The Ontology of *Idol*: Towards a Situated Aesthetics of Popular Music

Charles Fairchild

Facing the 'Crisis'

In the original invitation to the constructively titled colloquium 'Renegotiating Musicology,' of which this article is a result, organisers suggested that participants should feel free to think as broadly as possible about their particular places in the discipline. This is an unusually fraught request with regard to the musicological study of popular music. As several respected scholars have noted, the field of popular music studies has quite simply failed to craft a coherent and cohesive body of theories and methods for the analysis of its chosen objects of study. Further, for some, this lack of coherence constitutes a full-blown disciplinary crisis.[1] As Lawrence Grossberg has noted in a scathing essay—in which he registered his disappointment with the entire field—we have a lot of theoretical problems, but not a lot of theories to solve them. Worse, according to Grossberg, few of the explanations we do have are specific to a discipline that lacks a common analytical language.[2] While Grossberg might rightly criticise a familiar array of trans-historical, de-contextualised, apparently universal concerns for a field he seems to suspect may not actually exist, his existential angst is ultimately misleading. The distinction 'popular music' upon which so many of his careful ruminations are based is itself a false analytic category. There is no unifying process, principle or set of common materials that anyone can point to that all versions or iterations of what we call popular music share. Significant exceptions to the standard array of definitions can always be found within music that is nevertheless broadly recognised to be firmly within the family. Too often social categories such as 'popular music' masquerade as aesthetic facts reinscribing essentialist notions of music that precede

---

[1] Lawrence Grossberg, 'Reflections of a Disappointed Popular Music Scholar,' *Rock Over the Edge: Transformations in Popular Music Cultures*, ed. Roger Beebe, Denise Fulbrook and Ben Saunders (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2002) 25–59, and Angela McRobbie, 'Recent Rhythms of Sex and Race in Popular Music,' *Media Culture and Society* 17.2 (1995): 323–31.

[2] Grossberg, 'Reflections' 41.

analysis, analysis which should be grounded in the material and social facts at hand, not in idealist categories that have only a slight hold on the material weight of sound.

I have a fairly modest goal in what follows, not to identify *the* object of analysis, but to make a series of distinctions between the varied ways in which popular music is produced, distributed and mediated that can help explain how the objects of analysis of popular music studies do not often neatly inhabit many of the analytic categories that continue to dominate the field, such as 'authenticity,' 'genre' or 'subculture.'[3] Instead, I want to present several categories of aesthetic analysis that have not received much attention in popular music studies: 'medium,' 'materials,' 'ontological thickness' and 'autographic.' These concepts, explained in detail below, can help distinguish between the material aspects of music and the social processes through which music is mediated and made meaningful. These concepts can help us understand the very category 'popular music' not only through our reliably familiar analytical concepts, but also through the actual sounds of a piece of music and the history of productive activity from which those sounds result. In what follows, I argue that we can only understand the aural consequences of creative processes as they exist in inherent and inevitable relationships with the larger social processes of mediation through which the material consequences of that creativity are made socially meaningful. Taking the material consequences of the history of production as our starting point, we can then take the carefully produced sounds themselves as the objects of analysis from which publicly circulating and historically situated meanings are understood to be produced. Through this, existing methods of analysis, such as semiotic or textual analysis, might be situated more specifically within the cultures of creativity through which the sounds they purport to analyse are actually produced.[4] This way, we can take into account the larger social forces and historical circumstances that shape both the contours of the sounds we so dutifully transcribe or analyse, as well as the ways in which socially inscribed meanings grow from these sounds as two causally related parts of a larger situated aesthetics of popular music.

Ontological Distinctions and Social Categories

The crucial analytical distinction on which my arguments turn is between ontological distinctions and social categories. These two types of analysis are presented here not as a fixed binary, but as a way of distinguishing between different parts of a larger whole in specific relation to one another. The most important difference between the two is based on determining what exactly the irreducible and unavoidable elements of a particular piece of music are and understanding the relationship those elements have to the social processes that surround, contextualise and give meaning to them. Crucially, these aspects of a piece of music are not based on the competencies of a consumer or listener for their existence; nor are they dependent on some requisite level of knowledge for their identification. They exist outside of us. Put

---

[3] Two important recent collections of analytical essays, both of which attempt to claim disciplinary centrality, demonstrate the continuing dominance of these concepts: Roger Beebe, Denise Fulbrook and Ben Saunders, eds, *Rock Over the Edge: Transformations in Popular Music Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2002); Kevin J.H. Dettmar and William Richey, eds, *Reading Rock and Roll: Authenticity, Appropriation and Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia UP, 1999).

[4] Jason Toynbee presents an interesting analytical model called 'the radius of creativity,' which places musician creativity at the centre of the processes through which popular music is made meaningful. See Jason Toynbee, *Making Popular Music: Musicians, Creativity and Institutions* (London: Arnold, 2000).

simply, regardless of what we might think of a piece of music or a particular recording, once it is produced we cannot really do much to alter the history of its production or the general aural contours of the production itself.

In order to understand the relationships between ontological distinctions and social processes, I will argue that the idea of a paradigmatic sound practice, or practices, is a useful enough analytic concept to account for the social inscription of musical meaning in popular music as well as the complex of aesthetic values and actual sounds that constitute the object of meaning in the first place. Paradigmatic sound practices are the aesthetic practices from which the meanings of an artist's work grow through their use of specific materials publicly recognised to be idiomatic and situated expressions of existing musical conventions. These meanings grow and evolve through the contexts in which these sounds become public, through the techniques of production used to create them and the social circumstances of the experienced meaning of those sounds as music. Further, these meanings expand and contract, altered constantly by use and by each situated utterance or iteration in ways that can eventually become visible and knowable over time, existing in a dynamic relationship with the actual sounds and the particular history of their production.

The questions we can ask in relation to this concept might then take into account the various interrelated parts of the process through which popular music is created and circulates. For example, how was a particular piece of music composed? Was it scored and carefully written out, or created improvisationally? Was there some opaque combination of compositional techniques involved, such as a songwriter sitting at a piano noting a particular distillation of a series of improvisations? To what extent is the composition and realisation of a piece of music dependent on performance practices, those conventions and innovations that mediate between aesthetic ideals and actual sounds, shaping the particular structure of the sounds most of us will eventually hear? How is aesthetic validity determined? Is it determined by a community of peers or by record sales? Is some idiosyncratic measure of success in place that can account for both artistic and economic success, however separately and unequally? To what extent do different regimes of validation affect how the music was composed in the first place? Basing our analysis on what happens to shape and determine the social and technical processes of musical creation and the trajectories of meaning that trail behind and eventually overtake completed works would seem to at least sidestep some of the dilemmas of disciplinary incoherence Grossberg notes with such despondency. Further, taking as our analytic objects, those contextualised material facts of music we hear as made meaningful through the social processes of mediation and consumption can also help us out of his bind.

The major question for analysis, then, is not 'How do we define "popular music" or "popular music studies"' as distinct and bounded entities; instead, the questions are 'How do we create a mode of analysis that is appropriate to our chosen objects of study?' and, more importantly, 'How do we create analytic methods that take into account the collection of material and social facts we have unavoidably at hand?' Two things have to be known in order to answer these questions: first, how do we conceive of music in relation to this ambiguous phrase 'collection of material and social facts,' and second, how do we define the objects or units of aesthetic analysis?

Any music we listen to has inhered within it a series of social relationships the existence of which we can sometimes hear, sometimes not. I am trying to reference the complexity of finding

the material consequences of these relationships through the ambiguous phrase 'collection of material and social facts.' With regard to popular music, these relationships include the compositional processes through which the music itself is created, but it also includes the realisation of that music through particular performances using specific instrumentation and arrangements.[5] We can add those evanescent qualities of sound that often go unmentioned such as ambience, timbre or texture. The interpretable aural facts of most recorded music are often subject to intense aesthetic debate during their creation. When musicians create a recording, the final sound of that recording is the result of extensive creative argument that takes place within a culture of creativity often too complex to map out completely. Paradoxically, the dynamic and results of these debates are by definition clearly audible, but rarely accorded a central place in analysis.[6] Further, the aural contours of public versions of much popular music are utterly dependent on particular configurations of technological filters and mechanisms of circulation that are both historically and economically contingent; that is, the state of the art is constantly changing, and not everybody has the social or practical capital to access it. This collection of facts further includes numerous acts of musical performance of variously composed musical materials that are captured and then shaped and reshaped repeatedly into a form acceptable to the performers, composers and producers, a process that continues long after all of the musical performances themselves are complete. The collection of fixed sounds we hear has been mixed and remixed together in a potentially infinite number of iterations until the final version is agreed upon by those involved. The final material version is itself dependent on the varied involvement of all manner of people and institutions that have an interest in the outcome of this often long and complicated process. This includes musicians, producers, the record company and marketers, all of whom are enmeshed in particular kinds of power relationships with each other that ultimately shape the literal form of the final product.

But the processes of making meaning and assigning value or status to popular music is further transformed when that music is made public, that is when the 'final' product begins its journey through the purview of various cultural intermediaries eventually to be consumed by audiences in forms and contexts too diverse to imagine much less predict and quantify. What we are faced with in the analysis of the music we call popular is a bewildering series of distinct, but overlapping contexts and practices of creative and compositional knowledge and activity, technological tools and aesthetic judgements that shape the use of these tools, as well as the historical, economic and cultural contexts that shape and direct production, distribution and reception. The very thought that any one theoretical language can resolve this 'crisis' is at best ambitious.

Instead, we need to find ways to identify what it is we are actually talking about. Through Nattiez, Allan Moore has provided us with three important analytic critiques that can help us find our way through this thicket of circumstance: the immanent, the poietic and the aesthetic.[7] The 'immanent' critique is a critique of the sounds themselves considered as music. The 'poietic' critique is supposed to divine the intent and purpose of those creating music. The 'aesthetic' critique is a critique of the lived, situated experience of particular sounds recognised as music.

---

[5] Albin Zak, *The Poetics of Rock: Cutting Tracks, Making Records* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 2001) 24–25.
[6] Zak, *Poetics of Rock*, 49–50.
[7] Allan Moore, *Rock: The Primary Text* (Aldershot, Hants.: Ashgate, 2001) 5–6.

These three critiques give us some of the tools we need to be able to analyse what we tend to call popular music. However, these critiques, crucial as they are, still do not actually tell what it is we are analysing, in large part because these categories are generic distinctions between the parts of a general aesthetic process. They could be easily applied to divine the intent, content or experience of a painting, a building or a pop song without much in the way of fundamental alteration. But this schema does a great service in one crucial respect. It helps us to think about music simultaneously as actual sounds, as a kind of fixed record of a set of aesthetic intentions and as a socially inscribed, interpretable and evolving set of affects and meanings. Thus we can analyse music for what it is, what its creators supposed it to be and what people generally think about it after it has been produced using these overlapping and interrelating categories of critique. And yet we are still circling gingerly around the thing itself. We have to dig a bit deeper specifically because the social categories through which we both construct and receive meaning are not autonomous pre-existing forms, but are instead evolving, communal, cultural practices that are nevertheless always based on the specific material forms in which they reach us. Social categories such as style or genre, and the meanings associated with them develop through the things people do with music to make meaning from it; that is, popular music is a series of creative and interpretive traditions and practices, not simply static templates that exist outside any particular piece of music.

The Medium and Materials of Popular Music

So we have to ask which elements, if any, are common and irreducible to our experience of a particular form of popular music and which elements constantly evolve and change? Theodore Gracyk, in his study of an aesthetics of rock, argues that the rock object is constituted as the recorded sounds themselves. For Gracyk, the primary form of rock is its material existence as a specifically constructed collection of recorded sounds. These sounds are not the 'performance' of a work. These sounds are the work itself. They are carefully put together piece by piece and crafted with the tools at hand for a particular purpose within a specific series of contexts to form an irreducible material fact. The meanings we ascribe to rock grow primarily from how sounds are arranged in recordings; different versions of the same song can have drastically different meanings because of the ways some of the same musical materials—whether these be instruments, harmonic patterns or melodic contours—are arranged. The associations we make with music are based in large part on the way these sounds are fixed and then made public.[8]

While Gracyk never claims to universalise his arguments, he makes clear a central distinction between an artist's medium and their materials. Through the literature on aesthetics generally, Gracyk argues that an artist's medium is not simply the physical materials of an art form, but the network of conventions that specifies the ways in which those materials and the aesthetic qualities that envelop them are mediated and accrue meaning.[9] As Gracyk argues, when we listen to rock we listen to its sounds against a 'horizon of potentialities and limitations' explored by artists with their materials which help tell us what sounds matter to a given tradition of practice. An audience's reception of a work of art requires a general understanding of how aesthetic qualities and meanings emerge from the artist's use of his or her materials. The materials of

---

[8] Theodore Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1996) 18–19.
[9] Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise* 69–70.

popular music are not only musical instruments and the notes played on them, but also the many layers of sound production that stand between the audience and the artist, through which sounds are manipulated and shaped to produce a mutually recognisable object of meaning.[10] I would further argue that the particular ways in which each layer of material is used to produce sound through specific media of presentation constitutes an historically and socially situated paradigm of practice each part of which has to be taken into account in relation to a larger whole to understand the object of meaning upon which we work our analyses.

The relationships between ontological distinctions and social processes extend to the most foundational elements of music, determining what materials constitute a particular work and through this, understanding what I have been calling the productive paradigm of sound practice responsible for the actual form of those materials. An important distinction made by Gracyk in this regard is between recordings and performances. Relying this time on the literature in the aesthetics of music, Gracyk argues that different iterations of particular pieces of music can be understood as ontologically 'thicker' or 'thinner' depending on what is required to reproduce them. By this he means to provide criteria for understanding the extent to which the recognisable particularities of a piece of music are embodied in sounds fixed by recording or in a score realised through specific regimes of performance practices. According to Gracyk, rock is more often than not, an 'autographic' form which is 'ontologically thick.' That is to say rock cannot be reproduced from its source because its source is so specific. There is only one 'autographed' version, the master recording from which copies are made for us to hear. For Gracyk, the recording is, ontologically speaking, a 'thick thing' because it stands as the primary form of the work itself.[11] To put it another way, it is a heavy thing that has to carry most of the weight of the music's intentional, or poietic, meaning which then shapes all that is immanent in the music as well as the subsequent aesthetic experience of that music precisely because the genuine version cannot be reproduced in any form other than itself.[12] For much popular music it is not simply the notes performed using historically situated and socially recognised performance practices that carry the weight of the meaning, it is the specific timbres, textures and arrangements of the recorded sounds themselves that are also central to the meaningful experience of a piece of music.

While we can rely on this distinction to help us understand an artist's practice and intent, it cannot define a work's meanings any more than the distinction between medium and materials can. Recordings and scores are not just fixed and interpretable records of artistic intent, but acts of communication that often have unpredictable consequences over a long period of time. While a particular recording might be an important thing, it is not necessarily *the* thing forever. Nor is a recording an autonomous thing that produces its own meanings from its essential and irreducible characteristics. It has an aesthetic life. Therefore, it is crucial to historicise a recording or performance by understanding the musical act of communication as a set of carefully produced sounds existing within a particular time and place. Meanings produced subsequent to recording exist within larger and longer-lasting social contexts that may include performances, reactions to those performances and subsequent alterations of

---

[10] Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise* 72–74.
[11] Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise* 31–34.
[12] Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise* 31–36.

practice that may entirely reshape the way an artist works as well as public perceptions of that artist's work. It is this dynamic relationship between the ontological status of a work and the social context that surrounds it and helps produce and shape its various meanings that is central to my arguments here.

The Ontology of *Idol*

An interesting example of an evolving social context of musical meaning that exerts a radically shaping force on both the material facts of a given piece of music and their subsequent meanings is *Australian Idol*. The *Idol* phenomenon is a striking test case for the traditionally dominant kinds of analysis noted in my introduction. The tendency towards moral condemnation of this glitzy, often ridiculous spectacle is well established in the public discourses surrounding it, at least in Australia. But *Idol* is more or less impervious to any general critique of its presumed lack of authenticity because such critiques can tell us virtually nothing about its undeniable success or animating ideals. Further, traditional critiques of 'genre' and 'subculture' may be, on rare occasions, tangentially relevant to understanding some aspects of *Idol*, but it should be clear that this contest does not display the traditional modes of social cohesion that so many scholars have shown define musical subcultures, nor can *Idol* be persuasively argued to represent a 'genre,' at least not in the common use of the term. We have to move beyond familiar modes of analysis to understand what the music of *Idol* is actually doing, and through this, what it might mean at different points in time.

As I have argued at length elsewhere, *Idol* is not a genre or subculture, but a culture of strategic musical expression in which the sounds produced by the contestants cannot be separated from the overarching demands of the contest's narrative of drama, triumph and disaster.[13] It is this explicitly strategic culture of expression through which contestants shape their performances to adhere to and exploit the immediate demands of success within the contest itself. Further, the uses to which the televised recordings of these carefully contextualised moments of dramatic tension are put within the constantly evolving story of each *Idol* have a decisive effect of the simultaneously evolving meanings of each performance as the contest winds its way from the mass auditions to the Grand Final. I will analyse briefly two such performances, Guy Sebastian's performance of 'Climb Ev'ry Mountain' from Series One and Anthony Callea's performance of 'The Prayer' from Series Two, which show not only how uniform the aural consequences of these strategic demands can be, but also how particular. I will show how the demands placed on each potential 'Idol' shaped the materials each used and how the medium through which each performance travelled shaped the ways in which each performance accrued meaning. It will become clear that we can only understand the meanings of each 'Idol''s uses of previously existing musical materials, not only through an understanding of their musical characteristics, but also through the specifically situated circumstances of their expression and mediation.

When Guy Sebastian, the eventual winner of the first *Australian Idol*, stepped on stage to perform 'Climb Ev'ry Mountain,' his campaign for the *Idol* crown was in serious trouble. While he had made it to the final four without stumbling, the previous week's performances

---

[13] Charles Fairchild, 'Building the Authentic Celebrity: The "Idol" Phenomenon in the Attention Economy,' *Popular Music and Society* 30.3 (2007): 355–75.

left Sebastian as one of the bottom two vote-getters. He stood on the brink of elimination as a result. His performance on ''60s Night' was subsequently characterised as his 'do or die' performance. Host Andrew G introduced Sebastian by telling the audience that Sebastian was preparing to sing a tune most famously performed in the 1965 musical *The Sound of Music*, lately made relevant again by Christina Aguilera. The choice of this song was clever. Sebastian had already been at pains to establish himself as 'religious.' Given the musical training he received in his Adelaide branch of the Assemblies of God church, a cousin of the Hillsong Church, an institution famed for its rock concert-style services, this potentially odd song choice sat well with his evolving 'Idol' persona. Nor was the explicit association of Sebastian with Aguilera an accident. Sebastian's profile in the contest was already defined by his obvious enthusiasm for R&B songs previously performed by African Americans, such as Stevie Wonder and Beyonce Knowles. The mere choice of 'Climb Ev'ry Mountain' helped create a strong sense of semiotic unity before a note had been sung. The choice of this song referenced both Sebastian's piety and his style of vocal performance, marked as it was by extensive melismatic invention set within familiar melodies. But the smirking tone and false surprise of the host's introduction set up Sebastian perfectly. He stepped on stage to perform a song that was framed as a brave choice, given its origins, but also a deeply personal choice because of the singer's public persona. And given the fragile status of his claim to the title of 'Australian Idol,' the drama of the moment was surely going to reach fever pitch.

Sebastian's histrionic performance had few musical similarities with the original version of the song, relying instead on the vocal fireworks and familiar dramatic contours of contemporary R&B as embodied in Aguilera's version, complete with the gospel inspired overtones that define contemporary forms of that genre. As the music started, Sebastian modestly took centre stage, wearing a white cotton suit and patterned t-shirt. He had a full 'pop' orchestra behind him, complete with backing choir. He began the first verse singing quietly, but with a full tone, the song's harmonies outlined only by a piano. When he arrived at the second verse the substantial string section entered, shortly thereafter anchored by a muted brass section, a heavy, but restrained bass line, drum kit and timpani. Sebastian's truncated version of the song then moved quickly through a second verse which expanded the dynamic range of the song with the orchestra swelling louder then easing seamlessly into a swirling bridge section which landed Sebastian back on the signature lines of the song. He and the orchestra then took these lines to ever-increasing heights, repeating them several times in an extended final chorus shaped by Sebastian's idiosyncratic and improvisatory variations on the theme. The dramatic contour of the song was one clear constant upward trajectory. The real drama exuded from a final verse embroidered with extensive melismatic vocal improvisation punctuated by the orchestra's thumping notes of the final line presented in a pounding unison. The five notes comprising almost the entire tagline, 'un-til-you-find-your' were all heavily accented, except for the final word, 'dream,' before which the orchestra thudded to a full stop as Sebastian hit and held the expected high note. The orchestra then completed the cadence underneath. Before the harmonic resolution was complete, the studio audience had already begun cheering wildly and they leapt to their feet in frenzied applause as the final notes receded. Sebastian wiped away a tear, briefly turned his back to the cameras, composed himself and bravely accepted the effusive praise of the three judges

and the audience. This one moment was later credited, not only with winning Sebastian the contest, but with supplying him with his entire career.[14]

When Anthony Callea walked onto the *Idol* stage a year later to perform Celine Dion and Andrea Bocelli's recent hit 'The Prayer,' the dramatic context was markedly similar to that which surrounded Sebastian's performance of 'Climb Ev'ry Mountain.' However, there were several key elements distinguishing Callea's task from Sebastian's. First, there was no sense that the young singer was facing a 'do-or-die' moment. Callea had already faced his *Idol* abyss only a few weeks earlier when he was not chosen by the voters to continue into the final twelve contestants. Instead, he survived only as a 'Judges' Choice' during the 'Wild Card' programme. He noted on more than one occasion how this experience made him realise how delicate his status was from this point on in the contest. Claiming every performance as his 'last chance,' Callea never wavered during the finals, never landing in the bottom three and making it through the Grand Final as the highest vote-getter, reclaiming the public support he had previously been denied. But it was his performance of 'The Prayer' that put him 'over the top' in the judges' estimation, for many of the same reasons Sebastian's performance changed perceptions of his candidature. And again, we find that this was due in part to a similar sense of semiotic unity joining together the singer and the song. Callea's 'Italian roots' were on constant display during the round of the final twelve, embodied in his large supportive Melbourne family and his famous description of himself as 'just a short little wog.'[15] While his small stature and remarkably rich tenor voice stood him in stark contrast to the other male contestants, it was Callea's ability to perform both parts of 'The Prayer,' singing Dion's part in English and Bocelli's in Italian, that lent great credibility to his song choice. And, as with Sebastian, Callea's performance was definitively framed as a form of deep, personal expression. This was the public secret of their success, never explicitly acknowledged, but implicitly present nonetheless.

When Callea walked on stage during 'Idol's Choice' night, there was little indication that he was anything more than an unusually polished semi-professional singer. He was modestly dressed in a light coloured sweater and dark suit jacket. He had previously been described as 'a bit plastic' by one judge, the clear implication being that, while his performances were often technically flawless, they had no heart. Callea's performance of 'The Prayer' put his personal stamp on the materials he chose to present. Paradoxically, Callea did so through a remarkably similar collection of performative gestures and genre conventions as Sebastian, doing so in a suitably similar dramatic context. Callea, however, never associated himself with contemporary R&B vocal styles, instead most often displaying a clear, unadorned mode of melodic expression. Callea's version of 'The Prayer' used the same *Idol* orchestra as Sebastian and his performance began the same way, with a solo piano outlining the harmonies of the main verse as Callea quietly began singing, a solo violin entering in the background just before the full orchestra entered to fill out the second verse. As with Sebastian's performance, the orchestra gradually swelled the dynamic range of the song through each distinct section until

---

[14] See *Australian Idol: Greatest Moments DVD*, FremantleMedia Operations, 2003, and *Australian Idol: The Winner's Story*, produced by Grundy Television, a FremantleMedia Company, broadcast on the Ten Network, Sydney, 21 November 2003.

[15] *Australian Idol: Series Two*, produced by Grundy Television, a FremantleMedia Company, broadcast on the Ten Network, Sydney. Broadcasts began 13 July 2004.

Callea reached and held the high note of the final chorus. At this point the orchestra and the singer held the moment with great solidity, both coming to a full stop several seconds later. A brief pinprick of silence was followed by a quiet harmonic resolution over which the singer provided a subtle, clear falsetto to finish with an understated flourish. Again, the crowd and the judges leapt to their feet for an extended standing ovation. The dramatic moment of the song was almost exactly like that performed by Sebastian. Callea, like Sebastian, moved little and performed the same 'reach out and pull you close' hand gestures throughout, allowing his voice, rather than his body, to achieve expressive centrality. Both had succeeded in making someone else's music their own to prove they belonged, not only in the contest, but also in the rarefied world of pop stardom by obliging audience expectations in ways far too similar to be merely coincidental.

While it should be no surprise that uniform demands enforced by an unusually particular context might produce similar musical results, these carefully produced *Idol* moments are surprisingly complex when viewed outside the familiar analytical frames of popular music studies noted above. Instead, when considered as paradigmatic sound practices, through the lens of such concepts as medium, materials, autographic and ontological thickness, we can understand the distinctions between the material and social aspects of music more clearly. Primary to our understanding of the meanings that eventually accrued to the above-described performances is the unusual *Idol* medium through which these familiar musical materials were circulated. The structure of the *Idol* story is built around the wide variety of ways in which audiences can consume their 'Idols.' Central to this narrative construction are several television programmes that are ancillary to the 'main events' of the Sunday night performance showcases and the Monday night voting programmes. These include *Inside Idol*, *Idol House Party*, *Australian Idol: Up Close and Personal* and *Australian Idol: the Winner's Journey*.[16] In these 'extra' programmes, the producers repeatedly re-narrate what has happened on the show so far, retracing each surviving contestant's trail through the contest. Further, these programmes are the primary forums for the contestants to speak about the personal trials they experience during the long and taxing contest. Central to the careful and constant reiterations of the 'Idol's' stories are clips of key performances. And it was the way in which these two performances in particular were extensively recycled by *Idol*'s producers that established the particular medium for these increasingly familiar materials. Sebastian's 'back from the brink' and Callea's 'over the top' performances were repeated more times than most viewers probably realised.[17] By the night of each contestant's Grand Final appearance, tales of each singer's gritty success were set in stone. The heroic struggle of each contestant, not only to survive, but to thrive under significant duress, was used to demonstrate the validity of their claims to pop stardom as each stood on the precipice of the public reverence of celebrity. Viewers were taken 'all the way back' to the 'career defining' performances that allowed us to see one more time the exact point in the contest at which each contestant either summoned or created the inner resources to make it over that line that separates the ordinary from the extraordinary. Regardless of the final disposition of their dreams of pop stardom, both were seen to have earned their fame.

---

[16] Fairchild, 'Building the Authentic Celebrity.'

[17] In each case, clips of both performances made return appearances in subsequent seasons of the show complete with nostalgic commentary from the performers themselves each of whom was now said to be 'living the dream' in part because of these performances.

But it is not simply the machinations of *Idol*'s media machine that made these performers into credible pop stars. Each singer not only had to perform flawlessly on command on live television before a studio audience and judges, the collective reaction of which would go a long way towards shaping public perceptions of their further *Idol* potential, but each also had to capture one key moment in the midst of a long-running drama. Further, they had to fix that moment so clearly and distinctly that the voting audience would see it as an inherent part of the celebrity persona each was actively trying to form around themselves during the contest. This is perhaps the most difficult aspect of becoming an 'Idol.' If each singer had simply been viewed as a successful game-show contestant, their respective campaigns would have meant little. Instead, the extent to which each singer was seen to act as the central agent in the shaping of those musical materials that would come to define their pop-star status would go a long way in determining their success or failure, not only in the contest, but long after. They had to choose the right materials to be inserted into that all-embracing *Idol* medium. Sebastian and Callea used familiar musical referents with which to shape perceptions of their performing abilities. These familiar materials helped each seamlessly to slot themselves into the role of pop star. For Sebastian, the overtly religious sentiment of 'Climb Ev'ry Mountain' and his gospel-inspired rendition of the song created what proved to be an unbreakable link between him and contemporary R&B, an affiliation that has defined his output ever since. For Callea, it was the 'nod to his Italian roots' in his choice of 'The Prayer' that staked his claim to a particular type of stardom, a claim he substantiated by demonstrating his ability to pull off a reasonable facsimile of an operatic tenor.

Without doubt, however, the most ambiguous skill each singer presented was the ability to craft what we might call (with a knowing wink towards Gracyk) 'the autographed moment.' For Sebastian and Callea, a solid performance was simply insufficient for the task at hand. Instead, each had to create a moment only they could inhabit, gilded by expectations only they could satisfy. As Gracyk argues, the 'ontological thickness' of any particular piece of music increases as more and more conditions are placed on what is required to reproduce it. The ontological 'thickness' of each *Idol* performance examined here is constituted by the distinct set of circumstances marking the *Idol* performance as a specific paradigm of popular music production. While Gracyk argues that recordings are, by definition, ontologically thicker than performances, *Idol* can often be an interesting counter to this general rule. As with any piece of recorded music, the *Idol* performances are inevitably shaped by the circumstances of their creation and mediation. But in the above cases, the dramatic moment to which each reiteration of these key performances referred had long since passed, never to return. As such, the conditions for the recreation of these performances was as distant and impossible as for any recorded version of any song you might care to name. The dramatic moments produced by Sebastian's and Callea's performances quickly became just one more irreducible part of each song, little different ontologically from the sounds that constituted them. Once these performances were fixed and their elements rendered unchangeable, the history of their production became fixed and recognisable. The obvious distinction between *Idol* and an ontologically generic recording is that heavy patina of drama coating everything Sebastian and Callea did to produce those sounds in that way, at that moment. The specific aural and, in this case, visual and dramatic contours of each of performance, were shot through with the circumstances of their creation

that were subsequently fixed in place, continually presented and represented in a constantly evolving context of meaning. The material aspects of each performance remained, only able to refer us back to what it was that we got so excited about in the first place.

Conclusion

None of the prescriptions and arguments I have made in this article can ultimately prove capable of carving out some vaguely distinct thing called 'popular music,' a social category that often displays a remarkable breadth of musical practice. Instead, I would argue that understanding popular music as a collection of material and social facts whose direct consequence is an 'ontologically thick' material thing from which we draw, receive and make meaning within particular contexts and larger historical trajectories of meaning is a reasonable starting point for analysis. Instead of a solution for an alleged disciplinary crisis, I have tried to present the two performances from *Australian Idol* as distinct examples of what I have called paradigmatic sound practices, that is, sound practices in which the aesthetic meanings of an artist's work grow through their use of specific materials and are recognisable as representative of a particular tradition or idiom through the context or medium in which they are made public, through the modes of production used to create them and through the particular circumstances of the experienced meaning of those sounds. Sometimes one of these factors might matter more than the others; they certainly can't all matter the same way, all the time. The ways in which the sounds used in *Idol* are produced and contextualised most often matter much less than the ways in which they are presented at a particular point in the competition, but neither can be particularly meaningful without the other. Similarly, the cultural moment that defined the context of production matters as much for *Idol* as it might for any piece of music, but always in very specific ways. In this way, music that is obviously 'popular,' but which stands in defiance to existing modes of analysis which gauge the authenticity of a given musical expression, or tracks the tradition of practice from which it springs, or measures the power of its semiotic resonances, can be understood through a clearer accounting of the irreducible elements which make it what it is. There is an unavoidable and often unbearable density and diversity of musical practices that are routinely subsumed under the label 'popular music.' It seems foolhardy to think we can claim them all as our exclusive domain, or imagine them all to be uniquely pliant to our disciplinary languages and particular modes of understanding.