THE SONG REMAINS THE SAME: AUTHENTICITY IN
NOSTALGIA-BASED TRIBUTE BANDS

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Mark David Carpowich
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The Undersigned Faculty Committee Approves the

Thesis of Mark David Carpovich:

The Song Remains the Same: Authenticity in Nostalgia-Based Tribute Bands

Eric Smigel, Chair
School of Music and Dance

Kevin Delgado
School of Music and Dance

William Eadie
School of Journalism and Media Studies

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Song Remains the Same: Authenticity in Nostalgia-Based Tribute Bands
by
Mark David Carpowich
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Originating in the late 1970s with the Broadway production Beatlemania, the tribute phenomenon has grown into a global industry, providing a musical simulacrum for fans eager to relive an experience that might have occurred decades earlier. Due in part to the current climate of pop-music fans’ near-obsessive interest in their own cultural artifacts, tribute bands have thrived in the twenty-first century. Also contributing to the rise of the tribute phenomenon has been the unprecedented access to previously recorded material, which has not only allowed fans to become familiar with music and performances from the past, but also made it easier than ever for tribute performers to replicate original acts in nearly every way—specific musical instruments and accessories, performance techniques, on-stage mannerisms, costumes and hairstyles, and vocal inflection, to name just a few. Aided by cues offered by audio and video recordings, tribute musicians are in a unique position to accurately recreate the music of the past, potentially resulting in an authentic musical experience for audiences who may never have had the chance to see a particular original act in concert.

This thesis considers tribute performers in the context of a seven-category model that examines their musical, visual and ephemeral qualities, and uses it to evaluate the efforts of three veteran tribute acts to accurately simulate an original act’s concert experience in order to create a hyperreality. That hyperreality, in turn, can yield an authentic performance, enabling audiences to effectively experience an occurrence that is otherwise no longer possible to realize. The findings of this research suggest that, through meticulous attention to detail and an unwavering desire to carry on the musical legacy of an original act whose members no longer perform together, tribute musicians can create an authentic musical experience for fans by establishing a hyperreality based on the accuracy of their imitation.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Fan adoration of rock musicians has been around as long as the genre itself. From teenage girls dreamily watching Elvis Presley perform on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, to the Beatles trying to perform over the piercing screams of their audiences, to fan clubs and magazine-cover idolatry, rock-and-roll would be incomplete without the die-hard attitudes and blind loyalty of fans. So when Jutta and Lena Verworrn decided to fly from their native Germany to the United States in the fall of 2011 to hear the music of Neil Diamond performed live, they were not doing anything particularly unusual. Until, that is, you realize that their trip was planned around seeing David Sherry, a Diamond tribute artist, and not the singer himself. “Most tribute bands lack the passion Neil brings to his performances,” Jutta Verworrn explains, “and this is what his music is all about. [Sherry] has his own style and charisma, and his voice is fantastic. He is not a copy of Neil Diamond....”¹ But, in many ways, he is, and makes a living hoping his fans agree.

David Sherry is among thousands of musicians around the world who work as professional tribute artists, performing the music of any variety of rock and pop musicians to adoring audiences. Many strive not only to impersonate a famous musician, but also to recreate elements of specific albums, songs, and other factors associated with a given band. For instance, The Fab Four, a Southern California Beatles tribute act, employs Jerry Hoban, the same Ed Sullivan impersonator who appeared in the 1994 film *Pulp Fiction*, to introduce the band at its shows around the country. It is this attention to detail, and willingness to go above and beyond the music to add to the overall live-performance experience, that sets some acts apart and invokes a degree of authenticity. Unlike impersonators (who lack a musical attention to detail) and cover bands (which lack a visual attention to detail), tribute performers’ acts are inextricably linked to authenticity.²

² Shane Homan, ed., *Access All Eras: Tribute Bands and Global Pop Culture* (New York: Open
The purpose of this research is to examine the oft-debated concept of authenticity within the context of what has become known as the tribute phenomenon. Thanks to the development and expansion of recording technology during the latter half of the twentieth century, it is possible for musicians today to mimic the songs and stage-performance styles of artists from the past, in order to provide audiences with musical simulacra. Though some musicians play simply for fun, others go to greater lengths to achieve authenticity in their presentations of the music of others; these artists will be the subject of this thesis.

It is important at the outset to distinguish the term “authentic” from others relevant to the tribute phenomenon, such as “identical” and “accurate.” While the former is typically considered a subjective measure of performance, tribute acts may use instruments and costumes sonically or structurally identical to those of an original act, in order to create a musically, historically accurate performance of that act’s music. Recording technology allows for modern musicians to study a piece of music and perform it accurately, relative to the original, in terms of specific notes played, dynamics, timbre, etc. Although a tribute performer cannot literally recreate a specific historical context of a performance—for instance, a Jimi Hendrix tribute performer playing “The Star-Spangled Banner” on guitar cannot hope to recreate the sociocultural context that made Hendrix’s performance at Woodstock such a monumental moment in rock history— he or she can use identical means to establish a historically accurate hyperreality for audiences to use as an imaginarium for a musical experience.

The word “authenticity” is one to be used delicately, as it is applicable in a variety of musical contexts ranging from classical to pop. Much of the musicological debate surrounding the term exists in the context of early music; however, more recent literature has expanded its relevance to the tribute phenomenon. Some performers bill themselves as tribute musicians in spite of adding a twist to the music they love—the all-lesbian classic-rock tribute Lez Zeppelin, the all-little-people rock act Mini KISS, the senior-citizen-garbed ’90s alternative-rock tribute band Geezer—but this thesis will primarily examine the tribute artists who attempt to present straight-ahead, serious recreations of their favorite acts’ music.

University Press, 2006).

3 Of course, Hendrix himself could not recreate this moment were he alive today.
and live performances. The authenticity that these bands seek is a primary theme in this research, and will be discussed as an achievable quality to be pursued and employed by musicians. The research to be undertaken in this thesis will define authenticity as the realization of a performer’s effort to create a hyperreality for audiences through a detailed, faithful, and historically accurate recreation of an original act’s music and live performance, relative to original performance recordings (audio or video) from albums or even famous performances (e.g., the Beatles’ rooftop concert of 1969).

The tribute phenomenon has been a part of popular culture around the world for decades, having begun in earnest with the 1977 Broadway musical Beatlemania. Inspired by hearing his young daughter sing Beatles songs, and realizing their appeal to a new generation, music manager Steve Leber created the show and cast four musicians who spent nearly a year analyzing the Beatles’ music and stage presence “with the academic rigor of a scientist decoding a DNA strand.” Though the show ended in the early 1980s due to a legal challenge posed by the surviving Beatles on the basis of a proposed Beatlemania feature film, the potential success of a tribute act had become apparent, and the tribute phenomenon was born.

On the West Coast, tribute artists began to emerge shortly after the Broadway debut of Beatlemania. Randy Hansen is a Seattle-based guitarist who in 1977 started Randy Hansen’s Machine Gun, a trio dedicated to performing the music of Jimi Hendrix, and 35 years later still tours as a Hendrix tribute performer. Dave Brock began working in Los Angeles as a Jim Morrison tribute artist in the early 1980s, when he was cast as the singer in The Jim Morrison Rock Opera. The production ran out of money and folded after six months, before it even debuted; Brock elected to not let the time he spent learning the part go to waste, however, and has spent the past three decades performing in a Doors tribute band called Wild Child. In 2010, he was chosen to be the permanent singer in a band alongside Doors co-founders Ray Manzarek and Robby Krieger.

In the meantime, The Beatles continued to be perhaps the most popular band to emulate during the early days of the tribute phenomenon. David Brighton is a longtime

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David Bowie tribute artist who will be the subject of a case study in Chapter Four, but originally found work in Los Angeles’s tribute scene in the early 1990s as a George Harrison tribute artist. “The tribute world was kind of a small circle back in those days,” he says.

When the Beatlemania show was ended for legal reasons, it splintered off in a lot of different directions. There were many casts, and they all went out and started their own touring projects. Then other people started popping up doing it around the country, because they saw it was lucrative. But then they started fighting over the gigs and undercut each other. Some people would call up to the venues where a Beatle group was booked and pretend they were from Apple [Corps] and say, “We’re going to sue you if you have that band, but you can have this band.” At the time that I got in, there were still what they call the “Beatle wars” going on in some circles.5

Several decades later, thanks to the increased ease of access made possible by the internet (including YouTube, tribute-band web sites, message boards, and audio-file sharing), tribute acts now enjoy a higher profile and greater potential fan base than ever before, to the extent that CBS’s Late Show with David Letterman hosted a weeklong celebration of tribute bands in November 2010. Annual multi-band festivals such as The Tribute Festival in Minnesota, Tributefest in Southern California, and Glastonbudget in the United Kingdom have proliferated in recent years. In cities across America, venues of all sizes routinely book tribute bands onto their calendars; for instance, the House of Blues in San Diego hosted tribute acts on three of the final seven nights of November 2011, with other clubs following suit.6 The diversity of groups scheduled during this time period (including tributes to Rush, Depeche Mode, Johnny Cash, Bon Jovi, and REM) suggests the popularity of the tribute-band phenomenon itself, and not necessarily any specific genre or performer.

Some of the most popular tribute acts pay homage to rock and pop bands from the 1960s, ’70s and ’80s. Among the most successful is Björn Again, an ABBA tribute founded in Australia in 1988; nearly twenty-five years later, the group has played more than 4,700 shows in seventy countries.7 The act has since become a franchise, with different regional casts performing around the world, and has opened the door for other tribute acts such as

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5 David Brighton, telephone interview by author, February 11, 2012.
6 At least seven other tributes were scheduled elsewhere in town during the same weeklong period.
7 This number is staggering compared to the original ABBA, which played only 160 concerts in sixteen countries.
Arrival from Sweden, which touts the inclusion of original ABBA musicians and the group members’ Swedish heritage as evidence of authenticity. The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, and Led Zeppelin are some of the additional acts from decades ago that have a large number of tribute bands honoring them.

There is a strong nostalgic element to the tribute phenomenon\textsuperscript{8}, one that has resulted in an unprecedented demand in popular culture for musical and cinematic replays of the recent past. The first decade of the twenty-first century was overrun with efforts to relive recent history, a phenomenon that Simon Reynolds refers to as “retro.”\textsuperscript{9} Among its characteristics, he says, are its appeals to the relatively immediate past; an element of exact recall, made possible with audio and video recordings; and its involvement of artifacts of popular culture.\textsuperscript{10} These attributes are important parts of the tribute phenomenon, which may explain its unprecedented popularity after the turn of the century.

While many of the most successful and enduring tribute acts are those that perform as defunct acts, there is hardly a shortage of tribute musicians playing the music of original acts that still tour. U2, the Dave Matthews Band, Michael Bublé, Bon Jovi, and Pink were among the many acts recording, releasing, or touring behind new material in 2011. Interestingly, in spite of the original act being available in concert to fans, some tribute acts enjoy their greatest level of popularity and marketability when the bands they mimic go on the road.\textsuperscript{11} The concept of bands and vocalists performing as tribute artists to current pop and rock acts is an important part of the tribute phenomenon because it brings up questions such as: Is it more difficult to convince an audience of a tribute act’s ability to render an accurate imitation if the original performer is still actively touring, and can be readily compared? Do musicians paying tribute to current groups and singers have additional pressure to constantly update their act, considering that the original is likely doing the same? Why do some tribute bands become more marketable at times when fans can simply choose to see the original act?


\textsuperscript{9} Simon Reynolds, Retromania: Pop Culture’s Addiction to Its Own Past (London: Faber & Faber, 2011).

\textsuperscript{10} Reynolds, Retromania, xxx.

\textsuperscript{11} Kurutz, Like A Rolling Stone; Mike Nieland, interview with author, February 28, 2012.
The validity of these questions relies on whether the concept of authenticity itself is even possible to realize. Musicological literature has for decades hosted debate regarding authenticity in the context of the performance of early music. At the root of this debate is the challenge modern musicians face in accurately (relative to the composer’s intent) performing music composed prior to the advent and widespread use of recording technology, a challenge some scholars have claimed renders the concept of authentic performance an unachievable goal. Recording technology redefined the debate, however, by providing a means of preserving a musical document of the composer’s intent. In the case of popular music, often composed and recorded by the same artist, authenticity was particularly attainable. As a result of the development of this technology, the 1970s—the same time period when the tribute phenomenon was born—introduced authenticity as a central element of all Western performance, “when it began to prove an extraordinarily successful direction for many performers and groups, encouraged by a buoyant recording industry.” It is this same recording technology that has enabled tribute performers to recreate songs through the musical elements of a recording, such as guitar distortion or vocal inflection, as well as channeling the personality of the original performer; in other words, tribute acts can provide an accurate portrayal of an original act’s music and live performance through identical musical and visual means. Members of The Fab Four, for example, have gone to painstaking measures in both regards, and have found success in creating an authentic experience for audiences who have patronized the group in the form of international concert tours and merchandise sales. This has in turn led to commercial success for the group, which has made appearances on network TV programs and even earned its own PBS television special.


14 The group wears custom-made boots and costumes, and had wigs taken to a hairdresser to have them cut into the original band’s famous mop-top style. Bassist Ardy Sarraf uses a vintage Hofner bass and Pyramid strings, and even taught himself how to play left-handed, in order to capture both the musical and visual essence
In considering what authenticity is, it is also worthwhile to consider what it is not. This thesis regards an authentic tribute act as one that creates both an audio and visual simulacrum relative to an original act, achieved in part through accurate recreation and resulting in a hyperreal experience for audiences. Bands such as Ghost In The Machine (a four-piece Police tribute band that features a vocalist who does not play an instrument), Nearvana (fronted by a right-handed guitarist) and Rain (a nationally renowned Beatles tribute band that includes a right-handed bassist) are not authentic, according to this definition, since they are fundamentally different than the original and thus could not create a hyperreality for fans knowledgeable enough of the original to recognize the difference. Fans who are not aware of certain inaccuracies can have a hyperreal experience, but not an authentic one, as their hyperreality in this context is based on inaccurate presentation of the original act’s music.

A tribute band’s authenticity is realized both musically and aesthetically, and thus relies on fans’ familiarity with the original group’s music and stage show. Tribute bands are most likely to succeed in creating a simulacrum when an audience recognizes the original act being portrayed, and is familiar enough with the original to appreciate the nuances of the imitation. Some bands, such as the Fab Four, deliberately play the Beatles’ most recognizable songs; others, including Van Halen tribute act Atomic Punks, aim their set list at “hardcores” who know the band’s catalogue beyond its most commercially successful singles and albums. In either case, the audience’s ability to recognize and relate to the material is an important factor in the successful establishment of authenticity.

Also potentially important in determining success, though, is the endorsement of the original act. Though some acts have threatened or even carried out legal action against tribute artists, many others actively support musicians who carry on their legacies. The web sites of tribute bands such as Led Zepagain, Björn Again, and Super Diamond feature photos of

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17 A December 2011 cease-and-desist letter from attorneys representing rock band Social Distortion forced a San Diego tribute band to change its name from Socially Distorted to Total Distortion.
original band members posing with their tribute counterparts, which suggest the original artists’ awareness and approval of the tribute. Original Van Halen bassist Michael Anthony once joined Atomic Punks onstage for seven songs, and Neil Diamond made a surprise appearance in 2000 during the encore of a Super Diamond concert in Los Angeles, performing “I Am, I Said” for a stunned audience. And, in the ultimate show of support, the surviving members of Queen celebrated the band’s fortieth anniversary in the fall of 2011 by launching a worldwide search for its own tribute band, Queen Extravaganza, the members of which they hand-selected for a world tour that Queen drummer Roger Taylor says is “designed to enable fans to celebrate the music of Queen in a heart-stopping event.”

Ironically, an original act can later almost become a tribute to itself. Original members of Creedence Clearwater Revival, Styx, Lynyrd Skynyrd, Foreigner, Journey, and Sublime, to name just a few, have continued to tour with different singers, and still perform in large venues before thousands of fans. Instrumentally, the music would appear to be truly authentic, since it is being played by the original performers; but, with a lead singer imitating the original, these iterations of classic bands are arguably tribute acts, as they are collectively no more authentic than any other tribute band. Such acts fall into a unique category that will not be included in this thesis.

It is also interesting to consider whether tribute bands can potentially be even more authentic than the original artist in a modern-day performance. For example, who offers a more authentic presentation of a 1965 Beatles song: a 69-year-old Paul McCartney performing it with the aid of a teleprompter nearly a half-century after writing it, or a youthful McCartney impersonator recreating the precise vocal patterns, instrumentation, and other technical considerations from the album on which the song originally appeared? Performers who still play live, but perform decades-old material, often do so by changing the key, tempo, or instrumentation of older songs to better suit the changes in their bodies over the years, or in an effort to keep the material fresh. Are these performances authentic recreations of the original? Conversely, are they even more authentic than a tribute band’s?

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19 During their 2007 reunion tour, The Police performed several songs, including “Wrapped Around Your Finger” and “King of Pain,” that bore little resemblance to the album versions.
Because an original artist in this situation is not attempting to recreate an earlier performance with the precision of an authenticity-minded tribute act, such performers will not be included in the discussion put forth in this thesis.

A third consideration for this research is the inclusion of original costumes, instruments, stage props, and even musicians in a tribute act’s performance. If the actual items or performers that appeared with the original resurface with a tribute band, do they compromise the tribute’s authenticity? This thesis will argue that the tribute performance may re-introduce an item or musician without re-creating it; thus, such inclusion will not compromise a tribute act’s quest for authenticity. In fact, the spirit with which it occurs may even increase authenticity.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Shane Homan is perhaps the most prominent tribute-band scholar in the academy; his 2006 book *Access all Eras: Tribute Bands and Global Pop Culture* incorporates several different authors’ perspectives on tribute bands, audiences, and authenticity, and examines how and why musicians are able to make a living by performing the music of others, where imitations often do not succeed in other entertainment media. Exact replicas of films, for instance, have not always succeeded—for instance, Gus Van Sant’s 1998 shot-for-shot remake of Albert Hitchcock’s “Psycho” strove for authenticity but was rejected by audiences—so why are tribute bands embraced by fans of the original artist? Homan says the answer lies in authenticity, and provides an excellent foundation for the discussion of tribute acts, discussing them in both musical and historical contexts.

It is the concept of authenticity that sets tribute bands apart from other musicians who perform music written by others. Roy Shuker identifies a hierarchy for such musicians, based in part on his interpretation of authenticity. At the bottom of the hierarchy are cover bands, which play previously recorded hit songs as a way to both hone their members’ musical skills and give their audiences something familiar to listen to. At the top are session musicians, who perform on recordings and in concert in a supporting role, playing someone else’s music in an outsider role, but not imitating a previously recorded part. In the middle of the hierarchy are tribute bands, whose members “not only directly model themselves on
established bands, but actually copy them, presenting themselves as simulacra of the originals.”

Who determines authenticity? Some maintain that it is a performer-based construct, the type that would assign the highest level to a production like Queen Extravaganza. Others, including Inglis, consider authenticity to be an audience-based construct. Still others identify elements of each. Allan Moore, for instance, offers a three-tier model of determining authenticity: first person, or authenticity of expression, where the audience becomes engaged with an individual performer based on the integrity of his/her performance; second person, or authenticity of experience, where the audience connects with a performer through a sense of relating, belonging, and being understood; and third person, or authenticity of execution, where the performer “succeeds in conveying the impression of accurately representing the ideas of another, embedded within a tradition of performance.”

Tribute bands fall into the third category. Authenticity, he says, is ascribed, not inscribed, depending on the intention of the performer: in the case of tribute artists, he says, “There is no single ethos which underlies the activities of this mass of everyday musicians, but that of faithful reproduction in order to recover the reality of originary performances can be widely found.” Though the performer is responsible for faithful reproduction of the original act, Moore argues, the audience ultimately has both the privilege and responsibility of determining whether the performance is authentic, based on its awareness of whether the music is being faithfully recreated.

This process, says Bennett, has been accentuated through the dominance of media representations in contemporary society, which is a key ingredient in the tribute phenomenon: “The art of the tribute band involves creating as perfect as possible a representation of the tributed act…. [Its success in doing so is] highly dependent upon the willingness of the audience to buy into and go along with the ‘trick of illusion’ that the tribute band attempts to stage.” In other words, the degree to which a tribute band can be

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22 Ibid., 217.
considered effective in its craft is determined by the authenticity of its presentation, as understood by both its members and audience.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that while there are both hardcore and casual fans who attend tribute concerts, there are no casual authentically minded tribute artists. Therefore, this thesis will acknowledge the vital role of the audience in shaping authenticity, but recognizes that the ultimate judgment of authenticity falls on the performer. This argument will be supported throughout the thesis by comments made by tribute artists who were interviewed for this project.

In an effort to influence their audiences’ evaluation of authenticity, many tribute bands exhaust every resource in the pursuit of authentic presentations of their favorite groups’ music. The tribute phenomenon, then, can be linked to the postmodernist term *simulacra*, which refers to the simulation of objects and subsequent creation of an alternate reality (or “hyperreality”). Baudrillard asserts that hyperreality serves not as an imitation of reality, or even an equivalent substitute for reality, but in fact becomes reality itself when an original object becomes lost through a precession of sign-based models.

Baudrillard’s discussion of simulacra is an important part of the tribute phenomenon, and even appears in Shuker’s hierarchical model of authenticity for tribute bands. It suggests that, for example, seeing The Fab Four in 2012 would be just as good as seeing the Beatles in 1966, because it provides an equally “real” experience for those who did not see the original. It provides an outlet for fans whose nostalgia for the past can be relived to some extent. It also provides the basis for an imagined reality that in some ways is superior to the original; for instance, The Fab Four performs songs that the Beatles themselves never played live. Baudrillard, then, has a place in the tribute discussion; although his concept does not take into consideration that hyperreality can exist out of necessity, when the original becomes unavailable due to the passage of time, it does help explain why tribute acts are so popular, and how audiences can develop a means of evaluating their authenticity.

Baudrillard’s view of simulacrum is the creation of an alternate reality interchangeable with, and indistinguishable from, the original. This is not the case with

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tribute bands, whose authenticity is seen not in a reality competitive with the original, but rather one that acknowledges and pays homage to it. For example, while band members are backstage changing costumes during its concerts, The Fab Four shows video footage of Beatles fans during the 1960s; ABBA tribute Arrival From Sweden, meanwhile, offers biographical information about the original group’s members during its performances. Tribute acts do not attempt to act as a “precession of the model”; instead, their end goal is to accurately recreate an original group’s music and live performance. Tribute acts’ authenticity, then, is based on a hyperreality that acknowledges and complements an original reality, and will be evaluated accordingly in this thesis.

Fans likely would not attend a tribute concert without knowing the music of the original, and thus would be aware of the difference between the original act and a tribute. Peggy, a fifty-year-old San Diegan who saw Led Zeppelin in the 1970s and attended a performance by Led Zepagain in December 2011, said she “was actually thinking it was going to be very similar, because other tribute bands have been very closely matched [with the original…but] I knew I was not at a Led Zeppelin concert.” Tribute bands, then, can provide a hyperreal experience for some audiences, but are not seen as a replacement; their authenticity should be evaluated on their ability to mimic and recreate the aura, atmosphere, and experience of seeing an original act, and not their ability to convince an audience that they are that act.

To what extent must a tribute act be authentic? Ulf Lindberg et al., believe that if authenticity is achievable, precise replication of performance is not necessary; instead, it is the intangible concept of the “body authentic,” which considers the sensuous, non-technical aspects of music, and is the furthest extent to which authenticity can be realized. However, modern-day tribute bands base their replication on a studio performance that is permanently documented as the original artist, assisted by producers and engineers, intended for it to sound. With modern instrumental and studio technology, there is no reason why musicians of

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26 Personal communication with a fan, December 9, 2011.
today cannot precisely replicate an original recording; tribute bands can perform authentic recreations of original music in a live-performance setting, and do not need to rely on a “body authentic” or claims that original works of music are inherently impossible to perform as the original composer intended.

The emergence of recording technology fundamentally altered our understanding of music in the twentieth century. Recordings and other documentation of music from previous decades “not only provide retro with its raw materials,” says Reynolds, they also facilitate the “obsessive repeat-play of particular artifacts and focused listening that zooms in on minute stylistic details.”28 This technology also yielded what Katz refers to as the “phonograph effect,” or “any observable manifestation of recording’s influence.”29 As defined earlier, a tribute band’s commercial success can be based in part on its ability to appeal to an audience’s nostalgia, and its authenticity is evaluated in relation to recorded performances; thus, the impact of recorded music is a significant part of the proposed research.

Recordings serve not only as a model for tribute performers, but also as a point of reference for music fans, who become familiar with it upon repeated plays; this in turn breeds a sense of expectation when these fans hear the music performed live, and guides their experience at a tribute concert. Because they ultimately determine a tribute band’s authenticity, audiences of a Led Zeppelin tribute, for instance, might feel disappointed if the band’s performance of “Heartbreaker” is not immediately followed by “Living Loving Maid,” as the two songs appear sequentially on the *Led Zeppelin II* album and are usually played as a medley on the radio. For more detail-oriented fans, The Fab Four often begins its performances of “I’m Looking Through You” with the same false start that precedes the song on the American release of *Rubber Soul*. Recorded music thus serves as the primary means by which audiences evaluate a tribute band’s performance. In the early years of the phonograph, “the goal for any recording was to simulate a live performance”;30 today, the

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30 Ibid., 31.
opposite is true, and tribute acts—like the original rock bands they portray—strive to use their live performances as a simulation of recordings.\textsuperscript{31}

**PURPOSE**

The purpose of the proposed research is to evaluate the efforts of tribute bands to accurately recreate the music and stage performance of an original act, examining both their intent and effectiveness. This thesis will also consider how recording technology has prompted the reconsideration of authenticity in the literature. In examining the purpose of the tribute phenomenon, including why it exists and what it achieves and fulfills for the musicians who participate in it, the research will address the question of what is authentic in the age of reproduction, and will shed light on the relationship between the documentation and experience of artistic activities.

**LIMITATIONS**

Although many acts consider themselves to be tribute bands, this thesis will consider only those that provide serious recreations of an original performer or act, not such tongue-in-cheek performers as discussed on page three. This research will focus on bands and audiences that are based in Southern California or travel to the area and perform in venues with presale tickets. I plan to concentrate primarily on rock and pop bands, as many tribute acts are based on 1960s–1980s rock groups, and have selected three that perform the music of original acts with which I am familiar: The Police Experience, which has performed for and with original drummer Stewart Copeland; Arrival From Sweden, which has enjoyed longevity and global success based on its musical and visual similarity to ABBA; and David Brighton, whose David Bowie tribute act Space Oddity has brought him to concert venues around the world and even landed Brighton in a television commercial alongside his doppelgänger. These are among the most popular and successful active tribute acts,\textsuperscript{32} having moved beyond the club scene and regularly performing in larger, casino-sized venues.


\textsuperscript{32} Each of these acts appears respectively as the top Google-search return when “ABBA tribute act,” “The Police Tribute Act,” and “David Bowie tribute act” is entered in the search window.
Because each act offers elements of authenticity in different ways, the proposed research will approach authenticity from a variety of perspectives, and will provide a basis for comparative study. In addition to examining principles of authenticity, this thesis will explore issues related to nostalgia, recorded music, cultural identity, and musical performance.

**METHODODOLOGY**

This thesis is rooted in considerations of the literature—for instance, the discussion of authenticity through hyperreality as a practical, or even desirable, end—but will be executed on first-hand observation and interviews, and will approach the topic from the perspective that musical authenticity is ultimately achievable through the use of identical instruments and costumes. Though personal observation is an inherently qualitative undertaking, this thesis will attempt to mitigate this by introducing a seven-category model that will allow for all three tribute acts to be evaluated for accurate imitation by the following criteria: musical equipment and instrumentation, vocal inflection, ability to perform the music live, costumes, physical mannerisms and stage presence, the endorsement or involvement of the original act, and intangibles (to be considered and evaluated on a case-by-case basis) that add to the establishment of a hyperreality. These categories will determine accuracy in re-creating the original act’s music and live performance toward establishing a hyperreality. While some categories will be objective measurements of identical elements used by the tribute act in recreating the original, others are impossible to quantitatively evaluate and will instead gauge the artist’s intent.

Because audiences also have a role in determining a tribute act’s authenticity, fans will be interviewed in order to determine to what extent they consider the tribute to be authentic relative to the original. Samples of questions to be asked of audience members are available in Appendix A. The thesis will integrate findings from fieldwork with previously discussed literary considerations of authenticity, particularly regarding whether (and to what extent) it is determined by audience, performer, or elements of both.

**DEFINITIONS OF TERMS**

**Accuracy:** The degree to which a tribute performance recreates an original act’s music, visual appearance and mannerisms, and concert experience.
**Authenticity:** The extent to which a musical performance establishes a hyperreality for an audience by recalling a previous performance in detail, with regard to musicianship and on-stage execution.

**Cover band:** A musical act that plays songs made famous by original acts.

**Hyperreality:** A state of mind, created by tribute performers for audience members through historically accurate means, that results from the performers’ ability to accurately recall an original recorded or live musical performance.

**Identical:** The precise structural and/or sonic match of a tribute act’s instruments, costumes and other artifacts in comparison to the original performer.

**Impersonator:** A performer who seeks to capture the visual essence of an original act by replicating that act’s appearance and mannerisms.

**Nostalgia:** The appeal of recapturing a bygone era, or feelings associated with that era.

**Tribute band:** A musical act that seeks to authentically recreate the music and visual presentation of an original act through live and/or recorded performance.
CHAPTER 2
THE POLICE EXPERIENCE

Other than Sting’s 1992 wedding and the 2003 Rock & Roll Hall of Fame induction ceremony, members of seminal new-wave band The Police had not played together since completing their Synchronicity tour in Australia in 1984. In the years following the band’s breakup, singer/bassist Sting went on to find success as a solo performer; guitarist Andy Summers headlined jazz festivals and discovered a penchant for photography; and drummer Stewart Copeland went to Hollywood, finding work as a film-score composer while continuing to play drums with musicians including the surviving members of The Doors. So when the group opened the 2007 Grammy Awards broadcast with its hit song “Roxanne” and announced a reunion tour that would travel the world over the next two years, fans were ecstatic. Until this point, the only option for anyone wanting to hear the group’s music performed live was to see tribute bands such as The Police Experience, acts seemingly rendered unnecessary with the reappearance of the original act. “I thought it was going to kill us,” says The Police Experience drummer Mike Nieland, “but it doubled the business. When they first went out on the reunion tour, we had just started doing casinos and that level of gig—we weren’t doing clubs anymore. The reunion created a huge resurgence of interest in the band, obviously, and we started getting calls.”¹

The Police played 151 dates on its two-year reunion tour, drawing more than 3.3 million fans and grossing nearly $360 million. Prior to coming to fruition, it had long been considered one of the “big three” reunion tours fans were clamoring to see (the others being Pink Floyd and Led Zeppelin), all but guaranteeing huge ticket sales and media attention.² When the tour stopped at Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles, the sold-out crowd included several generations of fans, some seeing the trio for the first time, others for the first time in

¹ Mike Nieland, telephone interview by author, February 28, 2012.
decades. Also in the audience, however, were three local musicians who had spent the past several years hearing The Police’s material from the other side of the microphone.

David Rasner is a married father of four living in Southern California, teaching high school by day and English as a Second Language at night. The classically trained actor holds an MFA from the American Conservatory Theater graduate program, and has voiced dozens of characters for animated network television programs and feature films. He also is a big fan of The Police, and in 2002 placed an advertisement in the local publication Music Connection seeking bandmates for a new Police tribute act. The listing caught the attention of fellow Police fan Nieland, who had been seeking a jazz combo to play with. “At the time, the tribute thing hadn’t turned into what it is now, and honestly, when I first read about it, I kind of thought tribute bands were stupid,” he says.

Why would anybody pay to watch guys play other people’s music? But in the back of my mind, as silly as I thought it was, I kind of had a spot reserved for bands that I liked. I grew up listening to the Police, and I thought, now that would be an interesting gig, especially if the singer is good. So I called him up and we talked for a bit. I asked him, “What do you do in the band?” He said, “I do Sting,” and I came right back with, “Are you any good?” I wasn’t trying to be a jerk, I just didn’t want to waste my time. This was something I kind of wanted to, but kind of didn’t want to do, and I was going to do it, it was going to have to be right. We started playing, and as soon as he sang and I heard the impression, I was like, “Wow.” After we played a verse and a chorus of “Driven to Tears,” it was obvious he’d studied it.\(^3\)

Nieland too had studied the material, having learned the band’s entire catalogue (along with other bands featuring complicated drum parts, including Rush and Genesis) during his formative years as a drummer. Committed to accurately performing the band’s music, the pair honed their act for several months alongside a guitar student at the Musician’s Institute in Hollywood, who was slated to play the part of Summers. But the same quest for authenticity that had brought Nieland and Rasner together also brought an end to this particular lineup. “We showed up at the gig, and the guitarist—who was a nice-enough guy, but he didn’t look the part, he was a long-haired Japanese kid—rolled up on stage, and he had a music stand on stage with all of his notes,” Nieland says. “And we knew that wasn’t

\(^3\)Mike Nieland, telephone interview by author, February 28, 2012.
what we wanted to do.”⁴ Nieland and Rasner began their search for a new guitarist, eventually settling on Jimbo Head, a guitar technician working on Sunset Boulevard—right across the street from Nieland, unbeknownst to both. The new trio began rehearsing, and in short order started performing Police material live as a three-piece band (see Figure 1), attempting to create a simulacrum with Rasner (like Sting) playing bass and handling vocals—a formation not all Police tribute acts adopt. “Most of the guys that do the other bands, it’s not authentic,” Nieland says. “They have to take five people on stage with them. There was a band where the guitarist sang. The other issue I have with it is, there aren’t other bands that just do Police stuff. They all mix in Sting’s solo stuff, and we never, ever had an interest in doing that. We’re a Police band, not a Sting band.”⁵


Initially naming itself Fallout (after The Police’s first single), the tribute act rechristened itself The Police Experience “to create the experience of the live show,”⁶ according to Nieland. The group first based its performances on the original band’s album recordings,⁷ but soon began to amass audio and video bootlegs that helped its members more

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⁴ Mike Nieland, telephone interview by author, February 28, 2012.
⁵ Ibid.
⁶ Ibid.
⁷ Nieland remembers recording Police Experience rehearsals, then playing them back over the store PA during his shifts at Guitar Center and telling customers they were Police bootlegs. “When that started working,”
accurately recreate elements of The Police as a live band. The more time its members spent studying the recordings, the more they developed a feel for the music, adopting a body authentic to complement the technical aspects of recreation. “Knowing the material is one thing, because you can show anybody how to play the notes,” Nieland says.

But getting the pocket right, and making it feel like those songs: that’s where we really try to drill it in. If I’m playing one of those songs, I hold the sticks the same way [Copeland] does. It’s not for any other reason than it helps me feel like I’m playing that part right. I can kind of revert to seeing the video in my head of him playing. We’re about the same height, long skinny arms, long skinny legs. I think it would be a lot different if he was a little short guy, because I’m trying to create that groove space. Learning the song is one thing, but we work on really making them feel right.¹⁸

This dedication to feel is an important part of the band’s ability to connect with Police fans, Nieland believes, because the tribute act’s live performances carry the same energy and sense of unpredictability that the original was known for. When The Police Experience first started performing around Los Angeles, The Police had not toured in nearly two decades, meaning audiences had only performances from the 1970s and 1980s from which to draw comparisons.

This all changed with the announcement of the reunion tour, however; The Police performed at the 2007 Grammy Awards, then again the following day at a Hollywood nightclub as part of a media event to announce the tour. Video of these performances were available to the public, and in a matter of months fans were experiencing The Police—and not just The Police Experience—in stadiums around the country. The tribute band saw its own offers to perform increase, though, and was able to give audiences something the original act could not. “During the whole reunion tour, one of the biggest compliments we got was that [fans] loved the fact that we played the songs the old way,” Nieland says.

Some of the keys and some of the arrangements, I thought, they did for the reunion tour were just too soft-rock sounding. We got a lot of kudos for not copying the reunion-tour versions. We didn’t try to do anything they did now. Not that we didn’t like it, but we wanted to be “that band.” We all wanted to be the

¹⁸ Mike Nieland, telephone interview by author, February 28, 2012.
loud, sloppy ’80s band. I don’t want to be the clean, refined new-millennium band.⁹

Given its members’ foray into classical, new age, and film-score music, it is hardly a surprise that The Police would perform its New Wave-era catalog with some modifications more than twenty years later. The Police Experience, meanwhile, seeks to perform the songs with their original feeling and attitude intact, and in creating a temporally based hyperreality might present the songs more authentically than the original band did in 2007 and 2008. The tribute act’s accuracy in replicating The Police’s music and stage show is evaluated in the following section.

**MUSICAL EQUIPMENT**

Members of The Police Experience are no strangers to guitars, basses, and drums. Nieland works for a Connecticut-based music-instrument distribution company, and regularly travels to music shops around the country to train employees how to understand and sell his company’s products. Head is an employee of Mesa Boogie guitar amps. Given their access to new equipment and their professional obligation to follow trends in the industry, both have dedicated their lives not only to playing music, but also to cultivating a detailed knowledge of instruments.

The band’s web site provides a complete list of the equipment each member of the band uses, offering evidence of their efforts toward achieving authenticity. Summers is among few guitar players honored with signature models from both Gibson and Fender; Head plays both. Effects pedals that Summers has described as “very characteristic of the Police sound”¹⁰ – an MXR Phase 90, Maestro Echoplex EP2 – are among the items listed under Head’s gear inventory. Rasner performs with six bass guitars, including an electric upright bass similar to the one Sting used for live performances of “Walking on the Moon” during the 1983-84 Synchronicity tour, and also identifies amplifiers, microphones, picks, and cables to illustrate similarities between him and Sting.

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⁹ Mike Nieland, telephone interview by author, February 28, 2012.

Nieland’s 16-piece Tama Imperialstar drum kit is an exact replica of the one used by Copeland on all five of The Police’s studio recordings.\textsuperscript{11} A longtime drummer and equipment professional, Nieland has had little problem re-assembling Copeland’s equipment, right down to the brand of golf gloves that Copeland wore during the reunion tour; he is also one of the few tribute musicians who has had his accuracy of imitation directly tested, when Copeland himself sat in with the band in the midst of a performance. “I was trying to replicate the drum kit and be as authentic as I could,” he remembers. “The fact that he didn’t move anything when he sat down, he just sat down and played the drums, was very cool.”\textsuperscript{12}

**VOCALS**

Rasner utilizes his experience as a trained actor to accurately portray the unusual vocal patterns of Sting. Nieland says that Rasner had been “working on the voice for probably a year before he met me, just getting the impersonation down and getting the inflections. Sting doesn’t sing things normal; he tends to pronounce things weird when he sings. So [Rasner] learned all of that.”\textsuperscript{13} Rasner’s vocal impression has earned much admiration, and he has received compliments from everyone from Foo Fighters drummer Taylor Hawkins, who has praised Rasner’s ability to sound “exactly like Sting”;\textsuperscript{14} the producers of the Cartoon Network’s *Zatch Bell*, who hired Rasner to lend his impression to a blonde, spiky-haired British character named Steng; and Copeland, who is quoted on The Police Experience’s promotional video as saying that “the singer has Sting down to a tee.”\textsuperscript{15}

**IS THE MUSIC PERFORMED LIVE?**

The Police performed as a three-piece band, as does The Police Experience. Because the original band did not extensively utilize studio effects, its music can be replicated live; thanks to audio and video recordings, as well as magazine articles and even the original


\textsuperscript{12} Mike Nieland, telephone interview by author, February 28, 2012.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{14} Taylor Hawkins, interview by Mark Hoppus, *Hoppus on Music*, Fuse TV, April 15, 2011.

members’ personal web sites, tribute bands like The Police Experience can accurately reproduce its music in a live setting. Video footage of concert performances from the late 1970s through the 2007–08 reunion tour reveals that The Police rarely used on-stage musicians other than the three band members. Thus, the three-person Police Experience provides a historically and musically accurate live performance. “We don’t use fake anything,” Nieland says, “and that was important.”

If you’re going to do a tribute, you’re going to get up and play it. There are way too many tribute bands that get up and what they do is, they’ve got [pre-recorded backing] tracks up the wazoo. I know guys who do this. There are singers who literally lip-sync two-thirds of the set. If you’re listening to what’s going on on stage, you’re hearing a background vocal part that’s got six parts on it, but there’s only two guys on stage. I get it that you want to sound good, but we’ve always been kind of old school in that, if you want to sound good, then go practice and make yourself good.16

The Police Experience replicates many of the vocal harmony parts crafted by the original band; for instance, Nieland sings background vocals during the verse sections of “So Lonely,” just as Copeland did during the 1983 Synchronicity tour. Also, many songs performed by The Police Experience are unique hybrids of the original band’s live and studio recordings. For instance, the tribute band’s live rendition of “Roxanne” is based on the studio version recorded by The Police, but includes a call-and-response break in the middle of the song that the original band used during its live performances in the early 1980s, as seen in the 1981 music documentary *Urgh! A Music War*.17 This hybrid approach was deliberate, and was part of the band’s pursuit of authenticity when it originally formed. “I figured that, as long as we were staying in the sandbox, it didn’t really matter what we did,” says Nieland, “because anything that we did was pulled from bootlegs, and it was stuff that they actually really did live. They might not have done them all in the same performance, but this was the range of stuff we had to work with.”18

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16 Mike Nieland, telephone interview by author, February 28, 2012.
COSTUMES

Of the three original acts being considered in this thesis, The Police is the least oriented toward costumes. Aside from the multi-colored jacket Sting wore during the band’s Synchronicity tour, it may be difficult for fans to identify costumes with specific band members. Still, this has not deterred members of The Police Experience from making some effort. Noting Sting’s penchant for wearing sleeveless shirts, Rasner has performed in everything from a black tank top (see Figure 2) to a cutoff English Beat T-shirt, similar to the one Sting wore in The Police’s “Don’t Stand So Close To Me” video, as well as in a live performance in France that was included in *Urgh! A Music War*. Head typically performs in a black-and-white-striped T-shirt, similar to what Summers wore in the cover photo for the *Walking On The Moon* single, as well as during a 1979 appearance on the Dutch television program *Veronica’s Countdown*.


Nieland does not attempt to replicate any of Copeland’s specific on-stage outfits, which often included the tight T-shirts and short shorts popular at the time, for a variety of reasons. “I have no desire, as a 40-year-old guy, to try to make myself look like a 20-year-old guy,” he says. “I wear a T-shirt and shorts on stage, because that’s what he wore. I used to
wear the little short-short running shorts, but it takes a special kind of man to wear those and be confident in them. I did it for years, and after a while I was like, no one can see me when I’m sitting down anyway, what’s the point?”

Though not readily identifiable with the original group’s members, the outfits worn on stage by Rasner and Head are similar to those worn by The Police in live performances documented on video, and thus can be considered historically accurate. Nieland’s refusal to wear a historically accurate outfit might at first appear to render the band’s live show inauthentic by failing to create a hyperreality for fans, but because the length of his shorts cannot be observed by the audience, its perception of the band’s accuracy is not negatively affected; thus, The Police Experience may be considered authentic in this category as well.

MANNERISMS AND STAGE PRESENCE

Because many fans may not be able to name all three members of The Police, let alone identify their mannerisms, Head and Nieland have some leeway in accurately portraying them. Rasner, however, is under the microscope when it comes to mannerisms, and has prepared extensively to meet the challenge. Even his own bandmates are sometimes surprised with the accuracy with which Rasner portrays Sting, especially when Nieland first noticed his bandmate shaking his head during a song. “Sting has this move where he kind of throws his head back and gives it a quick shake,” Nieland says.

My wife came out and saw us, and she asked me after the show, “What’s wrong with your singer? Does he have some kind of a tic or something? He’s constantly shaking his head.” I didn’t really think much of it, and then about a week later I was watching—when we started learning the songs, we went out and collected as many bootlegs as we could get our hands on. We were watching one of the videos, and there was Sting doing the head thing—my wife flipped out and said, “That’s what he was doing!” And then I got it—he was being that detailed about it.

Rasner also frequently dances while playing, and often ends songs by leaping from the drum riser, both of which are Sting traits from his Police years.

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19 Mike Nieland, telephone interview by author, February 28, 2012.

20 Ibid.
Rasner also channels Sting in between songs, reciting actual banter typically recognized by only the hardest-core Police fans. “For example,” Nieland says, “in ‘Walking On The Moon,’ there’s a bootleg we got from France, and there’s one phrase he sings in French, and Dave will do that. The [Police] fan club people are still very active, even though the band is not active, and they know all this stuff. They go, ‘Oh wow, your singer did the line from Beziers in 1980? Wow, great!’”

His legs may be out of sight for fans, but Nieland is aware than the audience can see his hands during Police Experience concerts, and has replicated Copeland’s style of gripping his drumsticks not only for aesthetic authenticity, but also because he says “it makes me feel like I’m in character.”

That grip is really designed more for sensitive, articulate kind of playing; it’s not a grip that was every designed to beat the shit out of a rock drum kit. It’s a visual thing, but trying to play those songs without that grip, it’s just one of those idiosyncrasies that makes it all kind of work. It just doesn’t feel the same if I hold the sticks another way.

The degree to which members of The Police Experience have studied not only the musical style of the original members, but also their visual presence on stage, contributes significantly to the authenticity of their performance. None are dead ringers for their original-band counterparts in terms of pure physicality, but the tribute performers’ detailed recreation of mannerisms and stage presence render their live performance authentic.

**ENDORSEMENT**

A search for “The Police Experience” in the Google search engine yields a link to the band’s official web site, as well as a statement that the group is “endorsed by the entire Copeland family.” Although Stewart is the most famous of the Copeland brothers to Police fans, his two brothers were instrumental in the success not only of the original band, but also The Police Experience. The eldest, Miles, has worked in the music industry for decades, managing acts like Squeeze and founding IRS Records in 1979. Middle brother Ian, who passed away in 2006, was a promoter who founded Frontier Booking International, a talent

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22 Ibid.
agency that represented many of the most successful New Wave acts of the early 1980s. He also owned and operated a Beverly Hills restaurant, which opened in 1997 and serves as the backdrop to The Police Experience’s connection with the Copelands.

Nieland and Rasner drove to the restaurant shortly after forming their band, hoping to meet Ian. The group was almost immediately invited to play live at a party at the restaurant, celebrating The Police’s induction into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. Their performance was a success, and led to additional shows, including birthday parties for both Ian and Stewart. At the latter event, which Nieland says was the result of Ian pushing the idea on Stewart, The Police Experience “had two sets that night. We played the first half hour, 45 minutes, and then the birthday cake came out. We all sang ‘Happy Birthday’ to him, and you can see on the video where Ian’s kind of nudging him, and then finally goes, ‘I think Stewart wants to play one.’”

The original Police drummer joined the tribute act for two songs, playing drums on “Roxanne” and “Driven to Tears.” Stewart’s interaction with The Police Experience continued in subsequent years, including an exclusive one-on-one interview conducted by Nieland for Guitar Center.

Having played with the original band’s drummer, at an event orchestrated by the original band’s booking agent, indicates that representatives and at least one member of the original band held a high level of confidence in the tribute act’s ability to represent The Police. This is important in establishing The Police Experience as a legitimate tribute to the original, as it clearly has the approval of some of those best qualified to evaluate its accuracy in imitation.

INTANGIBLES

In the 2011 Foo Fighters documentary Back and Forth, drummer Taylor Hawkins remembers being happy that his band had temporarily become a trio in the late 1990s because it meant a similarity to The Police. Hawkins grew up idolizing the group, and was such a fan that he and his multi-platinum-selling group requested to be an opening act for The Police’s reunion concert at Dodger Stadium in 2007. He is a personal friend of The

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Police Experience guitarist, Jimbo Head. And, when Nieland has been unavailable to play concerts with his band, Hawkins has substituted for him on more than one occasion.

Hawkins has been a high-profile endorser of the group, having promoted its tribute act on major-market media outlets like Los Angeles radio station KROQ and Fuse TV’s *Hoppus on Music*. Having an advocate like Hawkins lends a sense of credibility to the act, and might encourage fans to attend a Police Experience performance if they know in advance that he will be performing. However, it does not independently create a sense of hyperreality; in fact, it might even distract from the performance if fans recognize him as the Foo Fighters drummer. For this reason, his involvement with the group—the one factor that could have fallen into consideration in this category—cannot be considered an intangible contributor to the group’s authenticity.

In all but one of the seven categories of criteria for evaluating accurate imitation considered in this thesis, members of The Police Experience can be identified as authentic tribute performers. The band’s commitment to creating a hyperreality through the faithful recreation of The Police’s live and studio recordings, through both instrumentation and feel, have earned the group the support of original members and management, as well as the endorsement of music celebrities. Rasner and Nieland both invested a significant part of their lives learning the musical styles and mannerisms of their original-band counterparts, but as Nieland says, “it wasn’t until Jimbo joined the band that we really started to get the feel part of it down, so there’s a confidence behind it, and we own it.”

Though of course they do not in fact own it, the confidence with which members of The Police Experience play helps create a hyperreality for fans at its concerts that in turn translates into an authentic musical experience.

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CHAPTER 3

ARRIVAL FROM SWEDEN

Though popular around the world, tribute bands have been particularly successful in Australia, where original acts are often not able to tour. Among the most well-known of the country’s home-grown acts is ABBA tribute Björn Again, founded in 1988 by two chemical engineers who were simply “all about having fun on a Friday night in a pub in Melbourne.” Three years later, the group had been discovered by a promoter from ABBA’s native country of Sweden and invited to embark on a European tour. Björn Again has since played thousands of concerts around the world, sold merchandise, appeared on television, and even became the first tribute band to play alongside major original recording acts in a festival setting, when it appeared at England’s Reading Festival in 1992. The band was the first to portray ABBA’s original members—Björn Ulvaeus, Benny Andersson, Agnetha Fältskog and Anni-Frid “Frida” Lyngstad—in a tribute setting, and has served as a model for many of the dozens of other ABBA tributes that have formed in the years since. Many of those acts have used Björn Again as an example of what to do when performing as a tribute band; Vicky Zetterberg, however, saw the group as an example of what not to do.

A native of Gothenburg, Sweden, Zetterberg saw ABBA live in concert three times in the 1970s, and remembers the first time she saw Björn Again perform in her home country. “They were talking in fake Swedish, they made fun of ABBA, there were only six people on stage,” she recalls.

And I said no, no, no, you can’t do ABBA like this. It’s an insult to Björn and Benny and Agnetha and Anni-Frid. It was really bad. So I decided to do a proper ABBA show. [People] always told me that I looked like Frida, and I have kind of a lower voice, alto-soprano. So I thought, “Maybe I should do that.” So I put it

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together. I knew all the ABBA songs, and I knew the way to sing, the techniques they used, and I always sing like that.\(^2\)

At the time, Zetterberg was singing with an original group whose members were part-time musicians who played together mostly for fun. Not long after the Björn Again concert, however, the band was rehearsing and recording its renditions of ABBA material. Seeing the potential for a more realistic and accurate reproduction of the ABBA concert experience than what the Australian act offered, Zetterberg soon left her bandmates and began working with a cast of full-time musicians dedicated to performing exclusively as ABBA (see Figure 3).

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\(^2\) Vicky Zetterberg, interview by author, February 18, 2012.
Nearly two decades later, Arrival From Sweden has performed in more than 35 countries around the world, including a televised New Year’s Eve concert in Poland that drew more than 50,000 attendees. Business is especially big in the United States, where the group sold out 27 of the 28 dates on its winter 2012 tour. It is the only Swedish band to headline the iconic Red Rocks Amphitheater in Colorado, and has sold out the venue for several consecutive years. But it is not just the money that keeps Arrival From Sweden on the road; it is also the opportunity to bring a faithful recreation of ABBA in concert to both new and longtime fans of the original group. “We have fun, and we meet people,” Zetterberg says. “There are people at every venue who say how much they like the show, they bring their families, and we really touch them. It means so much for them to see. ‘Oh my God, all the songs we remember!’ They are so happy. And we’re not even a regular group – we’re only a tribute band.”

Zetterberg’s desire to perform ABBA’s music goes beyond appealing to fans’ nostalgia, however; she is committed to the accurate recreation of the group’s concerts, so much so that she indoctrinates newly hired background singers by putting them through what she calls “ABBA school” in order to teach them the original singers’ vocal inflection and stage presence. As a result, Zetterberg is able to rotate between four different women portraying Agnetha without fans knowing, even those who have seen the group more than once. Musicians are also scrutinized thoroughly when she holds auditions for international tours, to ensure a seamless production. Because ABBA, she says, was nothing if not seamless. “You can’t do ABBA [just] for fun,” she says. “ABBA is really complex and really, really hard to do. I mean, at that time, ABBA had the best musicians you could get in Sweden. To do ABBA, it sounds really easy, but it’s so hard to do, because it’s so perfect.”

Today, Zetterberg and her bandmates perform so fluidly as ABBA that they have achieved a goal almost unheard of in the tribute phenomenon: Arrival From Sweden recorded and in 1999 commercially released the song “Just A Notion,” which ABBA recorded as a

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3 The lone non-sellout was Super Bowl Sunday, which Zetterberg says was scheduled by someone not accustomed to booking concerts in the United States.
5 Ibid.
demo in the 1970s but never completed. The acquisition of unreleased material puts a different spin on authenticity, as will be discussed toward the end of this chapter, and came about easier than Zetterberg could have expected or hoped after her original group had recorded some ABBA material and played several small-scale tribute shows. “One day I sent a tape to Björn and Benny, with me singing some ABBA songs, and I asked if they had any unreleased ABBA songs,” she says.

It was a crazy question, but I got an answer from Benny, and he said, “Yeah, sure, we like the cassette.” So I called the head office, where they have all ABBA recordings stored, and I said, “My name is Vicky. You’ve got an unreleased ABBA from Björn and Benny, and I want you to send that tape to me.” They started to laugh. So I said, “You’ve got to call Benny.” So they called me back after five minutes and said, “OK, where should we send it?” That was the start to being more professional, and do it in a professional way.6

The group’s professionalism has accounted in part for its longevity, as has its availability to perform dates around the world in the midst of the 1999 stage premiere of the musical *Mamma Mia* and accompanying film in 2008. Like The Police’s reunion tour did for The Police Experience, a renewal of interest in the original group helped parlay commercial opportunities for *Arrival From Sweden*, and also demanded a more authentic approach to the original material. Unlike The Police, however, the original members of ABBA will likely never play a reunion concert, which is fine with Zetterberg as both a tribute performer and fan. “They are old now,” she says,

and I want to remember them as they were. They are 65 years old today, they are totally different persons. I want to remember ABBA as they were when they had the energy, the passion, and they were still married and two couples. Today they’re divorced, they have totally different lives. The magic is not there anymore. That’s what we try to do: to give the audience the way ABBA was in the ’70s — the energy, the passion, to have fun on stage.7

Fans continue to clamor for ABBA’s music; though the group existed for only ten years, since 1993 six different record labels have released a combined eighteen ABBA greatest-hits CDs, as well as six box sets. Both the stage and screen versions of *Mamma Mia* were also highly successful, and Zetterberg says she has been approached to help develop a Broadway musical based on the lives of ABBA’s four original members. Being able to offer

6 Vicky Zetterberg, interview by author, February 18, 2012.
7 Ibid.
fans an accurate recreation of ABBA’s music is primarily rooted in the music, but there is also an economic element. “We help [ABBA] sell records, we help them make money,” Zetterberg says.

Every concert we do, they make money. People go out and buy the records, the DVDs, and also every venue has to pay them for every minute we are on stage. There’s a new generation who was never able to see ABBA. We meet a lot of children, and they are really, really fascinated. They’ve seen only *Mamma Mia*; they don’t know anything about ABBA. People know everything about Elvis, the Beatles, but very few know anything about ABBA. So of course we help ABBA make money. We continue the legacy.  

Because ABBA toured only one time in America, many of the group’s fans who attend Arrival From Sweden’s concerts did not experience the original group in concert. Plenty of video footage exists, however, along with hours of recorded material that fans can compare for authenticity with the tribute band. The tribute act’s accuracy in replicating ABBA’s music and stage show is evaluated in the following section.

**Musical Equipment**

Perhaps the best way for a tribute act to ensure it is playing an original band’s music authentically is to hire the musicians who played it the first time around. Arrival From Sweden routinely performs with original ABBA musicians, and though fellow Swedish ABBA tribute band Waterloo also boasts original ABBA musicians in its lineup, Zetterberg says hers was the first. The first performer she recruited for Arrival From Sweden was drummer Ola Brunkert, followed by bassist Rutger Gunnarsson; Zetterberg played for the first time with these and other ABBA musicians in 1997. Other original ABBA performers who have played with Arrival From Sweden include percussionists Roger Palm and Åke Sundqvist; guitarists Finn Sjöberg, Janne Schaffer, and Mats Ronander; bassist Mike Watson; and saxophonists Janne Kling and Ulf Andersson.

Though the original musicians do not always tour internationally with the tribute act, they often perform shows in Sweden and its neighboring countries. They are also available to Arrival From Sweden musicians who did not play with ABBA, to answer specific equipment-related questions. “I talk to Björn and Benny all the time,” Zetterberg says.

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8 Vicky Zetterberg, interview by author, February 18, 2012.
“Benny said to me, ‘Do you know what I like about Arrival? That you look up everything about the music.’” Zetterberg’s insistence on using equipment identical to that used by the original band—if not the band members themselves—is an indication of Arrival From Sweden’s authenticity.

**VOCALS**

The musicians supporting Arrival From Sweden may change between performances, but the one constant in the group—other than Zetterberg herself—has been the painstakingly precise recreation of the original singers’ vocal inflection. “I’ve always been fascinated with the way Agnetha and Anni-Frid are singing,” Zetterberg says.

They are really good singers, really great. And their voices together, when they sing together, they become one voice. They had to even sing vibrato so you could even hear who’s who, so it’s like one voice. The mix, the voice together, it’s so good. That’s a very big part of the ABBA sound. They also have a special technique they use: belting and swaying. When you’re belting, you use your stomach, and you do that the whole time, you just belt it. And it’s very hard to do that. And you also go up in your nose, so you sound like a cat. That’s really hard to do, but I have been studying their technique, and always was fascinated by their way of singing. I’ve auditioned girls in the band through the years, and they have been to musical schools, but very few can sing that way. I have my ABBA school, and I’m really hard. I train them. I talk to them and I say, “This is important, this is important, this is important, you have to do this.” Otherwise it can’t work in this group. The singing is really important. The timing in the songs, everything is so important. It’s very, very hard to find good girls.9

**IS THE MUSIC PERFORMED LIVE?**

In addition to the performers who portray Agnetha, Anni-Frid, Björn, and Benny, Arrival From Sweden features seven musicians on stage—a drummer, a percussionist, a bassist, a guitarist, and three female background singers. The textural density and timbral variety not only echo the original band’s live shows, but in the absence of pre-recorded backing tracks are also necessary to fill out the sound. “I asked ABBA’s producer, ‘What is the ABBA sound?’” Zetterberg says.

Like, Phil Spector has his sound, Motown has their sound. And he said, “It’s too much of everything.” [During ABBA studio recordings] the guitarist would do something, and it was, “Oh, we do it again. We do it again. We do it again.” And

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they did that with every instrument. So it sounds like a wall, like Phil Spector. If they want to do that live, they’re supposed to have twenty guitarists. When ABBA did it live, they had two or three guitarists, but on the records it sounds like they have ten. Also, they have a lot of instruments on the records that they don’t use on stage. ABBA is really a studio group.\textsuperscript{10}

The inability for Arrival From Sweden to recreate ABBA’s studio’s recordings with complete accuracy extends beyond the number of musicians it can bring on stage; there are also the issues of individual style, both for members of the tribute act and the original. Zetterberg is stern in her demands for vocal authenticity, but is more lax when it comes to instrumentation, especially when performing with non-original ABBA musicians. “The singers are more the signal of ABBA, they are really standing out,” she says.

But if a drummer doesn’t do this fill or that fill [from a recording], it doesn’t matter, as long as it’s a good drummer. The bass player is different, because he is really picking up everything Rutger Gunnarsson did. He said, “This bass player they had is amazing.” He had been listening to it for hours, and he said, “Some things I can never do, because it’s so hard to do.” You can’t compare what ABBA did on their records to what they did live; not even ABBA sounded like ABBA live.”\textsuperscript{11}

In order to accommodate for the difference, Arrival From Sweden adopts a hybrid approach, re-creating the signature ABBA vocals from studio recordings with looser and more interpretive instrumentation. Citing bootleg concert recordings and the live sequences in the film \textit{ABBA: The Movie}, Zetterberg says this is how ABBA performed live, rendering her tribute band’s performance authentic in this context.

**Costumes**

Of the five audience members interviewed following a February 2012 Arrival From Sweden concert in Southern California, four mentioned the group’s costumes as an important part of the success of its tribute to ABBA. The original group’s on-stage attire was part of what made ABBA unique during its active years, a point not lost on Zetterberg. “The clothes are exact copies of ABBA’s original outfits,” she says. “We have exclusive permission from ABBA’s costume designer. He saw our show many, many years ago, when I started the

\textsuperscript{10} Vicky Zetterberg, interview by author, February 18, 2012.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
group, and he loved it. So he said, ‘You can copy the costumes.’ So the clothes are really important.”

Most of the musicians on stage do not change costumes during the show – other than the background singers, who wear gold dresses over white leggings, every band member wears all white, following the concert scenes from ABBA: The Movie. The two male lead performers add a small bit of color to their outfits, typically either gold or green, but wear the same costume throughout the entire show. The two lead female vocalists do change their outfits, however – minus their gold boots, which stay on for the whole performance – and wear everything from kimonos to short dresses to jumpsuits, all identical to those worn in concert by the original performers (see Figure 4).


**MANNERISMS AND STAGE PRESENCE**

Having seen the original band three times during the 1970s, as well as bootleg video footage of ABBA in concert, Zetterberg is familiar with the group’s stage show, so much so that she is able to differentiate between ABBA’s lip-synched television appearances and live concert performances. In order to capture the essence of ABBA in concert, she has chosen to mimic the latter. “A lot of ABBA tribute bands, what they do is, they copy what [ABBA] did on TV shows,” Zetterberg says.

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12 Vicky Zetterberg, interview by author, February 18, 2012.
They were standing back to back, and they were doing moves like this [demonstrates]. But if you watch *ABBA: The Movie*, the only live video with ABBA, they are working all over the stage, and that’s what we do. The energy is so important in our shows. The most important [part] is that you have your audience there. We never do anything ABBA did on its TV shows.\(^\text{13}\)

Live sequences in *ABBA: The Movie* reveal an energy and enthusiasm among the performers that did not come across in its more subdued TV specials and music videos, energy that *Arrival From Sweden* exhibits in its own live performances. The tribute act is careful not to cross the line, though, as some other groups have done to the chagrin of fans. For instance, a YouTube video of Björn Again performing on Swiss TV in 1998 features the musician portraying Benny overzealously thrashing his head about while playing the keyboard; the video’s top viewer comment reads, “The keyboard player is a knob! Benny never used to head bang like that!”\(^\text{14}\) The tribute band also faithfully recreates the original group’s stage setup, which featured Benny stage left and Björn stage right, flanking Agnetha (right-center) and Anni-Frid (left-center). ABBA background singers were situated stage upright, as are those in *Arrival From Sweden*. This attention to detail, along with a commitment to preserve the original act’s energetic live performances, results in an accurate recreation of an ABBA concert.

**ENDORSEMENT**

In 1989, following the success of their musical *Chess*, Benny and Björn began work on a new stage project, *Kristina*. Among the women auditioning for a part in its world premiere in Sweden was Zetterberg; the opportunity to sing in front of two of her pop-music heroes was the start of a 20-plus-year friendship that would later include their endorsement of her ABBA tribute band. “With Björn and Benny, it’s business,” she says. “I talk about my band, and I make sure that everything is OK. They have sued a lot of other ABBA groups. I think the most important part is that I show them respect. I call Benny all the time and make sure everything is OK. So that’s really important, and I know that he likes that.”\(^\text{15}\)

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\(^{13}\) Vicky Zetterberg, interview by author, February 18, 2012.


\(^{15}\) Vicky Zetterberg, interview by author, February 18, 2012.
The original members’ support of Arrival From Sweden has not only helped the tribute act achieve financial reward through its profitable concert tours and merchandise sales, it has also translated into capital of credibility. The original members’ decision to entrust the rights to record and sell a previously unreleased ABBA demo to the tribute band not only serves as a clear endorsement of the group, it also creates an additional element of hyperreality by allowing audiences to imagine ABBA performing “Just a Notion,” since no other tribute acts perform this song as part of their act. The group’s endorsement and approval of Arrival From Sweden has brought financial benefits to both bands, and is a critical part of fans’ acceptance of Arrival From Sweden as an authentic recreation of ABBA, in both recorded and live-performance contexts.\(^{16}\)

**INTANGIBLES**

Of the thirty-seven ABBA tribute bands identified by Neil, only two are from the pop group’s native Sweden: Arrival From Sweden and Waterloo, which formed in 1996, a year after Arrival From Sweden. The majority are from English-speaking countries such as Great Britain, Canada, and Australia. But, as Zetterberg point out, just because the group’s lyrics are written in English does not mean they should be sung with conventional pronunciation. “ABBA sing in ‘Swenglish,’ they don’t sing in proper English,” she says.

When I saw this band from Australia singing “Dahn-cing Queen”? When ABBA’s singing, they’re really singing in Swedish.\(^{17}\) You can hear they’re not from America, they’re not from the U.K. They had a Swedish accent. In Australia they loved it, and one of the ways they loved it was because it was not proper English. It was charming. And now here [in America], every time people say, “Oh, it’s so charming, we love your accents.” So we realize that we don’t have to speak proper English. We do a song, “Eagle,” and I say “moan-tain.” And I do a song with a symphony orchestra, and Frida is singing “coh-ward.” What is “coh-ward”? Nothing, she means “coward.” And I do it also. Because you can’t sing “cow-ward.” You have to do it that way.\(^{18}\)

\(^{16}\) Arrival From Sweden has generated enough money through touring and merchandise sales to continue operating as a full-time entity for nearly twenty years. ABBA’s original members also make money when fans buy records and DVD following an Arrival From Sweden concert, and also from the concerts themselves; Zetterberg says venues are required to pay ABBA’s songwriters for every minute that her band is on stage.

\(^{17}\) This is literally the case during its live performance of “Fernando,” when Zetterberg sings the entire first verse in Swedish.

\(^{18}\) Vicky Zetterberg, interview by author, February 18, 2012.
Zetterberg believes that its members’ Swedish heritage and accents contribute to the creation of a hyperreality for audiences. In addition to the uniquely Swedish pronunciation of some English words, the group’s cultural identity also provides a presumed legitimacy with regard to its ability to accurately recreate the music. These cultural and linguistic factors, along with the unique opportunity the group had to record and release an ABBA demo, serve as an intangible source of authenticity in Arrival From Sweden.

In all of the seven categories of criteria for evaluating accurate imitation considered in this thesis, Arrival From Sweden can be identified as an authentic tribute act, creating for fans a believable simulacrum through its thorough knowledge of ABBA’s music and stage presence, its leader’s detailed approach to re-creating it for audiences two generations later, its members’ Swedish identity and accents, and its access to the original act’s costume designs and musicians.

The recording of “Just A Notion” is further evidence of its authenticity, although in this instance the music is not being fully recreated, but rather re-imagined. Unlike most of the discussions of authenticity in this thesis, which deal directly with a tribute band’s ability to create a hyperreality through re-enactment and mimicry, Arrival From Sweden’s performance of this previously unreleased demo creates a new reality which, for fans who never heard the demo, exists without a basis of comparison. However, it is important to consider that, unlike the composers of early music, the songwriters of “Just A Notion” were involved not only in approving the final version, but also in trusting Arrival From Sweden to complete the song in an authentic ABBA style. Therefore, “Just A Notion” is another intangible that lends authenticity to Arrival From Sweden, because its roots in ABBA’s Voulez-Vous sessions give it the same musical source as the rest of ABBA’s material. Audiences may never have heard the original, and thus not be able to identify with the song, but as will be discussed in the final chapter, they do not primarily determine a tribute act’s authenticity.
CHAPTER 4

SPACE ODDITY

In July 1973, David Bowie brought his 18-month Ziggy Stardust tour to an abrupt end at London’s Hammersmith Odeon. Without first discussing the matter with the members of his alter ego’s band, the Spiders From Mars—guitarist Mick Ronson, bassist Trevor Bolder, and drummer Woody Woodmansey—Bowie announced to the audience at the end of the night, “Not only is this the last show of the tour, but it is the last show we’ll ever do. Bye-bye.”¹ With that, the Ziggy Stardust character disappeared until it was resurrected in 1998 as part of an authenticity-driven art trend, the re-enactment.

To celebrate the concert’s twenty-fifth anniversary, British artists Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard restaged the final Ziggy Stardust concert as it looked on Super-8 video shot by fans, as well as on the 1973 documentary *Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*. Opening the concert to fans who they say “completely played what they perceived to be their part, [who] were there in with their seventies Bowie scarves and were right there on every cue, clapping, shouting, gasping,”² Forsyth and Pollard went to great lengths to recreate every minute detail of the concert as it existed on video, right down to installing red lights inside the venue to match the reddish haze in the documentary caused by the filmmaker’s 16-mm film. In staging a hyperreal experience of a hyperreal character, the duo created what Simon Reynolds calls “a simulation of a simulation, a replica of a replica.”³ Forsyth and Pollard hired a tribute band to support the actor portraying Bowie in their production, which they called *A Rock ’N’ Roll Suicide*, but with its emphasis on restaging the concert primarily as a historical event, their re-enactment lacked the musical accuracy that underlies the tribute phenomenon.

³ Ibid., 47.
It may have been coincidence, but David Brighton’s decision to debut his Bowie tribute act, Space Oddity, around the same time was fortuitous for fans desiring a musically based tribute experience. Brighton found the decision to be a natural one: “I sort of sounded like him, kind of had similar bone structure, etcetera,” he says (see Figure 5). “In other words, I could make myself look reasonably like him, I could make myself sing reasonably like him, to start with.”

Though Bowie had stopped touring regularly by the late 1990s, Brighton’s show—which today has visited dozens of countries around the world and been featured in residency in Las Vegas—was born to carry on the legacy of one of pop music’s most iconic figures.


Unlike the other musicians examined in depth in this thesis, Brighton has not limited himself to portraying just one famous musician. In 1993, he entered the tribute world as George Harrison, offering his services on a freelance basis to many of the Beatles tribute bands that formed in the 1980s following Beatlemania’s Broadway run. “In the Beatle world,

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it’s sort of like, ‘We need a George, are you available?’” Brighton says. “In the [Beatles tribute bands] that are out there touring, they’re very much used to doing that. There’s a lot of substituting going on. So you learn your role, you learn which harmonies you’re supposed to sing as George and which guitar solos you’re going to be doing.”5 Brighton’s tribute career started almost by accident, as he took on the role of Harrison during a six-song set of Beatles covers during a small church-sponsored New Year’s Eve concert. Attendees passed word to their friends of the success of the performance, and before long Brighton and his bandmates were accepting engagements as a Beatles cover band.

Brighton made the leap from cover band to tribute band after seeing his first Beatles tribute performance in person, where he says they were wearing the costumes and did three costume changes. I had never seen this done before. I’d known about the Beatlemania show, of course, back in the old days, but I’d never seen it, and it never would have occurred to me to try to get in and be a part of it. So I introduced myself to one of them, and I said, ‘Hey, I’ve started doing this just for fun, but you guys are doing this and making money at it’.”6

Brighton spent the next several months as a freelance performer with various Beatles tribute acts, one of which was hired to perform at an event hosted by a member of The Rutles, a group formed by the Monty Python comedy troupe in the 1970s as a comedic parody of The Beatles. In a moment similar to the “simulation of a simulation” Bowie tribute concert described earlier, Brighton’s portrayal of the Harrison-inspired character Dirk in The Rutles turned out to be more than just an evening of entertainment—one of the fans in attendance that night was Jimmy Pou, who portrayed Harrison in the original Broadway production of Beatlemania. Pou contacted Brighton after the concert and offered him the opportunity to be Pou’s substitute with the Chicago-based Beatles tribute band Twist and Shout. This opportunity resulted in additional exposure to the Beatles tribute world, and eventually led him to Ron McNeil, who not only had spent years crafting his own tribute to John Lennon, but also instilled in Brighton the importance of detail in tribute performance.

5 David Brighton, telephone interview by author, February 11, 2012.
6 Ibid.
Prior to becoming a tribute performer, Brighton had spent years as a lead guitarist with several original acts, including heavy metal band Quiet Riot. His experience in the Los Angeles rock scene may have helped Brighton gain credibility among his fellow musicians, but “in the tribute world, it purely comes down to, can you sound like the guy and can you play like the guy?” he says. “The fact that I was a professional musician and played with serious musicians, none of that hurt. But Ron was in the tribute world, and he was impressed with how well you could impersonate your character.” McNeil and Brighton spent the next several years playing as The Fab Four, but eventually Brighton felt the desire to try something new.

As he began a new career as a David Bowie tribute artist, Brighton remained mindful of the differences between being an impersonator and a tribute performer, the latter of which he says involves being able to “put every song under the microscope and you learn every note as close to the record as humanly possible, where you listen to where he picks it, where he bends each note, and try to make it exact,” he says.

And that’s the level of insanity that I learned from the Beatles tributes. If you can make it sound exactly like the record, then that’s a good thing. And that’s an insane amount of work. When I got in the Beatles thing, I was already a lead guitar player who sang, so I was just learning how to play lead guitar and sing like someone else. And I learned a lot—just taking those Beatles songs apart is an immense amount to learn. With Bowie’s thing, there was more I could learn.8 Thanks to the years he had already spent working with experienced tribute performers, Brighton had a learning curve less steep than that faced by other new tribute acts when it came to taking on the Bowie character.

That is not to say that crafting an accurate tribute to Bowie, among the most iconic performers in twentieth-century popular music, was easy. From the earliest days of developing his tribute act, Brighton found a significant challenge in trying to capture the essence of Bowie while representing as many as the singer’s characters and phases as possible. In addition to learning to render believable renditions of Bowie’s unorthodox music, Brighton also faced the demands of recreating the singer’s famously dramatic,

7 David Brighton, telephone interview by author, February 11, 2012.
8 Ibid.
visually oriented performances. “The Beatle audience and the Bowie audience, and some other groups, are absolutely interested in that,” he says. “Especially with Bowie, because it’s such a theatrical show. Half, at least, of their popularity, with both of those acts, is based on what they looked like, what they wore, what they said, their charisma.”

Brighton and his Space Oddity bandmates still compose and perform original music, but their commitment to detail in recreating the Bowie concert experience has won them not only legions of followers around the world, but also the ability to create a hyperreal musical experience for fans who are unlikely to see Bowie himself take the stage again. The tribute act’s accuracy in replicating Bowie’s music and stage show is evaluated in the following section.

**Musical Equipment**

A veteran of the tribute phenomenon, Brighton understands the importance of recreating the smallest details in the live performance of Bowie’s music, including specific equipment. Some gear is provided by Brighton himself for whoever is playing with him at any given time; in other instances, musicians use their own. Ideally, their equipment reflects what Bowie’s band members were using during the 1970s or 1980s, but given the longevity of Bowie’s career and the musical diversity of his output, any hope of possessing and incorporating every instrument used on the original recordings would be nearly impossible for any tribute performer. “Because we are spanning Bowie’s forty-something-year career and countless musicians that he worked with in his various bands,” Brighton says,

we mostly focus on Mick Ronson and his equipment. We use the authentic guitar, amp and effects at our larger shows for our Mick Ronson character. At [our smaller shows.] we don’t have the ability to use the proper amp, due to the restrictions of the venue. And although we put a Trevor [Bolder] wig on our bassist, he is covering so many styles beyond the era that Trevor played with Bowie, we currently let our bassist use gear that will work for all of the material. He did have a bass like Trevor’s for a while. It did not translate on the other material, however. [As for Brighton’s drummer, Ryan Brown.] Bowie has had so many bands and so many musicians, that we don’t try to force Ryan into the Woody Woodmansey mold.¹⁰

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¹⁰ David Brighton, e-mail to author, March 30, 2012.
The Police existed as a band for seven years, ABBA for ten; Bowie released twenty-three albums over a thirty-six-year career. The volume and diversity of his work, as well as its release over five different decades, resulted in its being recorded and performed on a vast array of instruments. It would be unreasonable to expect a tribute artist—or Bowie himself if he was still touring—to use such a variety in a single concert. Brighton’s attempts to use authentic instruments where possible, and at least to consider how to work around their lack of availability at certain points in his live set, indicates a commitment to performing Bowie’s music accurately.

**VOCALS**

During an interview with the author following Brighton’s March 17, 2012 concert in Laguna Beach, California, a fan asked whether Brighton is British. The fact that his accent is accurate enough for at least one audience member to believe is just one of the vocal elements that invites comparisons between the original and the tribute. For Brighton, the challenge of taking on Bowie’s vocal techniques—which, like his band members’ instruments, varied wildly between albums—was a logical one, given the frequent comparisons to Bowie that Brighton heard. “Bowie was always a voice that I’d been accused of sounding like, even when I was in originals groups years before,” Brighton says. “When we had record deals, people said, ‘You sound too much like Bowie,’ even if I tried not to. So I said, ‘Well, maybe that’s a voice I should try.’ So I thought I’d try the character.”

Over the course of his performing career, Bowie adopted several stage personalities; deciding which of them to portray presents a challenge for any Bowie tribute artist. The one constant in Bowie’s performances, however, has been his unmistakable and often-overlooked voice; *Rolling Stone* has praised the singer for his “astonishing range and control.”

Prior to taking the stage for the first time in the Bowie role, Brighton says, he spent “an insane amount of hours listening to the stuff and practicing to it. An insane amount of time. You’ve got to be literally an obsessive personality to assimilate all these details, and to even think

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12 Gilmore, “How Ziggy Stardust Fell to Earth,” 42.
they’re important enough to learn.”13 His efforts have paid off, however; Brighton’s web site boasts dozens of testimonials from fans, celebrities, and even those who worked directly with Bowie, expressing awe over his vocal similarity to the original singer. Brighton’s vocals retrace Bowie’s angst in “Suffragette City,” his isolation in “Space Oddity,” and his futuristic perspective in “I’m Afraid of Americans.” Though these songs were recorded over a span of twenty-eight years, Brighton was able to use recordings to mimic Bowie’s vocal inflection. Still, Brighton says he is still discovering nuances in Bowie’s voice and incorporating them into his performance. “To get into somebody else’s shoes musically takes years,” he says. “To kind of learn a character and what they’re doing musically, and get as much of yourself out of the way as possible, it takes studying and studying, and getting that inside of yourself.”14

**IS THE MUSIC PERFORMED LIVE?**

As is the case with The Police Experience and Arrival From Sweden, Brighton uses no pre-recorded tracks during his performances; instead, all songs are played by a five-person backing band that combines the identities of Spiders From Mars-era performers like Mick Ronson, Trevor Bolder, and Woody Woodmansey with the more anonymous musicians that played with Bowie throughout the remainder of his career. The exact makeup of Brighton’s band varies from show to show; like Arrival From Sweden, Space Oddity uses a revolving cast of musicians depending on their availability. The band also sometimes features a female backing vocalist, depending on the size of the stage at the venues where the group plays, which can affect its set lists. Regardless of which specific musicians are on stage at any given time, Brighton takes the performance seriously: “I view this kind of music we play as kind of like classical music,” he says.

When every instrumentalist in the group learns every note just like it sounded and then put it all together, it’s sort of like putting together this awesome tapestry, and it makes this great picture. At times I find it very exciting to recreate it and see what made it so great. And then, if you get amazing musicians who know not only how to play the notes, but how to play it with the feel and put their souls into it, then you get something that’s really spectacular. And that’s why I’ve surrounded

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14 Ibid.
myself with some of the best musicians on the planet. They all love and respect Bowie’s body of work, so it wasn’t really hard to find great players. It was hard to find a great group of players that jelled personality-wise; it wasn’t hard to find great players.¹⁵

Brighton’s musicians have played alongside Grammy winners and toured around the world with major-label recording acts. Their experience performing as backing musicians, oftentimes playing parts originally recorded in the studio by others and made familiar to audiences, has uniquely prepared them for their role as members of Brighton’s tribute act. The singer has also proclaimed his own obsession with having his band reproduce the original recordings through manual means, regardless of difficulty. Some of the guitar parts played by Robert Fripp on the 1977 album *Heroes* “are like these insane guitar things that are more like noises than notes [and were] hard to discern,” while some of the atonal keyboard parts played by pianist Mike Garson were “these really avant-garde/jazz/rock things that were just really unconventional.”¹⁶ Rather than ask his backing musicians to simply improvise the parts, however, Brighton demonstrated his commitment to accurate recreation by asking Garson for assistance. Garson responded by providing transcriptions, which have been used by Space Oddity during live performances ever since.

Space Oddity models its live performances on recorded versions of Bowie’s songs, but like The Police Experience, Brighton sees value in hybridizing studio versions with the live renditions performed at Bowie concerts preserved on bootleg recordings. “We try to replicate the studio versions to the best of our ability,” Brighton says, as those are the versions that more people know. On some things, like endings that faded on records, we will try to end the songs like Bowie’s band did in concert. And sometimes, when I’ve heard a live version of Bowie doing one of his songs that is even better than the studio recording, we will incorporate some of the ideas from the live version, taking the best of both versions and fusing them together.”¹⁷

Like The Police Experience, Brighton’s reinterpretations of some Bowie songs occur outside the limits of what the original act performed, but this does not preclude the tribute artist from providing a hyperreal experience for fans. Brighton may be reinterpreting Bowie’s live

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¹⁶ Ibid.
¹⁷ David Brighton, e-mail to author, February 18, 2012.
performances in a manner reflecting his own values and preferences, but he is culling the material—albeit in bits and pieces—entirely from actual Bowie renditions, meaning his performances are historically and musically accurate.

COSTUMES

Among the challenges of portraying David Bowie is accurately capturing his look and sound at any of the diverse phases of his career. Because Bowie was a visually oriented performer, costuming was an important part of his concert experience. Brighton realizes that, and has incorporated seven different looks for Bowie into his show. He typically opens his tribute concerts wearing black pants, black vest, and white shirt—the same outfit Bowie regularly wore in his Thin White Duke persona during his 1976 world concert tour.

Additional costumes and props include the iconic yellow suit Bowie made famous during the mid-1980s Let’s Dance era, his 1972 “Starman” costume, the kabuki mask on a stick Bowie routinely used during his 1974 concert tour to promote his Diamond Dogs album, and the unique Ziggy Stardust-era outfits created for Bowie during the early 1970s by Japanese fashion designer Kansai Yamamoto. The importance of detail in these costumes, as well as the challenges associated with achieving it, is not lost on Brighton, who over more than a decade has

spent an enormous amount of money on costumes. I remember a David Bowie impersonator from England—I’ve had a bunch of them from England e-mail me over the years and ask me advice—one of them asked, ‘Do you have any advice for the costumes?’ And I said, ‘Bro, you’ve just got to spend the money.’ There’s no way around it. I’ve tried to get costumes cheaper, but they’re crazy costumes, some of them, and getting them made is really expensive. And with the really crazy Ziggy Stardust stuff, they don’t make fabrics like that anymore, and so the costume maker just looks at you like, ‘OK, this is going to cost you,’ and they tell you some enormous amount of money.18

Brighton has invested a significant amount of his own money in costumes for his show, but was also fortunate in inheriting all but one of the costumes that were designed for him to wear in the television commercial in which he co-starred with Bowie.

Brighton’s supporting musicians also play in costume, though as is the case with their stage positioning, he believes that attempting to keep them in historically accurate costumes

at every point would be impractical given the vast changes in personnel supporting Bowie on stage. Brighton owns wigs that he asks some of his musicians to wear, in order to look more like the Ziggy Stardust-era performers they are portraying, but as a general rule he does not emphasize their look as much as his own, because “it simply wouldn’t work to have the musicians changing costumes as often as I do in the show,” he says. “So we just keep them with one look throughout. If the Ziggy-era look works for the individual players, that’s the look we go with. If it doesn’t, we have them do a more generic sideman look, as most of Bowie’s players over the years have been just that.”

**MANNERISMS AND STAGE PRESENCE**

During his years as a regularly touring act, Bowie was more than just a singer; he was a performer whose concerts were part musical event, part theatrical experience. Bowie was still touring as late as 2003, but by then “he wasn’t doing Ziggy Stardust, he wasn’t dressing like he used to,” says Brighton. “You weren’t getting the same experience.” In order to help fans get that experience, Brighton has taken both acting and dancing classes in order to capture Bowie’s essence on stage during various stages of his career, mimicking the original singer’s on-stage mannerisms to the degree that Harry Maslin, who produced Bowie’s *Young Americans* and *Station to Station* albums, claims that Brighton has the “moves and look to actually step in for David Bowie if he were unavailable and few would ever know.”

Brighton realizes that the dance classes he admittedly “stumbled through” helped his overall performance, but says that successfully impersonating original artists on stage ultimately comes down to “just learning to copy what they do. I once worked with a Michael Jackson impersonator who said, ‘Look, I’m a white guy who can’t dance, but I’ve learned to do Michael Jackson’s moves.’ And I’d say the same thing: I just learned to do Bowie’s thing.”

As the star of the show, Brighton is based at center stage (but constantly moves around the entire stage), as was Bowie. His supporting musicians stand on either side of him.

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20 Ibid.
in an arrangement based on the 1973 Ziggy Stardust tour. This may not have been an accurate arrangement for every one of Bowie’s tours, but considering how often Bowie changed his live show, Brighton believes it would be impractical to try to match his musicians’ stage positioning with whatever Bowie was doing at any given time. “Bowie’s done it all different ways,” Brighton says.

We match the side of the stage that Mick Ronson was on, because he was Bowie’s most recognizable sideman. He was Bowie’s co-star for a couple of years. After the Spiders were disbanded in 1973, it was Bowie out front and a bunch of guys in the back playing instruments. The positioning changed from band to band after that.23

Having spent years watching countless hours of video in order to study Bowie’s stage movements, Brighton had his mannerisms tested when he performed in a 2003 commercial alongside Bowie himself (which will be discussed in greater detail in the next section). Brighton spent the first day of the shoot watching Bowie walk through a series of scenes, and was asked to recreate the singer’s mannerisms and facial expressions the following day, in costume. “He has all these crazy performing skills,” Brighton says. “Like, he knows how to do mime, and he’s a dancer. There was one particular move he did that I thought, ‘There’s no way I’m going to be able to recreate that.’”24 The opportunity to watch Bowie up close, combined with the pressure to recreate his mannerisms for the camera, helped make Brighton’s physical imitation of Bowie even more accurate than it already was.

ENDORSEMENT

Unlike the other tribute performers featured in this research, Brighton has not worked with Bowie in the context of his tribute act. The one time that Brighton met Bowie in person, he made a deliberate effort to not discuss his act, fearing that Bowie might not find the impersonation flattering. There were also potential legal concerns: “Bowie did put a cease-and-desist on a [tribute] show that was going to tour in Europe. But for some reason, I’ve had his blessing so far. And Bowie’s official [web] site has always supported us.”25 Brighton has enjoyed the endorsement of the site for many years, which he says has led to increased

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24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
turnout at his concerts. One fan told Brighton after a concert that he had driven five hours to see the show, for the purpose of writing a review for the site. Brighton is careful, however, not to misinterpret the site’s support as an endorsement from Bowie himself, admitting that, “I don’t know to what degree Bowie looks at his web site.”

**INTANGIBLES**

In May 2012, the Schedule section of Space Oddity’s web site listed more than a dozen private engagements that Brighton had planned, indicating that the group is in high demand. While receiving offers to appear as Bowie is nothing new to Brighton, the opportunity he received in 2003—to perform as Bowie for Bowie—was unique. That year, the Vittel bottled-water brand debuted a television commercial featuring Bowie walking through an apartment, coming face to face with many of the characters he portrayed on stage and in music throughout his career. When the idea was first pitched to Bowie, he balked at the idea of having to bring characters like Ziggy Stardust back from the dead, and instead suggested using a lookalike to portray the characters. The commercial’s producers agreed, and tracked Brighton down on the internet. “They found my web site and they called me,” Brighton recalls. “They had me go do screen tests and send in pictures. I was really excited and nervous. You talk about your audience—if David Bowie’s your audience, you know you’re going to get scrutinized. So obviously I really, really wanted to do it.” Brighton was selected—a decision made in part, he was told, with Bowie’s personal involvement—and flown to New York to be fitted for costumes and wigs (see Figure 6), as well as for filming the commercial.

Brighton worked directly with Bowie during the shoot, an experience Brighton describes as “bizarre, surreal.” Though he recalls being embarrassed at the awkwardness of

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26 Among the personas featured in the 30-second commercial are Ziggy Stardust, Aladdin Sane, the Thin White Duke, Diamond Dog, Halloween Jack, and the Man Who Sold the World.


28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.
meeting one of his heroes, Brighton believes that the experience helped establish a high level of authenticity for his live concert performances because it allowed him to channel Bowie from an up-close and personal perspective, which he says has translated into the ability to create a hyperreality for fans. Being selected for the opportunity in the first place, he says, made him feel “very validated. It increased my confidence level. I got to work with David Bowie; I couldn’t think of a bigger honor. [Afterward,] I went out on stage with an increased amount of confidence, which enabled me to do a better job. It gave me more credibility.”

In six of the seven categories of criteria for evaluating accurate imitation considered in this thesis, Brighton can be identified as an authentic tribute performer. The seventh, the endorsement of Bowie himself, has eluded Brighton in part because of Bowie’s reclusion following a 2004 heart attack. Although he has not worked directly with Bowie on his tribute show—a gesture that has been considered an endorsement in this thesis’s other case studies—Brighton has earned the support of the singer’s official channel of communicating with his fans. Also, Bowie’s involvement in the selection of Brighton for the Vittel commercial could be seen as an endorsement, at least in a visual-performance context.

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Brighton takes pride in the accuracy of his imitation of the Bowie concert experience, but after twenty years of participating in the tribute phenomenon, he realizes not only that he is not David Bowie, but also that despite being based on a finite amount of material performed over a finite span of time, his Bowie tribute is always going to be a work in progress. “There are certain human limitations,” Brighton says. “I have my set of vocal cords; he has his set. I can manipulate mine to a certain degree to sound a certain amount like him, but I will never be him. But we’re as authentic as we can humanly be. Our objective is to be that way, and we’re always learning.”

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For the tribute acts evaluated in this thesis, the endorsement of the original act (implicit in the case of Brighton) has been an important part of establishing their legitimacy as tribute performers. For Elvis Presley tribute artists, however, endorsement of the original act’s estate is not only desirable; it is mandatory. Since the early 1980s, when state and federal courts upheld Elvis Presley Enterprises’s (EPE) ownership of Presley’s name, voice, likeness, and image, the organization has actively sought to end unofficial fan clubs, merchandising operations, and tribute performances, all in the name of preserving the integrity of his legacy. In the process of rendering Presley a “legally held, legally enforceable, and essentially monolithic entity,”1 EPE has defined the parameters of acceptable representations of Presley’s image, including tribute performances. Gone are the oft-maligned, visually oriented Elvis impersonators lampooned for years across popular culture for their “freakshow depictions” of Presley2; instead, they are now referred to strictly as Elvis Tribute Artists, or ETAs, and are not authorized to impersonate Presley outside of a musical context.

Since 2007, EPE has hosted the Ultimate Elvis Tribute Artist Contest, a months-long competition that evaluates contestants around the world for their ability to offer the “best representation of the legacy of Elvis Presley.”3 A panel of judges in each of twenty-eight preliminary-round locations uses a rubric—the contents of which are disclosed to the audience prior to the first performance—to determine the degree to which performers succeed in recreating Presley’s vocals, style, stage wear, and stage presence (see Appendix

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B), with the winner receiving a cash prize and a contract to perform in a Las Vegas tribute revue. The contest’s categories match some of those used to evaluate tribute performers in this thesis, but unlike the concerts of The Police Experience, Arrival From Sweden, and Space Oddity, the Ultimate Elvis Tribute Artist Contest—the only official way that fans can experience Presley’s music performed live—is so strictly directed that performers are limited in how they can create a hyperreality for their audience. The suspension of disbelief necessary for the tribute phenomenon to succeed is less likely to occur when fans know artists are shaping their tributes based on static criteria selected by judges, and not by the performers themselves. The goal of participants in the Ultimate Elvis Tribute Artist Contest is to score points with judges in order to win a competition, not necessarily to connect directly with the audience. Ironically, the word “authenticity” appears nowhere in association with the contest.

As discussed in Chapter One, authenticity can be understood as the degree to which an accurate recreation of an original act’s music and stage performance yields a hyperreal experience for audiences. This is the explicit goal of many tribute performers, including those interviewed for this thesis. When The Police Experience performs, Nieland “would like to think that people walk out and they go, ‘Wow, they sounded just like that band.’ That’s the goal.”

Zetterberg takes pride in recounting the time a Broadway producer came backstage after an Arrival From Sweden concert and “started to cry. She thought it was fantastic. And she said, ‘My God, it was passion, energy, the songs—it was ABBA.’” When Brighton channels David Bowie onstage, he aspires for fans, “at each section of the show, to go back in time and feel like they are there. If you could manipulate time, and make a concert where you got a few of David Bowie’s eras wrapped up into one show, that’s what I’m trying to make authentic.”

It is this pursuit of authenticity that sets these and other tribute acts apart from the tightly managed Elvis tribute experience, which allows audience members to see in advance

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4 Mike Nieland, telephone interview by author, February 28, 2012.
5 Vicky Zetterberg, interview by author, February 18, 2012.
the categories by which contestants are to be evaluated and thus inscribes the hyperreality of the performance. Moore’s assertion that authenticity in music is ascribed, and not inscribed, explains why the Ultimate Elvis Tribute Artist Contest is not an authentic recreation of the Elvis concert experience.

The discussion of authenticity in the context of the tribute phenomenon is a complex and potentially divergent one, for a variety of reasons. First, the two concepts are inherently at odds. By its very nature, a tribute act is an imitation; the idea of conjoining principles of authenticity with tribute bands that, by definition, re-create, re-enact, reproduce, and re-imagine a recorded product raises questions about what constitutes an authentic experience beyond accurate imitation.

Second, the means of evaluating authenticity in any form of music are abstract and subjectively based. Philip Auslander claims that the criteria for authenticity in rock music, for instance, are imaginary, vague, and subjective, though this “has never prevented them from functioning in a very real way for rock fans.” With so much variety between and among musicians and fans, it is difficult to consider what makes a musical experience authentic in the tribute phenomenon; Auslander’s observation of authenticity’s importance to the audience, however, suggests that the concept should not simply be disregarded for the sake of convenience.

Third, there is disagreement among scholars regarding whether authenticity should be evaluated on the basis of a performer’s adherence to an original act’s look, sound, or both. Some, like Theodore Gracyk in his discussion of rock music, believe that “only the music itself as it is experienced on records can be treated seriously, that the visual culture of rock reflects its imbrication with a venal entertainment industry.” Others, such as Evan Eisenberg, place a greater emphasis on the visual elements of a performance, as “every mode of record listening leaves us with a need for something, if not someone, to see and touch.” Auslander, meanwhile, asserts that authenticity “cannot be made on the basis of either visual

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8 Ibid., 73.
or aural evidence alone, but only by considering both, and the relationship of one to the other in light of other knowledge the listener brings to bear.”¹⁰ In addition, tribute artists might have no option but to subjectively channel the spirit of the original act in determining how to present a song that that act never performed live. The variety of possibilities in how to evaluate authenticity, as well as whether each factor is equally important in the process, problematizes the discussion of authenticity in the tribute phenomenon.

Fourth, audience members have varying degrees of knowledge about the original act being imitated. In some cases, even serious fans of an original band may not be able to identify the original group’s members, let alone the efforts of a tribute group to accurately imitate that band. Groups like the Australian Pink Floyd Show and Los Angeles-based Which One’s Pink? have consistently drawn audiences for more than a decade, yet their members do not physically resemble their counterparts in Pink Floyd, an original group that Brighton says “just stood there on stage and played music and had a light show. A lot of people couldn’t even tell you what they looked like. But the Pink Floyd audience doesn’t seem to be concerned with that.”¹¹ If audience members do not know what an original band’s musicians looked like, which brand of instruments they played, or how many people were in the band, how can they determine whether a tribute to that original band is performed authentically?

Authenticity, then, has found a tentative and usually speculative place in the literature in the context of popular music. Nearly a century ago, Walter Benjamin famously contended that works of art cannot be authentically reproduced, as the act of mechanical reproduction through technology strips from the copy the aura that renders the original as art, thus denying the audience the true experience of that art. Though Benjamin was concerned largely with the effects of photography on humans’ interpretation of the world around them, the age of reproduction in music has made Benjamin’s argument relevant in this thesis, as it raises the questions of whether original music loses its meaning once recorded, and by extension whether its aura is lost when it is subsequently performed in a tribute setting. Though he does not address the topic directly, Benjamin would probably have found the possibility of

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¹⁰ Auslander, Liveness, 76.

authenticity to exist within the tribute phenomenon. A reproduced work, he says, can maintain the aura of the original in the case of second-order simulacrum (i.e., forgery), which in the case of popular music could include the tribute act.¹²

More recent scholarship has been no clearer or more definitive when it comes to assigning authenticity to popular music. In Running with the Devil, Robert Walser discusses a variety of issues associated with heavy metal music, but in each of the seven instances that the author brings up authenticity, he uses the word in quotes, as if to indicate that it is not a fully realized or understood term, almost treating it as an idealized concept that serves no purpose beyond providing a vacant sense of legitimacy similar to the second-person authenticity identified by Moore.¹³ Reynolds discusses authenticity as impossible to achieve for musical presentations that are remote in time or space, both of which apply to the nostalgia-based tribute acts considered in this thesis. Discussing British jazz musicians of the 1940s whose performances reflected their advocacy of a return to a form of the genre popular decades earlier, Reynolds maintains that any artist who performs music from another time and/or place is condemned to inauthenticity: “Either he strives to be a faithful copyist, reproducing the music’s surface features as closely as possible, risking hollowness and redundancy; or he can attempt to bring something expressive and personal to it…which then risks bastardising the style.”¹⁴ In the context of the tribute phenomenon, though, performers can be faithful copyists without producing hollowness and redundancy, especially if they are creating a hyperreality that benefits both themselves and their audiences.¹⁵

Moore addresses authenticity in popular music by discussing three separate categories of authentic performance, but while he identifies a shared responsibility between performer and audience in establishing authenticity, Moore is not clear regarding which, if either, has a greater share of that responsibility. Though he states that the authenticity of a musical

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¹² Richard J. Lane, Reading Walter Benjamin: Writing through the Catastrophe (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).


¹⁴ Reynolds, Retromania, 211.

¹⁵ In the case of tribute acts, hollowness and redundancy would exist in a group’s pursuit of accuracy simply for accuracy’s sake, without regard for creating a hyperreal experience for audience members.
performance depends on the musical decisions that performers make, he also maintains that these decisions must resonate with, and be accepted by, the audience. Moore concludes by calling on future scholarship to examine why various perceivers find, or fail to find, a particular performance authentic. The final section of this thesis accepts Moore’s challenge by examining the role of the audience not in experiencing authenticity, but rather in determining it. While the audience is clearly a vital part of the tribute phenomenon, it may be presumptuous to assume that most are equipped with the background knowledge or interest to make the value-based judgments that comprise such a determination. Authenticity is perhaps better understood as both the byproduct and goal of hyperreality, created for the audience by the musicians performing the tribute, than as an independent judgment to be made.

There seem to exist some differences within the tribute phenomenon regarding the nature of the audience. Zetterberg, for example, is confident that much of the crowd at an Arrival From Sweden concert has “seen only Mamma Mia; they don’t know anything about ABBA.”16 Nieland believes that attendees of a Police Experience concert are not “people that are, like, surface Police fans. That’s not our main crowd. The people that come to see us are usually pretty hardcore fans, and they know the set cold, they know all the little things.”17 Brighton sees more of a mix at Space Oddity concerts: “A certain amount of the audience is off the street—you know, it’s something to do,” he says. “A certain amount of it is marginal fans—they know the hits on the radio. And then there’s a certain amount that are hardcore lunatics that know every note, and they know more about Bowie’s catalog than some of the guys in the band.”18 Brighton’s perspective is probably the most accurate of the three: the lack of a common knowledge base among the audience renders unlikely the prospect of the culturally based determination of authenticity proposed by Moore, because members of the culture in question are not equally informed about the original act and thus would not share a recognition of the tribute act’s accuracy in imitating the original.

17 Mike Nieland, telephone interview by author, February 28, 2012.
There are scores of music fans who do know the details of an original band’s music and performances that would be able to judge a tribute act’s accuracy, many of whom comment on tribute performances posted to internet sites like YouTube. Beatles tribute acts are judged particularly strictly by fans who perceive inaccuracies in everything from individual instrumental parts (“The George part is wrong! He doesn’t play the same part of [sic] the bass!”) to personal appearance and costumes (“Where’s Paul’s beard?” and “George has the wrong pants on.”). There are also highly knowledgeable fans, as well as those who know very little about the original act, who attend tribute concerts in person. Seven fans attending performances by the tribute bands discussed in Chapters Two, Three, and Four were randomly selected to be interviewed for this thesis, and were asked not only about their familiarity with the original band, but also about their experience seeing a tribute to that original band relative to their knowledge of its music and members.

One interviewee was an Anaheim resident named Mike, who had driven an hour to see Space Oddity in March 2012. Mike estimates that he has seen Bowie in concert at least twenty times, dating back to 1974, which allowed him to identify nuances as detailed as the color of Brighton’s hair relative to Bowie’s. He also recognized Brighton’s bootleg-studio hybrid approach discussed in Chapter Four, and realized Space Oddity’s depth when he had walked by the venue earlier in the day and heard the band performing “1984/Dodo,” a rare Bowie track, during its sound check. Prior to the start of the concert, Mike says, he had “had very minimal expectations. I didn’t think he was going to be able to look like him or sound like him; I figured they were going to do as best as they could. I just thought that it would be impossible to replicate his look and his sound. I was blown away at how well he succeeded doing that.” Mike’s recognition of Brighton’s morphing personality to match the changes in Bowie personas at various points of the concert is based on his having experienced many of them in person during the 1970s, and is thus a highly informed perspective.

21 Personal communication with a fan, March 17, 2012.
The remaining six interviewees, however, had never seen the original act in concert, and had relatively little knowledge of its music or stage show. Their post-concert evaluations were enthusiastic but vaguely stated, indicating a lack of detailed familiarity with the original group. Among the comments they provided are:

“it’s pretty good, all the costumes and stuff. And their voices were pretty darn good.”—Carl (Riverside, Calif.), Arrival From Sweden

“I assume this group was accurate, based on the costumes they were wearing, and it sounded authentic, it sounded like what I remember hearing. It was really neat that they’re all from Sweden, too.”—Ron (Carlsbad, Calif.), Arrival From Sweden

“I think it’s great. He dresses like him, and he looks like him. I see the gem in him.”—Alisa (Laguna Beach, Calif.), Space Oddity

“These guys are amazing. You think you’re seeing ABBA.”—Shannon (Vista, Calif.), Arrival From Sweden

“I think the costumes were great. Looking like the band was good.”—Jennifer (San Diego, Calif.), Arrival From Sweden

“Looking at the band, knowing there was a blonde and a dark-haired woman and the two guys, the hairstyles were true to the time.”—Rhonda (Vista, Calif.), Arrival From Sweden

Figure 7, a photograph taken at a Space Oddity concert, shows that while many tribute-concert audience members are aware and appreciative of the level of accuracy performers achieve in recreating the music and concert experience of an original group, others seem to treat the performance as background entertainment. Several fans at the front of the stage at this March 2012 concert had turned their backs on Brighton, choosing instead to engage in conversation. Though these audience members’ decision to turn away from the stage does not necessarily mean they appreciated the performance any less than other audience members, it does indicate a relative disinterest in the performance. This, along with the limited costume- and hairstyle-oriented observations offered by most of the interviewees above would suggest that, despite Moore’s belief that authenticity is audience-driven, the

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22 Coincidentally, Carl is a native of Sweden, but had no additional comments on the group.

performer plays a much more important role in its establishment. There are tribute-band fans who have not done detailed research on the original act; the same cannot be said, however, for the performers themselves.

The performers interviewed for this thesis seem not only to recognize this responsibility, but relish it as well. While all three acknowledge that the tribute phenomenon would not exist without audiences to watch the bands perform, Nieland asserts that The Police Experience’s authenticity is determined by “us first, then the audience,” through the establishment of hyperreality. 24 Zetterberg uses Arrival From Sweden concerts to educate non-Swedish audiences, since many know little about both ABBA and her home country. “We are kind of ambassadors,” she says. “Some people don’t even know IKEA is Swedish, Volvo is Swedish, Absolut vodka. So we talk about Sweden [and] ABBA.” 25 As previously stated, Brighton recognizes that some Space Oddity fans know Bowie’s material better than some of his band members, but “not more than I do, because I’m the leader.” 26

Because a tribute musician cannot hope to succeed as a tribute performer without knowing detailed musical, visual, and personal details about the act he or she is imitating, it

is the musician who should be seen as the ultimate authority in creating a hyperreal experience for the audience. As seen through the case studies in this thesis, musicians who are capable of composing and performing original music are often driven to participate in the tribute phenomenon by a deep appreciation and respect for the music of the original act. For fans, that motivation can come from a variety of sources ranging from near-obsession with the original group to a mere passing interest in its music. All three of the tribute musicians interviewed for this thesis have seen their respective original act in concert; the same surely cannot be said for many members of their audiences, some of whom are not old enough to have had the chance. This lends further credibility to a tribute performance, and adds to the performer’s authority in establishing a hyperreality because he or she experienced the original reality firsthand.

Allan Moore’s article on authenticity in popular music (2002) includes a discussion of a Genesis tribute band called ReGenesis, which he says offers a musical, visual, and technical recreation of the original group’s concerts “as a way of strengthening their ability to give people access to an experience (that of a particular live performance) otherwise denied them by Genesis’ demise.” This extends to any authentic tribute to a defunct group, including the ones discussed in this thesis. The Police, Bowie and ABBA will in all likelihood never again perform live; their tribute-band counterparts, then, are all nostalgia-based acts whose appeal may lie to some degree in our immersion in the age of retromania. In all three cases, the tribute act is recreating the music of an original act that existed within our living memory, exploiting recorded and mass-reproduced media and incorporating artifacts of popular culture in order to create a hyperreality for its audience. One reason for the tribute phenomenon’s rise in popularity at the start of the twenty-first century, suggests Reynolds, is that audiences may feel that new, original music lacks meaning and context, shamelessly appropriating styles from a variety of disconnected sources. He describes the

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1960s and 1990s as “surge decades” in pop history, and claims that each was followed by a
decade-long “period of going-in-circles…directionless phases [in which] it’s easy to
convince yourself that originality is overrated.” It is interesting to note that the first of these
so-called directionless decades was the 1970s, which gave birth to the tribute phenomenon in
the form of Beatlemania; the second was the period 2000–2010, which saw tribute bands
enjoy unprecedented success. It would appear then, that retromania plays a role in the tribute
phenomenon, enabling nostalgia-based groups to enjoy popularity through their ability to
create a hyperreality through accuracy of recreation.

Because musicians have this ability, it is the tribute performer who initiates the three
stage process examined in this thesis: accuracy of imitation leads to hyperreality for the
audience, which in turn results in an authentic musical experience. Audiences are not in the
position to develop hyperreality, but they can experience it, which means they are still a
critical part of the tribute phenomenon. The ever-expanding nature of the phenomenon, seen
in both its growth in availability to audiences and financial stability for performers, indicates
that it will not be going away soon, if at all. In a musical world that features posthumous
album releases and deceased musicians “appearing” at concerts in holographic form, the
strength and apparent longevity of the tribute phenomenon will continue to make available to
fans an authentic concert experience of a band that is no longer together, even if it must be
realized through hyperreality.

30 Reynolds, Retromania, 428.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
Question asked of performers included:

1. How and why did you become a tribute musician?
2. What made you select the artist you are imitating?
3. Have you ever seen the original in concert, either live or on video?
4. What role does the audience play in your performance?
5. Do you believe you are the most accurate tribute performer to this particular act? If so, what sets you apart?
6. What do you think the original act would say about your performance?
7. What has been the most difficult part of achieving an accurate portrayal?
8. Do you feel like your show is representative of the original act’s concert experience?
9. What vocal or performance training have you done to prepare specifically for this role?
10. You have been doing this for many years. What keeps you motivated?
11. If you could see the original act perform live again, would you? Why or why not?

Questions asked of audience members included:

1. Why did you come to the show tonight?
2. How familiar are you with the original act’s music and stage show?
3. Have you ever seen the original in concert, either live or on video?
4. Do you think you experienced what it was like to have attended one of the original act’s concerts?
5. Have you seen this tribute act before?
6. Is this band any more or less authentic than other tribute acts you have seen? How?
7. What do you think the original act would say about the tribute band’s performance?
8. How often do you see live music?
9. Does the level of accuracy in a tribute performance affect your appreciation of it?
APPENDIX B

ELVIS TRIBUTE ARTIST SCORE SHEET
2012 Ultimate Elvis Tribute Artist Contest Scoring Sheet

Contestant’s Name: ________________________________

Please rate the above ETA in the following categories below based upon performance by circling the number below. Please be sure to mark your scores clearly.

1. Vocals
   How do you rate the ETA’s overall singing ability, including singing in key and knowing the words to the song?
   1 = Poor  2 = 3 = 4 = 5 = 6 = 7 = 8 = 9 = 10 = Good  Excellent

2. Style
   How do you rate the ETA’s ability to present a look and style that well represents Elvis during the era of the song being performed?
   1 = Not a Good Representation  2 = Fair Representation  3 = Well Represents

3. Stage Wear
   How do you rate the ETA’s stage wear including quality and proper fit?
   1 = Poor  2 = 3 = 4 = 5 = 6 = 7 = 8 = 9 = 10 = Good  Excellent

4. Stage Presence
   How do you rate the ETA’s ability to recreate the charisma Elvis created when performing on stage?
   1 = Unable to Recreate Charisma  2 = Fair Recreation of Charisma  3 = Able to Recreate Charisma Well

SCORING: For use by preliminary contest organizer only.

Vocals Score = _________ x 2 = _________
Style Score = _________ x 1 = _________
Stage Wear Score = _________ x 1 = _________
Stage Presence Score = _________ x 1 = _________
TOTAL SCORE _________