

Living under the Lights: the growing importance of performativity and visual imagery for musicians in Toronto

Brian J. Hracs – University of Toronto

When we listen to recorded music there is a one-way exchange between the musician and the listener, but musicians also engage in a number of visual and interactive activities as well. When performing live shows, interviews or discussions with fans, for example, musicians carry out acts of emotional labour as well as visual and symbolic branding. Moreover, as the emphasis of the interactive and visual dimensions of music production are becoming more important, as revenues derived from selling copyrighted music decreases, the actions of musicians are increasingly scrutinized and vital to their success. In spite of existing research on performativity and emotional labour in other occupations, such as retail workers and flight attendants, however, these issues have surprisingly not been adequately addressed in performance – based occupations like music. Drawing from 50 interviews, this paper examines the ways in which musicians in Toronto perform with their instruments as well as their bodies and emotions. The spatial dynamics of these performances are also interrogated to demonstrate that even small variations in location, moving to center stage, for example, alter and intensify the performative act. Furthermore, this paper explores the influence of different factors including age, gender, ethnicity and musical genre on performativity by comparing the experiences of a demographically diverse group of musicians who perform in Toronto's indie rock, classical and hip-hop music scenes.