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## Transparent and Opaque Performance Personas

### ABSTRACT

Jeanette Bicknell has argued that a singer's public persona is relevant to the aesthetic evaluation of that singer's public performances of popular song. Here, I distinguish varieties of personas: those which are *transparent* (such as when a singer performs more or less *as that singer*) and those which are *opaque* (such as when a singer performs more or less *as a fictional character*). I also distinguish between *performance* personas and *song* personas. After introducing and elucidating these distinctions, I discuss ways in which they further inform aesthetic evaluation of such performances.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Jeanette Bicknell (2005, 2015) and others (Gracyk 2017, Levinson 2013) have drawn special attention to the notion of a singer's *public persona*: "the face, body, and personal history he or she presents to the audience" (Bicknell 2015, 43). If, following Bicknell, we take a standard, primary goal of singing in the public performance of popular song to be a particular sort of communication to an audience, then consideration of a singer's persona becomes relevant to the aesthetic evaluation of that singer's performances.<sup>1</sup> After all, if the song being sung is at odds with the singer's persona, he or she may fail to communicate convincingly, to the potential aesthetic detriment of the performance. The persona, then, sets a sort of social *tessitura*—not a vocal range outside of which the singer risks aesthetic defect, but a social range, comprising songs, topics, or sentiments.<sup>2</sup>

Here, I distinguish two kinds of performance personas: roughly, those which are assumed to veridically reflect the singer and those which are not. For reasons which will become clear, I call the former *transparent* and the latter *opaque*.<sup>3</sup> Examples of the former include the personas (typically) adopted by singers such as Ani DiFranco and Kurt Cobain. Examples of the latter include Oderus Urungus, Unknown Hinson, Papa

Emeritus, and Chris Gaines, the personas adopted respectively by Dave Brockie, of the American metal band Gwar; country singer and voice actor Stuart Daniel Baker; Tobias Forge, the formerly anonymous lead singer of the Swedish hard rock band Ghost, the identity of whom was confirmed through recent litigation; and (occasionally) Garth Brooks.<sup>4</sup> Once this distinction between kinds of personas is introduced and elucidated, I supplement it with the further distinction between *performance* personas and *song* personas. I then discuss a few aspects of the relevance of these varieties of personas to our aesthetic engagement with singing performances. My goals are more ampliative than critical: I take these distinctions to amount to a natural extension of Bicknell's framework, and though she does not explicitly address the sort of issues I discuss here, nothing in Bicknell's extant account precludes this extension.

### II. BICKNELL'S FRAMEWORK

For tractability and out of respect for the diversity of related phenomena, Bicknell restricts her focus to singing in the context of public, solo performance of popular song, with *songs* taken to be distinguished from other varieties of musical compositions by the presence of lyrical texts (2015, 1).

By *solo* performance, Bicknell means that the vocal component of the performance is provided by one, rather than multiple, singers. *Solo*, then, is not meant to be taken as synonymous with *instrumentally unaccompanied*, but is instead to be contrasted with *duet* and related notions.

According to Bicknell, one of the goals of singing in such contexts is communication to an audience. This may not be the only conceivable goal—a singer might be out to make money, get discovered, and so on—but it is a goal characteristic of the activity and, if not *the* primary goal, at least a typical primary goal. The nature of the communication, however, needs to be clarified. Despite the presence of a lyrical text—most plausibly conceived of as a kind of syntactic and semantic structure—careful consideration of cases suggests that communication of the text itself is neither necessary nor sufficient for meeting the communicative goal (2015, 10–11). This is because the most likely candidate of what it is that singers try to communicate is what we can call the *song meaning*, which is often not reducible to the text qua syntactic and semantic structure and may not even be “meaning” in any propositional sense at all. As both Bicknell (2015, 110) and David Davies (2013) discuss, song meaning depends not just on the text, but on the interplay between that text and accompanying musical elements. A singer might succeed in conveying the song meaning, then, without successfully producing a faithful instance of that song’s lyrical structure, just as he or she might succeed in producing a faithful instance without successfully conveying the song meaning.

Theodore Gracyk (2013) emphasizes that the meaning of a particular *performance* of a song can differ from the meaning of the song itself. This occurs in much the same way that familiar pragmatic phenomena occur in linguistic contexts, such as when my utterance of the sentence “I like your shirt” means something quite different than the standard semantic content of that sentence itself when my intention in uttering it is to mock your shirt. Intuitively put, we can “change the meanings of songs” when we perform them in defiance of their original spirit: sarcastically and so on. Put more carefully, full consideration of the communicative potential of performance leads to the conclusion that the meaning of a particular performance—a *performance meaning*—can vary from the *song meaning*—that is, the more standard meaning of the song being performed.

I proceed, perhaps diverging from Bicknell slightly, by taking a characteristic, primary goal of singing in public, solo performance of popular song to be the communication of a *performance meaning*, which itself depends upon considerations of the interplay between the song meaning and the singer’s actions. In many cases, performance meaning and song meaning will line up, just as in many cases, the meanings of our utterances line up with the semantic content of the sentences we utter. But they need not. In either case, I take the more characteristic, privileged goal to be the communication of performance meaning.

We can now introduce talk of personas. According to Bicknell, a singer’s persona “includes factors such as gender, race, age, and ethnicity, as well as quirks of personality such as those [Stan] Godlovitch describes” (2015, 43) in his extended discussion of performance, with those “quirks” including such things as “the riotous life of the performer, his cranky, immature conduct at august gatherings, his wayward attitude to his listeners, his crippling depressions, his bitter envy of his colleagues, his rapt intensity on stage, his savage career ambitions, and the like” (Godlovitch 2001, 143). Jerrold Levinson (2013, 35) also emphasizes “certain publicly known features of the singer’s personal history,” suggesting that we should consider facts not just about the singer’s current identity or personality but also what we can gather about where he or she comes from and what he or she has been through.

The adoption of a persona is inevitable and need not be conscious or intentional. When one performs publicly, one makes choices about how to present one’s self qua singer. Sometimes personas are complex and calculated; sometimes they are simple and straightforward. Indeed, sometimes they are so straightforward that we might be inclined to say that there is no persona at all. But, under the conception of a persona as a sort of public face, method of presentation, and limited biography, even these “no persona” personas are still, strictly speaking, personas.

A singer’s persona matters. Here is a simple example of why, from which we can generalize. As Gracyk (2001, 181) argues (and Bicknell [2015, 44] emphasizes), when performing, the “music’s ‘authorship’ attaches to [the] gendered body regardless of our knowledge of its actual authorship.” That is, when we hear a song performed by a vocalist who presents as a woman, we tend to hear

that song, in that instance, as if it were authored by a woman, even if it were in actuality authored by a man. A glaring mismatch of gender presentation between singer and song can thereby affect successful communication to an audience, insofar as the mismatch might render that communication less convincing. (Or, depending on the nuances of the case and the intended performance meaning, perhaps *more* convincing. While this is possible, we will stick with simpler cases for now.) Similar remarks apply to other aspects of a persona: if a singer adopts the persona of a rich socialite born into privilege, it would be all the more difficult to find that singer's performances of songs about the struggles of life in the gutter at all convincing or sincere.

These notions of *convincingness* and *sincerity* are aesthetically relevant. If one of the goals of a performance, qua aesthetic object, is the successful communication of a performance meaning to an audience, then aspects of that performance which diminish convincingness or cast doubt on sincerity can frustrate that communication, thereby serving as an aesthetic hurdle or barrier. Limiting the success of that communication, then, places limits on overall aesthetic potential: the sort of mismatch gestured at above might make a performance *awkward* or *uncomfortable*, perhaps *offensive*, and would almost certainly block it from being *moving*, *transcendent*, or *sublime*—all of which seem to presuppose at least some degree of convincingness and sincerity. This is not to say that convincingness and sincerity are always aesthetic virtues in themselves, but instead that their presence is typically a precondition for the presence of many other such virtues. A singer's persona, then, is not merely of biographical interest to the fandom but is instead crucially relevant to the overall aesthetic evaluation of that singer's performances.<sup>5</sup>

### III. TRANSPARENT PERSONAS

I now distinguish two kinds of personas. I assume neither that this distinction is exhaustive nor that all personas fall neatly under one or the other kind. In all likelihood, both admit of degrees, with actual personas sometimes registering to some degree as both, with respect to different aspects of those personas. Having noted these potential complicating factors, I will introduce the two kinds of

personas by treating the cases discussed as fully of one kind or the other. This is nothing more than an idealization for the purpose of initial explication and should not affect the application of the points made throughout the rest of the discussion to actual, messier cases.

Bicknell (2005, 267) draws an apt comparison between singing and acting, at least insofar as the singer *adopts* (consciously or not) a particular persona. The traits apparently possessed by that persona need not line up exactly with the actual traits of the person adopting it. What we—qua members of the music-listening public—take ourselves to know about singers like DiFranco or Cobain is perhaps the result of careful, calculated image construction or maybe just subconscious emphasis on some facts and traits and de-emphasis on others. But it would be a stretch—and perhaps an affront to competent use of the relevant concepts—to suppose that singers like those just mentioned are really *acting* in the stronger sense that they are intentionally portraying genuinely fictional characters. DiFranco's persona might be, in some sense, an *act*, but she is not acting in the same sense that, say, Mark Hamill is acting when he portrays Luke Skywalker in the *Star Wars* franchise. In the former case, we have something more akin to what Tzachi Zamir (2014, 171) calls “social role-playing,” whereas the latter case constitutes genuine acting in Zamir's sense of “an aesthetically-controlled embodied imaginative transformation” (12).

I take cases like those discussed so far to be such that facts about the singer and the singer's life, and not just those perhaps selectively emphasized for his or her persona, are directly relevant to the aforementioned evaluations of convincingness and sincerity. I also take them to be cases in which we are invited or otherwise licensed, explicitly or implicitly, to assume that facts and observations about the singer's persona hold of the singer more generally, qua private individual.<sup>6</sup> Given what we know about Cobain's persona, it would be jarring if we were to discover that he had actually maintained a hidden love of smooth jazz and a second job as a straight-laced actuary. Conversely, it is natural to infer from the fact that DiFranco's persona is such that she endorses certain progressive social stances—regarding feminism, labor, and so on—that DiFranco herself, the private individual off the stage and away from public performance contexts, also endorses those stances.

Call such personas *transparent*. A persona is *transparent* to the extent that audiences are explicitly or implicitly invited or otherwise licensed to infer conclusions about the singer qua private individual from facts and observations about the persona, and vice versa. In other words, personas are transparent when it is natural to suppose that, with respect to personas and persons, we can “see through” one to the other. We look at Cobain’s countercultural persona, and we infer that he himself, qua private individual, possesses countercultural attitudes, just as we look at DiFranco’s commitment to feminism and infer that such concerns and commitments are not merely contrived aspects of her persona but instead genuine aspects of DiFranco as she really is, on or off the stage. Similarly, we take facts and observations about the person—such as Cobain’s relationship to Courtney Love or DiFranco’s background as a coffee shop performer—to apply to the persona as well.

As mentioned earlier, it might be tempting to reject the claim that such singers operate under adopted personas and instead claim that they adopt no personas at all. But, again, if we follow Bicknell (2015, 43) in thinking of a persona as “the face, body, and personal history [the singer] presents to the audience,” then the presence of a persona is guaranteed in any situation in which a singer presents to an audience. The adoption of a persona need not be intentional or even noticed by the singer or the audience, but is instead automatic. I submit, then, that such “no-persona” personas are best understood as *maximally transparent* personas, but still *personas* nonetheless.

#### IV. OPAQUE PERSONAS

In some cases, it is obvious to listeners that inferences from facts and observations about a persona to conclusions about the singer qua private individual (and vice versa) are neither licensed nor appropriate. In these cases, the singer really is doing something much closer to—if not directly—portraying a genuinely fictional character through an act of “aesthetically-controlled embodied imaginative transformation” (Zamir 2014, 12).

Consider the former singer for Gwar, Oderus Urungus, depicted as a fifty-billion-year-old

monster from the planet Scumdogia and portrayed by the late Dave Brockie. It goes without saying that we should not infer from the fact that Urungus is portrayed as being fifty billion years old that Brockie himself is fifty billion years old, nor should we infer from the fact that Brockie was born in Ottawa that Urungus is being insincere about his birth planet. Similar remarks apply in the case of the lead singer of Ghost, Papa Emeritus, in which we would not infer from the fact that Emeritus is an undead, evil pope-like figure that the singer portraying him, Tobias Forge, is also such a figure. Stuart Daniel Baker portrays Unknown Hinson, a ghostly caricature of country musicians. Hinson sings about *his* various escapades and encounters, not Baker’s. Should they overlap, we are invited to understand them as, not Baker’s, but Hinson’s.

Call such personas *opaque*. A singer’s persona is *opaque* to the extent that audiences are neither explicitly nor implicitly invited or otherwise licensed to infer conclusions about that singer from facts and observations about the persona and vice versa. In other words, personas are opaque when it is natural to assume that, with respect to personas and persons, we *cannot* see through one to the other. Whereas it would tarnish her transparent persona were we to find out that DiFranco’s commitment to feminism were contrived, it would be strange, even inappropriate, to take issue with either Urungus or Brockie upon reminding ourselves of the obvious fact that Brockie himself is not an extraterrestrial. I spend the rest of this section clarifying my understanding of this kind of persona, and return to discussion of its role in aesthetic evaluation in Section VI.

Though we can conceive of the characters portrayed by those adopting opaque personas as fictional, it is worth noting that our imaginative engagement with them might differ from our standard mode of imaginative engagement with more typical characters such as Harry Potter.<sup>7</sup> In typical instances of our engagement with characters of that sort, we imagine them as agents, nonfictional from the perspective of the world they inhabit, with that world such that, if we do imagine ourselves in it at all, we imagine ourselves in it in the limited capacity of causally inefficacious observers. We recognize their world as fictional—or, at least, as a fictionalized version of our world. In our engagement with the characters portrayed by those adopting opaque personas, however,

we instead imagine the character as nonfictional from the perspective of our world, co-actual with us, and able to enter into causal relations with us—much like when I pretend that some stick is a sword. When reading J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, even when fully imaginatively immersed, I would not take myself to be able to bump into Harry Potter. But when at a Gwar performance, equally imaginatively immersed, I do take myself to be able to bump into Urungus (at least in the sense that I would describe certain experiences in that way). This is not to suggest that there is any ontological difference between fictional characters such as Potter and Urungus or that there are different varieties of fictional status. We can retain a unified ontology of fictional characters and a univocal understanding of fictional status and instead place the difference in our varieties of imaginative engagement. Were someone to write a novel about Urungus, I would imaginatively engage with the character in the same way as I do with Potter when I read *Prisoner of Azkaban*, just as I would imaginatively engage with Potter the same way I do with Urungus at a Gwar performance when I encounter someone portraying the character in a setting such as Universal Orlando's *The Wizarding World of Harry Potter*.

Some characters, such as the superhero Deadpool, behave atypically by breaking the “fourth wall,” as if to causally interact with the audience and blur the line between these modes of imaginative engagement. This is often done for aesthetic effect, generated by the tension or surprise of either momentarily drawing the audience into the character's fictional world or momentarily drawing the character out into the audience's world. This effect, however, depends upon a noticeable switch in prescribed mode of imaginative engagement from one that is standard, given the context, to another that is nonstandard. The difference between such characters and those portrayed through the adoption of opaque personas, however, is that the latter typically spend most, if not all, of their time on our side of the “fourth wall,” rather than switching back and forth for aesthetic effect, as the former might. Just as it would be odd to remark that someone portraying Harry Potter at Universal Orlando is “breaking the fourth wall,” it would also be odd to remark that Brockie does so when he portrays Urungus in performance. This suggests a real difference in the modes

of imaginative engagement gestured at here: when it comes to characters portrayed through opaque personas, in contrast with standard characters in films, novels, and so on, we either afford the “fourth wall” no role to play or, if we do, we expect it to be rather consistently broken.

Though there are exceptions, it is also standard for audiences to expect characters portrayed through the adoption of opaque personas to be linked to the same person, whereas much more variation tends to be tolerated with respect to who can portray a character in a film, play, and so on. When Brockie died, the Urungus character was retired, and controversy ensued when hip-hop artist Daniel Dumile started using stand-ins to perform under his MF Doom persona.<sup>8</sup> And while there might be various degrees of resistance toward recasting certain iconic characters in films or plays, these cases seem to be the exceptions rather than the norm, as we can see by considering characters ranging from Wonder Woman to Hamlet to Lando Calrissian.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, the adoption of an opaque persona is different from the adoption of a mere pseudonym. John Mellor made a career with the Clash performing under the pseudonym “Joe Strummer,” but all signs indicate that the Strummer persona is intended to be taken as transparent rather than opaque. It seems right to say that Strummer is Mellor, and better to say that Brockie *portrays* Urungus rather than that Brockie *is* Urungus—in much the same way that it seems right to say that Stephen King *is* Richard Bachman but merely *portrayed*, in the 1997 TV miniseries adaptation of *The Shining*, Gage Creed. And even when we do utter claims to the effect that Brockie *is* Urungus and King *is* Creed, we are best understood as using the “is” of *portrayal* rather than the “is” of *identity*, as we employ when we utter claims to the effect that Strummer *is* Mellor or King *is* Bachman. Conversely, we can further distinguish opaque personas from mere pseudonyms by noting that they can come apart in the other direction, with examples of singers adopting opaque personas while nonetheless performing under their given names, such as perhaps Tom Waits and Nick Cave.<sup>10</sup>

##### V. SONG PERSONAS

We can distinguish personas adopted by singers themselves—*performance* personas, whether

transparent or opaque—from personas the perspective from which a particular song's lyrics are sung. Many performers who adopt opaque performance personas do so even when not engaging in singing performances. The performance personas are adopted during stage banter, during interviews, and so on. Brooks's Chris Gaines persona was the subject of an entire (fictionalized) VH1 *Behind the Music* special in 1999. By contrast, what we might call a *song persona* is typically adopted by a singer during performances of some songs and not others, and never outside of the context of a singing performance.

Consider Shel Silverstein's "A Boy Named Sue," perhaps canonically performed by Johnny Cash. When Cash—or Silverstein, or anyone else—performs "A Boy Named Sue," he is (at least, in normal contexts) not adopting an opaque performance persona of a boy named Sue, but instead temporarily adopting a song persona. When the song is over, the song persona dissipates, whereas the singer's performance persona—again, transparent or opaque—remains. Audiences are neither explicitly nor implicitly invited or otherwise licensed to infer facts about the singer qua private individual *or* their performance persona, whether transparent or opaque, from facts and observations about the song persona and vice versa. On this understanding, the adoption of a performance persona is more akin to acting, in the sense mentioned earlier, whereas the adoption of a song persona is more akin to storytelling, even if that story is a first-person narrative.

For simplicity's sake, I characterize song personas as being adopted whenever a song is sung from a perspective other than that of the performance persona adopted by the singer at the time. On this understanding, Cash temporarily adopts a song persona when singing "A Boy Named Sue," but presumably not when singing, say, his own "I Walk the Line." To impose a nice symmetry between performance personas and song personas, we might conceive of such "persona-less" songs (like "I Walk the Line") as involving *transparent song personas* and "persona-fied" songs (like "A Boy Named Sue") as involving *opaque song personas*. Whether we are compelled to do so depends on whether the adoption of a song persona is as inevitable as is the adoption of a performance persona. It is also worth noting that the same song might be treated as involving a transparent song

persona when performed by some singers and an opaque song persona when performed by others, which suggests that judgments about whether a song persona is transparent or opaque might crucially depend on observations about particular performances. With these questions raised, I leave them open for now, noting that we have options in how to answer them.

## VI. AESTHETIC EVALUATION

The distinction between transparent and opaque performance personas raises a number of interesting philosophical issues. Some are metaphysical. Are songs and performances attributed to fictional opaque personas on an ontological par with those attributed to nonfictional transparent personas, or are they more akin to fictional artworks such as, say, *The Murder of Gonzago*, the play-within-a-play in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*? Others are ethical: what are the norms and consequences of adopting an opaque persona that differs from the singer qua private individual with respect to, say, ethnicity, religion, class, race, gender, sex, sexual orientation, or ability?<sup>11</sup> These issues are certainly worthy of pursuit, but I will not pursue them here. Instead, my focus is primarily on issues of aesthetic evaluation.

I submit that considerations of transparent and opaque performance personas are relevant to the aesthetic evaluation of singing performances in at least two ways. The first is that knowledge of whether a performance persona is transparent or opaque informs us about which facts we are to *screen off* or *allow in*—perhaps even *project*—when engaging aesthetically with the singer's performances. Similar to the cases discussed in Section III, it can perhaps be hard to find performances of Slayer's Tom Araya—which often include overtly anti-Christian lyrics, such as the song "New Faith" and its line "I keep the Bible in a pool of blood so none of its lies will affect me"—convincing or sincere upon considering that Araya is a devout Catholic singing lyrics he did not write.<sup>12</sup> If Araya's performance persona is transparent, as it seems to be, we are neither invited nor otherwise licensed to screen such facts off, resulting in the potential aesthetic detriment of his performances insofar as the inference from facts about Araya's religious beliefs qua private individual to facts about the religious beliefs of Araya

under his transparent performance persona would almost inevitably render his performance less convincing or sincere. And if, as suggested in Section II, convincingness and sincerity are typically preconditions for other aesthetic virtues, then the less convinced by his performance we are, the less likely we are to be aesthetically moved by it.

When Gracyk says that “[in] the same way that a public persona can deprive a song performance of conviction, facts about the singer’s private life can deprive the persona of conviction, too” (2017, §4), we can understand his point as applying to transparent, rather than opaque, performance personas. By contrast with Araya, when we consider Emeritus, an obviously opaque performance persona presented as a devout Satanist, the purported facts about the persona’s religious beliefs are what matters when evaluating the convincingness and sincerity of his performances. Unlike in Araya’s case, knowledge of the religious convictions of Forge-qua-Forge is unimportant, and even if we did know of them, they would not be relevant to his performances as Emeritus. Similarly, when Brockie performs as Oderus, we are invited to suspend disbelief and pretend that it really is a fifty-billion-year-old monster singing to us. We then gauge attributions of convincingness and sincerity against that pretense.<sup>13</sup> Purported facts about Brockie-qua-Oderus, not qua-Brockie, are relevant to the evaluation of a performance of a song such as, say, Gwar’s “Abys of Woe” (with lines like “my eldritch war-suit is pasted with brains, this empty feeling—all that remains”). So, we are free to ignore Brockie’s quirks of personality, personal history, and so on and are instead invited to presuppose only those attributed to Oderus. In summary: attention to matters of performance persona leads us to attend to which facts about the singer are relevant, which should be ignored, and which should be supplied in.

The story is similar with song personas, though with an extra layer. During a typical performance of “A Boy Named Sue,” a singer temporarily adopts a song persona, and we gauge attributions of convincingness and sincerity informed by the fit (or lack thereof) between the song persona and the more stable performance persona, whether the latter is transparent or opaque. When engaging with Cash’s performances of “A Boy Named Sue,” we consider facts about Cash-qua-Sue, whereas if we were to engage with Gaines’s performances of the song, we consider facts about Brooks-qua-

Gaines-qua-Sue. My prediction is that, in those latter (hypothetical) cases, the Gaines performance would be less convincing than if Brooks were to simply perform the song under his more standard, transparent performance persona, given the mismatch between the temporary song persona and the opaque performance persona and the relative ease of fit between the song persona and Brooks’s transparent performance persona.

A second way in which considerations of transparent and opaque performance personas are relevant to aesthetic evaluation pertains to the degree to which the persona itself is included as a directly relevant aspect of aesthetic evaluation. In the case of transparent performance personas, the persona is only *indirectly* relevant to aesthetic evaluation, insofar as facts about the persona are relevant to whether the attempted communication of performance meaning is convincing and sincere. It would be inappropriate, however, to evaluate that persona itself as a *directly* aesthetically relevant aspect of the performance: we do not, for example, rightly take DiFranco’s social stances or gender as genuinely aesthetically evaluable components of her performances. But when a singer adopts an opaque performance persona, it is appropriate to consider why the singer has opted to perform while adopting that particular persona, with those particular features. That is, it would not be inappropriate to consider Baker-qua-Hinson’s social stances—a cartoonish caricature of the worst stereotypes of the country-music-listening public—as a directly aesthetically relevant aspect of his performances. When Baker-qua-Hinson sings “Talk American” (a song sung from the perspective of a particularly xenophobic someone who apparently does not realize that English is not the official language of the United States, with lines such as “let’s talk American if we’re gonna live as one; if you reside in the USA, then learn to talk American”), we reflect not just on why and how Baker is singing, but also on why and how Baker performs that song *as* that particular caricature. Furthermore, the persona can affect performance meaning: Baker-qua-Hinson’s cartoonish performances of “Talk American” communicate an attitude of parodic condemnation toward xenophobic attitudes, which might not be the case had the same song been performed by, say, Ian Stuart Donaldson, singer of the neo-Nazi punk band Skrewdriver.<sup>14</sup> Donaldson’s performance persona

was presumably transparent, so we would hear his performance as a performance of “Talk American” by *Donaldson*—and sincerity would be disturbing.<sup>15</sup> Baker’s performance persona is opaque, so we should hear *his* performance as a performance by *Hinson*—and the sincerity of the performance would play against the cartoonishness of the persona, leading to the aforementioned communication of parodic condemnation.

Suppose, however, that we come to learn that Baker’s performance persona is not quite as opaque as its cartoonish nature might suggest and that songs sung under the Hinson persona do reflect Baker’s own social stances. On this supposition, we might say that while certain aspects of the Hinson persona are opaque—his pallid complexion, perhaps, and many of his sordid exploits—others, such as his social stances, are indeed transparent. If so, then learning these facts about Baker’s relation to the Hinson persona might cause us to reassess our evaluation of his performances, perhaps grouping them in with our hypothetical evaluation of performances by *Donaldson* and the like. If we were to instead continue to hold that his performance persona is fully opaque and determine that Baker was nonetheless intending to communicate a sincere social message through his performances, the overtly cartoonish persona might serve as a serious hurdle to sincerity and believability, likely drawing us out of the performance and serving to frustrate other aesthetic virtues. Whichever of those ways of understanding the Hinson persona would be best, it stands that if we were to learn that Baker and Hinson were closer in reality than the cartoonishness of the performance persona might initially suggest, our evaluation of Baker-qua-Hinson’s singing performances would be further complicated. The distinction between transparent and opaque performance personas helps us address these complications.

#### VII. PERFORMANCES NORMS AND COMPLICATED CASES

Given the aesthetic relevance of considerations of the distinction between transparent and opaque performance personas, it is likely no surprise that singers adopting opaque performance personas typically in some way signal to audiences that they are doing so. In cases like those of

Urungus or Emeritus, the signaling is obvious. When Brooks adopted the more realistic (compared to Urungus and Emeritus, at least) performance persona of Gaines, his “metamorphosis” was highly publicized. Absent such signaling, the default assumption seems to be that a performance persona is transparent. Were audiences to discover that a singer is covertly adopting an opaque performance persona while nonetheless acting as if that persona were really transparent, it might cast doubt on the believability and the sincerity of the singer *as a whole*: they might very well be labeled a “poser.”<sup>16</sup> This can also help us in approaching cases such as Bob Dylan’s use of a false biography early in his career (discussed in more detail in Gracyk 2017, §4): on one understanding, Dylan was trying to pass an otherwise opaque persona off as transparent.

I submit that the above suggests a tacit norm of performance practice, at least with respect to the public, solo performance of contemporary popular song: when adopting an opaque performance persona, it is a matter of custom for a singer to signal to audiences, in some explicit or implicit manner, that the persona is, in fact, opaque. Failure to do so runs the risk of undermining, perhaps categorically, the singer’s convincingness and sincerity. Insofar as convincingness and sincerity are aesthetically relevant features of particular performances, a categorical undermining of such traits might lead to lingering aesthetic frustration of that singer’s performances across the board. When Gracyk claims that “some things that are presented as part of a singer’s persona may be unacceptable elements of that persona—and so also of that performer’s performances—if they are not actually true of that singer” (2017, §4), my alternative diagnosis—situated within the framework developed here—is that something like this norm of performance practice is being violated.<sup>17</sup>

On some occasions, performers might flout this norm of performance practice intentionally, for aesthetic—or, in some cases, moral or political—effect. Gracyk discusses the case of Victor Willis, lead singer of The Village People, a group that had success in “publicizing gay subcultural identity that had been largely confined to a few urban centers” (2017, §5) The performance personas of all members of the group foregrounded their sexual orientation: all presented publicly as homosexual, even though Victor Willis himself did not privately identify as such. We can understand this

case as one in which Willis presented his opaque performance persona as transparent, to potentially progressive social and political effect.

Another instance of such flouting can be seen in the case of Brad Jordan and William Dennis, also known respectively as Scarface and Willie D, in their performances on the Geto Boys' song "Mind of a Lunatic." In discussion of the song, Aaron Smuts says:

[W]hen Scarface tells us how he killed the grandmother of his strung-out girlfriend, we learn that "she was screamin' out, 'Brad!'"—Scarface's first name, not his stage name. The song does not merely attribute the violence to the stage-name persona, but to the actual person—Brad Jordan. Similarly, after giving his actual birth date, Willie D closes the song, saying that the events are not fictional. . . . Apparently, they want to be thought of as monsters. (2013, 122)

Here, we can understand Jordan and Dennis as signaling that their opaque performance personas of Scarface and Willie D are instead transparent, for disturbing dramatic—and, hence, aesthetic—effect.

Armed with these distinctions and the observations that accompany them, we also find ourselves in a good position to better understand—and hence, better aesthetically engage with—what is going on in various other cases, complicated in other ways. Gracyk (2001, 209) mentions Shirley Manson and Linda Ronstadt, who "declare that they reveal nothing about themselves (their identities away from the spotlights) in their performances." Employing the framework developed here, there are a few ways to understand what Manson and Ronstadt might mean. One is that they intend their performance personas to be transparent, but want to limit the availability of facts about those personas and, hence, about themselves. Another is that they instead intend their performance personas to be opaque, operating as fully fictionalized albeit streamlined versions of themselves—essentially, a character that has all and only the traits that the singer portrays while performing. Yet another is that their performance personas are really transparent, but Manson and Ronstadt are attempting to subvert the aforementioned performance norm and signal to audiences that they are instead opaque. Given the different norms of evaluation that are invited by the adoption of transparent and opaque

performance personas, these different understandings of Manson and Ronstadt's remarks are worth exploring, as the understanding we ultimately adopt can affect our aesthetic evaluation of their singing performances.

Another complicated case is that of David Bowie. During some eras of Bowie's prolific career—perhaps during his early days, as well as his later run of albums—Bowie performed somewhat consistently under what was either a transparent performance persona or a rather stable Bowie opaque performance persona. During other times, he would adopt opaque performance personas, such as Ziggy Stardust or the Thin White Duke. If, during his later career, Bowie were to perform a song such as the Ziggy-era "Moonage Daydream," we can understand this as Bowie-qua-Bowie adopting a temporary Ziggy song persona. The best to way understand—and, hence, fully aesthetically engage with—Bowie's many performances, then, is to see him as a performer who frequently and freely cycled through transparent performance personas, opaque performance personas, and song personas, often layering them upon one another. It is to his credit as a singer and a performer that so many of his performances, filtered through persona atop persona, were such aesthetic successes.

#### VIII. CONCLUSIONS

Bicknell's arguments that singers' personas are aesthetically relevant to aesthetic evaluation of their public, solo performances of contemporary popular song are, I think, compelling. But treating all personas as of a kind is less helpful than distinguishing between transparent and opaque performance personas, coupled also with the distinction between performance personas and song personas. As I hope to have demonstrated throughout this discussion, these varieties of personas invite different modes of aesthetic engagement, and the distinctions among them can fruitfully aid in our understanding of various complicated cases. Informed judgments about the transparency or opacity of a performance persona (or temporarily adopted song persona) allow us to better judge both (i) which facts and inferences about the singer qua private individual or about the character portrayed are relevant to evaluations of believability and sincerity (the presence of which is

a precondition for certain other aesthetic virtues), and (ii) which aspects of the persona are directly relevant to the evaluation of the performance. The actual application of the notions discussed here will often be messy: are Beyoncé's Sasha Fierce persona or Hank Williams's Luke the Drifter persona best thought of as opaque personas, pseudonyms of their transparent performance personas, or merely song personas associated with certain sets of songs?<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, the increased depth of aesthetic understanding they make available to us justifies wading into and through the mess.<sup>19</sup>

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1. I appeal to notions of *convincingness* and *sincerity* while avoiding the related notion of *authenticity* due to the latter admitting of a wider range of meanings. For discussion of various understandings of *authenticity*, see, *inter alia*, Bicknell (2015, chapters 5 and 6) and Stephen Davies (2001, chapters 5 and 6.)
  2. Bicknell discusses how *oversinging* (in the sense of "singing that is excessive in terms of volume, ornamentation, emotional expression, or all of these" [2018, 84]) can lead to aesthetic defect along similar lines.
  3. Distinctions between transparency and opacity are perhaps familiar from other areas of philosophy. Though there are similarities, I do not presume that my distinction maps onto these other distinctions. My hope is that the reader will forgive any potentially objectionable meaning proliferation in light of the intuitive application of the terms in the present context.
  4. Forge has adopted five distinct personas while performing with Ghost: Papa Emeritus, Papa Emeritus II, Papa Emeritus III, Papa Emeritus 0, and Cardinal Copia. Given the similarity in the first four of these personas, I simplify matters by conflating them into one.
  5. Ted Gracyk has suggested that the very notion of a performance persona, in the sense discussed here, might be a relatively recent artifact of popular music performance practice. Settling this issue would require a careful and in-depth look at popular music history—a task which, while worthwhile, is beyond the scope of the current discussion. If this is correct, I would amend the current discussion to focus just on contemporary popular songs, as the relevant notion of a performance persona does seem to be operative in such contexts.
  6. The notion of some metaphysically distinct "private individual," divorced from any persona, is controversial. For critical discussion, see Zamir (2014, 27–30, and 2007, chapter 3).
  7. The literature on fiction and imagination is vast. See Currie (1990), Walton (1990), and Williams (1973, especially 38–39) for classic sources and Gendler (2011) for more recent sources.
  8. Interestingly, this observation does not extend to opaque personas adopted by (nonvocal) instrumentalists, as seen by considering Gwar's Beefcake the Mighty or Ghost's Nameless Ghouls, all of which have been portrayed by several individuals.
  9. Thanks to the editors for urging me to think more about the issues discussed in the preceding two paragraphs.
  10. Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting this last point and the examples.
  11. For related discussion, see Gracyk (2017).
  12. "New Faith," as is much of Slayer's music and lyrics, was written by guitarist Kerry King.
  13. It is due to the role of suspension of disbelief in these sorts of cases that I maintain that believability and at least the appearance of sincerity are relevant, as they are in the cases of transparent personas. Many singers who adopt

opaque performance personas go to great lengths to encourage and protect suspension of disbelief in their audiences; this would be much more difficult to explain if believability is taken to be irrelevant when engaging with opaque personas. Thanks to the editors for urging me to be more clear about this issue.

14. If this example is complicated by the fact that Donaldson was a U.K. citizen, the reader is invited to substitute in any xenophobic musician with U.S. citizenship.

15. At least, it would (hopefully) be disturbing to nonxenophobic audiences. It might instead be even more inspiring or empowering, compared to Baker-qua-Hinson's performances, to those who share such attitudes.

16. Lee Brown once suggested to me that his distaste for Tom Waits was rooted in considerations of this sort.

17. An anonymous referee suggests that we might instead think of cases like Dylan's as involving not the adoption of any opaque personas but instead merely the telling

of lies. Depending on how we understand the particulars of the case and the ideal applications of the framework developed here, this might indeed be the better diagnosis. I would submit, though, that, on this alternate understanding, a performance norm is still being violated: absent signaling that the persona is opaque, audiences are licensed to infer that the persona is transparent, and if they are licensed to infer that the persona is transparent, they are also licensed to infer that the inferences it invites are reliable inferences. Similar remarks apply to several of the cases discussed in this section.

18. Thanks to Jeanette Bicknell for suggesting the case of Beyoncé and Sasha Fierce.

19. For helpful feedback and discussion, thanks to Jeanette Bicknell, Sam Cowling, Lea Grant, Andrew Kania, Carly Susser, two anonymous referees, and the editors of this journal, as well as audiences at Denison University, the 2017 meeting of the Canadian Society for Aesthetics, and the 2017 meeting of the American Society of Aesthetics.