

THE WEDDING PRESENT—‘DARE’

When the indie band, The Wedding Present, decided to reprise their 1992 album *Seamonsters* for a twentieth anniversary tour, they were lacking a guitarist. By a series of fortunate events I found myself in that role as I boarded a flight to Los Angeles to kick off a round-the-world-trip, playing these songs to thousands of fans. As an ethnographer, from the outset I wanted to document the process of taking on this role in order better to understand what it means to learn to be in a band of untrained but highly-skilled musicians. I also wanted to understand what it means to be in a tight-knit community of fans who create meaning and belonging together. The fieldwork was deeply participatory and opportunistic in this sense; this was not a project that I could have planned for. My role as an active member in the group provided rich insights into the span of everyday life in a rock band—from the momentary, miraculous subtleties of performing together live, to the banal politics of sharing hotel rooms, loading the van, days spent driving, and time spent not doing much in particular. The song ‘Dare’ captures for me much of the magic of this strange, exhilarating fieldwork experience.

The Wedding Present was at the height of its popularity in the early 1990s, when present-day forty-something fans were slender teens. As such, The Wedding Present is a band that exists at the confluence between nostalgic reminiscing and the forging of new and exciting experiences in the very enactment of this reminiscing. A review of The Wedding Present performing live when I was with the band begins:

There is nothing quite like music for helping you mark the passage of time... it is an odd sensation, a simultaneous wave of nostalgia combined with a realisation of your own inevitable ageing—and it can feel a little disconcerting. (*This is Cornwall*, 11-7-2013)

This speaks to the complex interplay between music consumption and imaginings of age as an aspect of social identity. Music consumption, and the consumption of rock music in particular, has been long associated with the construction of teenage identity and so-called youth subcultures (Hebdige 1980). Frith (1978; 1996) has explored in detail the relationship between rock and youth identity, particularly in relation to performance, both on- and off-stage. Often, academic discussion of such performances of youth are confined to the chronological period of adolescence and young adulthood. In the twenty-first century, however, the relationship between age, identity and music consumption is increasingly complex (Alexander 2014). The Wedding Present is one of an increasingly large number of long-standing musical groups whose appeal is at once intergenerational, nostalgic, and fundamentally premised on the band’s significance as focal point for constructing ideas about ‘youth’, even among fans who are now well beyond the chronological limits of being ‘young’. This process allows fans to construct multiple, overlapping imaginings of age forged in their affinity with the subculture of the band.

Love and romance play an important part in this process. Most Wedding Present songs

are about love, and many fans see the band as a weathervane for their own experiences of love and loss. This is complicated by the fact that fans' ideas and experiences of love and romance evolve as they get older, overlaying teenage romance with the complexities of later adulthood. When I asked the singer, David Gedge, about this, he said,

I think those ideas of sentimental love stay the same and as strong as you grow older. The only difference is the practicalities involved with ageing. I think [love] is a universal subject in that everyone seems to go through the same range of emotions at some time (or all the time) and so they can identify with the protagonists in the songs. I often hear people say, 'It's like you've written that song about my life,' and that was always my goal really...to write about the things people go through in a simple, direct way. I think most people experience their own love stories through conversations, real or imagined.

Discourses of romance and youth, then, are always in the discursive background when the band is playing, whether on a turntable or onstage.

For the members of the band, the confluence of romantic nostalgia and something new demands an interesting kind of performance. On one level the band re-creates the past (literally replaying a classic album), including sonic representations of love and romance that resonate with the audience (e.g., discordant tension; sweet, pentatonic melodies; energetic, staccato guitars; and the contradistinction between quiet moments and thundering distortion). At the same time, in the rehearsal of these motifs—these memories of the past—each performance is new and nuanced, played by different hands

in subtly different ways, on different nights in a hundred dark rooms across the world. Add to this the fact that the band is made up of untrained musicians (myself included) who lack the language and schooling to speak to each other about their craft in terms of quavers, keys, or codas. Without this language, there is no formal, exacting recreation of the music as it was recorded, and neither is this the best means to provide what now-older, still-youthful fans are seeking. Instead, the conjuring of songs is a matter of tacit, shared understanding. It is a matter of embodied knowledge and learning situated and distributed in ways that are unique to the players in the band, in the moment when the song is performed. In the absence of a clearly legible archive of the songs, rehearsals were spent listening back, unearthing ancient cheat-sheets, or watching old videos of previous band members to try and figure out how the songs might be played—and then playing them slightly differently anyway in the moment on any given night.

What's more, this dynamic knowing is also distributed *between* the band and the crowd. When the band has a 'good' show and the audience tacitly or explicitly agrees, some momentary magic is conjured. To do this successfully, the players are highly-skilled in a way that is hard to articulate outside of the practice in which they are engaged along with the crew and the crowd. The labour that goes into making this performance 'work' for musicians and fans alike was what fascinated me most about playing in *The Wedding Present*.

Touring the world to play the 1991 album *Seamonsters* was a nightly exercise both in this process of conjuring songs and of ritual remembering, returning the audience to youth in the present. The album begins with a dark and brooding song entitled 'Dalliance', about love, loss, and unrequited, bitter-sweet feelings

of longing. When I think of this song, I'm transported back to a recurring moment in my fieldwork, both as the band's guitarist and as an anthropologist documenting situated learning and the construction of meaning in this particular musical community of practice (Lave 1982; Kenny 2017). At the beginning of 'Dalliance', I'm staring down at my left hand as it moves unthinkingly into position at the end of the guitar neck, ready to strike out the first iconic notes of the song. I'm anxious to play it right; there is no room for error or disappointment, and there are eyes in the darkness of the crowd, watching. From where I stand, the black lacquer on my Fender Jaguar is smudged with fingerprints and sweat, and specks of blood where the strings have cut my knuckles. It's a tool of daily use. Under the stage lights I become hyper-aware of how the millimetric movements of my fingertips will reverberate in the relative hush of the venue. I focus on playing lightly, maybe too slowly, hearing the cheer of the crowd as they recognise the riff and the start of the album they have come to hear. The song grows and I relax into its rhythm now that the naked first riff is out of the way. 'Dalliance' builds to a series of waves of sound as the final repetitions of the song's main riff crash out an ever-more distorted refrain. By the middle of the song I am getting lost in the sound, locking eyes fleetingly with the drummer, Charlie, as we hammer our instruments louder and louder, bodies flailing in time. When the song finishes, the final note lingers, turning slowly into a rising swell of guitar feedback and cymbal shimmer. I press my fingers hard into the spaces between guitar frets and turn to face my amplifier, completing the ballooning loop of sound, willing forward a slow scream of noise as the stage darkens between songs. Sweaty guitar strings shimmer briefly in the dimming stagelight. I look over to the singer and around

to check that everyone else is ready for the next song, reading readiness in their bodies and glances. I wonder if my guitar is still in tune and listen out for any dissonant notes in the wash of onstage noise. All this happens in ten or fifteen seconds. The feedback grows to fill the after-song silence, peaking just as David launches into the first line of the next song on the album, 'Dare'. He breathes into the microphone—'There's just one *Thing*'—and drums, bass, and guitar kick in again to drag the crowd forward into the set, and deep into their own memories.

Understanding how untrained musicians learn together involved understanding what it means to be in this kind of moment of conjuring new versions of old music. To do this, I found it helpful to think about how aspects of musical performance are not unlike experiences of possession. In many cases possession involves or even requires repetitive music that induces a trance or brings forth spirits to inhabit a body (Jankowski 2007). In a similar, if less profound way, there were regular moments of abandon when playing with the band where the music 'took over', and our playing became not so much a matter of individual contribution or skill but of embodied collaboration inseparable from its enactment. The middle eight of 'Dare' is one moment that was trance-like in this way. This section involves a repetitive guitar riff played only with staccato, rapid downstrokes that reflect the urgency of this part of the song. The riff is echoed by the kick drum, and both must be absolutely tight in order for this part of the song to work. The drummer and I would lock in to this part of the song, facing each other, listening to Katherine's bass thudding underneath, everything synchronised and entirely focused on hammering out this rhythm. Being locked into this pattern together created a strange kind of trance-like moment where we knew exactly what we were doing together to

make the song *work*, even though it is difficult to articulate what exactly this was outside of the context of the performance. On a simple level it was about being tight, in time, in the pocket; but it was also about conveying something of a trance-like insistence to the crowd—something you can't let go or give up.

Of course I wasn't aware of this in the moment, but sonically this was tied to capturing the mood of the ambivalent, daring, reckless romantic moment described in the lyrics. Over the top of this rhythm, the singer recounts:

*Are you calling John? Well tell him anything
Look how we tremble when we kiss
One day soon we'll laugh at this!
But just tonight, we've got everything
Stop listening for the door
I've told you where she went before...*

The song then crashes back into cymbals and distortion and the trance lifts as we dip back into the chorus, fans arms leaning over the barrier to stab their fists in the air in the dark, some with eyes closed, some eyes glistening, singing along, willing with the words, 'Stay all Night, I Dare You!' If we needed validation that we were helping to conjure fresh, youthful imaginings of loves past, longed for, now lost, this was the moment. The final refrain of the chorus riff is overlaid with a whining, distorted drone as David smashes a slide (a finger-length metal tube) into the frets of his guitar in an ever-higher, ever-wilder cacophony to the song's final, discordant, bitter-sweet, melancholy note. And then the song is over and we snap out of it. I quickly tune up, have a swig of beer, signal to Seb the sound engineer, and together we move on with the show.

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