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Expository Writing

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The Tribalism of Pop Fans

Pop music isn't directed to music. The artist himself stands large and demands that you pay attention to him. The music is, at most, a way of directing your attention to him; he captures your attention and your fascination. His music is like his words. You look through the music to the person, or to an artistic model of the person. It's not the what of sound but the what of action and personality that interests us when we are engaged with pop music. Or, to give a different image:when it comes to pop music, the artist stands between us and anything musical. And he does this on purpose. (Noë 172)

Music is often examined through a purely acoustic lens. To some, the author can be completely disconnected from the music. Pop music is often spoken worse of for being tribal, and for being focused on the pop idol rather than the music. Because pop idols use music to draw attention to themselves, and because pop fans are attracted to the idol instead of the music, pop music will always have this tribal nature. Noë writes about pop that “the music is, at most, a way of directing your attention to [the pop idol]; *he* captures your attention and your fascination… you look through the music to the person.” (Noë 172) They make it clear that in pop music, the acoustic appeal of the music is a secondary function. The real aim of the music is merely to draw the listener's attention to the idol themselves. This is due to the fact that the artist is intentionally idolizing themselves through their art. This places the pop artist, or rather the idolized image of them, at the center attention of pop music. In other words, all of a pop idols music serves to further emphasize their own image. The effect of this is that the idol develops a cult of personality around pop idol. It is clear that idols are at the center of pop music because the music of pop music expresses the identity of the idol. This contributes to the tribal nature of pop by forming this cult of personality.

This basic fact-that pop music is about the man or woman, the group, not the music-sheds light. From this standpoint we can appreciate that it is no accident that pop music is the music of fandom and the cult of personality, or that it is now unthinkable that there could be pop music without the music video. It is in the attention to style and attitude and posture and politics that the art of pop happens. Pop stars are sex symbols, and when we love them, we want in some sense to be like them, or at least to be with them, to have them, to belong to their tribe. Pop music is always tribal. And that's why it is also always generational. Pop music is directly concerned with identification and with why we want to identify with something new or different, or with something old that is new again, or something new that is really old. (Noë 172)

If the message of pop music is the identity of the idol, this suggests that pop fans are not really fans of the music, but rather fans of the idol. By examining this attraction, it can be seen how it is not only a physical attraction, but also about a wish to imitate the artist.. “Pop stars are sex symbols, and when we love them, we want in some sense to be like them, or at least to be with them, to have them, to belong to their tribe”. (Noë 172) Noë asserts that because of the way fans are attracted to their idol, they have a develop desire to be like them in some way. The effect of this can be seen in different methods of engaging with pop music, such as singing along, and playing air guitar. Both of these acts mimic the visual appearance of a musical performance, without the functional aspects of the performance. When engaging in this way, the fans become ceremonially like the idol. Because all the fans of a particular idol are copying from the same source material, that idol, they become like each other. This further unify the tribe of the pop artist. Engaging with pop music is about mimicking the idol, because they, not the music, are the object of fans attraction. Pop music is inevitably tribal, because of the idolization of the pop artist through their use of music, and because the fans are attracted to that idolized image rather than the music.