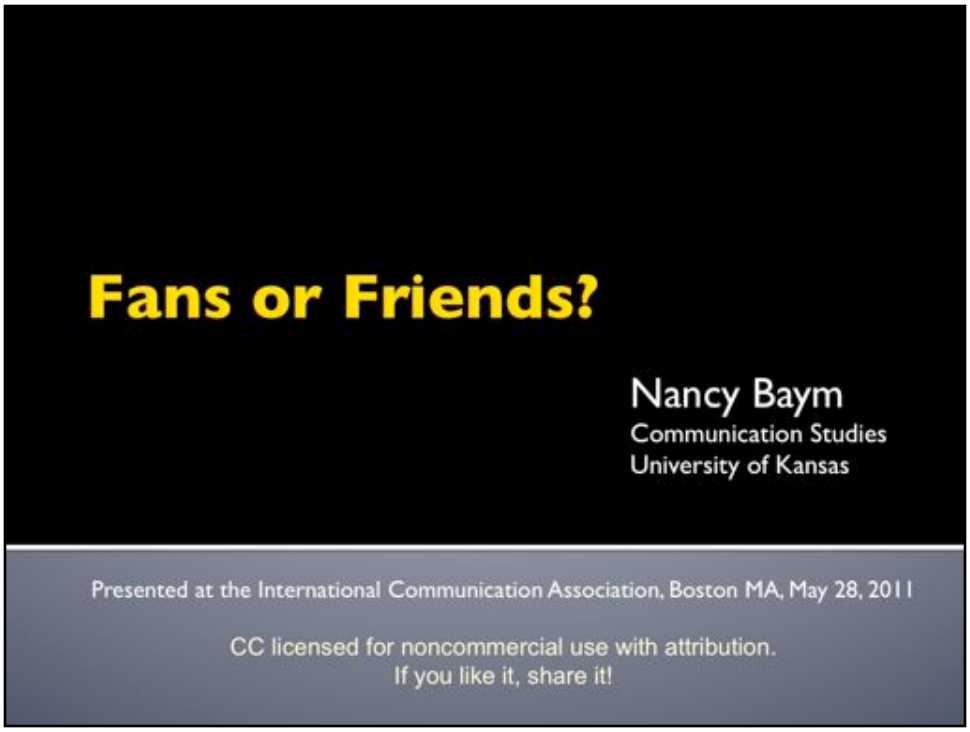


Social media have unsettled and forced people to reexamine, rethink, and rework many of our interpersonal relationships. Many people are experiencing the sense of having an "audience" for the first time as our online social networks expand to sizes that push us to reconsider how we can address so many at once. For those who are used to having audiences, however, the problem is reversed. What used to be clearly performer-audience relations increasingly resemble ordinary friendship. For the last year I've been interviewing musicians about their relationships with audiences and how they've been affected by social media.

"In the old days pop stars, rock stars used to just drop out of the sky didn't they? And now they're tweeting about what they had for breakfast or whatever. Well, interesting days though. It's one of those things I suppose people are still trying to find out - where to draw the boundaries and what works and what doesn't, you know?"

- Mark Kelly

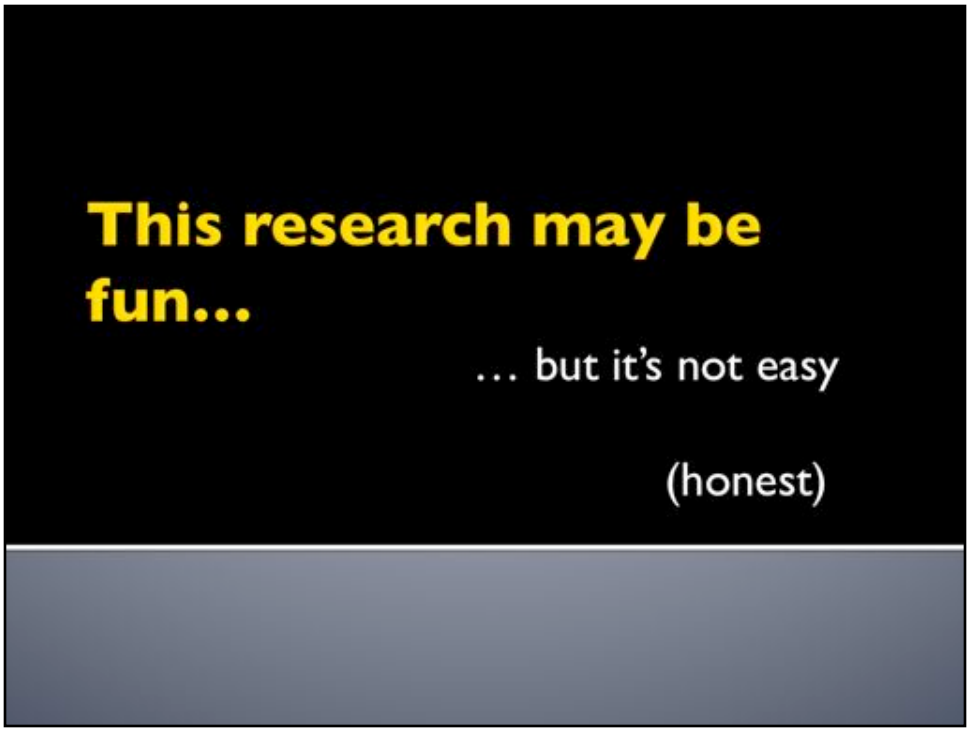
The basic issue I want to talk about here is this change from the inaccessible rock star of old, who never had to think about daily modes of relating to their audiences, to today's situation in which musicians not only CAN tweet about "what they had for breakfast"…

"You can't just show up and be a rock star and not put the effort in to showing your fans you care anymore."

– Sydney Wayser

…but often feel compelled to engage in direct, proactive and increasingly interpersonal modes of interaction with their fans.

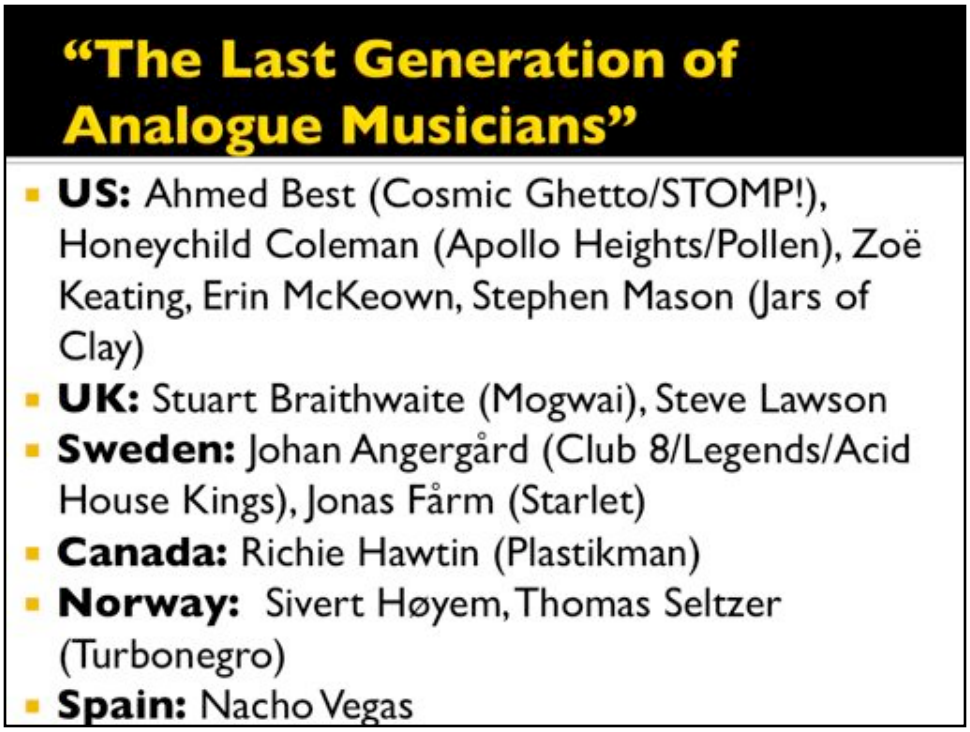
I'll briefly discuss my methods and sample, and then cover some of the positive benefits of this increasingly interpersonal form of engagement, discuss some of its challenges, and conclude with a brief summary of strategies musicians are using to manage these tensions.



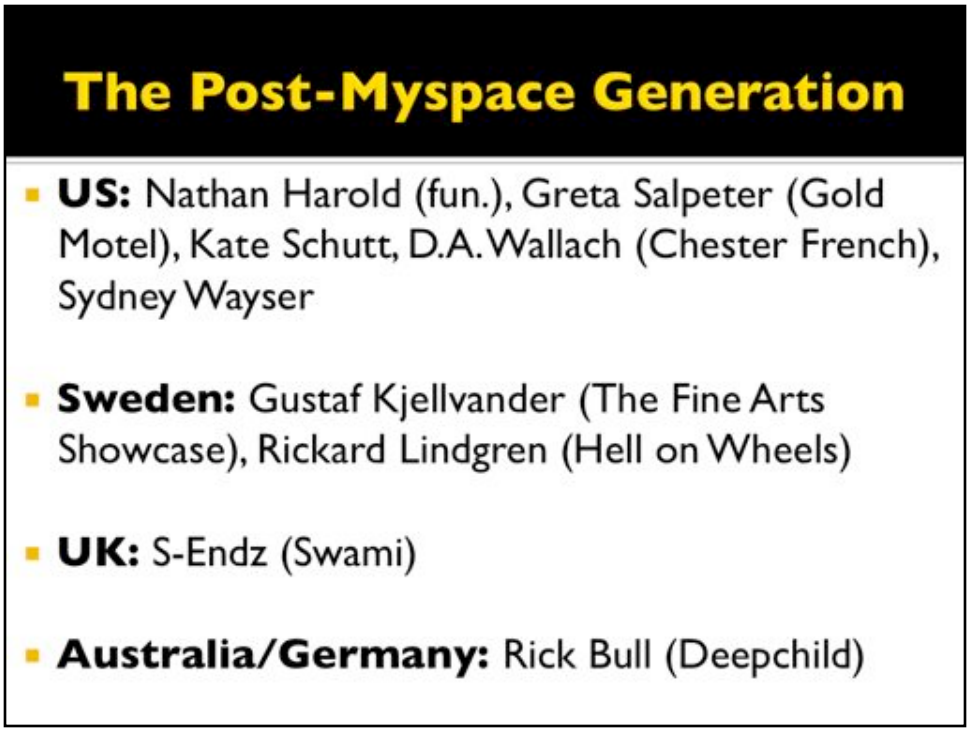
This is an area that has received almost no research attention. One reason – perhaps the main reason – is the problem of access. I relied primarily on my social networks, which includes several musicians and others in the music industries, to reach musicians. I also received introductions through the organizers of the French music trade conference MIDEM, at which I had spoken in 2009, in exchange for posting excerpts of some interviews on their blog. I originally intended to use snowball sampling, but quickly found that this would not work. Very few of the people I interviewed referred me to others. Initially this seemed to be because musicians thought I only wanted people who are exemplars of using social media well, but gradually I came to suspect that it reflected a tacit norm of not giving out each other's contact information. Given the pressures they're under, some of which I'll cover here, that made sense. Many of the contacts I made led to dead ends, reflecting the facts that giving interviews is something musicians do all the time and one which does not result in publicity holds little appeal, and that many musicians do not want or feel able to talk about their relationships with audience. Musicians were given the choice to be entirely on record, entirely anonymous, or to be on record but request that some segments be anonymous. In several cases I sent the finished transcripts to them so they could mark which parts they wanted anonymized. Very few wanted anything anonymized.

I've now interviewed 31 musicians for this project, plus four from a previous project with some topical overlap, as well as three managers and a producer, resulting in approximately 28 hours of interviews totaling approximately 800 single-spaced pages of transcripts. The shortest interview was 15 minutes and the longest was two and a half hours. Most were approximately 45 minutes. I worked from an interview protocol and had a few questions I asked of everyone, but I sought to create a conversation that drew out musicians' perspectives rather than imposing my own frame on the conversation. Many of the interviews thus went in directions that depended on the answers and topics the musicians raised.

My primary focus was on what one of the managers I spoke with referred to as "legacy artists," those who had been in the business since the 1980s or before and (most of whom) who are still professional musicians. Many of those with whom I spoke were thus well positioned to reflect not just on how the internet plays out in their relationships with audience, but also on how those relationships have been changed by social media.



I also spoke with artists who got their start in the late 1990s, what Sivert Høyem, one of the Norwegian musicians with whom I spoke referred to as "the last generation of analogue musicians." These artists too experienced the shift from encountering audiences primarily at shows and through mass media to encountering them directly through social media.



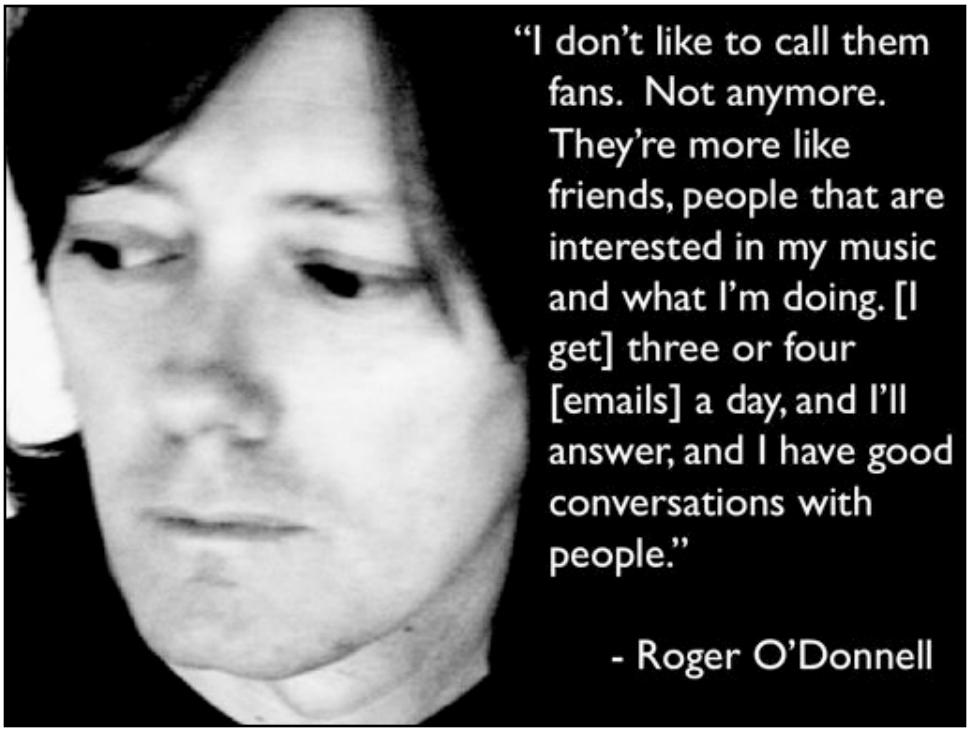
Finally, I spoke with a number of musicians who got their start after MySpace had already started in 2002. These people had never been professional musicians in a time when engaging social media was not germane to the job. For some, like Sydney Wayser whom I quoted at the outset, the idea of not having to engage an audience directly seemed unthinkable.

Most of the people with whom I spoke could be loosely categorized as indie or alternative rock, but, as this list shows, I spoke with artists in a wide variety of genres. Several important genres are not here, however, and others are minimally represented. Only nine of the people with whom I spoke were women, reflecting in part the gender dynamics of popular music. Just three were non-white. As you saw in the previous slides, I spoke with people from several countries, though all were North American or European. They included singers and a rapper, guitarists, bassists, keyboardists, and a cellist, a violinist, and a saxophone player.

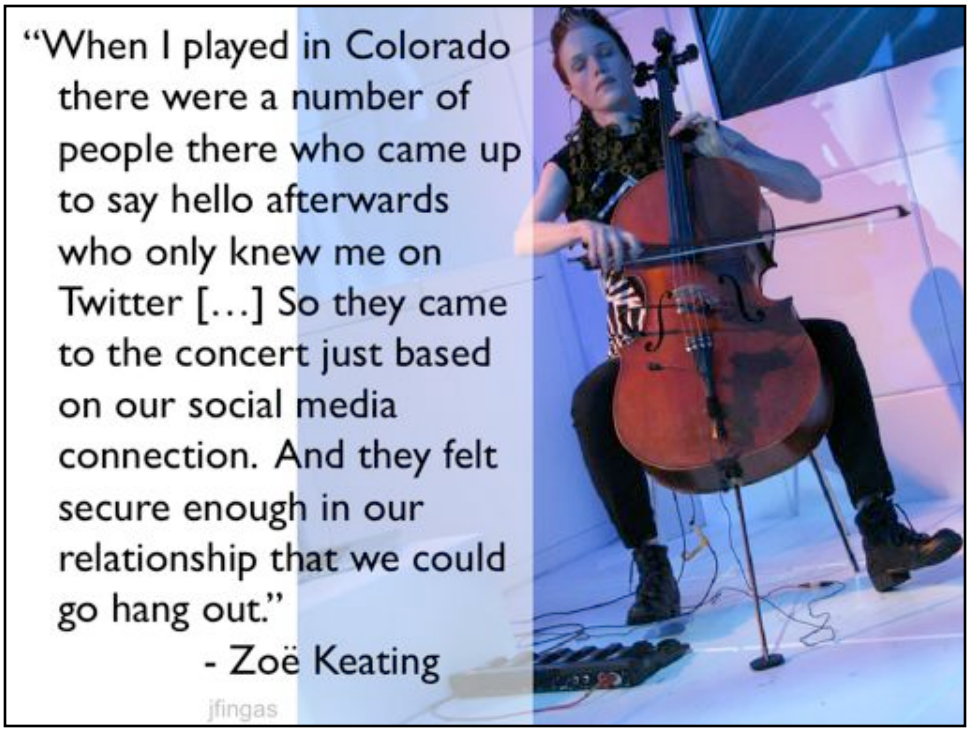
I continue to interview in hopes of achieving greater breadth. [If you are reading this and can connect me with people who would help in this, write and connect us please!]

There are many benefits musicians experience as a result of having direct access to their audiences and they to them. Many, including the economic, fall outside the scope of this paper. Others are personal. Musicians have always befriended members of their audiences as they chatted after shows, crashed on their couches, and, on rare occasion, built connections through fan letters and responses to them.

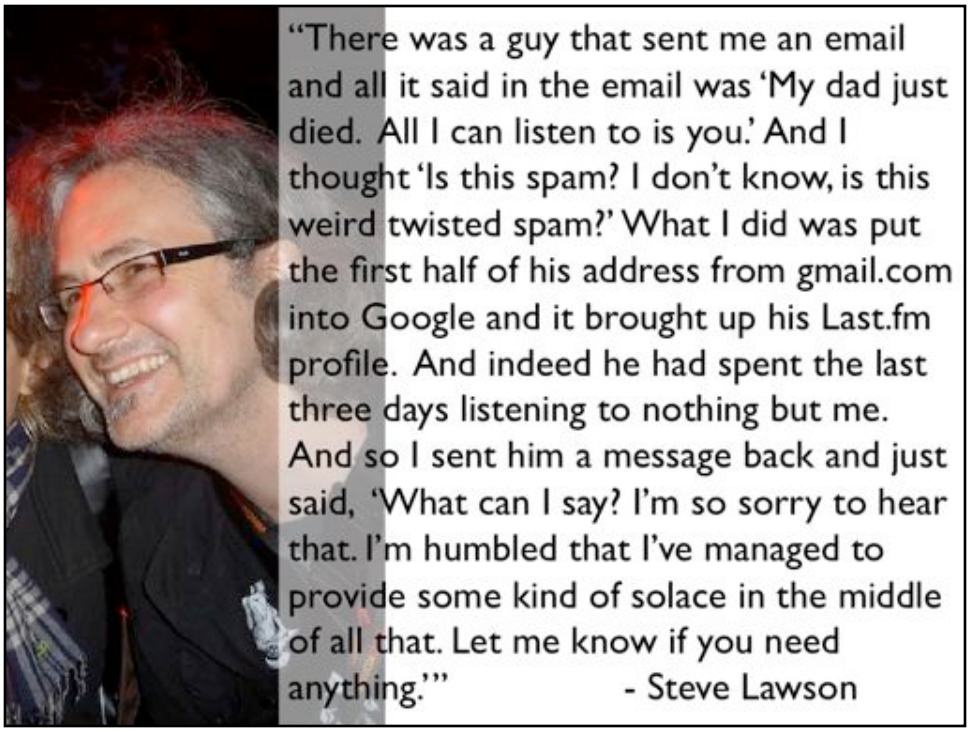
Now, however, many musicians are forming new personal relationships with fans, both as groups that offer a sense of community and as individuals as the back and forths that social media enable turn from surface topics to increasing depth and sense of knowing one another.



Some musicians work in relative isolation and the immediacy of contact with their audience offers a continuous source of support and reassurance that their work matters to others. The instant feedback when they release music is also very rewarding for many.



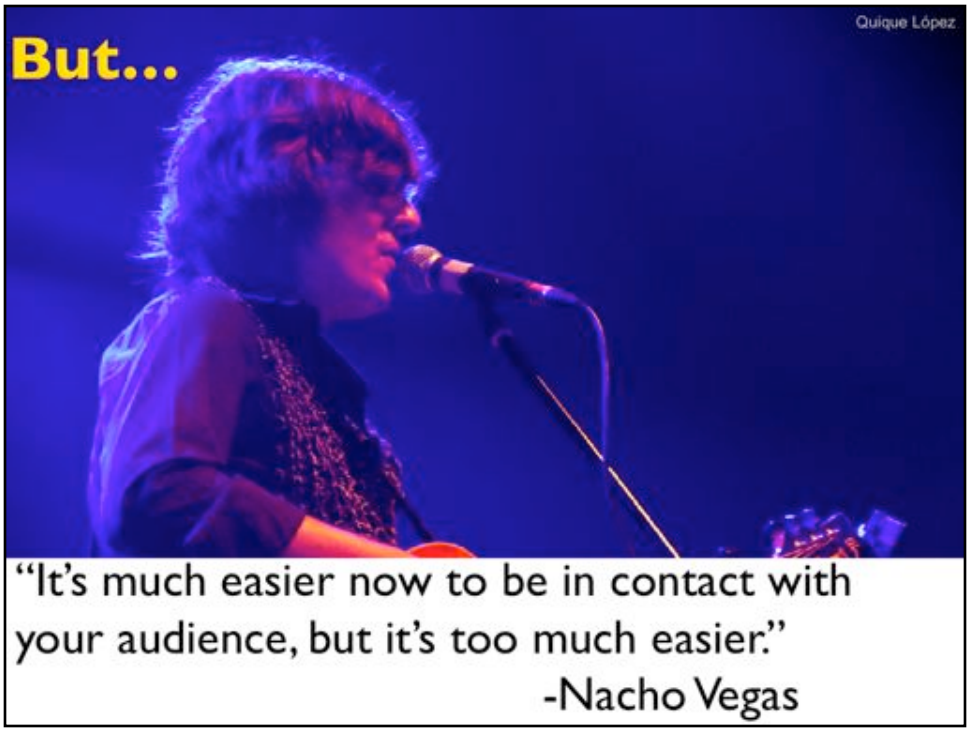
Often the relations formed online move offline, just as they do for people who are not musicians. This is less true for the really famous, like UB40 or Mogwai who play enormous venues and tend not to be as easy to approach in live encounters as mediated ones, although some of them, such as Richie Hawtin, make efforts to meet members of their audience when they tour.



Musicians also experience other kinds of personal rewards through the interpersonal connections formed with fans. A recurring theme I heard was the power of hearing that their music helped someone deal with the death of a loved one. These kinds of interactions were much less likely face-to-face and of all the things musicians could hear, seemed to validate their life's work in a particularly meaningful way.

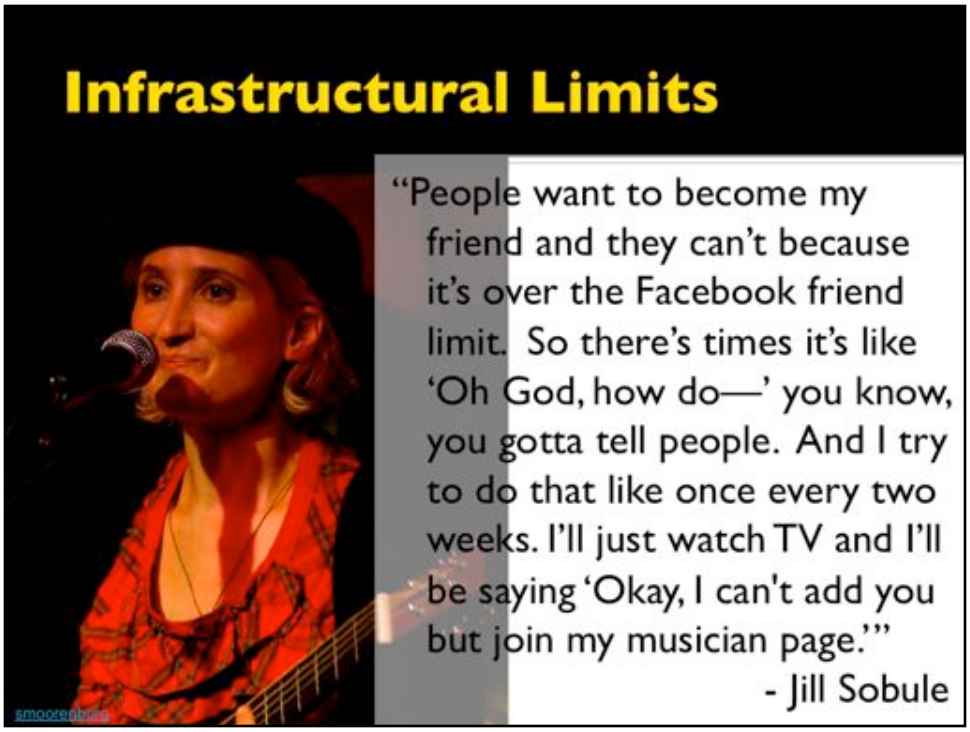
"People submitted the most honest, heart wrenching, beautiful, they were so-- I don't even know how to describe it. They were so forthright and so willing to share some very deep, personal moments with me. I was shocked, and I never thought I would get what I got. […] I got beautiful first person stream of conscience elegies about somebody's dying grandmother, to little scribbled notes about a street corner, to works of art, to love affairs - you know, secret love affairs - to total erotic things that shocked my pants off, anonymously submitted soft porn, basically. I mean, you know, I was shocked. I was totally shocked. It was so cool." - Kate Schutt

The opportunity to connect with audiences also offers the potential for new kinds of collaborations which can have unexpected interpersonal rewards. Kate Schutt did an album where she asked fans to send her love stories as a source of inspiration for her songwriting. Though she didn't end up using any of the stories in her songs directly, she was inspired by the experience and, as she describes here, was profoundly touched by the way they opened up to her. Again, this is a kind of personal reward that was not available before this kind of direct engagement was made possible.

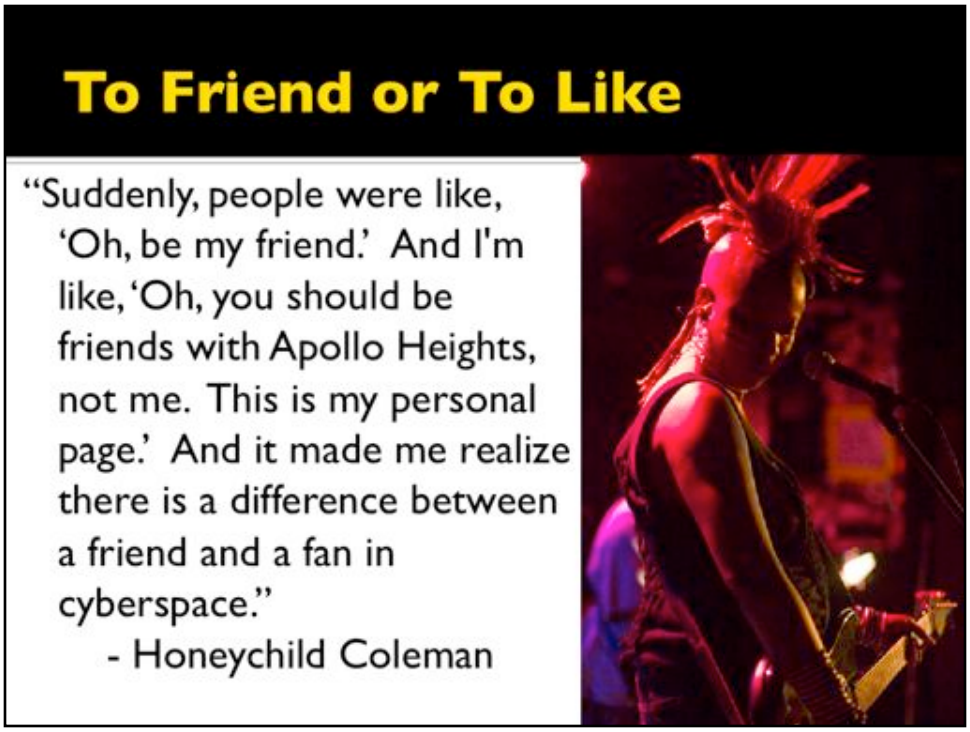


But, as the Spanish singer-songwriter Nacho Vegas pointed out (in his imperfect but poetic English), there are drawbacks to all this immediacy and I want to turn now to some of them.

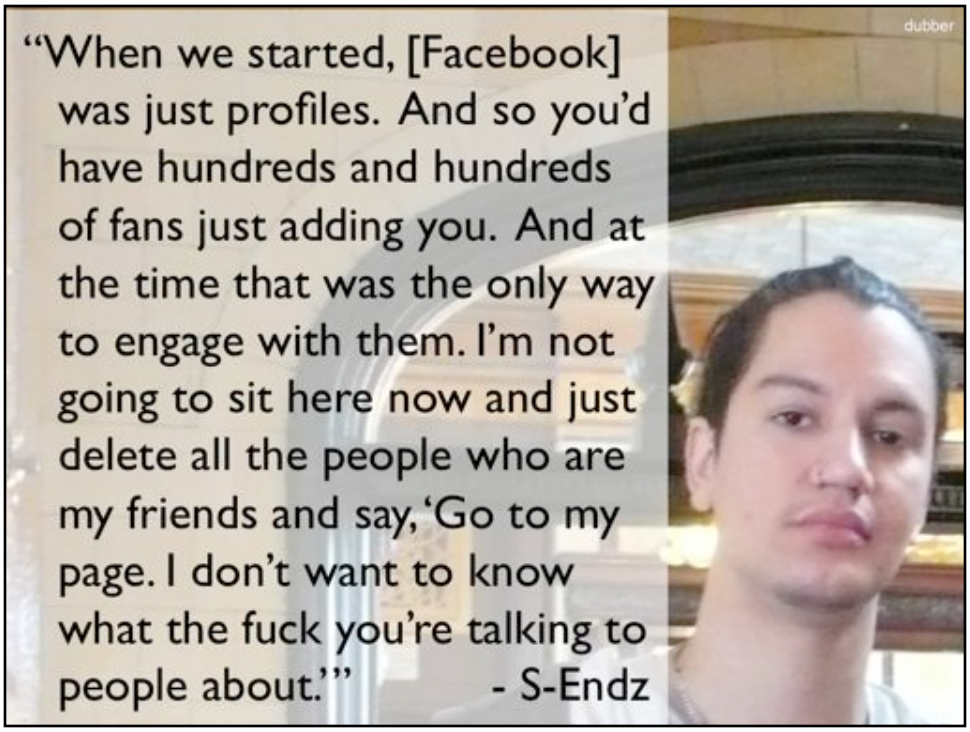
At a very basic level there is the problem that there are so many media through which to engage fans directly (and vice versa). They all take time, and which are in vogue change so rapidly that many feel overwhelmed. Each also has technological affordances which an individual musician may or may not like. Musicians differ in which media choices they make and their reasons for doing so. For instance, several musicians told me they love Twitter because it affords easy back and forth with their audiences, while another told me he likes Twitter because it works well as a broadcast medium. Some follow all or many fans back, others follow none. Some like to friend their fans on Facebook, while others like the separation between personal and professional profiles on the site. Some run Google alerts to see how they are being discussed across the internet while others assiduously avoid reading anything written about them outside the sites they control. They continue to use Myspace as a way to share their music and to familiarize potential audiences with what they do, but as a means of interaction with audiences all of them consider it dead, killed by spam, especially spam from other musicians.



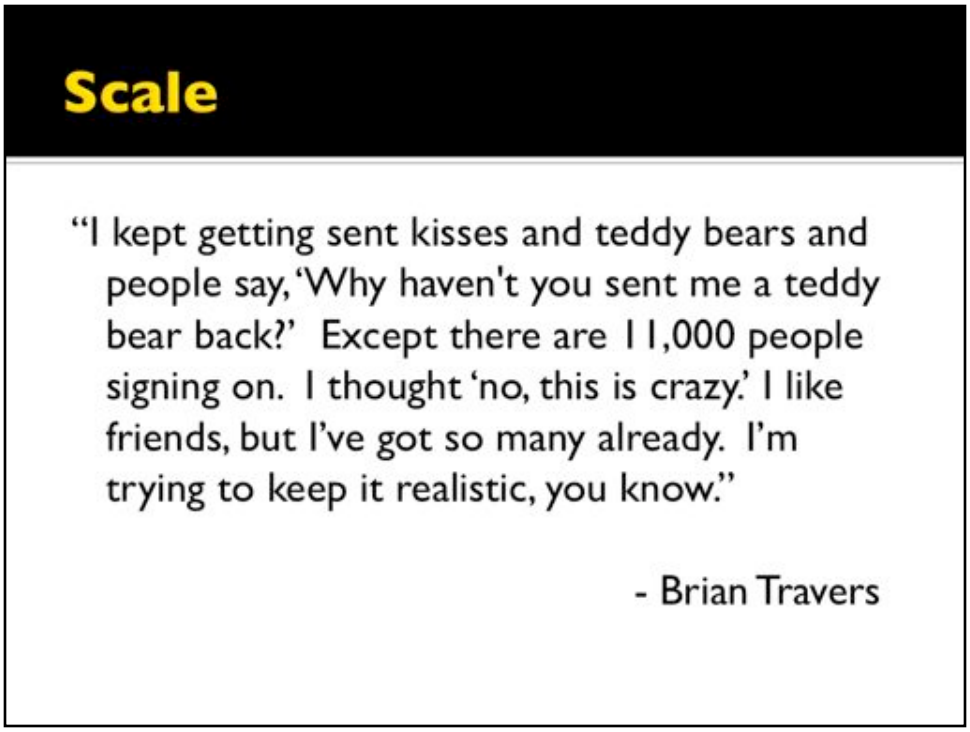
There are also a range of issues that arise from the technological structures of the different sites. For instance, Jill Sobule prefers to connect with her fans on her personal page rather than having a separate musician page. However, Facebook's 5000 friend limit makes that impossible and leaves her with the uncomfortable interpersonal task of having to decline friend requests she'd like to accept. In contrast, other musicians I spoke with created personal pages only because it was a requirement before they could create a fan page and prefer not to friend anyone at all. Several complained about the technical limitations of Myspace.



The distinction between personal and fan page also means that artists have to make conscious decisions about what exactly constitutes a "friend" rather than a "fan" in ways more explicit than before. Deciding what exactly constitutes a "friend" for Facebook purposes is a process most of the site's users deal with, but it's one made even more complicated when there is the alternative of a band page.

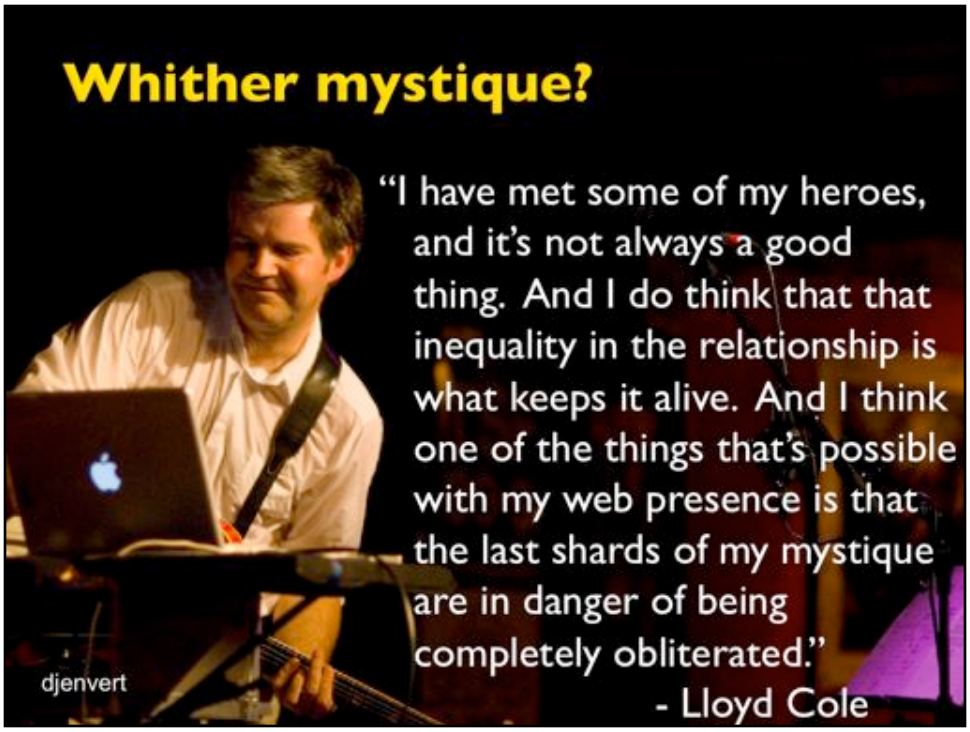


Musicians who, like Jill Sobule, began connecting with fans on Facebook before the site created musician pages may now find themselves with FB friends they would rather have on their fan page. Desi artist S-Endz, like many musicians, prefers Twitter because its asymmetry allows fans to follow him without his having to follow them back. But to now unfriend people whose requests he's previously accepted seems so unacceptably rude that he will not consider it.

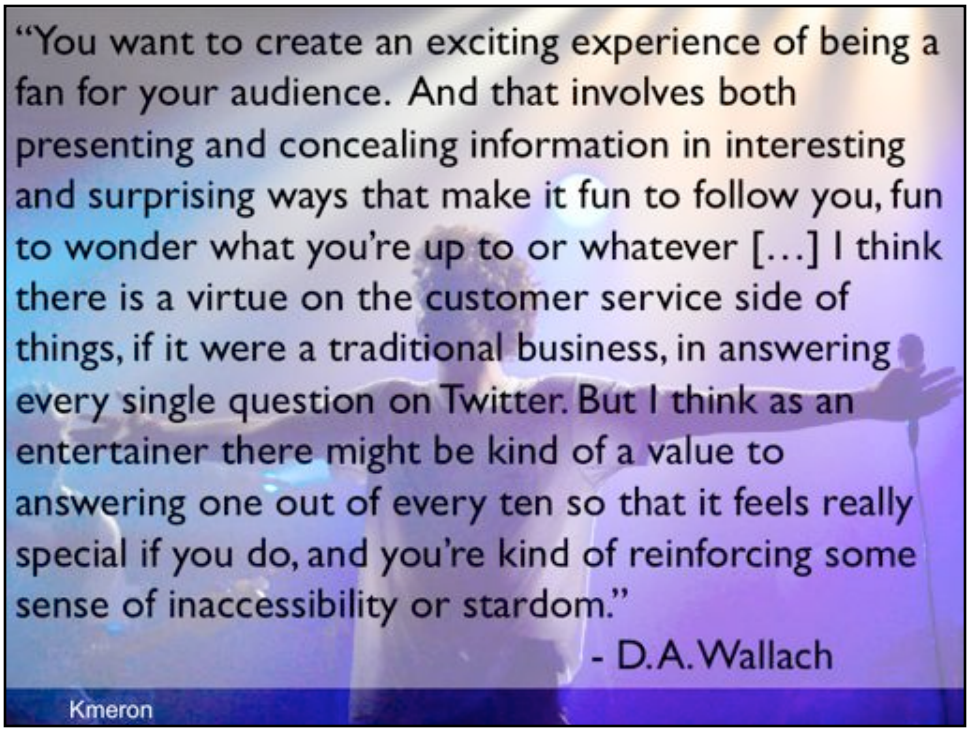


For musicians with tens of thousands of fans, like Brian Travers from UB40, the demands of fans on a site like Facebook that offers so many ways to engage can simply be overwhelming. After an initial foray, he left the site. On the other hand, he is a prolific tweeter and as a glance at his Twitter stream (@BTUB40) shows, he clearly enjoys the easy banter with fans he is able to attain there, but on his own terms.

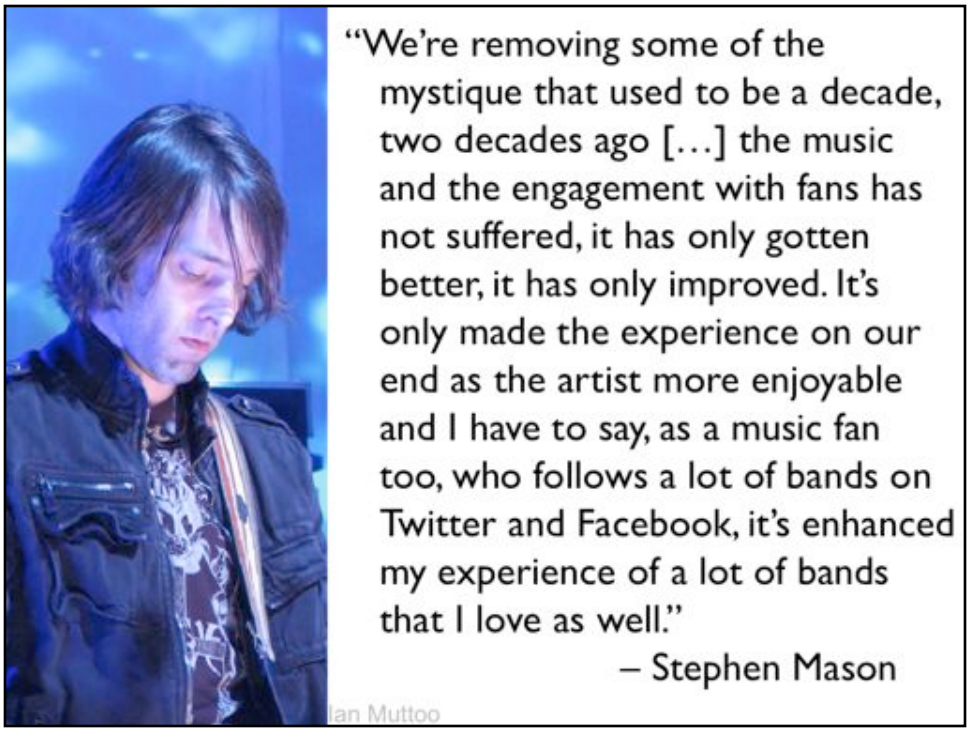
For many musicians, talking about their daily lives comes easily and feels fine. For others, it is something they do not want to do and yet may feel pressured to by sites' structures, by the norms of use on those sites, by peers, audience members, and people such as managers and publicists. For Erin McKeown it is an issue of privacy. For some, it is an issue of protecting mystique.



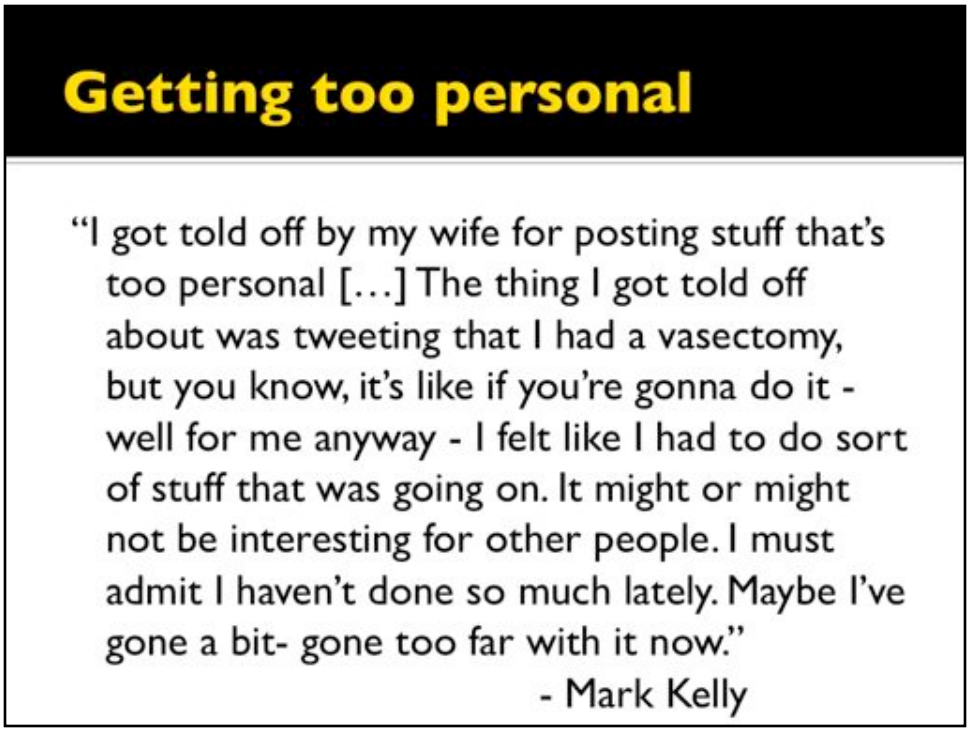
Lloyd Cole is not alone when he worries that as relationships between musicians and fans become increasingly interpersonal, the magic of the musical connection may be endangered. For artists like him, maintaining a sociable presence – online and off – is a matter of keeping his business intact and maintaining a source of income that can support his family rather than forming new relationships. Like many others, he has to navigate how to be sociable while conveying a message that he is not available for personal relationship.



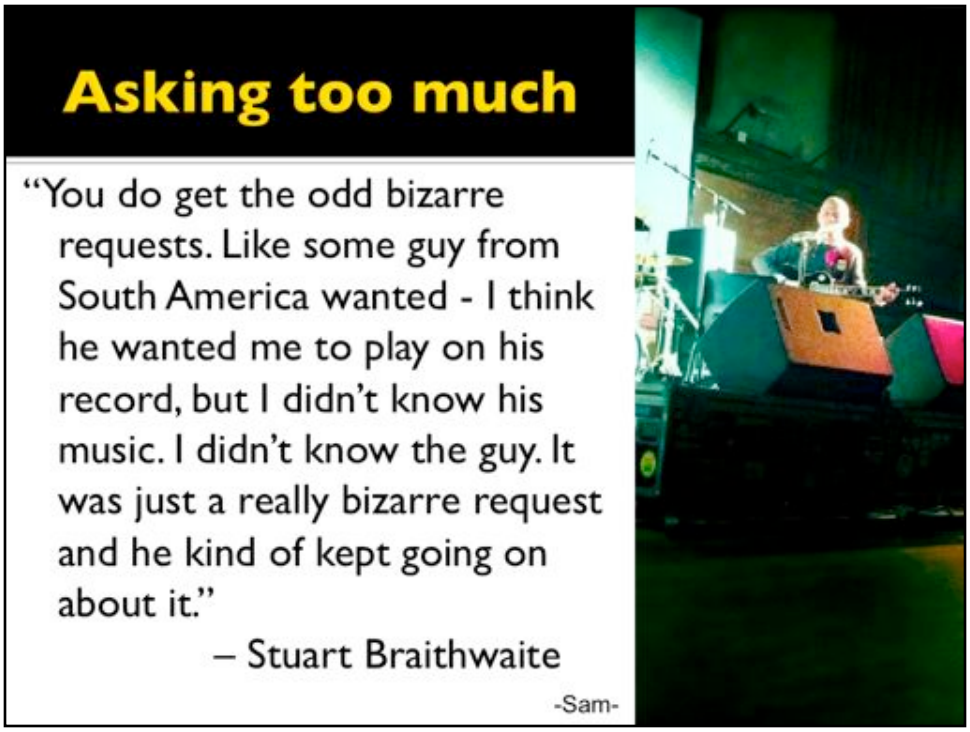
Others, like D.A. Wallach (whose band Chester French were the first band on Facebook since they were students at Harvard when it first launched), have no personal problem with befriending members of the audience, but worry that being too accessible can detract from the pleasures of their fandom.



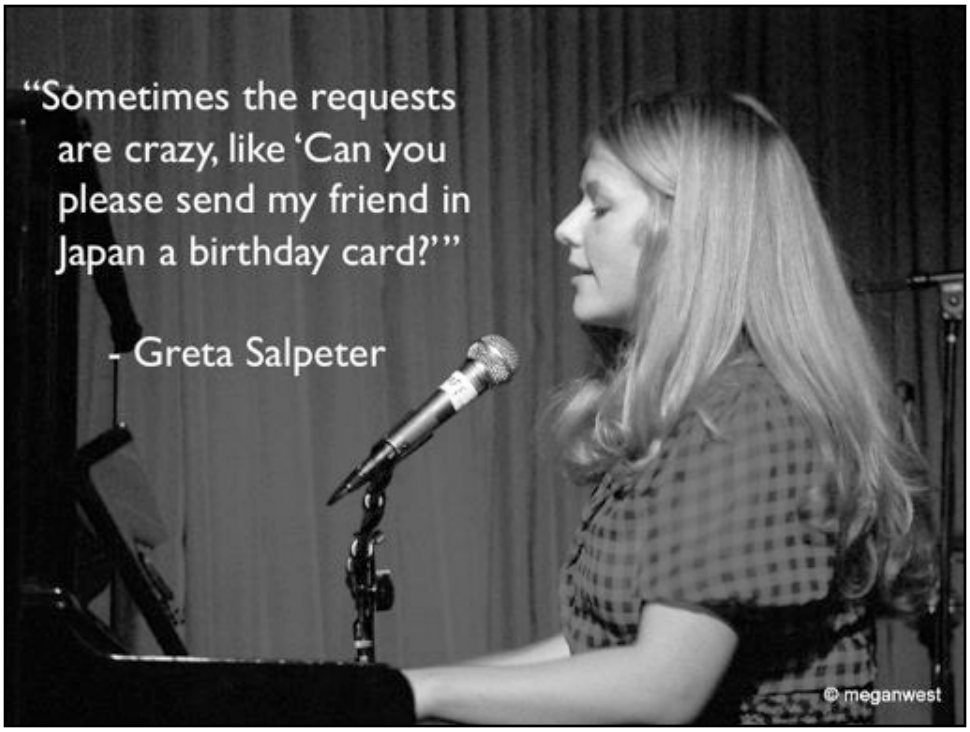
On the other hand, there are musicians who think mystique is over-rated and celebrate social media's potential to destroy its last shards. Like Stephen Mason and those I cited at the start of this talk, they enjoy getting to know their fans and letting their fans get to know them and believe that the mutual experience of more personal interaction serves only to enhance everyone's rewards. This seems to be a matter of personality more than age, genre, or anything else.



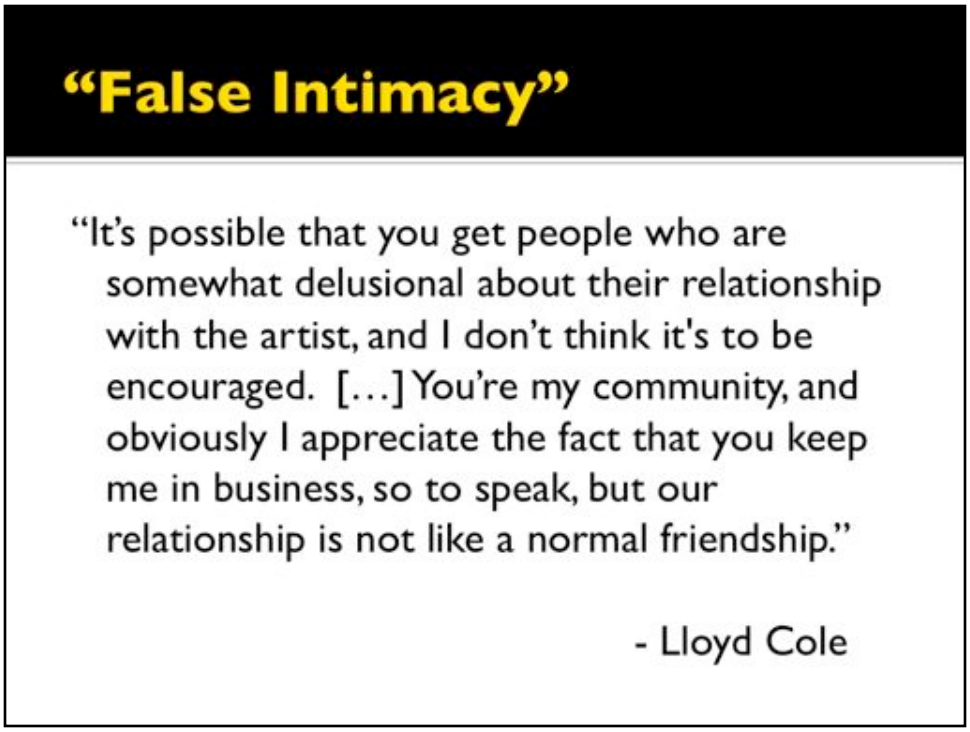
But even musicians who really enjoy integrating their musician personas with their everyday selves find themselves having to negotiate boundaries, if not for themselves, then for the people with whom they have close relationships who may not appreciate all that they share with strangers.



Musicians often encounter boundary violations as audiences seek too much from them through social media. As I'll discuss in a moment, this can be a yearning for a deep personal relationship, but it can also be a stream of requests they have neither time nor inclination to fulfill.



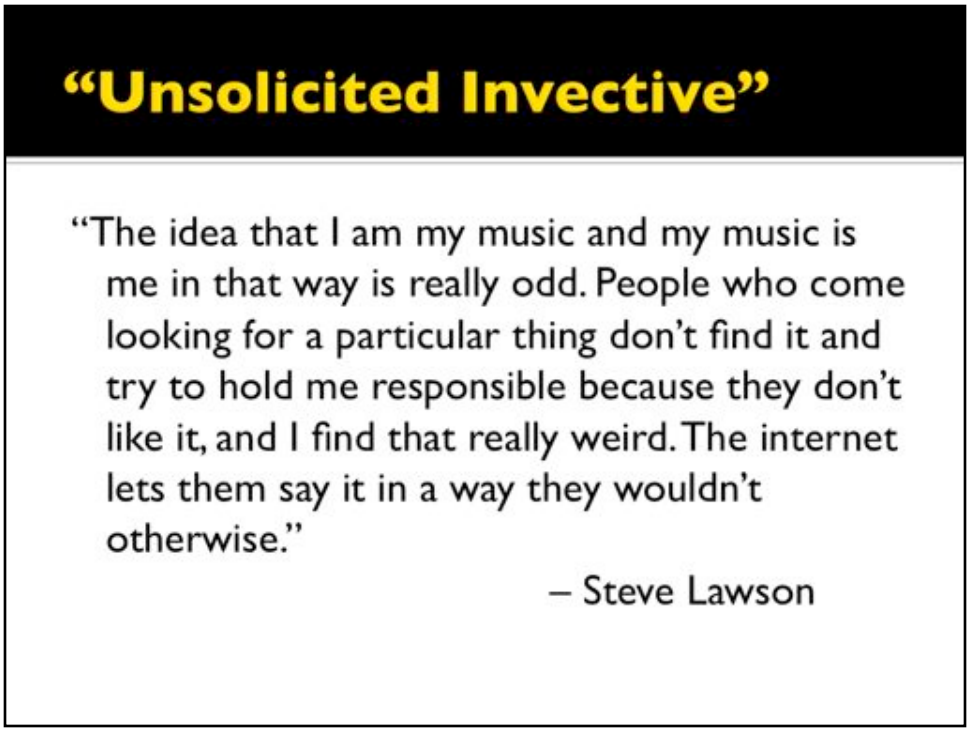
Greta Salpeter wouldn't mind doing these kinds of things, but hasn't got the time to fulfill all the "crazy" requests she gets.



All the issues I've just raised are challenging, but are more annoyances than threats. More upsetting to musicians is the phenomenon Sivert Høyem termed "false intimacy" where fans feel more connected to the artist than is appropriate. The image of the deluded stalking fanatic fan is pervasive in popular culture. Although none of the musicians I spoke with found this to be pervasive amongst members of their audience, most had encountered it from at least one person, and many had encountered it from several.

"I guess some people have that kind of connection on a really spiritual level or whatever, and they really feel that they know me, and that can be pretty scary. […] nowadays, it's easy for people to monopolize you if they want to. And I have people just sending me ten emails each day and contacting me and following me on everything I do, sending me text messages and stuff, which is just really tiring and annoying." - Sivert Høyem

For people like Lloyd Cole, it may feel easy to just shut those people out. Other manage it with policies like responding to a first email but never to a second. Others like Sivert Høyem, feel compelled be nice and to respond, making it doubly difficult to maintain boundaries that feel safe. This is particularly challenging in small countries where fans may encounter the musicians where they live, as is Høyem's situation in Norway.



Finally (though this is by no means the end of the topic), social media is not used only by fans to engage musicians, it is also used by anti-fans who take advantage of the anonymity of the internet to spew what Billy Bragg called "unsolicited invective" their way. Personal encounters may be verbally abusive. This too requires musicians to develop coping strategies.

Those are the primary interpersonal issues musicians face as they negotiate the differences between audience and friends. Each could easily be elaborated into a paper on its own and I have only had time to whip through them quickly here. In addition there are issues such as dealing with criticism which have interpersonal dimensions but which I have set aside in this paper.

I don't have the time to fully elaborate all of the ways musicians strategically manage these concerns, but here's a summary of the main strategies that emerge in the interviews.

Some musicians, like Steve Lawson or Zoë Keating, simply maintain a single online identity that integrates the personal with the professional. As Zoë put it, "It's sort of easy for me because I don't have to think is that my inside voice or my outside voice? For better or worse they're the same voice."

Others manage their engagement by using media in which they feel they have the most control (as is the case with Brian Travers choosing Twitter and avoiding Facebook) or limiting their exposure to sites they do not control such as fan boards or blogs they don't write.

All of them, like everyone else, manage the topics they share. Some, like Sivert Høyem or Kate Schutt, focus only on topics that are consistent with their musician identity. Others, like Jill Sobule, encourage discussion on a wide range of topics that foster a sense of community amongst participants. Some like Billy Bragg or David Lowery love engaging in political discussions and arguments with their fans. Almost all steer clear of discussing their families.

Many have strategies for managing access to themselves – blocking people on Twitter who are unkind, refusing to follow others on Twitter (even if they are happy to respond to others' tweets), or limiting how often they will reply to emails or which kinds of messages receive responses.

I began this talk by noting that many of the issues musicians face are parallel to those we all face in using social media, but that the problems for them were enhanced. In this sense, their strategies are not limited only to those who are used to relating to audiences. Just as they are negotiating how to do new kinds of friendship, perhaps they can help teach the rest of us how to negotiate new kinds of audience.

Questions?

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Thanks!

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