

Experiencing Authenticity and Bluegrass Performance in Toronto

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Abstract: Because of its acoustic instrumentation, “untrained” singing style, and affinities with old-time music and rural culture, authenticity in bluegrass is thought to comply with what Richard Peterson calls the “hard core” tradition in country music (1997:213-215). Approaching authenticity as a quality of experience (rather than an inherent characteristic of a particular cultural product or performance), this paper considers how a sense of “hard core” authenticity emerges during a live bluegrass event in Toronto. In particular, I focus on repertoire management, stage activity, and an array of visual cues observed during the performances.

Each week, Crazy Strings, a collective¹ of some of Toronto’s most well known bluegrass musicians, hosts “High Lonesome Wednesdays” at the Silver Dollar Room. The show, which consistently draws young undergraduate students, neighbourhood “regulars,” and country/folk music enthusiasts, has remained a popular live music event in the city for over ten years. In this paper I examine how some of the constructs of bluegrass authenticity are conveyed and experienced during Crazy Strings’ weekly bluegrass performances at the Dollar.

Authenticity in bluegrass is often presented in terms of upholding a rural, pre-modern musical tradition. Because of its acoustic instrumentation, “untrained” singing style, and affinities with old-time music, rural culture, and what are considered to be the roots of country music, the conventional ideas of bluegrass authenticity comply with what Richard Peterson calls country’s “hard core” tradition (1997:213-215). This tradition is juxtaposed with the more commercial, soft shell country that is characterized by polished production aesthetics (e.g., countryopolitan) and artists like Kenny Rogers, Garth Brooks, and Shania Twain, to name a few. Peterson maintains, however, that

the authenticity associated with hard core country is not inherent to the music, but is “a socially agreed-upon construct” (5). As such a construct, he argues that there are no experts who can authoritatively assert that certain artists or styles of country music are “authentic.” Instead, Peterson asserts, authenticity “is continuously negotiated in an ongoing interplay between performers, diverse commercial interests, fans, and the evolving image” (6).

Folklorist Regina Bendix (1997) also questions the assumption of authenticity as a static and inherent quality of a cultural product or performance, and instead places authenticity in the realm of the experiential. For her, this experience could be characterized by “the chills running down one’s spine during musical performances [...] moments that may stir one to tears, laughter, elation” (1997:13-14). The flexibility of Peterson and Bendix’s conception of authenticity provides a way forward for understanding how authenticity is constructed and experienced during Crazy String’s performances.

Before considering the group’s Wednesday night performances, however, I want to draw briefly on Harris Berger’s work in exploring how the performance scenario and various constructs of bluegrass (and “hard core” country) authenticity shape an experience of the authentic. Berger (2004) argues that our experience of self, our surroundings, and the activities that take place around us emerges through, what he calls, the “perspectival organization of phenomena” (46). One of his central points is that a sense of self-experience surfaces as we engage with and organize a matrix of phenomena and surrounding details. Some details are *focused* upon and experienced clearly and intensely; others appear on the *fringe* and, while not so clear, still inform our experience; and then there are those details that appear on the *horizon*—that is, on the very “edge of immediate experience” (47). In short, our experiences (of self, of authenticity, etc.) at a performance are the result of how we engage with numerous phenomena (e.g., sights, sounds, smells, sensations; awareness of others, ourselves, history, etc.). What’s more, because we are constantly organizing and reorganizing (i.e., bringing to the foreground and/or pushing to the background) these phenomena, our experiences are never really fixed, but are instead fluid; they are perpetually shape-shifting, if only slightly. In this paper, I do not intend to carry out the type of systematic phenomenological examination that Berger engages in, but it is helpful to keep his observations in mind throughout the following analysis of how authenticity is experienced in an urban performance context.

The surrounding details that Crazy Strings’ weekly audience engage with include stage talk, repertoire, an array of visual cues (e.g., attire, instruments, venue décor, etc.), movement, architecture, and an awareness of history (of place, musical genre, popular culture, personal, etc.) to name a few.

Such an expansive list, of course, is far too much material to meaningfully comment on in this paper. Instead, to give a sense of how an experience of authenticity emerges, I'm going to limit my focus to Crazy Strings' repertoire management, on-stage activity, and other visual cues that I observed during their performances. Before launching into my analysis, however, the following ethnographic vignette will elucidate some of the activity that takes place during Crazy Strings' weekly performances.

On a July night in Toronto, I find myself sitting at the bar of the Silver Dollar Room during the venue's weekly bluegrass and old time show. Between songs the members of Crazy Strings glance around the stage to see who in the band has a suggestion for the next number. Andrew Collins quickly picks the intro to the song "Get In Line Brother" on his mandolin. When a band has been playing as routinely as these guys, sometimes quickly strumming a progression, or playing a few notes of the melody will suffice in calling up the next song. In some cases, this can even serve as a preamble for especially attentive audience members.

This is one such case. Immediately after Andrew sounds those introductory notes, a young fan standing in front of the stage yells out the song's title. The pleasure and excitement he experiences in recognizing what's about to come is audible in his voice. Several others follow suit in unison with a resounding, "Yeeeeah!" Immediately, Andrew repeats the mandolin intro, this time with much more conviction, and the band launches into "Get in Line Brother." It seems everyone in the bar is focused on the stage and most are participating in some way: hollering and whistling loudly; clapping, slapping, stomping, or pounding their tables to the beat; holding their drinks up in an all embracing toast. In front of the stage, about thirty people shake their heads while gazing with wonder at the band. A group of twenty-something-year-old girls dance in a circle and a few guys do exaggerated and ungainly barn dances. Others just seem to hop randomly, beers held high overhead.

"Get in Line Brother," an old Flatt & Scruggs song about getting on your knees and praying for salvation, is a crowd favourite at the Dollar and, in my experience, always provokes a frenetic reaction. It's a high-energy song with a driving rhythm. The solos are almost always magnificent, and the four-part harmony on the chorus is eye-catch-

ing ear-candy. The song starts with each of the instruments driving it forward and supporting the mandolin which lays out the melody for eight bars. All of the most recognizable elements of bluegrass are present from the outset. The upright bass thumps, pinning the song down on the 1s and 3s, while the fiddle and acoustic guitar fill in the offbeats; the joyous melody emerges in a flurry of mandolin notes; and, of course, the banjo rolls along in that signature bluegrass (i.e., Scruggs-) style. Then, four of the six personnel on-stage—Max Heineman, Andrew Collins, Chris Quinn, and Chris Coole—all gather around a mike placed at centre stage to sing the chorus in harmony:

Get in line brother if you wanna go home.
Get on your knees and righten that wrong.
Then you'll be singin' this old-time song.

At this point the other singers drop out and, Quinn, who has been taking the bass harmony, sings the song's tag in his deepest voice, "Get in line brother..." The rest of the band regroup in harmony to finish the lyric, "...if you wanna go home."

Using his foot, bassist/singer Max Heineman drags his bass forward and steps a bit closer to the mike to sing the verses. As far as bluegrass singers go, his voice is particularly soulful; equal parts Ralph Stanley, Hazel Dickens, and Otis Redding. He's also a singer who visibly "gets into" the music. His brow is furrowed and his eyes are half-closed, as he nods his head and slightly swings the bass to the song's rhythm.

Each chorus is followed by a solo that progressively heightens the excitement in the room and prompts a loud response from the audience. Not only do the solos sound great, but they are visually sensational as the soloists dodge one another to step up to one of the three mikes on stage. When the song is coming to an end, the singers draw out the final lyrics in harmony, "Then you'll be singin' this old-time sooooooong." All but Quinn step away from the mike and cease playing as he sings the final tag in a slow and deep a cappella, "Get in li-ine brotheerrrrr..." The others then join in, also a cappella, "...if you wannaaa gooooo..." And, finally, there's a short pause before the final crescendoed Ami/A harmony, "hhhhhhooooooooome."

Repertoire Management and Performance Aesthetics

In the essay, “Big Fish, Small Pond: Country Musicians and Their Markets,” Neil Rosenberg (1986) argues that musicians personalize their performances in order to appeal to what they assume is their audiences specific tastes. In this way, he says, performers are “both a mirror and an instrument of folk and popular tastes” (160-161). Rosenberg’s emphasis on local audience tastes provides a point of departure for further investigation of how the groups make stylistic repertoire choices on the bluegrass nights.

When I spoke with the members of Crazy Strings about the type of songs they feel the Dollar crowd enjoys most, tempo was a common theme. In their experience (and this is observable in the crowd’s response to the music) the audience at the Dollar like the band to play *fast*. To be sure, the group performs a relatively equal mix of slow, medium, and fast-paced tunes, but they are aware of which songs get the most animated response from the Wednesday night audience. At the Dollar, songs like the blistering “Red Rocking Chair” and barn-burner instrumentals like “Fire on the Mountain” or fiddler John Showman’s scurrying composition “Bear County Breakdown,” always incite a furor. The volume and fast pace of these songs heighten the energy in the room and enliven the audience. In addition, they demonstrate the band’s virtuosity as the musicians execute dazzling solo after dazzling solo.

For Crazy Strings, the choice to play a fast-paced tune serves practical purposes and where they place such songs in the set affords a considerable amount of control over how they and the overall performance event are interpreted. Over the course of my research, I noticed that the group often placed fast instrumentals at the beginning and end of their sets. When I asked banjoist Chris Quinn about this, he suggested that bookending a set in such a way serves as both a call to attention, as well as a means to spark interest in what is to come:

[We do it] to start with a bang, catch the audience, wake them up, sort of have them paying attention if they’re gonna pay attention at all. And then [...] we end with a bang so they’ll stick around for the next one. It’s also a way of setting a *tone*. It’s a way of getting the audience’s attention, and tempo seems to be one way of grabbing people. You don’t wanna lose a [vocal] song on an audience because the words are so important, whereas if people are sort of shuffling into their seats or not quite ready for the show, starting off with an instrumental is a great way of focusing the audience. [Also], when you’re dealing with a fairly rowdy bar, quite often that’s a good place to begin. (Quinn 2009)

While Crazy Strings do not perform with pre-written set lists, Quinn's comment indicates that repertoire management is something they consider strongly. How songs are arranged in a set influences the atmosphere in the venue; what Quinn calls the "tone." What's more, how they begin the set calls attention to a shift from the everyday to a performance scenario. Using a loud and fast tune *keys* the transition to performance in an abrupt fashion (Bauman 1977:15; Frith 1996:207). It is often the case during acoustic performances by local musicians in bars or cafés that the music will start below the hum of conversation and activity, but performance is only *really* keyed when the vocalist begins to sing, at which point the audience is aware that the show has begun and, if the singer is lucky, the chit-chat in the room dwindles. This is not so when Crazy Strings begin their sets with a fervent instrumental tune. Rather, the show begins forcefully—"with a bang"—and the audience is thrown into the performance.

The band's management of their opening repertoire also frames how they are interpreted as musicians and people by the audience. First and foremost, these high-speed tunes can demonstrate the players' virtuosity from the outset. Within a few bars they present themselves as "serious," studied, professional musicians. More related to the themes of this discussion, however, is how the opening number can reinforce some of the constructs of bluegrass authenticity. The instrumental tunes showcase the acoustic instruments. This is especially so for the fiddle, banjo, and mandolin, which, through popular culture representations, have become equated with ruralness, pre-modernity, and tradition. Additionally, the way solo spots are passed between musicians maintains such themes. How two musicians play off of each other's ideas, creating moments where the players smirk and make eye-contact with one another, recalls notions of camaraderie, lighthearted fun, and spontaneity associated with simple, casual ("folk") music-making. Ironically, this reading of bluegrass as "simple" music-making can overshadow the actual skill it takes to play the music. Quinn shared several anecdotes of people wanting to come up on stage to play a song with them and how, in his words, "It would just fall apart" (2009) because the player (not necessarily a practiced bluegrass musician) underestimated the high level of skill the music demands. Quinn attributes this response to an easygoing blitheness associated with the genre: "Nobody would ever go to a jazz show and say, 'Hey look, I brought my tambourine!' and just start going at it. Whereas with bluegrass, it's very inviting music on many levels, but I don't think a lot of people realize how challenging it is to play" (2009).

These performance attributes—the virtuosity, the camaraderie, and the spontaneity—all contribute to a notion of the performance as authentic. The band members, who are all masters of their instruments, come off immedi-

ately during the opening tunes as being the “real deal”—a group that has dedicated a fair amount of their time to studying bluegrass and honing their skills. Further, the encouragement and appreciation they offer one another through quick glances creates a sense of camaraderie, and the way one musician will quickly flee from the mike as another rushes up to take a solo (something discussed in greater detail below) gives the performance a spontaneous quality. While the musicians are obviously trained and the permutations of licks they jumble into a solo are seemingly second nature, the easygoing camaraderie and spontaneity on stage inspires a reading of their show as organic or emerging as raw and in the moment. For many audience members, this organic quality distinguishes the show from other forms of polished, overly-contrived pop music performances. This is a distinction that Crazy Strings are aware of, and, as Quinn argues, the casual, unceremonious aesthetic of their performance is another way the band appeals to their local market:

In the United States there seems to be a trend toward sort of a New Country vocal quality in some of the bluegrass of today. And New Country never took hold in Toronto, so there's no way in hell that anyone around here is going to be listening to that kind of bluegrass. It just doesn't sit right...it's got no soul. [...] I think the music that we play, part of the appeal for many people is that it's not glitzy, it's not being faked, it's being done right in front of you. It's very immediate and it's being done on acoustic instruments into microphones. So, it's that much more immediate in a sense. Because it's not being processed through a massive system there's an acoustic *feel* to the whole thing. So, I think people gravitate toward that. (2009)

In this comment Quinn differentiates his group's brand of bluegrass from some of the more polished and produced styles emerging in the United States. While he may be accused of generalizing the personal tastes of Toronto's country music fans,² his assessment does reflect many of the audience comments I heard throughout the course of my research. In particular, one fan commented that he is drawn to the music because it is not all based around one performer; everyone's talent is highlighted and the band has to “work together.”

The idea of “working together,” and of “working” in general, is key to understanding the appeal of a sense of camaraderie and spontaneity, as well as the “realness” alluded to in Quinn's comment. It is one facet of the performance that allows the audience to connect the sounds they hear to the visuals on stage; namely, the performer's movements and expressions. Fast instru-

mentals, in particular, exhibit the work that goes into performing bluegrass and provide a connection between the sounds and the actions of the musician. This is mainly because they *do* require a significant amount of work on the performer's behalf. When one is engaged in a solo, we can see their fingers moving rapidly, perspiration appears upon their forehead, their eyes are focused on the instrument, and they might furrow their brow or bite their lip with intense concentration. The transition into this work mode is especially evident when a musician goes from the relatively relaxed state of providing a steady backing rhythm and then slips up to the mike to take a demanding solo.

For the musicians on bluegrass night, the effort is real and the concentration is necessary. But let's not forget that these are all very practiced musicians, and to some extent, the licks they build their solos from *are* second nature. This is where a more willful performance style comes into effect; one that goes beyond simply playing a song adequately. It is worth quoting Crazy Strings fiddler John Showman at length on this aspect of performance:

I'm really struck by how the older fiddle players have an aesthetic when they play. They kinda stand straight, they smile, they kind of accentuate the amount of bow they use. So it just looks like there's a lot of motion. At least visually, it's kind of arresting. I don't know...I try to do that to some degree. I also like to move somewhat when I'm playing...not be too much of a statue. But I don't really know too much what people react to visually. I mean, I can only guess that people like to be kind of involved somehow, and if you're moving to the music or they can see you working, then you can somehow communicate to them...or if you can somehow make obvious what you're doing, you can lure them in. Performance is a real art. It's the hardest thing to get. Well...you know...the hardest thing to get is to be good at your instrument, I guess. But, once you have that, being a good performer is a different skill, for sure. [...] It's weird...the aesthetics always change. Sometimes people wanna be compelled to reflect on something, sometimes they just want fireworks. It's hard to say. So, you gotta try to be sensitive to what the song is doing, I guess, and try to play with the right kind of aesthetic. It's subtle. You wanna kinda slide in and just look full of intent...add to the music. (2009)

Here, John talks a bit about his own performance style and suggests that in order to move the audience with a particular song, the way a performer physically presents him/herself on stage is nearly as important as his/her ability to play the

song well. A large part of this presentation is demonstrating the physical work that goes into playing the fiddle, and, as John notes, this sometimes means accentuating the movements.

But how do exaggerated movements captivate an audience any more than if the music was played by a less animated, stationary musician? John speculates that audiences like to be involved somehow in a performance and that the way a performer moves in relation to the music—and to what he’s playing specifically—can satisfy this desire. John’s accentuated bowing, then, draws people into the performance by making a clear connection between the sounds being made and their source. In a sense, he invites the audience to witness an insider’s view of how the music is produced—he demystifies the music by (over) exposing the performance.

Simon Frith (1996) makes a similar point in relation to high-profile singing stars. He notes that such performers are “involved in a process of *double enactment*” (212; emphasis in original). That is, they must take on both the role of the song’s protagonist, as well as the role of the “star.” A singer like Céline Dion, for instance, will dramatize the emotions expressed in a song through her facial and vocal gestures (e.g., longing and sadness in performances of the song “My Heart Will Go On”) while at the same time enacting the role of a star through a repertoire of physical moves that emphasize the emotion, but are only suitable in a performance situation (e.g., sweeping hand gestures, fist-pumping, etc.). In addition to this, Frith maintains that the star gives “some intimation of a real physical being—a physical body producing a physical sound; sweat produced by real work; a physicality that *overflows* the formal constraints of the performance” (212; emphasis in original). On the bluegrass nights, exposing the work involved in producing the music (revealing the source, the bodies, and the activities involved) contributes to the organic quality of the performance. Moreover, while the movements are, to some extent, performed, the awkward artlessness of an intensely concentrated face and the feeling that the difficult, handmade performance can go wrong with a simple slip of the bow, contribute to an overall sense of the event’s “realness.” The audience is captivated by these performances because they are made aware of what is happening—simply, music is being made by people. They are involved inasmuch as they are invited to witness this process in action; they are made knowledgeable insiders.

Visual Cues: The Shared Microphone

The experience of authenticity at the Dollar’s weekly bluegrass night emerges as individuals engage with a matrix of surrounding details, activities, and phe-

nomena. Many of these details are visual cues which, when taken in conjunction with the music, the performance context, and diverse sets of historical, social, and cultural knowledge, produce a sense (or different senses) of the authentic. As mentioned, a survey of all of the cues present at the Dollar is beyond the scope of this paper. However, one on-stage visual cue that I want to highlight in particular is the centre stage microphone.

The centre stage mike is something the band recognizes as central to their stage aesthetic and, indeed, it frequently catches the audience's attention. It is a shared mike that is used by all of the singers (who often gather around it and sing in harmony). It is also used for fiddle solos and short runs on the guitar or mandolin. As an aesthetic component it serves two important purposes: first, it aligns the band with a more romantic image of bluegrass music. While they use a contemporary mike, the way it is used has an iconic presence which calls to mind the choreography of early bluegrass groups, or more generally, an earlier era in studio recording and radio broadcasting (Rosenberg [1985] 2005:312). Perhaps the most resonant image for many of the casual or recently converted bluegrass fans at the Dollar is of the Soggy Bottom Boys gathered around a large mike singing "Man of Constant Sorrow" in the film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

A mike placed at centre stage for all performers to use was the norm for bluegrass bands up until the late 1960s. As microphone and amplification technology advanced throughout that decade, bluegrass bands were forced to maintain the same level of volume as their much louder country music contemporaries who had no qualms with "going electric," and with whom they often shared the stage. Moreover, the omnidirectional centre stage mike that bluegrass performers were accustomed to using was not compatible with the much larger and louder PA systems that were coming into use and were prone to feedback. To manage this problem, many bands began to use unidirectional mikes—which have a much smaller pick up range—placed before each musician, thus limiting the amount of amplified sound that could be fed back through the microphones (ibid.:313). By the mid-1990s, however, omnidirectional condenser microphone technology caught up with amplification technology and, to the excitement of many bluegrass artists and fans, groups readopted the single mike set up and, in Doyle Lawson's words, began to "combine [...] hi-tech equipment with tradition" (Lawson in Bob McWilliams, December 25, 1994, e-mail to BGRASS-L mailing list).³ Now, both single mike or more electrified multiple mike set ups are common in live bluegrass performances. Still, a group's use of a centre stage mike aligns them with the roots of bluegrass, an anti-modern ethos that champions a "golden era" of popular music performance, and, ultimately, casts the ensemble as authentic

players performing in country music's "hard core tradition" (Peterson 1997; also see Rosenberg [1985] 2005:313 for a discussion of the backlash experienced by bluegrass bands who "went electric").

A second, and more interesting, aesthetic function of the centre stage mike involves its role as an ordering device which is implicated in how the band members navigate the stage. That is, having a mike placed at centre stage forces the musicians to move across the performance space in order to effectively present their music. On the Dollar's stage, there are three microphones shared between six musicians. Because none of the instruments (aside from the acoustic bass, which has a small pickup mike attached to the bridge) are plugged directly into the venue's PA system, near the centre mike described above, there are two waist-level mikes placed about five feet to each side. Chris Quinn (banjo) and Andrew Collins (mandolin) play solos into the mike on the right side of the stage while Chris Coole (guitar/clawhammer banjo) and Marc Roy (guitar) play solos in the left mike. This mike set up allows—indeed, requires—the band members to move about the stage. It is an ordering device which is recognized by the band as part of their stage aesthetic and appeal. Further, as Andrew and Chris note, the demands of the mikes ensure that the performers look interesting on stage and thus allow them to focus on playing their instruments well:

We don't work out a stage show per se. I mean, part of the benefit of the mike set up that we use is that because we're sharing mikes and all moving in and out of the mikes, it really adds a very visual aspect to the show that we didn't have when we used to just play into our own mikes. Which allows us to not have to think about how we look when we're playing...the choreography of just getting the sound right takes care of that. (Collins 2009)

It has to be interesting on stage. One thing that we've got going for us is just that single mike deal that we do with the singing. It keeps the band moving around. In a way we could get better sound if we all had separate mikes and were using monitors and all that. But, we've all just realized that people love watching us move around. And there's elements of that that keep the music good because it keeps you really on your toes. (Coole 2009)

As an aesthetic feature, the band's microphone set up—especially the centre stage mike—aligns the band with a more traditional notion of bluegrass and country music. It also maintains a spontaneous energy on stage and keeps things visually interesting. Like the exhilarating formations executed by a professional

flight troupe, the performers continuously move from back stage to front stage, from the periphery to the centre, all the while staying out of each other's way, lifting the necks of their instruments from the paths of oncoming traffic, and, most importantly, never missing a beat.

In addition to the visual appeal of the bands' mike set up, Chris indicates that it also affects the sound of their performances. For one, he suggests that the need to move quickly in order to make it to the mike "keeps you on your toes" and thus "[keeps] the music good." On one level, this alludes to a more abstract phenomenon, namely that the energy required and prompted by the mike set up somehow filters into and enhances the player's performance. Without discrediting this theory (after all, the link between expressive movement and performance quality is a phenomenon that many musicians have experienced), it is perhaps best to approach the movement-performance nexus as something that influences the experience of the listener, more so than the playing ability of the instrumentalist or vocalist. "How musicians look," says Frith (1997), "clearly affects how at first we hear them" (219). Rushing toward and away from the mike reinforces some of the ideas about bluegrass that emerge when we hear the music. In particular, like the exaggerated bowing described by John Showman, this movement across the stage communicates a sense of spontaneity and organic music-making by highlighting the activity required to successfully pull off the performance. The hustle and bustle usually concealed backstage, is brought to the forefront.

In this sense, Chris' suggestion that the music itself is enhanced because the need to move to the microphones keeps the musicians aware of the performance demands is largely in the realm of visual sensory perception (if, indeed, we can separate the senses so conveniently when attempting to describe an experience). But Chris also notes a more palpable way that the mike set up affects the band's sound, namely that it gives the music a less polished timbre. Each vocal and instrument cannot be mixed separately so as to maintain a consistent fidelity. Instead, the band members have to control the mixing themselves, to some extent,⁴ by moving nearer or further from the mikes, much as a professional crooner does. This means the sound is more nuanced and there is more room for error (e.g., accidentally hitting the mike with an instrument, not standing close enough, creating feedback, etc.). What's more, when the musicians are not playing a solo, there is a substantial amount of space between the mike and their instruments, and they are hardly, if at all, amplified through the PA system. The overall sound at the bluegrass nights can by no means be described as "lo-fi," but it does lack the precision and consistency of a more controlled live performance, and maintains both a visual and aural sense of spontaneity and rawness.

Conclusion

Above, Chris Quinn talks about using the opening song to set a “tone” for the entire show. By “tone” he is referring to a change in the venue’s atmosphere characterized by the high-energy of the opening tune and the awareness among all in attendance that they are now in the midst of a performance event. Throughout this paper I have built upon Quinn’s comments regarding the tone of the Dollar’s bluegrass nights. This tone involves more than a particular energy in the venue, and is in part produced through a combination of performative and aesthetic features. These features include, but are not limited to, the repertoire and how it is managed, the band member’s virtuosity, the acoustic instruments, musician interaction and movement, the mike set up and, of course, the sound of the music. How these features are interpreted and understood varies. But, for the most part, they encourage readings of the performance that reinforce some of the more common constructs of bluegrass and hard core country authenticity. The performance looks and sounds raw, spontaneous, and organic; it hearkens notions of a “golden era” and of simple, unassuming music-making that is understood to be rare in the contemporary commercial entertainment industry. The performers themselves evoke these same images through their on-stage physicality and their apparent camaraderie as they *work together* to produce the music.

At the same time, other features that seem to compromise these interpretations are also evident. The band’s attire and stage banter (two things I didn’t get into here) convey a contemporary urbaneness (or at least nothing specifically country) that, if taken out of the performance context, would seem antithetical to the rural and pre-modernity tropes maintained throughout the show. Likewise, their virtuosity, something to which they have evidently committed a lot of time, could undercut the notion of simplicity associated with the music and the sense of spontaneity that emerges during the performance. Still, these features do not necessarily conflict during the performance event. Instead, the band manages and puts forward numerous authenticities, including the obvious constructs of bluegrass authenticity, but also conceptions of authenticity associated with being true to one’s own self and cultural background (i.e., an “authentic person”), as well as with being an accomplished performer (i.e., the “real deal”). Central to the tone Crazy Strings establishes on bluegrass night are ideas and feelings that what is being performed is authentic; that the musicians performing are authentic. To build on I. Sheldon Posen’s (1993) conclusion, the features discussed above contribute to multiple “flavour[s]” (129) of authenticity that help define the performance event. 🍀

Notes

1. Aside from Marc Roy (guitar/vocals), the core group of Crazy Strings is made up of members from the well known Canadian bluegrass group, the Foggy Hometown Boys: Andrew Collins (mandolin/fiddle), Chris Coole (guitar/banjo/vocals), Max Heineman (bass/vocals), Chris Quinn (banjo/vocals), and John Showman (fiddle/vocals).
2. To be fair, he has two decades of experience performing live bluegrass and country music in Toronto. So, it would be unwise to completely discredit his comments and his knowledge of the local country music market (especially the live music market) based on these apparent generalizations.
3. I thank Neil Rosenberg for bringing this trend to my attention and for digging up a passage from Doyle Lawson's 1994 Christmas newsletter as published on the BGRASS-L online discussion list.
4. Crazy Strings have a sound technician that they prefer to work with during their Dollar shows. On the nights when this sound person is unavailable, there is a noticeable difference in the fidelity of their show and there is significantly more feedback.

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