

‘He can be whatever you want him to be’: Identity and intimacy in the masked performance of Ghost

CATHERINE HOAD

School of Music and Creative Media Production, College of Creative Arts, Massey University, Wellington.
Mount Cook 6021, New Zealand
E-mail: c.hoad@massey.ac.nz

Abstract

Using Swedish metal band Ghost as a primary case study, this article examines how anonymous bands mediate their identity through the use of masks. The isolation of the band members’ ‘real’ identities from their musical performance complicates traditional modes of ‘knowing’ the performer, but in turn enables the formation of a multitude of connectivities, as audiences utilise masked bodies as sites upon which to project their desires and fantasies. Such projections are integral to the ways in which masking allows performers to mobilise and sustain their connections to audiences, who themselves become complicit in the maintenance of anonymity. This article thus considers how masks might challenge established notions of popular music performance, celebrity and authenticity, particularly within heavy metal contexts, and investigates how masks, rather than de-identifying a performer, can invite intimate connections among musicians and audiences.

Introduction

Research exploring how identity and intimacy are implicated in popular music scenes, practices and cultures has often overlooked performance, and instead laid emphasis on physical and geographic space in constructing a sense of distance and proximity. The role of local scenes in maintaining a sense of regional identity, connectivities within musical practices and the infrastructural quandaries facing musical communities has provided fertile ground for academic research into the ways in which identity and intimacy facilitate and inform relationships among texts, musicians and audiences. However, investigations into how intimacy is manifested in the affective, interpersonal dynamics of the performance itself can add another factor to the ways in which emotional relations and identities are conceived. This article thus explores how identity and intimacy are negotiated in the context of ‘masked’ performers. Using Swedish metal band Ghost¹ as a case study, this article examines how the relationship between

¹ Ghost were also known as ‘Ghost BC’ in North American markets between 2013 and 2015 due to legal reasons.

musicians and audiences develops and is complicated by the masked anonymity of a performer. I explore how the tradition of 'masking' in popular music complicates the ways in which the 'authentic', emotional relationships between audience and performer are discussed and constructed in popular music studies. Isolating the identities of the performers themselves has previously been taken to represent an emotional distance between the performer and their 'true' self, and indeed the audience and wider music industry. Despite this, the mask might actually not construct a distance between audience and performer, but rather blur such parasocial relationships by allowing masked bodies to act as spaces of intimacy and communality.

This article thus has two key purposes: firstly, to consider the ways in which masks challenge traditional notions of popular music performance and celebrity, particularly within heavy metal contexts; and secondly, to consider how masks, rather than de-identifying a performer, invite intimate connections between musicians and audiences. By focusing on the career of Swedish metal band Ghost between 2010 and 2016,² I examine in turn how the band's identity is mediated through their use of masks, and the relationships that this masking enables. Ghost's desire to maintain the performance as an isolated space from which they can separate their 'true' selves is in turn undercut by the intimacy enabled by the masks, as audiences utilise masked bodies as sites upon which to project desires and fantasies. In this article I thus examine the three central reasons articulated by Ghost as to why they wear masks, analyse how these narratives are situated within the broader tradition of the masquerade in rock music and heavy metal, and canvass the significance of the 'anonymous band' as a wider transmedia phenomenon.

First, I examine Ghost's claim that masking allows the band to prioritise the music without the intrusion of personal identity. Second, I look to Ghost's desire to resist and critique the spectacle of celebrity and remain 'regular' persons beyond the performance; and third, I investigate how the mask allows Ghost to maintain the band's genre-based identity and band members' relationships with their fans. In the final section I examine how Ghost complicate heavy metal's dogmatic emphasis on 'authenticity', and how the threat of 'unmasking' is combatted by collusion between the band and their audience. I therefore use Ghost as a central example of how masks mediate connections and a sense of 'knowingness' (Bailey 1994, p. 138) between bands and their audiences. The mask, I argue, rather than acting as a barrier or site of artifice, invites a sense of communality and intimacy, which in turn can challenge staged/real, inside/outside binaries of performance discourse and instead construct an 'anonymous' performance as 'real' and highly personal.

Scooby Doom, where are you? Ghost and the 'anonymous band'

Ghost were formed in Linköping, Sweden between 2006 and 2008 by members of several other, unnamed bands. The band released a three track demo named

² This article focuses specifically on this period in light of significant changes to the band in early 2017, which occurred following the drafting of this piece. Since the writing of this article, the band's lineup has been unmasked and replaced, with the former members of the band launching legal action against Ghost's frontman for royalties. Whilst this article touches on these recent issues, the significance and complexities of these changes are beyond the scope of this article, and will be best addressed in future work.

Elizabeth in 2010, and have since produced another two EPs and three full-length studio albums. Their debut *Opus Eponymous* was released in 2010; *Infestissimum* was released in 2013 and debuted at Number 1 in Sweden; and the lead single from their most recent release *Meliora* received a Grammy in 2016 for 'Best Metal Performance'. Ghost's lyrical themes draw extensively on Satanism and horror; their music is heavily influenced by psychedelic rock and early heavy metal, featuring melodic vocal harmonies, mid-tempo riffs, poppish hooks, heavy bass lines, and progressive keyboard-driven instrumentals. The band's musical sound has been variously described as hard rock, traditional heavy metal, doom metal, pop metal and, at times, 'Scooby Doo Chase Music'. The band themselves and fans often affectionately refer to the band as 'Scooby Doom' in deference to the frequent mid-1960s pop influences in their music.

Ghost's most marketable characteristic, particularly within the 2010–2016 period that this article focuses on, is the anonymity under which the band performs. In all its iterations, the band only appears in costumes drawn from Catholic clerical clothing, and have worn masks throughout the entirety of their career. The members of Ghost have no official identities beyond frontman Papa Emeritus, the 'anti-pope', and the Nameless Ghouls. They have never performed without the costumes; all songwriting credits are attributed to 'A Ghoulish Writer'. While their anonymity remains constant, the manifestations of their anonymity change as Ghost enter a new 'era' with the release of each new album. Each era is marked by the appearance of Papa Emeritus's successor – Papa Emeritus I, II, III and so on – and different costumes for the Nameless Ghouls, who are often marked by discernible line-up changes (the most notable of these occurred in March 2017, when the relatively steady and commercially successful 'third era' line-up was totally replaced and unmasked soon afterwards). The Nameless Ghouls themselves are identified only by Alchemical symbols corresponding to their role in the band – Fire/Alpha (lead guitar), Water (bass), Air (keyboards), Earth (drums) and Aether/Omega (rhythm guitar). When a member is replaced, the new musician simply assumes the Alchemical symbol of the allotted instrument – between 2010 and 2016, for example, there were at least two Earths and three Waters, and fans made this distinction through referring to Old Earth, Old Water and so on.

Ghost are not the first band to use masks, disguises or alteregos as part of their image. The 'masquerade', in rock music, adds further complicating dimensions to established ways of addressing 'performance' in music discourse. For the purpose of this article, 'performance' as a term is utilised in line with Simon Frith's (1996, p. 204) understanding of 'performance' as an experience, or set of experiences, of sociability which are 'framed' in particular ways within popular entertainment (Frith 1996, p. 207). Frith sees popular music as long caught in the shifting boundaries between the staged and the everyday (Frith 1996, p.204), where emphasis is laid on the process of 'putting together and taking apart a persona' (Frith 1996, p.205). This approach to performance as 'staged', as Frith suggests, can be resultant in a series of problematic binary oppositions – subject/object, mind/body, inside/outside (Frith 1996, p. 205), the implications of which for the act of 'masking' are discussed further in this article.

The notion of a 'constructed' persona framed as an entertainment brand remains a key site of inquiry for popular music's understanding of celebrity and audiences. Such discussions, Pattie (2007) argues, have not been sufficiently extended into rock music. Discussions of heavy metal performance as a constructed, 'branded'

(Hickam 2015, p. 150) site are even more uncommon, despite the prevalence of theatricality and masked aesthetics within the genre's history. Academic discussions of 'masks and metal, shadow and metal, or branding and metal [are] relatively sparse' (Hickam 2015, p. 152). Where such discussions have emerged, scholarship has laid greater focus on transgressive, atavistic and demonic iconography within the visual language of metal (Walser 1993; Kahn-Harris 2007). Masked performances themselves are rarely addressed, with Hickam's (2015) exception focusing on the branding power of masks in the context of sites such as promotional posters and album covers.

Scholarly considerations of rock and metal as branded performance, or indeed a 'performance' itself, are a prospect which often sit uncomfortably with wider social narratives of the anti-commercial 'authenticity' of these genres (cf. Walser 1993; Kahn-Harris 2007). These discussions, however, have the by-effect of calling into account performative 'authenticity' itself. For Chambers and Weiner (2016, p. 129), performers of rock music have an established tradition of adopting alter egos, 'constructing performed narratives in live concerts, on concept albums, and in promotional media, blurring the lines between performer and character'. Ghost's masked performances and aesthetics draw on performative traditions established in hard rock and heavy metal canons. Papa Emeritus's prosthetic mask is an obvious nod to black and white, skull-like corpse paint ubiquitous in black metal iconography, which itself draws its origins from foundational metal and hard rock acts such as King Diamond of Mercyful Fate, Alice Cooper and the iconic masquerades of KISS. The transmedia construction of their identity is also a vital factor – Chambers and Weiner (2016, p. 129) argue that the performances of KISS, Alice Cooper, David Bowie and so on were successful precisely because these artists sought to present an integrated artistic package across live performances, cover art, off-stage presence and symbolism, which contributed to an overall performance across media. Certainly this transmedia spectacle is one readily embraced by Ghost, who not only perform in music videos and on stage in full costume, but maintain this for photoshoots, promotional appearances, interviews and merchandising.

Ghost's anonymity nonetheless offers a different perspective on 'disguised' performances from the alter-egos employed by Bowie and Cooper. The persona of Alice Cooper, for example, acts as a site for abject performance for the 'real' man once known as Vincent Furnier. Such characters played by 'real' people – however problematic such a distinction may be – are taken to be a projection or extension of self which maintains the performance, and one which the 'real' person can gesture back to when they are not performing. It is not uncommon, for example, for Alice Cooper to refer to 'Alice' as a being separate from his 'real' self. Whilst there has always been a 'close and ambiguous relationship' between Alice and 'Alice', says Chambers (2013, p. 450), it remains that 'Alice' is an adopted persona that allows for a distorted presentation of self. For Ahonen (2007, p. 75), the use of distinctive imagery and a 'star persona' intensifies the impression that 'the artist is sharing something personal' (2007, p. 56) through both the music and the extension of self represented in the performance. In addition to such 'personal' performances, however, she notes that discussions of artist identity must extend to those artists whose 'imagery is covered with masks and fiction'.

Such anonymity and 'faceless imagery' (Ahonen 2007, p. 56) do not mean that such artists have no public image, but rather that the visual imagery usually built around the artist's personal appearance is replaced by another set of images, codes and connotations. Furthermore, the disguised image of the 'anonymous' band

does not automatically mean that the music is impersonal in nature. Rather, bands such as Ghost have been able to use their public image as a way of not only preserving their 'true' identities, but also constructing communal ones in their place. Such communal identities thus structure fans' engagement with the band, blurring the lines between the artifice of the staged persona and the apparent intimacy of the real. In doing so, Ghost might then call into question how the familiar imagery of popular music stardom works, and point to alternative ways of creating musical identities and experiences.

Why do Ghost wear masks? Mapping methodology

For the remainder of this article I consider the three key reasons articulated by the members of Ghost to explain why they have predicated their musical identity on masked anonymity – (1) to prioritise the music, (2) to resist the spectacle of celebrity by remaining 'normal' persons and (3) to maintain the genre-based identity of the band and their relationship with the audience. These three reasons were distinguished in the research through the regularity with which they featured in press interviews with unidentified individual band members, uniformly referred to in these texts as 'a Nameless Ghoul'. As such, this article utilises critical discourse analysis of select interviews with members of Ghost across a six-year period, from 2010 to 2016. These interviews are drawn largely from key print and online music outlets, particularly those which are central sources of news for heavy metal communities, such as *Terrorizer*, *Metal Hammer* and *Decibel*. The transmission of Ghost's narrative through such outlets can lend further insights into the ways in which their personae are mobilised beyond live performance spaces, and maintained in transmedia texts. I also consider how fans have responded to these narratives in wider discussions on social media platforms such as Facebook, Reddit and Tumblr.

Addressing the largely online spaces of such discussions also indicates the challenges in preserving the anonymity of a 'masked' band within the highly saturated media context of web 2.0. In addition to the critical discourse analysis of interviews which reveal the prevalence of Ghost's three central reasons for masking, I also situate these narratives within wider scholarly discussions of musical 'author images' as they intersect with anonymity or 'facelessness' (Ahonen 2007) and the role of such fictive onstage personae in the 'presentation of self' (Chambers, 2013). All three of these reasons put forth by Ghost work in both conciliatory and contradictory ways, and their slippages remain an area of interest. The last point, however, remains the most crucial for considering how connectivities form from anonymity, as I argue that Ghost's 'faceless' anonymity has resulted in a much more intimate connection with their audiences than a typical 'faced' performance would have allowed for. As audiences are able to construct and consume Ghost's masked bodies as sites of projection, communality and intimacy, the anonymous performance itself becomes a highly personalised experience in ways that can often elide the 'reality' of an unmasked persona.

'A horror show with music': masking as musical theatre

The first reason Ghost give for wearing masks and concealing their identities is concerned with the music itself. The band commonly espouses the notion that the

concept of 'Ghost' only emerged as a way to best accentuate the music. The music preceded the concept – a Nameless Ghoul claims that, upon playing 'probably the most heavy metal riff that has ever existed' (in Kaye 2013), the aesthetic of the band developed as a necessary way to 'build on the foundation of this heavy imagery' and hence combine the music with the band's love of horror films and the traditions of Scandinavian metal (in Kaye 2013). The only way that the music could 'work', in any kind of commercial way, necessitated theatrical imagery – there is a conscious understanding from the band that they exist in a 'twilight zone between music and theatre' (Moffitt 2016). Masking is a strategy through which to present the musical experience of Ghost as totally immersive theatre, without the distraction of individual faces or 'real' identities. This sentiment is supported in statements from band members themselves:

We knew very early that to make this material work we needed to fulfil our dream of putting a horror show together with music. In order to successfully do that, we needed to erase any real identity in terms of individual faces. What we wanted to make, to achieve, was a theatrical experience'. (Norton 2011)

We do not wish to pollute the magickal aspect of the band . . . If there were identities of normal living individuals, this concept could never materialise. What people see, hear and experience with Ghost is the result of the fact that they do not see individuals. (Moffitt 2016)

Ghost's masked performance, in this instance, is a method through which to prioritise the musical experience. To be most effective, the music needs visual horror and abjection to accompany it, and enable the integration of the spectacle across multiple forms. The idea of 'erasing real identity' is hence a project that ostensibly ensures that audiences focus on the theatre or 'art' of the performance, and not the people behind it. The claim that the main focus 'should be on the music, not the artist's public persona' (Ahonen 2007, p. 61) is not a particularly new one. Bands such as Daft Punk have utilised a 'faceless' image to lay greater emphasis on the music and how it is used, with less attention placed on the persons who create and perform it (Ahonen 2007, p. 61). Other well-known anonymous bands also indicate that there is simply something special in maintaining the secrecy of the band members' identities – of The Residents, an avant-garde pop band that has successfully remained anonymous since forming in the early 1970s, Don Hardy³ states that the 'mystery is so much more fun than whatever the reality would be' (in Weingarten 2015). This is a common sentiment for Ghost, who argue that performing with their 'real' identities would 'pollute the magickal aspect of the band' (Moffitt 2016). Furthermore, there is a conscious aversion to appearing 'real', and the impediments of this 'reality' to the immersive experience of the music:

We realized that we needed to leave stuff up to the imagination. We want to leave things to the listeners and fantasy. We want people to think, feel something, let go. A lot of bands feel like they need to be 'real' and be one of the guys. We're quite the opposite. (Norton 2011)

Ghost's suggestion that the rigidity of the 'real' complicates the affective intensity of their performance challenges notions of artists sharing something personal through

³ Don Hardy directed the feature length documentary *Theory of Obscurity: A Film about The Residents* in 2015.

an 'authentic' performance (Ahonen 2007, p. 56), and instead lays emphasis on the emotional qualities of the musical experience itself. Following this sentiment thus infers that if Ghost exist as the spectacle of the performance, and not as the sum of several individuals, then it does not really matter who these members are. This is a notion the band themselves have played with in music videos, where the members of Ghost have been 'revealed' to be rebellious nuns in 'Year Zero' (*Infestissumam*, 2013), or children in 'Cirice' (*Meliora*, 2015). Removing individual identities, for the members, maintains the integrity of the experience and makes the notion of an identifiable individual subject disappear within the performance.

'Enter the bubble, break the bubble': masks as a response to celebrity

The notion of the musical subject disappearing 'within' a performance adds further complicating dimensions to scholarly tensions over where a performative subject may be located. Situating the work and the artist as one and the same, says Frith (1996, p. 205), leads to the unsettling question of 'where is the "subject"?' By objectifying a fictional identity in place of subjectifying an 'authentic', 'real' performer as the site of the performance narrative or simply doing away with identity altogether, Ghost may potentially challenge the role of 'fellow feeling' as a key form of music communication, and henceforth performance and branding (Blacking [1983] in Frith 1996, p. 218). Masked musical images and the isolation of 'real' identity, for Ahonen (2007, p. 67), can be understood as a rejection of previous ways of constructing 'stardom'. In some ways Ghost can be seen to actively exploit the branding which has often accompanied heavy metal's construction of marketable symbolism. The band mascot, in the form of Papa Emeritus, echoes other well-known metallic mascots, such as Megadeth's Vic Rattlehead or Iron Maiden's Eddie. Turning the frontman himself into a symbolic commodity can, conversely, also act as a way to deflect attention away from the band. This is affirmed by a comment from a Nameless Ghoul:

We're trying to have Papa Emeritus be the star. . . . Not us as individuals. It's sort of like Eddie for Iron Maiden, except we have our Eddie singing. (Pehling 2012)

Frith (1996, p.215) argues that a performer's 'real', individual self becomes one of the central motifs in understandings of musical performance and musical response. By shifting the focus to Papa Emeritus as a symbol rather than a performer, hiding their faces, and engaging in regular lineup changes, Ghost might then undermine traditional modes of stardom and performance. Without comprehension of particular cues related to individual members – cues which go largely unacknowledged and unmentioned by interviewers – it can be difficult to know if it is always the same people underneath the masks.

This ability to trouble conventional understandings of celebrity bodies is supported by the second key reason for masking, as articulated by Ghost – to critique and resist the spectacle of the music industry, and remain 'normal' people beyond the performance. Masked identity has long played a role in allowing performers to maintain a 'normal' life beyond the celebrity system of popular music – artists such as Sia, for example, have regularly spoken of a desire to have a career in music while eschewing the constant visibility of becoming famous. The rejection of a 'visual author image' (Ahonen 2007, p. 57) can call into question marketing

strategies which are based on personal appearance and its associated star value. Such approaches nonetheless affirm an inside/outside binary, or 'normal'/staged dichotomy, which establish a performance as something external to the realms of 'real' life. Despite their disavowal of the 'real' identity within the space of the performance, Ghost nevertheless maintain such binaries when discussing their lives beyond the band. For Ghost, exiting the 'dramaturgy' of the performance allows them to 'break the bubble' – being mistaken for roadies, being refused backstage access and being a member of the crowd mean that they can 'relate in a more healthy way to what we're doing, because we don't need to be associated personally with what we do culturally' (Norton 2011).

The assertion by a Nameless Ghoul that band members seek to keep the 'personal' distinct from the 'cultural' indicates the ways in which a 'masked' performance can deconstruct the conflation of artist with art, and exploit the tension between the 'implied story', or content of a musical performance, and the 'real story', or pragmatic form (Frith 1996, p. 209). Nonetheless, the band also indicates that, for the duration of the performance, the implied story itself is very much 'real':

[I]t's important for people to understand that we want our shows to be enhanced by the fact that you don't know. At every show we play or success we achieve it's surprisingly relieving not to be part of what everyone else in the music business wants to be a part of. It allows you to differentiate between yourself and your life and the role you enter. When we're in cloaks and wearing costumes we enter a sphere. When we enter this sphere it's highly real. We want people attending the show to enter that sphere as well. When we leave, when we exit that bubble, we are no longer a part of Ghost. That might sound pretentious or naïve but that's the way we want it. (Norton 2011)

Ghost's presentation of the performance sphere as 'real' adds complicating dimensions to Frith's (1996, p. 209) notion of the tension of the implied reality and the 'real' reality of a performance. Furthermore, it reveals the conflicts within the band's own conception of the 'reality' of the performance *vs.* the 'real' identity of the musicians. If the 'implied' reality is, for Ghost, the actual reality, then the band sits in a complex position between the beginning and end of the performance. There is a sense, then, that the performance of Ghost as a concept never truly ends, but simply that members step out and are 'no longer a part' of that performance for periods of time. Doing so, according to Ghost, allows them to differentiate between the self and the performative role. Ghost are thus able to shirk the expectation to be 'rock stars all the time' (Norton 2011):

We live in Sweden, in a small town without a lot of people. We aren't in the epicenter of where anything happens with the band. We go on the road, enter the bubble, then break the bubble and come home. A lot of bands living in London are expected to be rock stars all the time. That is truly diabolical (laughs) and not the way we want to live. (Norton 2011)

In this instance, Ghost make moves towards an inside/outside binary, where the isolated 'bubble' of the performance is contrasted against the 'reality' of their daily lives in small-town Sweden. Also telling is that such privileging of 'normal' life is contrasted against the experiences of musicians expected to maintain the performance 'all the time'. Anonymity enabled by masking therefore enables the relief of not being a part of 'what everyone else in the music business wants to be a part of' (Norton 2011), where band members can come and go without publicity, and well-known musicians such as Dave Grohl can make anonymous guest appearances

in costume, unknown to the audience at the time (Bienstock 2015). As a reaction against the marketing strategies of the 'star system' which rely on personal appearance and a sense of 'knowing' the artist (Ahonen 2007, p. 57), the masked space of Ghost's performance then constructs a site of resistance to such strategies, and in turn enables a sense of personal freedom for its members and guest performers.

Divine presence: masks as cultural and brand identity

If the use of disguised imagery can be read as a counteraction to the traditional star system, Ghost's masked performance might also be understood as a wider critique of idolatry and cults of personality. Criticism of organised religion is a relatively established tradition in heavy metal scenes, where Kahn-Harris (2007, p. 38) argues that a 'universally shared ... opposition to Christianity' is often taken as a common reference point in a coherent ideology maintained by metal fans in specific subgenres. A thematic opposition to Christianity, realised through 'satanic symbols and imagery' (Weinstein [1991] 2000, p. 54), has been a staple feature of metal music since its earliest incarnations: 'In the West', says Weinstein ([1991] 2000, p. 54), 'there is no better symbol of rebellion'. Ghost's appropriation of Catholic iconography through their visual imagery and performative rituals can hence be seen as a concerted attempt to ridicule the traditions of Western Christianity. In a 2013 interview, a Nameless Ghoul claims that

[W]ith Ghost we are attempting to fashion an aesthetic work of art, reflecting the artistic entertainment values of a Biblical linear anti-Christian Satanism. From a personal point of view, we are basically making a mockery of linear religion because it's such a simplified way of looking at divinity. (Kaye 2013)

Ghost's repudiation of 'simplified', linear religion is nonetheless undercut by the ways in which Christianity supplies the symbols and discursive frameworks that the band, and anti-Christianity metal scene members at large, utilise in their attempts to enact transgressions (Kahn-Harris 2007, pp. 38–39). For Walser (1993, p. 55), the specific musical gestures of heavy metal operate within a code to communicate experiences of power and transcendent freedom. It follows, then, that attempts by bands to appropriate the codes of metal for religious or ritualistic purposes are posited on the suitability of precisely such experiences for transmissions of faith-based doctrines. Metal's discourses therefore have the power to 'organise the exchange of meanings'; and deviations can be resistant or creative (Walser 1993, p. 55). For Ghost, anti-Christian deviation, realised through their aesthetic, music and performances, is both resistant and creative. Just as Christianity may reinterpret the codes of heavy metal (Walser 1993, p. 55), metal, in the context of Ghost, appropriates and reinterprets the codes of Christianity to produce different meanings. Such renegotiations and shifting structures in meaning are positioned by the band as central to their performative message:

What we wish to simulate at our shows, to the point where it's real, it's a mass ... It's this idea of religion, where people meet in a room or a building or a place that we have agreed upon as being solemn, and we then conduct predetermined rituals – rituals being the songs, or movements, things like that – in order for us to reach a sense of divine presence. And a lot of the sensations that we are evoking at our shows are very close to the sort of warm religious feelings you would get from an actual church mass. We're using the same sort of

symbolism as the church, in a way, but with the idea of achieving bliss. *Joyful bliss*. (Bienstock 2015)

This sense of ritual is further developed by the anonymity of the band members. The musicians are absolved of their 'real' identities and replaced with symbolic titles, much in the same way that members of the clergy renounce their identity upon joining a religious order. Ghost then fashion themselves as an 'anti-Church', referring to their fans as the 'Children of Ghost' and their concerts as 'rituals', and any communication from the band on social media is preceded by the statement 'A message from the clergy'. Such ploys have allowed the band to critique the entanglement of idolatry with celebrity, while also actively exploiting its symbols and structures. This can emerge in quite playful ways, as evidenced by the naming of their most recent EP and tour – 'Popestar', a play on 'Popstar', and also through humorous, but quite pointed criticism. When accepting the award for Best Hard Rock/Metal album at the Swedish *Grammis* in 2014, for example, the Omega Ghouls stated 'Doing the Devil's work through singing and clapping and dancing and cults of personality and idolatry . . . well, that's not something only we are doing, but everyone in here. So thanks for letting us help! (Fredrik Revs, 2014).

Ghost's control over their own music and image-making helps to isolate the band from the familiar star system, critique the spectacle of idolatry and create a unique image of their own, through which new kinds of connections and relationships between performers and audiences may be formed. Thus the third reason for Ghost's anonymity emerges – anonymity allows the band to maintain their branded and generic identity, and their relationship with fans. Ghost's own understanding of themselves as a 'show' or, in their more grandiose moments, a sacrilegious cult, means that the band can gesture back to their central imagery while continuing to grow and expand. While Ghost's public image is marked by regular transitions with the coming of each new 'era', the band can maintain a central narrative which allows it to express its ideas through public commentary and masked imagery. This teleology is a central structuring point for the band's identity: when asked 'So you are thinking of a whole Ghost mythos or storyline?', a Nameless Ghoul replies 'Yeah, that's the point' (Norton 2011).

This concerted effort to construct Ghost as a mythic machination situates the band within the tension between an implied reality and a reality of form (Frith 1996, p. 209). The premise of a Ghost 'storyline' coincides with the performance's implied message of world domination – a video released by the band on Youtube in late 2016, for example, features 'Sister Emperor' berating the band for their continued 'failings' and calling for 'a new coming' (Ghost, 2016) – and the material, 'form' reality of the band's career, where the aforementioned video promotes the band's next album and a new 'transfiguration' represented through the forthcoming Papa Emeritus IV. Nonetheless the band's candidly commercial aspirations themselves act as a form of socio-cultural critique – Ghost have been particularly straightforward in asserting their interest in market success, stating that 'From the beginning we had commercial ambitions . . . Part of the manifesto is that we are supposed to attract more people than your mundane underground metal band' (Moffitt 2016). The band's relatively rapid success can be read as a conscious effort on behalf of Ghost to exploit long-held anxieties concerning the ease with which idolatry infiltrates capitalistic entertainment contexts (Benjamin [1921] 1996, p. 288), and operates within their broader desire to maintain and mobilise a distinct identity.

Ghost's distinctive imagery has therefore been integral to their commercial branding and the maintenance of the band's identity. The 'visual spectacle of performance', for Chambers and Weiner (2016, p. 131), and the adoption of explicitly theatrical personae, can enable collective, performative identities – the expressive modalities of which can allow the performance itself to become indicative of the socio-cultural concerns of the band and its audience (cf. Fuchs 1999). Within heavy metal in particular, masks serve specific social functions and are often sites of tension and conflicting meanings. Hickam (2015, p. 150) argues that 'all subgenres of metal have displayed prevalent use of masks and shadow in cover art, marketing and performance to depict the mysterious, the monstrous, the courageous, the villainous, the epic, the transhuman, the posthuman and the superhuman'. Masks have been central to the visual branding of metal; these brands in turn exhibit distinctions and commonalities that allow masks to play a variety of roles and mobilise a host of meanings (Hickam 2015, p. 150). Bands such as GWAR and Slipknot have played on the 'monstrous' aspects of metallic masking, engaging with a longer generic history of the grotesque and the sublime (Walser 1993, p. 160). In situating their band within a wider aesthetic trajectory of violence and horror, Midnight and Mglå have worn executioner-style hoods covering their faces for performances.

Beyond aesthetically abject performances, metallic masks can have more immediately political, and often problematic, meanings. The black and white corpse paint mask of black metal, for Wiebe-Taylor (2010) and Beckwith (2002), is seen as an expression of ontological whiteness; Daniel (2014), conversely, sees the skull-like mask as 'occultation' and 'necro-minstrelsy'. Metallic masks also serve nationalistic functions. This is the case for Dead Kelly, whose balaclava masks, nationalist symbolism and pseudonyms affirm a collectively masculinist, working-class 'Australian' identity, while Wilson (2010, p. 151) suggests that the masks of Eurovision heroes Lordi became the locus of nationalist desire precisely because they represented a collective, ferocious Finnish identity. The use of religious imagery in masking is also not isolated to Ghost. Polish black metal act Batushka perform in masked anonymity while utilising the symbolism of the Slavonic Orthodox church. Masking, in metal, can then be seen as a site of and strategy for the transmission of social and cultural meaning. Ghost's 'anti-church' is a marker of collective isolation from both Christianity and mass market capitalism – as one Ghoul says, 'My whole upbringing was within the extreme metal scene, where diabolical imagery is a way of communicating alienation and otherness' (Kaye 2013). Ghost's self-styled position as 'isolated' from the music industry is further affirmed through their experiences in having their music banned from mainstream airplay in the US, censorship of their album covers and video clips (Whelan 2014), and struggling to find a choir in Nashville that would sing Satanic chants during the recording of *Infestissumam*.

Ghoulish gimmicks: ghost, unmasking and the 'authenticity' discourse of metal

Despite their experiences with censorship, Ghost's increased public visibility calls attention to one of the central quandaries for an 'anonymous' band – 'Is it possible to use a faceless author image as a protest against the conventional star system and visual marketing? Or is the use of mysterious imagery merely another way of gaining recognition?' (Ahonen 2007, p. 59). The fact remains that Ghost are a

commercially and critically successful band. They have won a Grammy, make regular television appearances in the USA, UK and Europe, and featured in the showreel of iconic Swedish performers in the 2016 Eurovision song contest. Ghost's image is extremely marketable – the mystery which accompanies their masked public image has proven highly profitable, as indicated through the popularity of replica Ghost masks sold through merchandisers. Ghost ultimately rely on their visual imagery as a way of marketing the music. As such, despite their image not being built around the band members' identities and physical appearance, Ghost have recognisable imagery encapsulated in their logos and masks. That this imagery is tied to the traditional aesthetics of horror and heavy metal – skulls, Satanism and the abject – enables a set of codes and connotations that reinforce the artist's musical identity (Negus 1992). Such ties, however, also create tensions between Ghost's success and the wider metal scene. Commercial success and the band's pop influences have seen Ghost repeatedly accused of being 'not real metal' – a factor which has never seemed to be of great concern to Ghost themselves, but continues to pervade discussions of the band. Slayer's Kerry King, for example, has announced that he '[loves] the imagery' but 'just [hates] the fucking music' (Pasbani 2015); change.org presently hosts a petition to 'Shut down the Swedish retro metal band Ghost' on the grounds that they are 'not metal' (Armdacht, 2014) .

Criticism of Ghost's theatricality coincides with a longer tradition of hostility towards visual spectacle in rock and metal, which Walser (1993, p. 11) argues was seen as 'commercial artifice' which compromised the music's 'authenticity'. Ghost's commercial success thus not only reshapes metal's musical discourse, but also enables discussions of metal's boundaries and limitations. Ghost have reflected on this, arguing that the band's identity emerges from a desire to complicate the 'rules' of metal – 'there are a lot of dogmatic rules in traditional heavy metal that are very limiting. I wanted to find a way where you could be a heavy metal band but just disregard the dogma' (Rosen 2015). Ghost's anonymity thus allows the band to usurp metal's dogmatic emphasis on authenticity or 'fundamentalism' (Weinstein [1991] 2000, p. 48; Kahn-Harris 2007, p. 2) in ways they might not have otherwise been able to in their other bands, which the band implies are extreme metal acts (Kaye 2013).

Transgressing metal's assumedly staunch norms has allowed Ghost musical flexibility which disrupts the frameworks of extreme metal's transgressive subcultural capital (Kahn-Harris 2007, p. 127). Papa Emeritus's high-pitched, melodic vocals are far removed from what Kahn-Harris (2007, p. 30) sees as the 'sonic transgression' of growled or screamed extreme metal vocals. Furthermore, Ghost can play with myriad styles and songs – they regularly cover pop acts such as ABBA and Army of Lovers, and playfully add kazoos to live performances. Such disruptions to metal's codes, and their commercial success therein, has nonetheless drawn significant animosity towards the band. The antagonism towards Ghost on one hand thus manifests as criticism of an 'inauthentic' gimmick, and on the other, a desire to see the band unmasked – to dispel the fetishism of the masked body, and unmask them as ordinary men (Wilson 2010, p. 152).

As the band's popularity increased in the period from 2010 to 2016, speculation as to Ghost's 'real' identities became a key pastime in heavy metal and hard rock circles. Such speculation comes as little more than an annoyance to the band, who dislike these abrasive investigations into their personal lives. Members of the band in this period maintain that the only people who 'really' know their true identities

are their immediate families; and if they do appear out of costume on tour, they rely on the goodwill of fellow bands – or bribes – not to expose them (McGovern 2013). This is a task made increasingly difficult by the proliferation of social media, where fans and non-fans alike have traced the band members' identities and posted 'unmasked' photos on social networking sites. Ghost accept the speculation into their personal appearance as a component part of the mythos that surrounds 'anonymous' bands, but bristle at rumours that the band is composed of high-profile musicians (cf. Emperor Rhombus 2015; Mack 2015):

The question of the members of the band being known already; people would be surprised if they knew how unknown we really are. The people we've heard about as being suspected members of the band look very different to us. ... But it works in our favour as speculation is also part of the concept and confusion that is Ghost. In our terms, it is mission accomplished. (Moffitt 2016)

For Wilson (2010, p. 151), the question of 'unmasking' can lay down the terms and limits of the cultural and political power of masks. In the case of Finnish metal act Lordi, the 'unmasking' of frontman Mr Lordi by press outlets caused public outrage – not only because of the breaking of the 'taboo' (Wilson 2010, p. 151), but because the act of '[tearing] away the ferocious mask' (Wilson 2010, p. 152) was also perceived as a tearing away of national self-belief. Lordi's victory at Eurovision in 2006 was taken to be 'a heroic national deed and an expression of Finnish *sisu* (guts or toughness)' (Häyhtiö and Rinne, in Wilson 2010, p. 151); the unveiling of the band's 'real' identities was thus a 'symbolic castration' (Wilson 2010, p. 152) of the masculinist nationalism entangled with the masked identity. The attempts to unmask Ghost can thus be read as simple curiosity, and also a desire to shatter the immersive space of their anonymous performance. The discourse of 'unmasking' hence carries with it complex extenuations of the binary oppositions of performance – inside/outside, subject/object and so on (Frith 1996, p. 205). Just as the act of masking enables the formation of a series of meanings and collective, performative identities, unmasking contains within it the power to deconstruct the symbolism and implied reality of the performance – 'to distinguish between truth and falsity, appearance and reality, presence and absence' (Wilson 2010, p. 152).

Children of Ghost: anonymity and knowingness

Despite ongoing attempts to publically unmask the band and rupture the mystery of their performance, prior to 2017 Ghost were largely successful in keeping their 'real' identities isolated from the phenomenon of the band. This, I argue, is for one key reason – the fans themselves. Ghost's anonymity is policed most rigorously not by the band, but by their fans. Unmasked photos are condemned by fans when they do appear, and fans often go to great lengths to have such images removed. Tumblr bloggers, for example, have posted a 'First Timer's Guide to meeting Ghost unmasked'; others have anonymously condemned Tumblr blogs and Facebook pages who post 'unmasked' photos, stating 'I don't know how you could call yourself a fan when you blatantly disrespect their wishes'. Music press outlets, despite being complicit in generating rumours and publishing unmasked images, have also been largely good-natured in maintaining the anonymity of the band, who nonetheless represent a challenge to traditional understandings of the interview process:

Interviewing Ghost, however, is a dicey proposition. Rules about transparency and traditional journalism go out the window. You're told you'll be interviewing a nameless ghoul, meaning it could be the guitarist or drummer or maybe a janitor at Metal Blade Records. We're assuming it's a member of Ghost but skeptical. (Norton 2011)

This collusion between band, fans and press implies an intimacy that allows the masked narrative to be seen as a collaborative act, constructed and maintained by both performers and audiences. Ghost exploit a 'knowingness' (Bailey 1994, p. 138), a conspiracy of meaning that relies on the audience's recognition and identification of routine (Bailey 1994, p. 140). This is evident in the band's jokes about the artifice of the 'story' of Ghost. A Youtube video of an in-store appearance in Seattle in August of 2015, for example, shows Papa Emeritus III discussing a song performed by his 'predecessor' Papa Emeritus II, quickly amending 'I remember this song ... No I don't, I was never there, fuck that' (Canal Chibata, 2015). Such slip-pages in live performances rely on the audience's assumed knowledge that Papa Emeritus I, II and III are played by the same man, despite the mythos of reincarnation or replacement in the band's narrative. These acts construct audiences as colluders, by using a mode of address 'which both flattered the audience's social competence and acknowledged its social wariness' (Frith 1996, p. 209). Ghost's audience thus experiences a personal investment in the masked anonymity of the band, a feeling that they too are complicit in the illusion, and thus responsible for its maintenance.

Such social contracts between the band and the fans have seen audiences do away with the visual imagery that is normally built around an artist's physical appearance, and instead replaced this with another set of images and narratives. This has been particularly apparent in the band's most commercially successful lineup of 2015–2016, often referred to as 'Era III' by fans. Ghost's fans have constructed canonical band member identities precisely from the nuanced symbols of their anonymous individuality – or rather, their individualised anonymity. Despite the shrouding of the band members' personal appearances with masks and identical costumes, fans are able to distinguish between members based on factors such as height, build, tattoos and jewellery (the Air ghoul, for example, is this line-up's tallest member; the Alpha/Fire ghoul has distinctive tattoos on each hand), and personality traits discerned through interviews and on-stage demeanor (the Earth ghoul is the 'cute one'; the Omega/Aether ghoul is the 'bad boy'). This attachment can be seen to undermine the notion that the 'fictitious characters' represented by masked performers '[bear] no relation to the private lives of the band members' (Ahonen 2007, p. 67).

The personal affinity many fans feel for Ghost blurs the line between masked imagery and the members' private personas, and in turn undercuts the fan's own compliance in the band's desire to remove individual identity from the performance. This places fans in the complex position of being deeply attached to the anonymous person and their symbolism, while also actively avoiding their 'real' identity and maintaining the mythos of the band. The absence and subsequent replacement of the musician behind the Omega ghoul in late 2016 acts as a useful example of how fans navigate their own bonds to both the members as individuals and the band as a collective concept. Where many have voiced their disappointment in Omega's apparent omission, a similarly large portion are enthused by the presence of a woman who assumed the role of 'Water' on bass. The appearance of a woman in the band alongside male members is conversely taken as an affirmation



Figure 1. Ghost performing at Sound Academy, Toronto, in 2015. Photo reproduced with the kind permission of Riley Taylor (rileytaylorphoto.com).

that individual identity, even in regard to gender identity, does not really matter within the greater conceptual performance narrative represented by Ghost.

Such actions therefore challenge the isolation of the ‘faceless’ band, and its understandings in popular music scholarship. As such, where Gloag (2001, p. 401) sees ‘faceless’ artists as representative of a postmodern dissonance and emotional isolation, I would argue that Ghost, through their anonymity, instead represent a site upon which fans can project both individual and communal desires. Ghost, after all, are not really ‘faceless’ at all – their aesthetics might be images of disguise and contrivance, but they nonetheless become focal points around which fans build narratives. These narratives, it is important to note, are often sexual in nature. The band is presented as a ‘seductive mystery’ (Whelan 2014), which the members regularly capitalise upon through lewd comments in interviews and on stage, and the limited marketing of a line of Ghost sex toys around Valentine’s Day. Ghost can then be seen to add a further dimension to the existing, relatively sparse literature on masked performances in popular music – that of sexuality and eroticism.

The sexual element of anonymity is readily played upon by Ghost, wherein band members are configured as the locus of sexual desires precisely because of the multitude of meanings enabled by their masked body – of Papa Emeritus, a Nameless Ghoul states ‘obviously somewhere underneath all that stuff there’s someone else, he can be whatever you want him to be’ (Stosuy 2013). The sexual attraction of ‘faceless beings’ is further affirmed through statements that ‘you can easily transform what you don’t see underneath into anything you wish’ (Bennett 2013, p. 80). The band also make playful nods towards the sexual plurality enabled by anonymity – when asked if the band’s promiscuity extends to both ‘male and female’, a Ghoul responds ‘Well, in the dark, you can’t really tell’ (Bennett 2013, p. 80). The band also welcome the fetishising of their anonymous identities transmitted through fan art and fan fiction, suggesting that such forms maintain the art and influence of Ghost as a performative concept (Stosuy 2013). Fans themselves are thus able to

enter in to the performance and phenomenology of Ghost through adopting their symbolism, partaking in the rituals and creating fan art and fan fiction that maintains the phantasmagoria of the band, and the highly real, personal experiences of these narratives therein. For fans, then, the 'authentic' identity is Ghost, and the members' 'real' identities would be a distraction to this.

Conclusion

In early 2017, internal tensions within Ghost resulted in the replacement and subsequent unmasking of the band's Era III lineup, with only frontman Papa Emeritus remaining unchanged. Papa Emeritus has since gone on to claim that Ghost, rather than being a collective, was only ever a 'one-man project', populated by rotating session musicians throughout the band's career (*Blabbermouth* 2017). Ghost's 'new' lineup was unmasked almost immediately via a Reddit thread ((Reddit 2017) https://www.reddit.com/r/papa_and_ghouls/comments/633k93/spoiler_the_new_ghouls_are/), an announcement which was met with little concern from fans who had earlier condemned any speculation into the members' 'real' identities. Such shifts point to significant paradigmatic changes for Ghost, as audiences renegotiate their emotional connection to the band, and recalibrate the meaning of Ghost's masked identity. These changes reveal how integral intimacy and collusion have been to Ghost's identity prior to 2017, where the band's masks, rather than acting as a barrier or site of artifice, allowed audiences to form affective attachments to Ghost's masked bodies, which in turn constructed the band's 'anonymous' performance as 'real' and highly personal.

In response to this question of the intimacy of anonymity, this article has addressed how the masked performance of Swedish metal band Ghost, as it developed between 2010 and 2016, both engages with and challenges notions of identity, intimacy and performance in popular music discourse. For the members of Ghost, the performance is at once a site isolated from their 'real' identities, yet also operates as a space of communal meaning and collaboration in which the band and their audience is complicit. Through their masked performance, Ghost are thus able to call into question marketing strategies based on an artist's personal appearance, and complicate heavy metal's generic understandings of performative authenticity. The subsequent hostility towards Ghost and their commercial success has nevertheless seen repeated attempts to publicly unmask the band, and henceforth call into question the actual transgressive power of an anonymous performance as a subversion of success. The quandary remains, as Ahonen (2007, p. 61) suggests, whether masked imagery is just another way of constructing stardom, a question which remains central to further research in the area of performance and celebrity identity.

In moving towards a conclusion, I want to see the masked performances not as sites of isolation and distance, but rather as spaces of intimacy and communality. For Ghost's fans, preserving anonymity is not necessarily about protecting the person's 'real' identity, but maintaining the integrity of the fans' relationship with their performance. As Chambers (2013, p. 444) contends, the interplay between the presentation of the self and a performative persona is one enacted 'with the purpose of contributing to an "authentic" connection between performers and their respective audiences', the authenticity of which hinges not on an objective reality, but the persona's relationship to the context of the performance itself. In the case of a band like

Ghost, whose masked anonymity allows them to prioritise the musical experience, resist the spectacle of celebrity and maintain a symbolic communal identity, such performances can thus problematise quite rigid generic understandings of 'authenticity' and identity, and instead question what happens when 'real' identity is a threat to the authenticity of anonymity. The threat of 'unmasking' thus holds within it the power to rupture the connectivities of the anonymous spectacle, which is a traumatic prospect for fans, and indeed the band members themselves. For fans and band alike, Ghost exist in the tensions between the implied reality and the knowingness of the audience in maintaining the spectacle, a relationship which in turn becomes highly personal and meaningful.

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