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Folk on the fringes of popular music culture – an insider’s reading of the object-signs.

Abstract and full paper

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Abstract

My paper addresses methodological issues arising from my recent doctoral research (Wilby 2013) on amateur music-making as intersubjective discourse in folk clubs. In particular, it examines the dilemma of claiming validity for research findings gained from observation, interpretation and participation by a researcher already ‘steeped’ in the shared values and experiences of folk club participants – an academic by day and a folksinger by night. It considers whether scholarly authority is derived from objective observation, on the basis that empirical findings may be treated as typical of a wider ‘universe’ of folk clubs, or from the researcher’s unique perspective founded on 40 years of familiarity and personal history of attending and organising such events.

My doctoral research supported the thesis that musicians and participants at folk clubs and similar gatherings acquire and reaffirm a sense of social and communal identity through involvement and interaction within the symbolic world of the music event. My objective was to demonstrate how an ethnographic study of music-making at a grass-roots level – and within the seemingly peripheral, non-commercial and non-institutionalised domain of amateur music-making events – is capable of enriching our understanding of popular music culture.

My attempt to resolve methodological concerns of the researcher’s own relationship with the domain under scrutiny rests on the notion of intersubjectivity in the sense that has been associated with participant observation and anthropological research by the so-called

'Chicago School' (Prus 1996). If we consider a social gathering of friends who simply want to share their music, it is possible to observe and interpret their performances – musical and social – as instances of symbolic interaction (Goffman 1959; Garfinkel 1967) in which a contextual framework of meanings becomes apparent and is shared by participants. Such a framework is based on routine, etiquette, ritual, appropriate role-play and identity, and provides a cultural locus for shared values, histories, tastes and notions of creativity.

Within this framework, it is possible to map out a series of *object-signs* as constituent elements of the intersubjective domain of the folk club. These include literal 'objects' as well as participant roles, musical repertoires, event formats and economic signifiers.

The identification of object-signs provides the means of characterising amateur music-making as social and cultural practice or discourse (in the Foucauldian sense), based on shared, intersubjective readings of objects by participants. It draws on their own terms of reference in the interpretation of such signs, along the lines set out by Garfinkel's concept of indexicality as well as Bourdieu's reflexivity. I contend that this offers a richer understanding of folk clubs as cultural events than might be derived from empirical approaches that seek to define them as observable communities; it takes into account the experiential elements of participants' interpretation of the event and their own sense of identity.

Methodologically, an analysis of object-signs is more accessible and comprehensible from a perspective based on the researcher's own familiarity of the domain. My paper sets out the case that recognition of participants' sense of propriety, community and identity, and how this stems from the sharing of a framework of meanings, makes it possible to develop a deeper understanding of the practice of music-making, or as Christopher Small described it, 'musicking' (1998) in the 'twilight zones' of the small back-room folk clubs. Furthermore, this can be achieved, arguably, in a way that offers more profound insights into popular music culture than those gleaned from first-hand observation based on quasi-objective descriptive accounts alone.

(567 words)

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Introduction – from the perspective of the ‘insider’.

In keeping with the theme of this symposium, my paper reflects on the role of the ethnographer working on the boundaries or fringes of mainstream popular music culture. My interest is in folk music, as performed and shared in small folk clubs and music sessions, usually by enthusiastic amateurs, often in the back rooms of public houses. The focus of my research is not the music itself, nor its provenance, nor its insights into folklore and histories of cultures past. I am more concerned with the *practices* of sharing live performances of music and the extent to which such performative events constitute a specific ‘amateur music’ discourse, characterised by its own sets of rules, roles, shared values and identities.

My argument here is that the ‘insider’, as a researcher, has the potential to gain insights into cultural practices and shared experience which may be denied to the ‘objective’, dispassionate anthropologist even if the latter were to become immersed in his or her area of study as a participant-observer. By ‘insider’, I refer to someone who is already immersed and has built up not only a longstanding involvement and interest in the field of study, but also a set of enriched and relevant personal experiences as a participant known to, and accepted by fellow participants whose behaviours and interactions are the subjects of enquiry. My case is that the ‘insider’ is able to achieve unique insights, ironically through the act of *objectifying* elements of that culture but defining these elements in terms of the meanings they acquire within the cultural event under scrutiny, meanings that are accessible through the terms of reference shared by participants of that event and not least by the ‘insider’ him or herself. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, the ‘objects’ thus become meaningful as ‘object-signs’.

Of course it is not unusual or surprising for research at postgraduate and doctoral level to be driven by the personal interests and engagement of the researcher. My observations as a research supervisor have shown that perennial methodological issues of objectivity, authority, credibility and veracity – arise in particular when research students are unwilling to leave the comfort zone of personal interest. More astute students realise quickly that one of the hardest tasks facing them is to produce convincing findings by stepping outside the zone and objectifying one’s own value-laden experience. And from *my* personal experience as a PhD researcher, I can confirm that this is not a problem to be taken lightly.

My recent doctoral research into amateur music-making (Wilby 2013) sought to investigate the sharing and performance of music as discursive practice, with particular focus on amateur musicians in English folk clubs. My personal involvement in the world of folk clubs extends back to my role as compere for a college folk club in 1970. My research included a case-study examination of three folk clubs in which I had, to varying degrees, personal involvement as an organiser, performer, audience member and music journalist. It was intended to illuminate music-making at a grass-roots level and offer a characterisation of this as intersubjective practice, through which musicians and participants at folk clubs develop a sense of social and communal identity by engaging with the symbolic world of the event. It is from this insider's research perspective – and with reference to the thesis presented in my dissertation – that I present this discussion.

Folk clubs – liminal and liminoid domains.

My consideration of the methodological implications of my research begins with this proposition: *In modern industrial capitalism, the performance and sharing of music at folk clubs can be a subversive experience.*

i) Why modern industrial capitalism?

The basis of my proposition is that the commodification of music-as-product forces a distinction between 'popular music' and 'music of the people' in the anthropological or vernacular sense. Within capitalism, the latter acquires its own borderline personality. Tim Wall offers a simple distinction between 'folk' and 'popular' music. For him, folk is 'seen as an organic, communally produced music,' while popular is 'industrialised and professionalised music production for mass consumption' (Wall 2003, p.29). Jason Toynbee recognises the inadequacy of 'music-as-commodity' defining performer-audience relationships at localised or amateur music events; he uses the term 'proto-market' to qualify this concept:

... the defining characteristic of the proto-market is that the level of activity cannot be explained by economic factors alone. People are engaged in music-making sometimes for the love of it, sometimes for the esteem and sometimes because they expect in the future to enter the music industry proper. (Toynbee 2000, p.27)

Christopher Small (1995, 1998) insisted that the objectification of music as a 'composition' or 'performance' or 'thing' conceals its transcendent nature as human experience and he created the term 'musicking' to emphasise the nature of music as social or collective practice. His proposition was that '*music is not primarily a thing or a collection of things, but an activity in which we engage*' (Small 1998, p. 50 – author's italics). This conceptualisation of music highlights its facility to shape and constitute the fabric of human experience. I have summarised this perspective: 'Music as a 'thing' may have emotion embedded in its meaning, but 'musicking' as a practice has meaning embedded in the emotions it creates and the sense of shared identity that it engenders' (Wilby 2013, p15).

In the context of industrial capitalism, critics of popular music from Adorno (1941) onwards have concentrated on its mass appeal through standardisation. Tim Wall summarises a commonly shared thesis on the production of varying forms of popular music as 'the formulaic products of a manipulative media and music industry... [in which] the artists we favour are just part of a music culture that seeks to exploit us and make us conformist consumers and workers', (Wall 2003, p.130). My research into folk clubs as communities – and my personal experience of these – has pointed to the amateur folk club as constituting a discourse, one which draws on the contemporary values, meanings and interpretation of events, past and present, but simultaneously detaches itself from the hegemonic mainstream and provides a voice and identity for its participants in which such values may be challenged or subverted. This leads us to the second part of my proposition.

ii) Why subversive?

Ian Burkitt (2008) describes the world of entertainment and diversion within industrial capitalism as one where individuals find 'freedom to play with ideas, fantasies and materials' and thus 'experience some sense of transcendence over social structural limitations' (Burkitt 2008, p.143). He cites Victor Turner's (1982) distinction between 'liminal' and 'liminoid' experience; the former refers to the suspension of normative structures whereby members of entire social group engage in ritualistic or life-changing events, while the latter is more specific to industrial capitalism and provides a means – some might say a 'safe outlet' – to challenge the values and assumptions enshrined within

our political economy. Burkitt offers the theatre as an example of liminoid activity but his characterisation could be readily transferred to the amateur folk club:

...it is part of an 'entertainment industry' but is one in which the dramas of everyday life can be heightened and the underlying causes of collective experiences and tensions can be explored and critiqued. In this way, theatre can provide a liminoid space in which the rituals of everyday life can be played with, heightened, subverted, reassembled, made grotesque and critiqued. It is an experience that is both part of the time and space of industrial capitalism, yet one that finds ways to break free from it. (Burkitt 2008, p.143)

I have argued that the performance of music at folk clubs, especially at the level of the amateur, may be viewed as liminoid activity that draws on a wider ideological context in order to derive its own meaning:

Rather than provide an escape pod from the rigours of daily life, the microcosm feeds from the cultural universe in which it floats. The meanings produced and shared are not self-contained but are drawn from – and reflect – wider discourses brought into the domain by those who take part. (Wilby 2013, p.207)

Recognition of how participants intersubjectively share the moment of the music-making event, and the construction of its sets of meanings *for them*, is essential for the ethnographer. The meanings of the event are derived through subversive readings: overtly and in many cases politically in the emergence of the folk club scene from the so-called 'folk revival' on the 1960s (see Bean 2014 for detailed and personal accounts by folk performers of this phenomenon) but more broadly if we consider subversion as a challenge to the mainstream institutions of the popular music industry, replacing it with an alternative repertoire of styles, performance rituals and network of events, specialist media and 'folk' celebrities.

The construction, reinforcement and sharing of these alternative sets of meaning are significant in their shaping of intersubjective identity. If the music community defines itself through shared agreement of such meanings, the ethnographer's observation of how participants relate collectively to objects that make up the domain of the music club can bring us closer to an understanding of this identity.

Objectivity and object-signs.

My identification and application of the concept of the 'object-sign' enabled me to construct an analysis of music-making events that could be presented as more rigorous, systematic and arguably testable than a set of descriptive or anecdotal observations.

The concept is based on a definition of the 'object' offered by Robert Prus:

...any item, thing, distinction, concept, behavior, or image to which people may refer (i.e., become aware of, attend to, point to, acknowledge, consider, discuss or otherwise act toward)' (Prus 1996, p.30).

The term 'object-sign' represents a specific application of Erving Goffman's concept of the 'sign vehicle' (1959) in which attention is given to the representational relationship established between the sign and the participant of the event. Through his or her reading of the sign, and the sharing of that reading with fellow interlocutors, the participant is able to acquire an identity as one who is part of the group dynamic and discursive experience. Symbolic interactionism offers a methodological framework in which the 'text' of amateur music-making may be analysed.

Object-signs are not confined to physical objects, such as musical instruments, PA systems or the arrangement of furniture in the room, but may also refer to interpretations by participants of roles, event formats and performance practices. For my research of folk clubs, I established a framework of such signs based on the following headings:

- i. People, hierarchies and role relationships;
- ii. Physical object-signs;
- iii. Event formats;
- iv. Repertoires, styles and practices;
- v. Economic relationships (Wilby 2013).

Within this framework, the ritual and narrative of the folk club event could be defined through the significance of object-signs for its protagonists. Membership of the 'club' (formal or symbolic) calls on a shared understanding of the role and significance of objects and how their combined presence within the domain of the folk club symbiotically reinforces their meanings.

To illustrate: a consideration of 'people' as object-signs alerts us to unspoken agreements, by participants, on hierarchies and roles within a folk club setting which establish cohesion of identity and role expectations, reflecting Robert Merton's concept of the 'role set' (1969). 'Event formats' highlight shared understandings of conventional and appropriate behaviour for participants for concert-style events, music sessions or 'singarounds'. In the context of varying and elusive definitions of 'folk' music, 'repertoires and styles' refers to shared understandings within folk clubs of what may count as suitable and acceptable material to perform and the extent to which relatively unskilled, amateur performance is tolerated or even encouraged. 'Economic relationships' considers the symbolic values of admission charges and payments to guest artists within a non-commercial setting.

As a participant observer, the identification and analysis of object-signs offered two important benefits. Firstly, they provided a conceptual template of analysis which could be applied to a range of music-making situations, not only amateur folk clubs but any event that may be defined in Small's terminology as 'musicking'. This is not to deny the essentially interpretative nature of sign analysis or to claim the potential to reproduce observable findings but, as a template, it offers a means of exploring music-making – or for that matter any form of cultural activity – to produce significant insight into popular culture. Secondly – and, for the purposes of this paper, more importantly – it provided a means for an 'insider', like myself, to objectify a world of which I had become intimately familiar and to provide a set of conclusions about that world which would hopefully be considered as scholarly and authoritative.

Indexicality and reflexivity – the insider's terms of reference.

In his appraisal of traditional ethnography, Paul Willis (1976) is critical of the participant observer playing a passive role and argues the need to establish a theoretical perspective to enable selection and interpretation of observations. A manifesto jointly authored by Willis and Mats Trondman (2002) advocates 'Theoretically Informed Methodology for Ethnography' (or TIME) as a means of producing significant and unpredicted findings from empirical observation. They refer

to Harold Garfinkel's (1967) thesis that meanings of social events should not be imposed externally through structures devised by ethnographers but instead be sought as derivations of social life as experienced by the participants of those events. This search for 'meaningfulness' relevant to and generated within any specific social situation is described by Garfinkel as indexicality. Meanings that people attach to objects within a social situation are derived from a context in which actors intersubjectively assume roles and identities appropriate to that situation.

Garfinkel has effectively provided a justification for the 'insider' ethnographer whose own long-term experience of the social situation under examination enables him or her to 'make sense' of a situation from the perspective of those under observation. Actions of members of a social group are 'rational' when viewed from within their own terms of reference and the participants' construction of social reality. To refer to actions and their meanings as 'indexical' thus highlights the derivation of their associated meanings from the context of that group whose identity is characterised by the normative behaviours of group members.

Pierre Bourdieu's interpretive approach to sociology explores similar methodological territory when setting out the 'problem' of reflexivity (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), rendering it impossible for knowledge of a social situation to be wholly objective. Not only do we need access to protagonists' terms of reference to understand meanings within a social system, we also need to acknowledge the discourses which regulate social practices and the power relations that are implicit within these.

For the purposes of my doctoral research, the 'folk scene', may be conceptualised in Bourdieu's terms as a 'field', in his words 'a network, or configuration, of objective relations between positions' (*op cit*, p.97). In order to engage with this 'field', it became necessary to draw on a combination of two reference sets: that of the researcher and that of the practitioner. In Bourdieu's terminology, these constitute the 'habitus' in which I develop an understanding of the normative frameworks of appropriate thought and action through experience and knowledge, or 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1986).

This had important implications for my mode of research. The cultural capital invested in me as an academic *and* as a practitioner impacted on the social relationships that I shared with

participants at folk clubs. My status *as a practitioner* called for full immersion by playing guitar, singing, listening to and talking about music and socialising with fellow participants as friends, colleagues and 'folkies'. My 'status' *as an academic researcher* accorded me the authority to engage in appropriate research activities outside that social situation: to conduct interviews and instigate social media discussions in the name of 'research'. It called for judgement on my part to determine which mode of activity was appropriate for each situation. Reflexivity highlights the impact of the observer on the observed and, as a field researcher, I risked undermining my social engagement with participants, for example, by taking copious notes at a folk club or making audio and video recordings of social interactions.

Conclusion – the role and rationale of the intersubjective researcher.

In the field of ethnomusicology, folk music may bring its mandolin to the party but is rarely asked to play. A cursory browse through archives of the journal *Popular Music* suggests that rock, jazz, hip hop, punk and blues are more likely to attract scholarly attention than folk as 'popular' forms of music. While there is a vast body of work on folk music in relation to histories, traditions and folklore, studies of contemporary practices in folk music performance are relatively few (for example Brocken 2003, Finnegan 2007 and the often cited but not updated works by Georgina Boyes, 1993, and Niall MacKinnon, also in 1993). Folk clubs may represent a peripheral form of cultural practice, under-represented by mainstream media and designated as specialist, minority or, in a derogatory sense, 'amateur' within popular culture, but they have also received limited academic attention despite their rich potential as sites for the observation of 'musicking' which are relatively (but not entirely) shielded from the market-driven discourse of the popular music industry. Ethnomusicology does of course provide insights into the cultural context of music itself through the recording of experience of performers and composers and the social situations they have encountered. In his discussion on the relevance of ethnomusicology to the study of British folk music, Jonathan Stock argues:

the researcher has the responsibility of living among the researched; living as far as possible as one of the researched; taking full part in their musical lives; and gradually coming to understand, typically through personal engagement in performance, what music really means in that particular society. (Stock 1999)

Indeed, the benefits of this form of research would be the development and dissemination of better understanding of traditions and cultural identities. However, in this paper, I hope to have elaborated on the potential for ethnographic research into the practices of amateur music-making rather than the products. Folk clubs provide fitting territory for liminal experience and exploration of the peripheral world of popular culture, places where amateurs and enthusiasts gather to share music in settings that are simultaneously informal but, in their own discursive terms, regulated and shaped through intersubjective meaning production.

It is a territory that is both accessible yet implicitly self-referential. Arguably this provides a challenge to the anthropologist seeking to make sense of the meanings produced, but one that is more readily met by the informed participant who is in the privileged position of being able to observe popular music culture from the inside looking out.

(3088 words)

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