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Fan Culture Research Paper
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We're Gonna be Big Stars:
A Cavicchi inspired analysis of Counting Crows' success

David Cavicchi's "Loving Music" outlines the ways in which music really began the media fandom that is encountered presently in society. His argument is compelling and can be demonstrated in a case study of the band Counting Crows, tracing their fan following from 1993 to present time. The band has tested the boundaries of their music over the last decade and a half to produce unique albums that are tied together by on-going themes and the distinct quality of singer and song writer, Adam Duritz. A "band's band," the Counting Crows interaction with fans through multiple contexts has allowed the fan base to remain strong for over fifteen years as well as allow the band to enjoy success without sell-out. In an examination of the albums produced by the Counting Crows, the transformation their musical palate combined with their ability to adhere to a personalized and unique sound, the band embodies an excellent exemplar of Cavicchi's argument about music fandom.

Early in Cavicchi's discussion of the origins of fandom from the mid-nineteenth century, he addresses the ways that fans began consuming live performance, seeing this as the beginning of fan practices. Continued viewing of the same concert for the physical experience of being in the presence of the performer with a mass of people was described by many as a rush and as addictive. Counting Crows capitalize on this aspect of music fandom by providing their fans with a true live experience that is unique to each concert. The Counting Crow's roots are in performing live and that is where they always seem to

return. They are known for the tendency to adlib and use improvisation in their songs both musically and lyrically during their live performances. They play what they feel like playing when they feel like playing it and by doing so are able to put forth much more passion than if they were constantly repeating the same rehearsed set. They have “... a well-deserved reputation for treating studio recordings as mere skeletons for in-the-moment concert performances” (Kot).

Beyond simple performance, Cavicchi identified the next step in fandom as personalizing the performer by observing “heightened awareness of the personal qualities of performers” (p. 238). For Counting Crows, this distinctive quality is lead singer Duritz’s voice. This identifiable characteristic of the band has allowed the group to experiment with a huge palate of musical styles and take from a variety of influences as they produced drastically different albums. They ranged from their debut acoustic album *August and Everything After* that brought the group into the spotlight in 1993, to a harsher and angrier rock sound in *Recovering the Satellites*. From there they transitioned to a more upbeat genre in *This Desert Life* by introducing more synthesizers and string instruments, leading to a Beatles-inspired pop album *Hard Candy*. The newest album, *Saturday Nights and Sunday Mornings*, is guitar and piano dominated. The band explored various possibilities with the incorporation of these new sounds but the overriding melodies produced by Duritz gave the songs the consistency needed to be true to themselves as well as Counting Crows’ fans. The diversity of sounds composed by Counting Crows also works to further expand their fan base, as it brings in fans from different musical backgrounds.

Having a diverse group of fans creates a variety in consumption practices and methods to keep the fandom alive between album releases and concerts. Cavicchi discusses the methods utilized to keep music in daily life and highlights the introduction of sheet music to the market, as well as amateur performance. (This can be paralleled to cover bands today.) Just as technological advances allowed for music fandom to grow, our technologically advanced society has provided a multitude of alternate music consumption and fan practices. Counting Crows' Adam Duritz is an active blogger (responding to fan comments and criticisms at least twice a month) and there are many fan sites that track gossip, tours, and new releases of songs and videos for the general fan public.

Duritz has also conveniently provided fans with much to discuss online and in person regarding his lyrics using reoccurring themes and characters throughout his albums. He uses real details in all of his songs, with the exception of Maria, who appears in the first track of their first album and continues to materialize in subsequent albums. "She's just an idea of someone I came up with...I mean, she's me. It's a theme that's stuck through songs. So she keeps popping up" (Duritz, www.anna-begins.com). This employment of his life into his work is a major reason Duritz's work is so personal and so many fans can connect with it. He tells us, "I *like* to use the real details," (Duritz, VH1). His allusion to real-life details leaves discussion and speculation about meaning and symbolism wide open for discussion and conversation between fans. It also creates Cavicchi's essential personal connection between the performer and the viewer with the incorporation of the music and the musician into everyday life.

What Cavicchi fails to mention is the paradox presented to musicians who wish to be successful but want to avoid the taboo action of ‘selling-out,’ which typically results in the loss of fans. The aversion to a band selling-out stems from Cavicchi’s well defined “personal connection and depth of feeling” that is obtain by the fan to the music, which fuels the fan’s desire to keep the band pure and untainted by the capitalist society (p. 248). When fans hear of possible transitions being made by the band or projects beginning that they don’t understand they often grow worried that their favorite band is going to ‘sell-out’ (Luerssen). The Counting Crows, however, have gracefully avoided this on a number of occasions. For instance, when *August and Everything After* was just reaching the top of the charts, Duritz shut it down mid-album and only allowed two videos to be made in the United States. Many fans worried when the band was featured in a Coke commercial. Duritz responded with the legitimate case that Coke is a decent product and exposure on that particular commercial would not seem to have any negative effects. He reassured his fans, “Look we’re not selling out. The Coke ad doesn’t affect how we made our record at all” (Luerssen).

Cavacchi’s speculation on the music origins of audience-consumer relations is certainly still visible in music fan culture of present day. Any band that is able to successfully create a stimulating live performance, provide the fans with personal identifiable qualities, and interact with fans directly through multiple medias and indirectly through texts is sure to secure a fan following. The Counting Crows have maintained a fan base for over fifteen years by provided fans with new live performances, revamped albums, live albums and blog postings. There are so many ways to connect to the band, such as through the real-life inspired lyrics as well as through interviews with

Adam Duritz. The personal investments that the fans maintain with the group are the key to the band's success. Adam Duritz explains the one true constant in all past Counting Crows albums and all those to come "...no one ever gives you honestly what it's like inside them. I'm not out to do anything that's a good deed, and I'm not out to spread peace and love...I just do it, but I do think it's a good thing; to give someone something real."

Works Cited

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