Top Tour List,” Variety, December 13, 1990, 52. Most of these statistics do not indicate international sales of New Kids records. Comparable levels of sales and success were recorded in the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia (to a lesser degree), Japan, and Europe. For example, see International Charts, Billboard, December 16, 1989, 66. Other indications of the group’s “phenomenal” status include the fact that the release of their 1990 album Step by Step established a first-day sales record. Also, New Kids released a series of videos to coincide with their albums. Their first two music video releases became the first music videos to have sales of more than one million copies. See Ed Christman, “New Kids’ Step by Step Sells by Leaps and Bounds,” Billboard, June 16, 1990, 6, 92.
27 Ibid.
29 This is also the rough demographic of the audience for MTV and Much-music, two video music channels in North America. Particularly the teenage demographic
is seen to be an extremely valuable commodity to “capture”: the value of this audience for advertisers is one of the principal motivations for the development of these specialty channels focusing on youth culture.

30 Frith develops the significance of the distinctions between pop and rock in *Sound Effects*, 27–38.

31 In his third and final appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in 1957, Presley’s sexually provocative hip gyrations were not shown; only his upper body was televised. After his first two appearances on the program, in which his entire body was visible to the viewing audience, public furor resulted in the decision to photograph him only in close-up when he next appeared. His full image was thought to be too dangerous to be left uncensored for young female audience members. Alex McNeil, *Total Television: A Comprehensive Guide to Programming from 1948 to the Present*, 3rd ed. (New York: Penguin, 1991), 226–27.

32 David Cassidy, in the tradition of the early 1970s, had shoulder-length extremely straight hair; Leif Garrett, a mid-1970s teen idol, had flowing locks in the style of Farrah Fawcett; Shaun Cassidy, emblematic of the boy-man, had characteristic dimples and baby face.

33 Catalano, *New Kids on the Block*, 4.

34 Dougherty, “The Heartthrobs of America.”

35 A 1990 advertising insert in *Billboard* estimated the various revenues New Kids had amassed from the spring of 1989 to December 1990. Merchandising revenue dwarfed all the other categories: $400 million of a total of $861,373,000 of earnings were derived from merchandising agreements. By comparison, the group’s record sales totaled $143.8 million domestically and concerts totaled $120 million. The ad also identified the products New Kids images were connected with: “posters, t-shirts, hats, banners, buttons (the regular concert fare) . . . . then the merchandise diversified — postcards, poster books, jewelry, baseball-type trading cards, sleeping bags, bed sheets, poster puzzles, beach towels, watches, jackets, cups, laundry bags, balloons, boxer shorts, pajamas, water bottles, rainwear, umbrellas, gloves, scarves, mittens, shower curtains, sunglasses, sunglass cords, lunchboxes, mirrors, slippers, paper tattoos, belts, socks, sweater, storage trunks, bedspreads, and of course, Hasbro Inc.’s two lines of dolls — one in concert clothes with stage set available, and one in street clothes.” Karen Schlossberg, “Merchandising: The Amazing Business of Defining, Controlling and Marketing an Image Explosion” (in an advertising supplement), *Billboard*, December 15, 1990, NK-22, 32, 34. The ad supplement itself was an interesting phenomenon. It indicated, through a series of congratulatory inserts, the number of companies that had been involved in the New Kids’ success.

36 Typical of such reportage is D. Wild, “Puberty to Platinum,” *Rolling Stone*, November 2, 1989, 15–17. Even more typical is the general overlooking of the band in many music publications, including *Creem*.

37 Catalano, *New Kids on the Block*, 16.

38 This controversy plagued New Kids’ claims to legitimacy or “authenticity.” The latest claim, made in early 1992, is that they in fact did not sing major parts of their albums. So, in this latest variation not only is their authenticity of performance challenged, but their authenticity in the “official” records of their music is put under suspicion.

39 The original album, after the success of their second album, also went platinum (i.e., had sales of more than one million).
The age of listeners attracted to New Kids was quickly seen as a "problem" for radio programmers throughout North America. For example, Mike Edwards, a programmer for a Buffalo, New York, station, explained that "some of our research has shown burn on the New Kids and that the perception of playing too much of New Kids can be a negative for you. We have to be very cautious." Other programmers indicated that by April 1991 stations were getting a lot of hate calls about the group. Many stations chose not to play the group except during certain early evening hours. Their fear was that they were losing an older listening demographic, a demographic much more lucrative to their advertising clientele than six- to ten-year-olds. Sean Ross and Thom Duffy, "Radio Gridlock on New Kids' Block?" Billboard, April 28, 1990, 4, 74.

The female preteen magazine has a heavily overcoded structure. Operating as fantasy magazines organized around male adolescent stars, Tiger Beat, Bop, Teen Machine, Superteen, and others build each of their segments around full-page or two-page photo spreads of these individual stars. Thus, from 1988 to 1991, the members of New Kids on the Block individually were repeatedly the subjects of these photo features. The utility of the magazines is as sources of these one- or two-page photos for decoration of the bedroom. The magazines must reorganize themselves constantly so that the images presented are in concert with the newest stars of television, film, and popular music. In order to do so, they sponsor a plethora of contests and polls interspersed with profiles of idols. The contests represent an essential marketing technique for a magazine industry that must continually re-present fantasy materials for the preteen female audience.


Indeed, Starr's choices of the five members had a great deal to do with their familiarity with black street culture and break dancing. For instance, Donnie's claims to fame were his dance imitations of Michael Jackson and the bravado to engage in spontaneous rap performances in the local park. Jordan and Danny were part of rival break-dance groups who would practice and perform their moves in downtown Boston every Saturday well before they became New Kids members - white kids engaged in what was an essentially black youth activity. As Danny's fellow break-dancer and friend David Harris described it: "We would select a suitable store and start break-dancing on it, with cushions in our hats ... We'd perform for half an hour or so then move on to another store. By lunchtime, we'd have earned around forty dollars, which wasn't bad for thirteen and fourteen year olds." Robin McGibbon, New Kids on the Block: The Whole Story by Their Friends (New York: Avon, 1990), 16.

See Chappell and Garafalo, Rock 'n' Roll Is Here to Pay.


Ibid., chs. 6–7.


According to their lawyer, Barry Rosenthal, an integral part of the marketing of New Kids was to construct them as five individuals who "have their own set of fans. Our concept was to make these kids bigger than the group so they cannot be
replaced. Fan appeal to the kids as individuals was the insurance that we did for our clients.” Advertising insert, Billboard, December 15, 1990, NK-32, 33.

In addition, they changed their name to just the initials NKOTB, and the first single from the album, the raunchy “Dirty Dawg,” was released on a white label. Even Columbia’s publicity listed the group in anagram fashion as BONK-T. They dropped their Svengali, Maurice Starr, and took on other producers who allowed them greater control to return to the musical roots they love. See Craig Rosen, “Columbia, NKOTB ‘Face the Music’ with New Album,” Billboard, January 15, 1994, 10.