

Fandom, Liveness and Technology at Tori Amos Music Concerts: examining the movement of meaning within social media use

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In recent years, the use of smart phones, mobile internet and social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and text messaging has altered live music experiences for some popular music fans and audiences quite sharply. Live music has been regarded as a powerful and integral element within popular music fandom, a space where fans can gather to 'enact the meaning of fandom' (Cavicchi 1998, 37), and as an event 'made distinctive by its listeners, as each person's connection with the event is shaped by expectations, prior experiences, mood and concentration' (Burland and Pitts 2014, 1). The arrival of new technological tools has facilitated powerful interjections into the behaviour within this space, enabling music fans at the show to connect digitally with each other, to tweet and text concert photos, set-lists and other information live, and by allowing non-physically present fans around the world to feel part of, and experience a sense of, the event (Bennett 2012, 2014). In other words, the boundaries of live music events are being extended to include the remotely located audience and give them a *sense* of being there. Likewise, physically present concert goers are also experiencing an extension of their experience, through the ability to capture and preserve moments of the show on video and photo through their mobile devices, and connect with the remotely located fans as the show takes place. These possibilities can produce strong tensions for some fans who aim to remain engaged in the live show, yet feel a desire to use their technological devices to perform a valued service to non-physically present fans and also preserve moments of the event.

This chapter will examine further the technological processes of texting, tweeting and mobile phone use by live popular music concert attendees as they attempt to connect with, and inform, a non-physically present audience. Through empirical research, in the form of a survey conducted with fans of prolific touring artist Tori Amos, the impact of this practice on the physically and non-physically present audience will be explored, in an effort to understand and unravel the consequences of this process on their live music experiences. Building on work by Philip Auslander (2008) and Roger Silverstone (1999) this chapter will focus specifically on how technological use at music concerts can be understood through the lens of, and as a process of, liveness and mediation and how this can be, for some fans, entangled with changing notions of experience, meaning and value. In other words, this study will examine 'the movement of meaning' and its 'constant transformation' (Silverstone 1999: 13) within this use of technological tools. It will examine how these circulated mediated meanings can compliment, or collide with, fans' understanding of (1) the meaning making and presence of the non-physically present audience and (2) the entanglement of mediation and immersion in the live music event. Silverstone suggests that mediation essentially occurs within the discourses 'in which we as producers and consumers act and interact, urgently seeking to make sense of the world, the media world, the mediated world, the world of mediation' (1999, 13). Building on these observations, and those of Auslander (2008), I propose that similarly urgent interactions can be found within music fandom discourses surrounding live concerts, with fans, audience members, and often the artists themselves, seeking to 'make sense' of these new technologies and the transformations of the live music space they wield upon audiences, present and non-present. Overall, I argue that although live technological connections and updates during music shows are considered an important and valued service by many Tori Amos fans, a

practice which permits them to enact the values of their fandom on a collective level as they follow the updates from volunteer fans, meanings can also change and transform as fans collectively and personally seek to understand, negotiate and make sense of these emerging processes of mediation.

Liveness, mediation and live music fandom

The development of technology and mobile devices has seen an alteration and divergence in the practices and behaviour of some audience members within live music concerts.

Whereas lighters used to be held aloft during certain songs, these have often been replaced by phones (Strauss 1998; Chesher 2007), which are being used to take photos, film videos, call friends physically present and absent, and also to update their presence at the show on social media platforms. The widespread appearance of these devices within concerts has been welcomed and incorporated into the shows of some artists - for example, R.E.M., U2, and Richie Hawtin, who allows audience members to connect with him and the music through an interactive iPhone app during the show (Baym 2011). However, conversely, the technology has been rejected by others, such as the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, Wilco, Ryan Adams, and Kate Bush, all of whom have personally requested that audience members refrain from using any technological devices or screens during their concerts. Debate has been sparked over the use of what some have deemed intrusive and disturbing technology (Lee 2013) and there have been efforts to quell the use of screens and bright lights within the concert space (Hann 2013).

One area that this technology use has infiltrated is music fandom, with it permitting fans physically present or remotely located to connect with each other during concerts, sending

updates and constructing and preserving moments. In this sense, these practices of using technology are very much connected to notions of 'liveness', which involves 'a relationship of simultaneity' (Auslander 2002, 210) between audience members and a live event as it unfolds. As Auslander observes, 'liveness' can also be understood as 'a moving target, a historically contingent concept whose meaning changes over time and is keyed to technological development' (2008, xii), a process which we are currently observing with not only live theatre broadcasts (Barker 2013), and sports attendance, but also within live music fans and audience members at shows and their use of mobile devices.

In addition to being connected to issues of 'liveness', taking Auslander's (2008) observations further, I also want to underline in this chapter the extent to which mediation arises within these practices. Roger Silverstone, writing about news and media, approaches mediation as a process within which meaning moves between texts, discourses and events and fosters

the constant transformation of meanings, both large scale and small, significant and insignificant, as media texts and texts about media circulate in writing, in speech and audiovisual forms, and as we, individually and collectively [...] contribute to their production (1999, 13).

Although Silverstone was ruminating here on news and media, I would argue that these observations surrounding mediation can also be applied to live music concerts and fan/audience use of technological devices. In essence, through technological behaviour, the live concert is being mediatised, with its parts filtered through mobile devices, ready to be ingested by an online audience, or preserved as a memory of the show by the recorder (Long 2014). In this sense, and with the complicated and differing approaches between those who are physically there as audience members, those who are remotely located, and

the musicians themselves, there can seemingly be a landscape of different meanings surrounding the live event.

A Study of Tori Amos Fandom

In order to question and explore how some music fans are undertaking technological practices and using their devices to send live updates during concerts, I selected the fan community of American singer-songwriter Tori Amos as a case study that may offer rich insight into how meaning, mediatisation and liveness are perceived. Tori Amos is a prolific touring artist who changes her set-list nightly on tour (Farrugia and Gobatto 2010; Amos and Powers 2005), regularly includes improvisational songs and introductions, one-off cover versions and has a large fanbase with many attending multiple shows each tour and others who discuss and preserve these performances at length online. The level of interest within her fanbase surrounding these concerts is highlighted by the technological tactics that occur within each show, and have done since the technology permitted. For example, at each concert a fan volunteers to be the assigned texter or tweeter who relays information via their phone about the songs being performed, as they occur 'live', to fans gathered online on Amos's fan forums, Facebook and Twitter. These online fans discuss the show, play the songs being performed and experience an event remotely, even though they are not physically present (Bennett 2012). Photographs and vines are often tweeted, as are soundcheck set-lists, if fans overhear them from outside the venue, provoking further discussion and anticipation surrounding which of these songs would be performed during the concert. As a singer and pianist, Amos's musical structure of the tour often changes – her most recent tours have been solo, but she has also performed with a three piece band, a

full orchestra, and a string quartet. Her solo and orchestral concerts have primarily lent themselves to an audience that remain quiet throughout the performance – which is heightened by her often playing seated venues. In contrast, her concerts with the band can occur at standing, general admission, venues and provoke a more physical and loud response from fans in attendance. Whatever venue and musical set-up, her concerts have been regarded as being ‘intense’ and ‘intimate’ (Jeckell 2005, 17), due to the personal nature of lyrics and strong focus on the audience, with Amos looking directly and pointedly at audience members.

Although Tori Amos has had a fairly large and active online fan base since the early 1990s, she had not maintained a strong (at least seemingly) personal presence on social media until 2014 and the release of the *Unrepentant Geraldines* album and its accompanying tour. During this time, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram were used in tandem surrounding the live shows. On Instagram an ‘Unrepentant Selfie Tour Instagram Photo Contest’ was launched where fans were encouraged to take selfies of themselves surrounding their attendance at a concert on the tour (showing themselves at a venue or with a ticket) – using the hashtag #Unrepentantselfie and a specific hashtag for the city they were attending the show in. A selected fan in each ‘tour market’ could then win a tour programme autographed by Amos. The musician also took part in the hashtag herself, taking selfies in different locations and countries across the tour, and posting them on Instagram under the hashtag. This process was also continued with two other forms of personal images that were posted across Twitter, Facebook and Instagram: selfies of Amos while backstage while she prepared to take the stage and photos of the set-list after the show, which featured on them her hand-written chords and last minute changes, and were surrounded by artefacts from her

dressing room. Both types of pictures received much attention from the fan community, with fans sharing their anticipation for the show under the pre-concert selfies, attempting to predict the set-lists and guessing the songs that would be played. The post-concert set-list pictures would then feature further reactions towards what had been performed, even though many fans would already know the set-list (due to texting and tweeting practices). Thus, as her social media engagement also now demonstrates, live concerts within Tori Amos fandom could be viewed as powerful anchors and meeting spaces, imbued with meaning for those physically present, and those unable to attend – with the anticipation and unexpectedness surrounding set-lists offering meaning for many within her fan community.

In order to ascertain how fans articulate and understand the use of smart/mobile phones, internet and texting during live concerts, I launched an anonymous online survey that focused on these issues and during October and November 2012 posted an invitation to participate on Unforumzed (unofficial fan forums), Twitter and a Facebook group for Tori Amos live concerts. The survey was comprised of both quantitative and qualitative questions and received 56 responses, with 44 of these declaring a willingness to take part in follow up interviews. In terms of demographics of the respondents to the questionnaire, 45% identified themselves as male, 55% as female, with nobody identifying themselves as other. The survey received a considerably wide reaching range of ages: 3% were aged 18 and under, with 32% being aged between 19 and 29, and 61% between 30 and 45. 4% were aged between 45 and 65. Respondents came from 17 different countries, with residents from the USA and UK being the most dominantly represented. All responses are presented as verbatim and without any identifying demographical information.

However, it is also important to acknowledge the limitations of an online fan study of this nature. The sample focused on specifically on online Tori Amos fans, with fans who are not online absent and not accounted for. As a consequence, the findings of this survey and study do not claim to represent all Tori Amos fans, or all music audiences. However, as specific emerging practices of fan behaviour are being explored in this study, the relatively small sample was deemed sufficient enough to make some preliminary explorations into uses of technology during live music concerts, and to identify pertinent questions and themes rising out of these practices.

Writing about the findings of this survey elsewhere (Bennett, 2014) I focused on the tensions and confliction for some fans between a desire to provide an act of service to the collective fan community through texting and tweeting to non-physically present fans following via their computers, and a commitment to what they perceived as their own uninterrupted engagement and submersion in the experience of the live concert. However, in this chapter I want to unravel understandings of these technological practices and attitudes further, by focusing more closely on the intersection of mediation, meanings, and a sense of liveness. To do this, I will explore and discuss in turn two, often interrelated, themes of fans' understandings: (1) the meaning making and presence of the non-physically present audience and (2) the entanglement of mediation and live music experience.

The meaning making and presence of the remotely located online audience.

When asked in the survey if they followed set-lists and other updates live from tweeters and texters during Tori Amos concerts they were not physically present at, the majority of respondents (57% or 32 out of 56) stated they actively took part in this practice, whereas

39% (22 out of 56) said they currently did not. Thus, this leads us into the first dominant theme, which focuses on the presence of the remotely located audience, who are following live updates on the shows as it unfolds.

Asked further how often they thought about the online audience when they were physically present themselves during the shows, 45% (25 out of 56) of respondents indicated they did not, whereas the majority (54% or 30 out of 56) said they did. From those who claimed not to consider the online and physically absent audience during the show, a dominant pattern expressed within responses was that they were focused on and engaged in the music, so did not consider these individuals at all during the evening. Examples of this perspective included:

Never. I try to focus on my own experience during the show (ha, that sounded so selfish!)

I don't. I want to be as present in the moment as I can be.

I'm too wrapped up in the musical Experience to really think about that.

Thus, technological connections for some individuals are viewed as a disruption that could jeopardise their musical experience and concentration. Within these responses was a striking emphasis on the individual, and the Tori Amos music concert being a personal event that requires uninterrupted engagement and immersion. However, in contrast to this, others took a more collective approach, and claimed to regularly think of the online fans that were following the live updates, especially during the performances of rare songs, where their reaction as they receive the update is imagined:

For Tori shows, I generally think about how the people reading the setlist are reacting when something very rare is played or when something is played for the first time that tour/ever. It adds a little bit of extra excitement to know that there are others out there enthused about what's being played.

I think of them all of the time!!!! Often wishing they were there with me as a song gets played that I know they love and I feel sad knowing they are missing it by not being there, but then I feel glad that they at least get to know that the song is being played, right there and then at that moment.

For the above respondents, knowledge that non-present individuals were aware of the specific songs being played exactly as they happened delivered further meaning to their concert experience. More specifically, there is an interesting difference in these responses: the first fan talks about thinking of other fans ('people') in the wider community that seem to be unknown to him or her, whereas the second focuses on specific individuals, such as friends or family at home. In both instances, an awareness of these individuals and bringing a sense of the live experience to them was hinged with emotion, such as excitement or sadness. Notions of excitement were expanded on by another fan:

I support the idea (and I can say that from having experienced both sides of the coin as both the Texter/Tweeter and the rabid recipient!) For fans who are unable to be at the show and are at home either logged into an active discussion forum and/or logged into twitter, receiving real-time setlist information is hugely exciting and helps foster a sense of community amongst fellow fans as the lively discussion begins to unfold. People start to guess what song will be played next or create fantasy setlists and then compare them to the real thing. If a song is played with a new

arrangement, with a unique improvised 'intro' or if the lyrics are forgotten or changed, it creates even more excitement and helps the fans at home feel like they are there in the concert hall too.

Thus, the remotely located fans are depicted as experiencing the event live, through their collective, collaborative and technologically mediated actions and thereby become another audience for the concert. Small details such as forgotten lyrics, new introductions and improvisations are thus also given high prominence by these practices. Although they may not be in the room where the event is taking place, they are engaging in their own meaning making through mediation. This occurs through the 'lively discussion', judgement on songs being performed, and predictions (for example, the creation of possible set-lists). All of these activities could be viewed as the collective contribution to the 'transformations of meaning' within mediation as discussed by Silverstone (1999: 13). In these cases, Tori Amos fans that use technology to send and receive updates from the live concerts, and those who receive them, are anchoring this behaviour with significant meaning in the fan culture. As another respondent similarly highlights, due to these activities the physically absent audience has become an integral part of the concert experience for the present audience. In other words, they are an absence that has a presence:

Yes I'd say I'm always aware of [online fans], as much as I am of the ambience in the venue itself actually.

For this fan, the non-present audience, linked through technology, becomes part of the ambience and energy of the event. For another, predictions of how absent fans may be reacting negatively to certain songs being played factors in her experience during the show.

In this sense, online reaction matters, and is viewed as a collective that expresses fan community norms and values surrounding certain songs:

I think about it a lot, as I pay attention to the online reaction to the shows prior to mine, so I can't help but think like 'Oh, they're going to roll their eyes when they read this song is on'. I think the shows are for the people actually at them, but the Tori online fandom is a little different and so it's kind of like 'our' thing, even if we're not all there at every show.

However, while some of the above respondents appeared to be seemingly firm in their views, for others, the use and appearance of technology within the live music concerts proved a more complicated issue that brought forth contrasting meanings, as the next section will now move on to explore, in terms of how mediation can impact on immersion and engagement in the concerts.

The entanglement of mediation and live music experience

In order to explore how Tori Amos fans articulate and negotiate the use of technology during her live music shows, and how mediation connects with their experience, I asked them to describe how they viewed the impact of technological devices and the practice of texting and tweeting updates during concerts. Within the responses there appeared a variety of different views and meanings articulated, which highlights the complexities of these processes and their appearance in the live music show space. For those who felt that engaging in this activity detracted from the experience of the physically present fans, the

prospect of not being focused or engaged in the live moment and of missing key elements was frequently cited:

People aren't as present. It's absolutely what I think. There are people who get so caught up in tweeting/texting every moment of a show - pictures, lyrics, updates, lighting changes, costume changes... they miss on being in the moment and being there.

I think it takes the person out of the moment. They are connected to the fans at home, and it takes away from the experience as a whole. If they are looking at their phones, how can they be paying all of their attention on the show?

Another respondent mentioned the distraction they felt both being an audience member performing the texting/tweeting service, and also as one witnessing others using their devices to record elements of the show:

I do think it is annoying to those who dont want bright lights in their face... honestly, I go to ALOT of different concerts and the most annoying thing in the world is to watch the show through the phone being held up by the dude in front of me... I've only blow by blow texted the entire set ... once ... and it takes away from being able to relax and enjoy the show . you miss out .

In this sense, these responses articulate meanings of 'missing out': of being physically present but absent from vital elements of the show due to their preoccupation with their own media/technology use. In contrast to this, for other fans, technology has a different meaning, allowing them to improve their knowledge surrounding their own attendance at the shows, and indicating what to anticipate:

Of course, it takes away some of the excitement for fans who don't want to spoil the surprise. But in a case like the recent Gold Dust Tour it can also be quite helpful to find out what staples will be played and whether or not there might be room for unexpected songs. Anyone is free to look at the tweets or ignore them. They changed my concert experience for the better.

Although this knowledge may remove some elements of surprise, as another fan expanded, experiencing the set-list and show information live through the updates, made some want to attend more shows in person:

At one time I thought it might be soiling the element of surprise as maybe knowing what is coming makes you less interested, however this could be said for attending multiple shows on a tour... knowing what Tori plays in a part of the world I can't easily get to is great - knowing what she plays down the road when I decided not to go... well that's a risk I spend hours debating! Sometimes I make the right choice so looking at the setlist proves it, other times I get pangs of regret. In general the texting/tweeting makes me want to go to as many shows as I can – which friends and family do not understand! That's quite common I believe...

For the following respondent, the complexities of these practices are highlighted. A distinction is made between technological practices, with texting and tweeting being viewed as a lesser disruption than filming or holding devices up in the air – a practice described as an inevitable part of contemporary concert going. However, the later benefits of putting up with technological use are also highlighted, through the enjoyment of re-watching the videos at a later date on YouTube:

It is definitely changing the overall experience for fans. Although some will say texting and tweeting is disruptive, it's nothing on a par with people who film concerts on their phone or camera. It's almost impossible not to attend a concert now without seeing a sea of lit up phones and cameras scattered across the audience and although this can cause annoyance for people who are seated/standing nearby, we all appreciate the final result, once it is uploaded to Youtube!... I feel that if it is done discreetly then the benefits far outweigh the negatives. We must remember that for every one person tweeting, texting or filming, there are probably 10 people talking loudly, drinking heavily, getting up to go to the toilet, or being violent or abusive, and I find this to be much more obnoxious than someone texting or tweeting.

This perspective then offers an observation that, from their experience at the concerts, some audience members can display disruptive and disengaged behaviour even without the use of technology. Ultimately, this fan sees value and meaning in the live texting and tweeting service, yet with the provision that it is conducted in a 'discreet' manner that does not disturb others.

Overall, these responses demonstrate how understandings of technological use during concerts can have differing meanings between fans that are not clear cut, but rather complicated and being regularly moved and transformed between individuals and their experiences.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the use of technology by music fans, unravelling how processes of liveness and mediation are impacting upon their experiences of these events. I have argued that although live connections and updates during music shows are considered an important and valued service by many of the fans surveyed and are viewed as a practice which allows the meanings and values of their fandom to be enacted, meanings can also alter and transform as fans collectively and personally seek to make sense and negotiate these emerging processes of mediation.

Arising from these findings are two interrelated implications and areas for future research. Firstly, how meanings surrounding mediation may transform further as technological devices, practices and trends advance. The recent banning of the use of 'selfie sticks' during concerts (Cowler 2015) by major UK music venues London O2, SSE Wembley Arena and the O2 Academy Brixton is evidence of the growing intersection between technology and concert going, and the efforts to curb it. As Silverstone argues, in order to understand how mediation operates, we need 'to understand how meanings emerge, where and with what consequences. We need to be able to identify those moments where the process appears to break down. Where it is distorted by technology or intention' (1999, 18). In this sense, perhaps 'selfie sticks' are the tipping point surrounding meaning and technology at these events, as seemingly an ultimate personal practice that focus on self rather than collective experience. They could be viewed as disrupting the process of the live music concert, breaking down through mediation the meanings of being an attendee, and drawing the non-physically present audience (who are the imagined viewers of the selfies) to the forefront. How meanings emerge, shift and are transformed as new devices advance will therefore be an area with which to explore within future audience studies.

Secondly, how younger fans that have grown up with these forms of technology may construct and ascribe meaning to their use is also an area for investigation. The Tori Amos fans surveyed in this chapter, as per her fan base, are predominantly aged between 19 and 45, thus would not have grown up with smart phones being used at concerts in such a manner. Perhaps younger, newer, fans of the musician may have different meanings surrounding engagement, mediation and liveness, and thus how these notions collide between those who have grown up with the technology, and those who have witnessed the technological change over time, will be an area for future consideration.

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