

## ADDRESSING THE PERSONA

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Any analysis of communicative language must observe the inequalities of interpersonal discourse, thus the critical discourse analyst Jan Blommaert, who declares that: »Dialogue does not presuppose co-operativity, [...] sharedness, [...] [or] symmetry in contextualising power« (Blommaert 2005: 44-45). As I listen to the track »If Six Was Nine« by The Jimi Hendrix Experience (1967), I have the power to silence Jimi Hendrix, a power he does not share. But he knows why I am listening to it, and why I will refrain from switching the track off. Who is this Jimi Hendrix with whom I wage this virtual tug-of-war? This article falls into two parts. In the first part, I discuss how the persona operates in listening to recorded song; in the second I directly address the track by means of this perspective.

### I

I begin by suggesting that the identity of the singing voice which delivers the song operates at three distinct levels. At least, these levels can be made distinct through analysis, but they are not always self-evident. Such a tripartite theorisation is not novel: Philip Auslander builds on work by Simon Frith (2008: 196-199) in distinguishing between »the *real person* [the performer as human being], the *performance persona* [the performer as social being] and the *character* [what Frith calls »song personality.« (Auslander 2009: 305). However, perhaps because I am less interested in musicians than I am in music, I tend to conflate the first two of these, while I further subdivide the third. Let me describe my approach to such distinction. My first level is comparatively unproblematic. A song is performed through singing by a particular individual, who is normally named, an individual who has an observable historical biography, the song's *performer*. Thus, when we listen to the Who, we listen to the voice of Roger Daltrey. Roger Daltrey has an identity outside his existence with the Who – he has appeared in films,

he is known as a keen angler, etc. etc. These details pertain to Daltrey as performer, and are aspects of his identity we can become cognisant of should we choose. And the same can be said of Buddy Holly, for instance, although the details will differ. When we hear Holly sing »Every Day« (1957), we create in our minds an identity for that singing voice which is not identical with the identity of Buddy Holly – all performers assume a *persona* when singing and, however close that persona is to the identity of the performer, it can always be distinguished from it. Naomi Cumming notes that recording engineers modify the sound created by a particular performer:

»By altering the balance, dynamic level, and quality of her sounds, the engineers have effectively created for her a musical ›body‹ and identity. [...] They are able to effect this illusion because the characteristics of sounds are the aural ›marks‹ of bodily actions« (Cumming 2000: 21f.).

It is this ›illusion‹ I am calling the *persona*. What is true of Holly is also true of, for instance, Robert Plant. But when he sings the Jimi Hendrix classic »Hey Joe« (Plant 2002), the individual who is addressing »Joe« is neither the actual Robert Plant (the individual who used to sing with Led Zeppelin and would go on to sing with Alison Krauss), nor is he ›Robert Plant‹, the persona associated with the powerful voice in those two particular performance situations. He is instead a figure inside the song, who has no identity outside it – he is a *protagonist* within the song. These three levels, of performer, persona and protagonist are, I think, always identifiable, although the relationship between them is not necessarily self-evident.

At one extreme musicians may work to make these three categories co-extensive; at the other they may be utterly distinct. Take David Bowie's track »Five Years« (1972). We know this as the work of Bowie the performer, a Bowie whose performance history includes such varied tracks as »The Gospel According To Tony Day« (1966) and »Hallo Spaceboy« (1995). However, we also know this track as the work of Bowie inhabiting the persona of Ziggy Stardust, a persona he would make explicit in performance situations, extending to some aspects of his own personal life. Who, though, is the protagonist of the song? We hear a rather didactic, despairing individual declaring that »the end of the world is nigh« (we have only five years left...). This protagonist cannot easily be identified with either Bowie or Ziggy, although the identity of Ziggy provides a useful context for the song. Here, then, the three levels of identity are clearly distinguishable. When we hear John Lennon sing the Beatles' »All You Need Is Love« (1967), the situation is very different. The identity of Lennon as performer is unmistakable,

especially since the original recording was televised. It is not open to serious doubt. The characteristics of the persona Lennon adopts for the track are commensurate with the characteristics of Lennon the individual, the performer, especially since Lennon had worked so hard over the preceding years to try to ensure that the persona he presented was the individual he was trying to be. The song's protagonist is someone who declares that provided one loves, nothing else is necessary. Again, this appears to be the position Lennon tried to adopt in his real life, at least during this mid-1960s period. Here, then, in distinction to the Bowie example, performer, persona and protagonist appear to be identical. All tracks will exhibit degrees of relationship between these, and that degree needs to be noted. Matt Gelbart has offered a thoroughgoing, perceptive and historicized analysis of the concept in particular relation to the work of the Kinks, particularly in the subtle way that persona and protagonist are divorced. He notes that in the rock'n'roll era, the persona was regarded as the »genuine« voice of the performer and that, even after the intervention of Bowie and others »the illusion of spontaneous composition by a protagonist-composer remains one important ingredient in rock reception« (Gelbart 2000: 213). In so doing, he points to an important overlap between the persona and authenticity which, while important, is outwith the focus of this paper.

So, what should we expect of the persona? It may be of use to impose some limits on the range of options. Three questions are useful here. The first comes from asking whether the persona appears to be realistic, or whether it is overtly fictional. A realistic persona is one which requests that we interpret it as coming directly from the singer, as a vocalised version of a direct address, through conversation or similar means. A fictional persona arises in a situation where the singer is unambiguously taking on a particular character, much as an actor does. Of course, in many cases the distinction between these two possibilities may not be immediately apparent. The second comes from asking whether the situation described, the narrative of the track, is itself realistic, everyday, likely to be encountered by members of the imagined community addressed by the singer, or of which the singer forms a part, or is fictional, perhaps with an imagined historical, or mythological, quality. The third comes from asking whether the protagonist is personally involved in the situation described, is singing from reputed experience affected by the situation, or is acting as an observer of the situation, external to it, and simply reporting on it. Some examples will explain. Billy J. Kramer & The Dakotas' »Do You Want To Know A Secret?« (1963) is pretty unproblematic in terms of understanding the persona. »Billy« is singing to his sweetheart in a realistic manner, duplicating the experience of thou-

sands of contemporary men, and is clearly involved in the situation he is describing. Even in such a simple example, though, note the effect of the remainder of the texture – the punch line (»I'm in love with you«) is prepared by a dramatic shift to the minor, and by an increase in density (particularly in the kit), before the »you« is sung virtually unaccompanied, set apart. The time is the present (of the song), and it describes a momentary sensation (that of sharing with his sweetheart the secret that perhaps they have both felt for »a week or two«) and we are left to guess at what the future may hold. This is such a normative position for songs (whether the felt expression is positive or negative), that I think of this combination of:

realistic (not fictional) persona,  
everyday (not fantastic) situation,  
involved (not objectified) stance,  
present (not past or future) time, and,  
exploration of the moment  
as the ›bedrock‹ position of the persona.

It was under the influence of psychedelia in the mid 1960s that alternative positions were first consistently explored. Foremost among these was the Kinks' »Waterloo Sunset« (1967). This exhibits a psychedelic consciousness principally in that a very mundane experience (seeing the sun set over a metropolitan Waterloo station) is transformed into something wonderful (hinted at by the angelic choir behind the opening »dirty old river«). The ›authentic‹ experience (the meeting of »Terry and Julie«<sup>1</sup>, who themselves gaze on the sunset) is reported from the outside by Ray Davies whose experience of simply seeing the sunset is paradisiacal. His stance, then, is uninvolved, although his position is clearly positive towards what he describes.

Billy Joel's »Leningrad« (1989) is a little more complex. His persona takes on two distinct roles, suggesting two different protagonists. In the first role, he describes certain aspects of growing up in the U.S.A. during the Cold War from a purportedly first-hand position (the experience of air-raid drills, for instance). However, by this point he has also described events in the life of a certain Viktor, from Leningrad, from a perspective which cannot be equally first-hand and, in the counterposing of »I« and »Viktor«, he is clearly describing Viktor's experiences second-hand. However, the way these experiences felt is not open to Joel's first position. Hence, the persona adopts both first-hand protagonist and external, narrative perspectives, which come together impressively at that moment when

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1 The names apparently taken from contemporary film stars Terence Stamp and Julie Christie.

»I« punningly becomes »eye (to eye)«. Mike Scott's persona in the Waterboys' »Song Of The Steppes« (1983) has a similar encounter narrative, but from the Soviet perspective. On the surface, the persona takes on the role of a single protagonist, recounting a series of events covering the involvement of Soviet soldiers in World War II and their subsequent incarceration in Siberia, because they had become »too westernized«. Although the presence of a tenor sax in the Waterboys' line-up was standard at this time, in this track it also symbolizes that very westernness. Early in the track, the persona exchanges his »sacks« for a »uniform«. At least, that is how various lyric websites have it. I, however, have always heard the exchange as involving his »sax«. Heard in this way, the instrument at first expresses his persona, and then (after the exchange), seems to express his alienation, which the lyric will then go on to explore. Again, what seems simple on the surface repays greater consideration. So, while this basic five-part schema (persona, situation, stance, temporality and timespan) acts adequately to begin the process of constructing an identity for the persona to whom we are listening, we do need to note that many concrete cases are more complex.

## II

It is, perhaps, difficult to pin down the dominant principles of any social movement which finds expression in music. For the musicians of the Woodstock generation, we can perhaps cite a mix of attempts to arrest processes of alienation, the development of a ›new consciousness‹ founded on personal responsibility and the embedding of the individual within the community, and an avoidance of uniformity (Moore 2004: 75-89, drawing on Reich 1971 and Roszak 1969). In more specifically musical terms, we find musical ambition, the use of up-to-date technology, virtuosity, big ideas and interest in conceptualisation (Covach 2005) are key. It is perhaps the idea of a new consciousness (itself a very ›big idea‹) which is paramount in the work of Jimi Hendrix, and specifically so in his track »If Six Was Nine«. This much has to be gleaned from external sources: to what extent is this determinable from the track itself? It depends for its understanding on its very title, perhaps to a greater extent than do many songs. That title posits the ludicrous suggestion that our very understanding of reality is based on an insecure foundation (something is wrong with the number system). As such, it insists on a very definite distinction between what appears to us as ›real‹ and what constitutes ›reality‹, a distinction which might suggest Platonic

idealism. And, insofar as it is realised musically, it is perhaps that final freak-out (the last minute and a half or so, i.e. from 3:54) which is most representative. Each of the three musicians goes his own way, we lose a sense of the beat, and we lose a sense of harmony although bassist Noel Redding sticks resolutely to the tonic. This could be read as an instantiation of personal responsibility on behalf of the musicians to explore themselves, but in that all three sound together, that self-exploration is nonetheless embedded within a community.

Much has happened in the track by this point. Perhaps a key aspect to note is its origin in the blues, apparent at least in the first two verses. These have the conventional three-part 12-bar blues structure, which appears as two pairs of lines in each verse, followed by a two-line refrain, repeated each time. Harmonically and texturally, the ›verse‹ is sparse, empty and unchanging (a minimal riff over a tonic pedal), while the ›refrain‹ is rich (complex guitar chords and an unspecific harmonic pattern based on phrygian III, phrygian II and ionian II) and dense. A blues (minor) pentatonic is undeniably behind the verse's vocal, while the refrain carries a greater sense of heightened speech. And the lyric tells us how to interpret this difference. The refrain's lines ›I got my own world to live through, and I ain't gonna copy you‹ emphasise Hendrix' difference (›ain't gonna copy‹), while the stresses apparent in the way Hendrix delivers the lyric (those words in italics) distinguish his persona through self-assertion and self-distinction. Since the blues is a pattern shared par excellence, it is an ideal choice as vehicle to demonstrate what Hendrix is not going to ›copy‹. Here Hendrix paints his persona as realistic, deeply involved, and in his own present.

The opening texture is very striking, consisting simply of a minimal riff through the first beat, and then a cymbal through the next four. When Hendrix' voice enters, there is a sense of thickening texture because he doubles his vocal line on the guitar, but there is still a great sense of space surrounding what we hear – the auditory scene is wide. This is compounded by the vocal delivery – there is great vocal space, with lengthy gaps after every three or four syllables, as if these are either very difficult to articulate, or of supreme importance. This massive spaciousness is manifested later in extreme echo, specifically at 2:49, where two percussive strikes on the guitar are allowed to rebound. Hendrix' persona is unconcerned for a sun which ›refuse to shine‹ and mountains which ›fall in the sea‹ or a six which ›turns out to be nine‹ for, of course, these categories of natural objects simply don't act in that way. They are stable, in our experience (and even mountains, should they begin to crumble, don't usually reach the sea),

and thus Hendrix' imagery challenges the track's realism. This only serves to highlight the following image, that of hippies who might »cut off all their hair« for, of course, in the later 1970s, that is what so many of them did.

Although the track opens with some nod toward convention in the blues reference, it does not stay there. Indeed, although the lyric simply serves to focus in on the individuality of Hendrix' persona, the music instantiates the image schema identified by Mark Johnson (1987: 113-117) as that of the PATH, and which therefore implies a narrative timespan. This starts right from the introduction, which divides into four brief phrases. Each of these phrases is marked by four cymbal strokes, each successively louder, with the fourth allowed to ring undamped. This minimal PATH (four times traversed) operates also over a longer scale. The relevant stages of this longer PATH are:

- (1) the introduction, marked by the bare riff and cymbal;
- (2) the first verse (0:13), with its minimal texture and blues delivery giving way to a more idiosyncratic refrain;
- (3) the second verse (0:54), with the texture now thickened by the bass and by a fuller riff which »fills in« the space left empty by the riff in the first verse, and with a more agitated delivery of the lyric;
- (4) an escape from the regular presentation of verses (1:32), with a yet busier guitar role in the texture, into what appears almost as sermonising (Hendrix' voice moves to a slightly less extreme position on the right), through four lines with a decaying sense of structure due largely to the loss of the riff;
- (5) a free section (1:48) which alternates phrygian II with I (thereby, possibly, being seen as an expansion of the sense of the refrain);
- (6) a texturally abrupt return (2:52) to what sounds like it may be »just another« verse, but which turns out to be the expressive climax to the track, brought about first by the expansive kit, and second by Hendrix' lyric; this represents thereby a spiral rather than a circular return to the riff (I shall return to this section below);
- (7) the final freak-out (3:53).

The song, thus, has seven phases through which it passes, while all but the opening to the sixth are marked by an increasing density and energy of texture. This pattern formed by a process which is broken only to return renewed, and stronger, is extremely common and may be considered a particularly musical rendition of a PATH schema. Through its appearance here, it strengthens the possibility of a realistic reading. Note that although the seventh section generally picks up where the fifth section concluded, the

bass has moved from alternating scale-degree 5 an octave apart, to alternating scale-degrees 1 and 5 – a clear telegraphing of the track's coming closure.

Just as a sense of growth was apparent through the first few sections, there is another such in the sixth section, although this is manifested through the soundbox rather than by way of the track's instrumental textures. The stage for this has been set in the introduction where what sounds like Noel Redding's whispers give way to Hendrix' initial melodic line. Note that that line is delivered from a fairly extreme position to the right of the soundbox. This serves to balance Hendrix' guitar which sounds correspondingly to the left. My perspective on how his vocal performance develops combines aspects of ecological perception and proxemics. Through the first three sections (above), Hendrix' voice has been getting gradually louder, to cut across the growing busyness of the texture, and has been situated in a social space. At 1:32, he suddenly changes attitude. Vocal space becomes immediately compressed (»white-collar conservatives...«) as the guitar covers what vocal space remains, and he adopts a more personal space (the compression of vocal space is indicative of urgency in getting his »message« across). This sharing with his listener(s) more particular details of his experience gives way to a moment when he waves his »freak flag high« (1:44), simultaneously declaring his individuality and membership of the counterculture. As we slip into the fifth (wordless) section, the guitar shoots from one side of the soundbox to the other, but notably exchanges its Gs for G#s (the tonic is E), a turn to the positive which, in combination with the growing virtuosity of his guitar playing, seems to express the exultation of newly discovered freedom, a freedom curbed by the arrival on chord V and that stunning echo. As we enter section 6, drummer Mitch Mitchell gradually explores his own version of Hendrix' display. At first we hear Hendrix' persona command »fall, mountains«, suggesting that the earlier understanding of this »frame« (that of the operation of mountains in the normative perception of the landscape) may have been superseded. Mitchell runs wild, masking what a very softly-spoken Hendrix continues to say, specifying his own psyched-out space. Initially, Hendrix no longer needs to raise his voice over the kit, because we (his listeners) have become tuned in to his intimate space, but clearly not tuned in enough, as he vanishes behind the kit. This relationship is turned on its head at 3:35 when, astonishingly, it is almost as if Hendrix has swallowed the microphone – »when it's time for me to die« (how much more personal could you get?) is delivered almost from inside the listener's space. This, clearly, is as much as one can handle, for the only response is the wordless freak out.



So, who is this Jimi Hendrix who presents himself to me? He is weighed down with meaning, through his involved stance. He conveys urgency, through his very present exploration of his identity. And yet this presentation has a measure of equivocation, in that both realistic and fictional readings cannot be thoroughgoing. It is this strange combination of urgency, of depth, and of ambiguity which I find so attractive and which ensures that I shall not switch off. And, moreover, there is of course external evidence that Jimi Hendrix the performer shared some of the characteristics of Jimi Hendrix the persona in »If Six Was Nine«. A heady cocktail indeed.

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## Abstract

Consideration of the discursive possibilities of song leads to a posing of the key question: »To whom am I listening?« This paper outlines the theory of persona occasioned by this question, necessitating as it does an understanding of the personic environment formed by a track's narrative, its textural formation and its harmonic underpinning. The bulk of the paper, however, will attempt to put this theory into practice in interrogating Jimi Hendrix' »If Six Was Nine«.