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Private words, public emotions: performing confession in indie music

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Abstract

This essay examines the work of singer-songwriter William Fitzsimmons as an example of how confessional performance is constructed within indie music. I contend that both audiences and artists participate in a discourse that draws on narratives of personal communication, intimacy and authenticity in order to create a distinctively confessional aesthetic. This aesthetic orientation is then reflected in performances that are framed as autobiographical and truth-telling. After surveying aspects of indie music that contribute to the formation of this aesthetic, I trace the implications of performed confession through an exploration of the sonic, visual and relational characteristics of Fitzsimmons's performances from his 2008 album The Sparrow and the Crow. *By examining how artist and audience construct the confessional, I suggest a new perspective on how the confessional trope operates in indie music.*

In a dimly lit room panelled with dark wood a tall, spare man with an incongruously bushy black beard strums a guitar quietly. One might be forgiven for thinking him lost in thought, but in the next moment hazy pink lights illuminate a hushed and expectant crowd in a scene of intimate connection between singer-songwriter William Fitzsimmons and audience that will be repeated time and again over the course of his tour. As the singer begins a well-known song, phones appear in the hands of many eager to record a live performance, while others whisper along to their favourite lyrics. As a scene, this could take place almost anywhere and perhaps with almost anyone, but the intense focus of both singer and audience go beyond what is usual in concerts to create a distinctively charged interpersonal relationship. The striking atmosphere becomes even more so on close listening to the song's lyrics, which are punctuated by poignant acknowledgements of guilt and pleas for forgiveness. The aura of the confessional created in Fitzsimmons's performance lingers even after the song ends and the crowd erupts; afterwards, a man remarks to his companion: 'Man, that was so therapeutic'.[1]

This observation of Fitzsimmons's performance employs terms suggesting confession and healing, but he is not the first musician to trade on the belief in music as an opportunity for self-revelation, nor are his audiences alone in finding therapeutic use-value in such listening experiences. David R. Shumway has traced connections

[1] This description is based on personal observation.

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between the confessional approaches in literature and in popular music by suggesting a parallel between the confessional poetry of Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath and the emergence in the late 1960s and 1970s of confessional singer-songwriters such as Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, Joni Mitchell and James Taylor (Shumway 2014, pp. 148–74). Writing on these singer-songwriters frequently characterises them as radically introspective: witness Jon Landau's review of James Taylor as someone who 'writes and sings songs that are reflections of his own life' and who 'seems more interested in soothing his troubled mind' than in 'kicking out any jams' (Landau 1969, p. 28). This approach brings up important questions of address, intimacy and performing persona, but the resulting focus on the artist as an individual absorbed, in Michel Foucault's words, in 'the infinite task of extracting from the depths of oneself, in between the words, a truth' (Foucault 1978, p. 59), minimises the active role of the audience in creating and sustaining musical confessions. A more accurate conception of musical confession might frame it as emerging from a performative truth-telling complicated by its presentation within an aesthetic setting in which multiple actors (musicians, audiences, marketing teams, etc.) are present. In this context, a confessional performance, such as the one I describe in the opening of this essay, becomes a provocative staging ground for the interaction of these forces.

Using Fitzsimmons's performances from his album *The Sparrow and the Crow* as examples, in this essay I examine how indie musicians marshal conceptual, technological and expressive means to create a distinctively confessional aesthetic of performance. The re-emergence of such an aesthetic as a characteristic of a subgenre I call 'confessional indie'[2] music can be linked to other contemporary forms of first-person narrative, yet it offers a distinct means of performing confession as a part of a mutually negotiated relationship between performer and audience. After detailing how musicians and audiences negotiate this aesthetic, I trace the ways in which Fitzsimmons's audiences turn his individual confession into a relational space connecting artist and audience. Ultimately, I argue that this co-production of musical confession encourages participants to adopt a confessor–confessant relationship that extends the tradition of the confessional singer-songwriter in new ways.

Contextualising confession

By referring to Fitzsimmons as a confessional indie singer-songwriter I am positioning him as an exponent of a particular subgenre (or perhaps sub-subgenre) of popular music. This situating of Fitzsimmons is crucial because 'Genres bring with them connotations about music and identity which may encode specific affective qualities [and] a whole variety of social characteristics', and thus 'may be understood as mediating the discursive web (spun between the media, consumers, and industry personnel) in which musical meaning circulates' (Brackett 2002, p. 66–7; cf. Fabbri 1982, pp. 52–63). The confluence of these connotations inevitably shapes our understanding of Fitzsimmons, his music and his audience. Thus, it is important to contextualise

[2] 'Indie' music was originally conceived as that produced independently of major recording companies. While this characteristic is still valued by some, the aesthetic characteristics of indie have become diffuse. For the purposes of this essay, I am interested in exploring indie music and its confessional singer-songwriters as a distinctive intersection of aesthetic, social and commercial phenomena.

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Fitzsimmons's performances with regard to the label of the confessional indie singer-songwriter.

The origins of confession lie deep in Latin, where *confitieri* means 'to declare' or 'to avow'. In English it retains the Latinate sense of forceful revelation, whether it is associated with the severity of a priest's confessional, the drama of a courtroom cross-examination or the mock-seriousness of adolescent angst lampooned in books and films whose titles invariably begin 'Confessions of a . . .' It has particular resonance within literature, where the tradition of the written confession stretches back through Rousseau to at least Augustine. Connotations of truth permeate this tradition, as exemplified in Francis R. Hart's consideration of confession as an exercise in individual ontology – a 'personal history that seeks to communicate or express the essential nature, the truth, of the self' (Hart 1974, p. 227). Likewise, J.M. Coetzee writes: 'we can demarcate a mode of autobiographical writing that we can call the *confession*, as distinct from the *memoir* and the *apology*, on the basis of an underlying motive to tell an essential truth about the self' (Coetzee 1985, p. 194). Yet, although both Hart and Coetzee focus on the self-revelation of an individual, the confessional aesthetic they describe is that of a self constructed in the view of another, and is thus both communal and creative.

The tension between confession as self-revelatory and as self-construction links it to larger questions of self-representation and the 'performance of the self'. Writing of digital culture, Nancy Thumim (2012) distinguishes between the bounded texts of self-representation and the continual performance of the self, but the kind of performance I discuss is not easily separable into these categories. Confession is in one sense a bounded text, yet within confessional performance the collection of self-representations becomes a part of a pervasive and embodied performance of the self wherein the representations are woven together; this essay suggests an unpicking of the performative cloth that allows, in Keith Negus's words, 'for a critical discussion of how values, beliefs, world views, and experiences are created, represented, conveyed, and mediated through songs' (Negus 2011, p. 623). To this description I would add 'within a social context'. Both confession and musical performance are socially mediated acts that take place within a relational space; moreover, Nicholas Cook suggests that there is additional resonance in that both confession and musical performance partake in the replication of 'socially agreed forms of expression' in ways that provoke comparison with religious ritual (Cook 2001, n.p.). These multiple linking conceptual threads point to understanding musical confession as a performed activity constructed by artists and audiences.

Even if, as Shumway notes, the confessional indie singer-songwriter first gained particular prominence in the 1960s and 1970s, the tradition has gone neither unchallenged nor unchanged. Writing of female singer-songwriters in the 1990s, Sheila Whiteley suggests that the decade is marked by two distinct musical trends, one which 'relates to folk (and the singer songwriter tradition) in its emphasis on authenticity, "truthfulness" to personal experience, and community' and one that is 'concerned with artifice' and 'largely governed by the imperatives of commercial success' (Whiteley 2000, p. 196). This split is also apparent in male-dominated indie rock, where the confessional aesthetic has competed with a more ironic or distancing stance that Jeffrey Roessner terms 'post-confessional' (Roessner 2012). Fitzsimmons explicitly invokes the first tradition when he describes his music, as 'even when it's not really folk music, it's always folk because it's always confessional' (Fitzsimmons 2011). Although Roessner's use of 'post' implies a teleology, the

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relative strengths of these orientations has shifted over time (implicitly acknowledged by Roessner's comment that the confessional can be understood as a reaction against modernist impersonality; Roessner 2012, p. 205), and I suggest that the appetite for confessional performance has proven enduring.

I have already noted Shumway's account of the advent of the confessional singer-songwriter, and although the label is now used to describe artists ranging from Adele to Elvis Costello (Till 2016), Fitzsimmons nevertheless fits its mould (see Figure 1). He shares this classification with similar contemporary artists such as Ingrid Michaelson, Bon Iver and Sufjan Stevens; however, the directness with which he relates his life experiences is noteworthy.

His biography on Naim Label capitalises on this openness by encapsulating the most prominent features of his life in a single rhetorical question: 'How many other musicians can you name who are ex-psychotherapists, and whose blind parents' divorce was so traumatic he wrote an album about it, the recording of which in turn proved so harrowing it precipitated the dissolution of his own marriage, which he then proceeded to document on the follow-up?'[3] The albums this biography references are Fitzsimmons's second and third: *Goodnight* (2006) and *The Sparrow and the Crow* (2008). Its lurid language may be off-putting to some, but by rooting Fitzsimmons's music in real-life trauma it primes listeners to expect an experience that is not only emotionally significant, but also indicative of Fitzsimmons's personal character. In the case of *The Sparrow and the Crow*, which proved to be a watershed in terms of Fitzsimmons's technical development (it was the first of his albums to be recorded in a professional studio) and commercial impact (it was named iTunes's Best Folk Album of 2008), the combination of relational trauma and confessional performance has been career-making.[4]

Since the release of *The Sparrow and the Crow*, Fitzsimmons has continued to explore the darker sides of relationships, whether that means engaging in a 'a real and long coming confrontation with personal demons, past mistakes, and the specter of mental illness which has hovered over me for the great majority of my life' on *Gold in the Shadow* (Fitzsimmons 2011) or recognising the interplay of savagery and kindness in the human character on *Lions* (Fitzsimmons 2014). The mining of his personal life across eight albums suggests comparisons with older generations of singer-songwriters (from acknowledged influences such as Elliott Smith, Tom Petty and James Taylor) and with a contemporary strain of confessional writing in a more popular style, as evidenced by artists like Taylor Swift and Adele. Yet while the latter's combination of a discourse of authenticity and commercial success often retains an edge of entertainment, Fitzsimmons's brand of reflective intensity can alter even the most playful confessions. For instance, his cover of Katy Perry's 'I Kissed a Girl' changes a teasing story of a woman who kisses another woman as part of an 'experimental game' into a story of a man who cheats. In their unrelenting, if gently expressed, exposure of the messiness of humanity, Fitzsimmons's performances set up musical confession as a kind of performative practice.

[3] William Fitzsimmons, 'Biography' (n.d.). Note: the biography is undated and the website is no longer accessible.

[4] Seth Cohen (2008). Since 2008, Fitzsimmons has released a further six studio albums and embarked on a string of successful tours of the USA and Europe. All of his albums contain significant autobiographical links, although none have been as dark in tone or have had as great an impact as *The Sparrow and the Crow*.

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Figure 1. Copyright Erin Brown. Reproduced with the kind permission of William Fitzsimmons.

In many respects the story of Fitzsimmons's career sounds like that of a typical, moderately successful, indie musician; yet the detailed mapping of Fitzsimmons's unique background and life experiences onto his music separates him even from his fellow confessional indie singer-songwriters and makes his work a particularly acute study of how these artists and their audiences construct a performance as confessional. Key to this is *The Sparrow and the Crow*, which was conceived as an apology to the singer's ex-wife after their divorce and is the apotheosis of Fitzsimmons's confessional stance. The album's path through the charred ruins of his relationship centres on the confession of guilt and a hope for forgiveness given aural form in the juxtaposition of the tracks 'I Don't Feel It Anymore (Song of the Sparrow)' and 'Please Forgive Me (Song of the Crow)', which give the album its name. Ten years after its release, *The Sparrow and the Crow* remains foundational for framing Fitzsimmons as a confessional artist.

Indie music and the singer-songwriter

Indie music spans a variety of styles from the so-called 'underground' scene of the 1960s through 1980s 'college rock' and the 'alternative' music of the 1990s to today's profusion of subgenres: 85 'indie' musics including indietronica, indie emo rock and indie fuzzpop are listed on the genre map on *Every Noise at Once*.[5] Although it originally signified an independent artist unaffiliated with a major record label,

[5] *Every Noise at Once*, http://everynoise.com/engenremap.html (accessed 20 July 2016); see Ryan Hibbett (2005) for a more detailed exploration of indie's origins.

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'indie' now encompasses a range of aesthetics and lifestyles – to the point where Peter Weber ends his 2014 article on indie music's growing market dominance with the aside, 'maybe "indie" isn't winning after all. How could it? Once a genre wins, it's not "independent," it's popular'. Weber's suspicion recognises that the tenets that once defined indie music now seem to be in flux. In this ever-diversifying picture, the identification of confessional indie as a significant strand stakes a claim based on its distinctive re-configuring of the artist–audience relationship rather than solely on its relationship to the music industry.[6]

In comparison with indie's relatively modern provenance, performing one's own compositions is an ancient tradition. Nevertheless, in the later 20th century, referring to someone as a singer-songwriter came to represent a tradition understood in contrast (on aesthetic, cultural and occasionally moral grounds) to the mainstream of pop music. Key to the term's early development in the 1970s was 'a musical shift away from the more raucous styles of rock and a lyrical shift from the more public concerns that helped to define the folk revival' (Shumway 2016, p. 11) towards a more intimate, personal style. This new interest in probing the artist's inner life heralded the advent of a distinctively confessional approach to musical communication that continues to influence perceptions of singer-songwriters. For Fitzsimmons and his fellow confessional artists this is rooted in their often-(auto)biographical lyrics and supported by a performing style that encourages personal identification with the artist as subject.[7]

Fitzsimmons and his contemporaries represent a particular expression of the confessional singer-songwriter at a moment when the music press has repeatedly proclaimed the death of indie (especially indie rock and its stereotype of the alternatingly sad and angry white male singer) as a genre (Maddux 2010; Lynsky 2012; Turner 2016). Such reports may be exaggerated, but the re-emergence of an intimate confessional tone challenges the dominance of indie rock's harder aesthetics even as it retains some of the same social and emotional connotations. Its origins can be difficult to pinpoint, but Bon Iver's critically acclaimed debut album *For Emma, Forever Ago* (for which singer-songwriter Justin Vernon holed up in a remote Wisconsin cabin to recover from both the breakdown of a relationship and glandular fever) was released just before *The Sparrow and the Crow* in early 2008, and both Stevens and Michaelson came to prominence in the early- to mid-2000s. All of these artists have careers marked by the slow accumulation of fans through online platforms such as MySpace and YouTube, and their temporal grouping parallels the explosion of first-person confessional narratives in media forms as diverse as reality television, blogs and Twitter. As Rosalind Coward (2013) notes, confessional writing is not new – but what is new is the breadth of its reach, the variety of its forms and its (often technologically mediated) means of engagement with its audience. Not all indie artists can be characterised as confessional and vice versa; nevertheless, the performance culture surrounding indie music encourages an aesthetic of self-revelation amongst many singer-songwriters, thus providing a hospitable environment for confessional song.

[6] Despite this, Fitzsimmons can be positioned squarely within the older production expectations of the indie genre: his first two albums were self-produced before he was signed to two independent labels (Downtown Music and Nettwerk Records) and from his earliest albums he has worked with other prominent indie musicians, including Death Cab for Cutie's Chris Walla.

[7] Nicola Dibben (2006) gives a similar argument for her characterisation of Björk as a confessional artist.

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Autobiographical apologies

Following on from J.L. Austin's theory of performativity, performances by these artists may be analysed as constitutive of particular confessional speech-acts.[8] Alternatively, we might be encouraged to think about confession as embodied performance, following Judith Butler, or of a confessional aesthetic as offering a distinctive frame for understanding a performance, following Erving Goffman. Combining sensitivity to language, embodied practice and social contexts allows performativity to be considered across the range of describable aspects of a performance. In other words, by applying the idea of the song as an aesthetic frame that conditions how audiences react to the speech-act contained within it, the performance becomes a setting for action as well as a vehicle for recounting a story. This interpretation of the song-frame becomes complicated when the frame is transgressed by a narrative, such as that implied by autobiographical music, that blends fictive and real elements. The blend of the real and the not-quite-real in purportedly autobiographical music means that such performers stand at once inside and outside the song frame, making it difficult to decipher where the performance ends and the personal life of the singer begins.

This positioning of a performance – and of a performer – is characteristic of the confessional approach to popular music and it leads to a conflict between the expectations of truthfulness in confessional performance and the constructed nature of performance. After all, *pace* C.P.E. Bach who claimed that a musician 'must of necessity feel all of the affects that he hopes to arouse in his audience' (Bach 1949 [1753], p. 152), it is widely accepted that any emotional content perceived by an audience cannot be accurately mapped onto the state of the performer. Nevertheless, the perception of such a correspondence not only persists, but also is key to the confessional singer's success. In an analysis of singer-songwriter Björk, who, like Fitzsimmons, is often presented as an autobiographical performer, Nicola Dibben notes: 'the discourse surrounding music presents song as if it gives the listener privileged access to the singer's psyche and emotional life, yet the communal display of the emotional life seems squarely at odds with the construction of emotion as something uniquely private and self-contained' (Dibben 2006, p. 192). As a person who has made a career out of the intimate details of his personal life, Fitzsimmons's performance highlights the paradoxical relationship between the intimacy of the confessional experience and the quotidian realities of public performance.

From one perspective, the confessional character of *The Sparrow and the Crow* is a consequence of its being a 'breakup' album, an album type which has a notable history of confessional approaches beyond the indie aesthetic, from Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours* to Adele's *21*. It is true that using pop songs as a means of both confession and apology has a storied history from Willie Nelson's 'Always on My Mind' to Elton John's 'Sorry Seems to Be the Hardest Word'. The musical depiction of relationships has developed conventions, tropes and genre codes that support interpretation. It is in the nature of songs that they express intimate feelings in public, enclosed

[8] Unlike apologies or extensions of forgiveness, confessional speech is not specifically included in Austin's list of performative utterances. I suggest that this is a result of confessional speech being both performative and constative in that it implies the presence of both a performative self who makes the confession, and a constative self who is being confessed about. This doubling of persona is itself an intriguing aspect of confessional speech as performed.

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within an aesthetic frame; however, a close examination of Fitzsimmons's performance reveals an interplay between person, artistic persona and multiple audiences that belies the straightforward confessional tone of his music.

Like these examples from Nelson and John, Fitzsimmons's songs seem to be addressed to an individual 'you', but his audience is inevitably ambiguous: on the one hand are the listening public who purchase albums, attend concerts and are the primary hearers (or, more pointedly, overhearers) of his words, and on the other is the unnamed woman who is both the subject of his confession and its addressee. This multiplicity is acknowledged in the album's dedication 'to those with a broken heart', 'those who have broken the heart of another' and 'most of all to her whose forgiveness helped me find my way back home' (Fitzsimmons 2008). In contrast, the lyrics on *The Sparrow and the Crow* are narrowly focused on the experiences of two people in a relationship, of whom only Fitzsimmons actually appears. Even on the album's lone duet ('I Don't Feel It Anymore (Song of the Sparrow)'), in which Priscilla Ahn gives voice to the mysterious woman, the audience hears only her imagined perspective filtered through Fitzsimmons's words. If the album is interpreted as a story, Fitzsimmons is not only the storyteller, he is also the story's primary antagonist: it is unclear how reliable his version of events is.

Although Fitzsimmons claims to have written the album as an apology, its explicitly public display of dirty laundry suggests that it could be construed as an affront rather than as a conciliatory gesture. Yet, for all his music's brazenness, Fitzsimmons has been surprisingly taciturn in some respects; for instance, he never refers to his ex-wife by name. His motivation is unclear, although there have been occasions when the subject of an artist's musical exposition contemplated retaliation, such as Marvin Gaye's 1978 album *Here, My Dear*: after the release of the alternatingly tender and scathing account of his turbulent marriage and divorce from Anna Gurdy Gaye, Anna publicly considered filing an invasion-of-privacy lawsuit (Lester 1979). Fitzsimmons is more explicit about his own role in the marriage's failure, referencing two factors in particular: his infidelity ('it was betrayal [. . .] In a lot of other areas I was pretty good, but that's kind of the most important one, and that's the thing that tore us apart'; Fitzsimmons 2012), and the turmoil caused by recording an album – *Goodnight* (2006) – about his parents' divorce:

> It was easily the darkest time I've been through. My marriage hadn't been good for some time and that was the final straw, recording [*Goodnight*]. To this day I still don't know whether the process I went through to make those songs was a symptom or a cause of a larger issue, but I do know that I regret it. . . . To convey heartbreak you have to experience loneliness. I wanted it to be a dark experience. It just went too far. (William Fitzsimmons, 'Biography', n.d.)

The tension between the ostensibly self-revelatory performer, an absent addressee, and multiple secondary audiences raises one of the recurring issues within confessional music: namely, who is confessing to whom? If his ex-wife's forgiveness was the only goal of *The Sparrow and the Crow*, Fitzsimmons could have found a more private – if less financially lucrative – approach.[9] He could have even serenaded her! Instead, the failed relationship with his ex-wife becomes a framing device for an ongoing relationship with multiple audiences, who then authenticate his confession

[9] As Joan Didion (1961, p. 14) admits, 'writers are always selling somebody out'.

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by comparing his performance against standards of intimacy and truth-telling common in the indie milieu.

In the next sections of this essay I explore how this confessional aesthetic is constructed, first via an examination of its ideological basis in beliefs about authenticity, then via the mechanism of the performing persona and supporting technological and performative aspects. Although these sections foreground choices made by Fitzsimmons, it is important to note that confessional performance is a dialogue between performer and audience. As Leslie Jamison (2014) writes, 'confession doesn't just allow – it incites'. I suggest that the kinds of responses Fitzsimmons's performances incite from his audience indicate a relationship I characterise as confessor–confessant. Some of these responses appear in the closing sections of the essay, but the impact of the audience's intense engagement with Fitzsimmons as a confessional performer is evident throughout.

Authenticity in indie music

Fundamental to the confessional indie aesthetic in which Fitzsimmons operates is a discourse of authenticity that regulates how performances of confession are (consciously or unconsciously) measured. Thus, before delving into the aesthetic qualities of confessional indie music, it is important to say a few words about the academic bête noire of authenticity. As a designation, 'authentic' is deeply problematic, in no small part because it is, as Lionel Trilling suggests, 'implicitly a polemical concept' (Trilling 1972, p. 94). Even though it has been almost 30 years since Richard Taruskin asked 'do we really want to talk about "authenticity" anymore?' this 'stock-in-trade of press agents and promoters' (Taruskin 1988, p. 137) remains a deeply embedded trope.[10] The focus of my examination is not to suggest that performances by confessional indie singer-songwriters are somehow more authentic than those of other performers, but rather to reveal the ways in which Fitzsimmons's audience willingly overlook the constructed nature of his performances in favour of interpreting them as congruent with the confessional ideal of authenticity. Acknowledging the influence of authenticity as a framing device within a particular milieu allows us to sidestep questions of ontology in favour of examining its epistemological significance.

In 'Authenticity as Authentication', Allan Moore describes multiple uses of the term 'authentic' within popular music: as a descriptor of a performance style or socio-economic status, as shorthand for artistic motivation or as an acknowledgement of a performer's sincerity (Moore 2002, pp. 210–11). Moore suggests that the key to a performance of authenticity is the audience's interpretation of particular gestures or of the performance style of an artist as authentic – a phenomenon he refers to as authenticity of expression. Sarah Rubridge picks up on this in her argument that 'Authenticity is [. . .] not a property *of*, but something we ascribe *to* a performance' (Rubridge 1996, p. 219). Although I agree with Rubridge's emphasis on the audience-to-performance directionality, I would add that authenticity is not a static quality, but is subject to constant negotiation by the participants. This is supported by Lawrence Grossberg's argument for different discourses of authenticity operating

[10] Taruskin's target was the term 'authentic performance', which he argued obscured the fact that such performance styles were intrinsically (perhaps even authentically) modern rather than a recovery of some historical practice.

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in different subgenres of rock music (Grossberg 1993; cf. Fornäs 1995, pp. 274–9). The ways in which Fitzsimmons's confessional music may be evaluated as performing authenticity or inauthenticity depend on the standards current within his audience; thus, we can speak of the indie aesthetic of authenticity as distinct from the rock or folk or Britpop aesthetics.

Of particular significance within this indie aesthetic is what Moore calls 'first-person authenticity', which is perceived when 'an originator (composer, performer) succeeds in conveying the impression that his/her utterance is one of integrity, that it represents an attempt to communicate in an unmediated form with an audience' (Moore 2002, p. 214). Implicit is a connection between authenticity and truth that persists in spite of the acknowledged social conditioning of authenticity. Although the listener recognises that the performance is a constructed image of sincerity, he or she willingly – even eagerly – accepts it as a genuine attempt at truthful expression. On *The Sparrow and the Crow*, Fitzsimmons can be interpreted as attempting truth-telling in multiple contexts: personally, in that the subject of the music is his own life; relationally, in that the relationship with his (absent) ex-wife forms the emotional heart of the music; and culturally, in that the framing of the songs as personally significant invites listeners to participate vicariously by accepting these truths as relevant to their own lives.

Behind every mask, another mask?

Working in opposition to a discourse that constructs Fitzsimmons as performing authentic truth-telling is the recognition that, in Edward T. Cone's words, 'all music, like all literature, is dramatic' and as a dramatic art form, musical performance presents multiple virtual subjects simultaneously (Cone 1974, p. 3). In an influential parsing of the layers of subjectivity in musical performance, Simon Frith offers a three-part division between the person of the performer, his or her 'star image' and the lyrical character he or she embodies in any given performance (Frith 1996, pp. 186, 212); other theorists use 'virtual presences', 'personages' or 'stars' to signify the separation between the human being and the various roles they perform.[11] In this essay I have followed Cone and Philip Auslander, among others, in adopting the term 'persona' to refer to the performer's identity as a musician, in part because the idea of masking that inheres in the concept of persona is useful for understanding the difficulties in separating Fitzsimmons's person and his performed character.

The embodiment of a persona in an individual is particularly relevant to Fitzsimmons because his music, and by extension, his persona, is perceived as being autobiographical, and thereby challenges the separation between person and persona. There is an assumption of veracity underlying discussions of Fitzsimmons's music and indie musicians more generally, but this does not obviate the necessity of distinguishing between person and persona. Unlike Freddie Mercury, Bob Dylan, or fellow indie singer-songwriter Bon Iver, William Fitzsimmons does not use a stage name to distinguish individual from performer.

[11] These terms originate with Naomi Cumming, David Graver and Richard Dyer, respectively. Another influential set of terms ('real author', 'implied author', 'narrator' and 'character') taken from Wayne C. Booth's fictional narrative (via Keith Negus) offers another layer of nuance in discussions of authorship. See Keith Negus (2011).

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Unlike Lady Gaga[12] or Madonna, his public image is not one of conspicuous manipulation of expectations or continual reinventions of persona; his self-presentation is as sincere and intimately expressive within the confines of a single persona that is assumed to correspond closely with his 'real life' character. Furthermore, as a singer-songwriter the audience's attention is always focused on him as a solo artist even in shows where he performs with a band. The resulting image of Fitzsimmons is conspicuously in line with what Dibben has identified as 'a compositional ideology [in pop music] in which singers understand themselves to be expressing things about or from their own experience' (Dibben 2009, p. 319).

The use of personal experience as an anchor for a performed persona is a familiar process when it comes to dramatic actors, who are frequently praised for their ability to inhabit a range of characters. Jeanette Bicknell has argued that an audience's assumptions about a given performer's gender, race, age and even personality influence their judgment of a character's 'fit' for a musician even more strictly than that of an actor: 'Although we accept for the most part that actors play at being someone else, we expect singers, at some level, to be themselves, or at least to be true to the persona they have established' (Bicknell 2005, p. 267). Singers who stray too far from their accepted persona – whether by changing their musical style à la Bob Dylan or by reinventing their persona à la Rihanna – risk alienating audiences. The danger inherent in such a move is amply demonstrated by one of the most infamous incidents in popular music history: the heckling call of 'Judas!' directed at Dylan by a disgruntled fan during a concert at the Manchester Free Trade Hall on 17 May 1966. Simon Frith has suggested that for Dylan's fans 'the issue here seems to be less the dishonoring of an ideal or an original musical concept, than the betrayal of an identity, of an understanding of what an artist *stood for*, and how that, in turn, reflected (and reflected back on) the identity of their listeners' (Frith 2004, p. 67).[13] This identity was linked to both aesthetic and topical characteristics of Dylan's music. Although Fitzsimmons is not Dylan, the fact that he has established himself as an indie artist with a distinctively confessional outlook constrains his ability to (re)present himself onstage in a way that alters the perception of authentic intimacy built into his performing persona without alienating his audience. This in turn points towards the reciprocal nature of confessional performance wherein both artist and audience are involved in projecting a confessor/confessant relationship.

Even though the discourse of authenticity that surrounds confessional indie music seems to require Fitzsimmons to present himself truthfully on stage, we must maintain the distinction between William Fitzsimmons as a human being and as a performer. One the one hand this distinction seems obvious: after all, the 'real' Fitzsimmons is currently living a life quite unlike the one depicted on *The Sparrow and the Crow*. On the other hand, the mask in which Fitzsimmons performs purports to be an accurate representation of the performer's self, making the delicate unpicking of person, persona and character necessary for performance analysis more

[12] Lady Gaga (Stefani Germanotta) has been the subject of multiple recent discussions about authenticity, many incredulous of her over-the-top performing style; nevertheless, both the artist and her fans conceive of her work as authentic and their relationship hinges on feelings of intimacy as exemplified by Gaga's moniker 'Mother Monster'. Although both Gaga and Fitzsimmons operate within discourses of authenticity, they perform authenticity using different means.

[13] Cf. Elijah Wald (2015) for an alternative and provocative account of the many tensions that inhere in Dylan's 'going electric'.

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challenging. Here, Auslander's cautionary statement 'we must be suspicious of any supposition that musicians are simply "being themselves" on stage' (Auslander 2004, p. 6) is a pertinent reminder, but even though listeners are aware of the layers of artifice that separate the person of the performer from themselves, the perception that that distance can be erased through the mediation of the performing persona is a crucial part of the audience's enjoyment of the music.

Intimate technology

Belief and authenticity play significant roles in the work of singer-songwriters such as Fitzsimmons in part because the idea of confessional song is closely intertwined in public consciousness with ideals of personal intimacy. Dibben argues that the belief in a performer's authenticity is a result of 'one of the most prevalent ideologies of music creation and reception and of the person in contemporary society – the idea that people have an inner, private core' (Dibben 2009, p. 317). She suggests, following Richard Dyer, that the audience's desire to somehow reach the real person behind the star image is due to the example a public figure offers for understanding the human experience. In other words, the identities constructed for performers work to shape the audience's understanding both of the star and of themselves in the world.[14]

One of the primary conditions of identification is the perception of intimacy between individuals. This desire for connection, however illusory, is part of what drives the public interest in the lived minutiae of public figures and it structures socialisation on a number of levels. Within the music industry this is evident from phenomena such as fan clubs, 'all-access' backstage passes and other perks available to those listeners who wish to demonstrate their interest and commitment to a particular performer (or who at least have put forward a sufficient amount of money for the privilege of such access). In confessional indie, the fostering of this intimacy between the public performer and an audience in music performance is less tied to particular sounds than to aesthetic choices regarding aural elements such as recording techniques, instrumentation or vocal timbre, visual cues such as gesture, and non-musical characteristics such as behaviour or dress. Fitzsimmons's performance draws on these elements in crafting an intimate experience for his audience that is in line with his confessional persona.

When it comes to aesthetics, the many sub-genres grouped under the heading of indie share certain characteristics, notably including a fondness for a do-it-yourself approach to music production. One result is a renewed appreciation for lo-fi recording, not only amongst artists who record in home studios, but even amongst those who might have access to more traditional studio set-ups but prefer the rawness of a less polished sound. Under this conception of recording, imperfect recording quality, a limited sonic palette and even mistakes in diction or instrumental accompaniment are all taken to be markers of a real, rather than elaborately staged, experience. Ironically, the realness this style purports to capture is often the result of carefully controlled recording environments. On *The Sparrow and the Crow*, a prominent example occurs at the end of the song 'Even Now', a piano-driven ballad of enduring love. At the end of the recorded track there is a rustling sound after the

[14] The process of identification has been explored more thoroughly by Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (1996).

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final chorus, revealed in an interview to be the sound of Fitzsimmons getting up from his chair and walking away.[15] He says of that choice, 'I wanted to leave that one just as it is. No tricks or editing. Just hit record and sing and play it honestly' (Bienkiewicz 2012). Of note here are the repeated references to unmediated communication: in order to be an honest communication (implicitly a communication of the self), the song must be left 'just as it is' without technological tampering. In itself, this is both a potentially sincere statement of artistic intent and a disingenuous representation of the realities of recorded performance. Although the track may be motivated by a genuine interest in a raw sound, it is nonetheless the result of what William Moylen (2002) and Serge Lacasse (2005) call 'phonographic staging', wherein recording techniques actively shape a song's narrative through manipulating the audience's sense of space, time, timbre or loudness. In this case, the inclusion of the sound in the final recording heightens the perception of intimacy by placing the listener in the same room as the singer even as it makes the work of technological mediation evident. Even if we interpret the chair rustling as an honest gesture, it is still an honesty that is inescapably mediated by technology.

Within the boundaries of a confessional singer-songwriter style, interpretive choices consistently emphasise the personally communicative elements. For example, one of Fitzsimmons's distinctive vocal traits is a lyrical delivery that ranges in dynamic from conversational to barely audible. 'Gentle', 'mellow and delicate' and 'softly sweet' are among the common descriptions of his sound, which also elicit frequent comparisons with his contemporaries Sufjan Stevens, Justin Vernon of Bon Iver, and Sam Bream of Iron and Wine. Fitzsimmons's breathy timbre and frequent use of the falsetto range match the delicacy of the fingerpicked guitars, piano and light drum accompaniment that envelops the lyrics. The sparseness of the accompaniment, which rarely incorporates more than three or four instrumental timbres, highlights the unique qualities of the singing voice and fosters a sense of intimacy with the audience. At times, the volume drops low enough as to be almost unintelligible, as when Fitzsimmons breathes the key word 'but' in the chorus of 'Please Forgive Me (Song of the Crow)': 'But please forgive me/Please, please forgive me'. Coming at the point of connection between the conflict set up in the first two verses ('You swept me off my feet . . . I left you there to bleed') and the devastating conclusion of the final verse ('and so your heart is free'), the swallowing of this single word intensifies the chorus's simple request for absolution.

In studio recordings, the half-whispered character of Fitzsimmons's voice means that projecting his vocals over the instrumental mix relies on technological manipulation in the form of sound mixing choices and close-miking. The effect of these routine mixing procedures situates the audience in a virtual space wherein they seem to be physically very close to the artist, to the point where not only the sound of his fingers on the guitar strings but also intakes of breath and the articulation of final consonants are clearly audible. These choices also shape the sound in live performances, although a profusion of variables make controlling live sound more difficult. One way in which this recorded proximity is mirrored in live performance is through venue size. Fitzsimmons currently favours mid-size venues that hold 400–500 people (standing room) and are designed to accommodate artists whose popularity has outstripped the capacity of bars but who have not yet acquired the kind of

[15] William Fitzsimmons, interview by Chris Bienkiewicz (2012).

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following that sells out amphitheatres or stadiums. The relatively small size of the venues ensures that audience members stand or sit quite close to him during the concert. Moreover, Fitzsimmons's habit of ending a show by climbing down into the crowd for a few acoustic closing numbers amplifies the sense of personal connection between performer and audience.

One distinctive non-aural characteristic of Fitzsimmons's live performance style is his lack of eye contact with audiences. Even though he looks out at the crowd in between songs and at his band members during instrumental breaks he normally sings with closed eyes. At first glance this might seem alienating to audience members who have come to expect a performance that is as much visual as aural, but instead it suggests a level of absorption in the musical experience that dovetails with the expectations of performing as a personally meaningful experience. Nicholas Cook has explored the phenomenon of the closed eyes in the case of Jimi Hendrix's performance of 'Foxy Lady' at the Isle of Wight Festival in 1970, saying, 'the effect is one of withdrawal from the stage: it is as if Hendrix is accessing some invisible world from which he draws the music, acting more as a medium for a higher source than a creative agent in his own right' (Cook 2013, p. 297).[16] In the case of Fitzsimmons, one interpretation is that the habit of closing his eyes is an unconscious one stemming from his childhood experience of communicating through music – but without eye contact – with his blind parents. As he comments, 'Music was like a level playing field where we could all meet and communicate without our eyes mattering at all' (Fitzsimmons 2009d). Like Hendrix, the impression this creates of Fitzsimmons is one of a focusing of attention; however, unlike Cook's description of Hendrix's access to a realm of suprapersonal artistic transcendence, Fitzsimmons's attention is drawn inward in order to communicate something of great personal value, resulting in a sense of striking familiarity and closeness rather than detachment.

Other extramusical indicators such as dress and demeanour likewise influence how audiences interact with Fitzsimmons's persona. On the surface, Fitzsimmons seems to fit the stereotype of the indie singer-songwriter: promotional photos demonstrate proclivities for plaid flannel shirts, knitted caps, combat boots and braces, and both fans and reviewers regularly comment on his luxuriant beard (see Figure 2). He describes his appearance as 'thirty per cent hipster and seventy per cent homeless' and has commented that his tour wardrobe is chosen from the same clothes he wears at home.[17] In practice, this means jeans paired with loose-fitting denim or plaid shirts and the occasional appearance of dungarees – the latter hovering somewhere between hipster-ironic and practical choice for the rural Illinois dweller.

In concerts, Fitzsimmons converses easily with the crowd in between songs, including fielding frequent audience requests such as 'can I touch your beard?' and opening up about parts of his life not explicitly documented in his music such as his struggles with anorexia nervosa and anxiety disorders. At a show in March 2014, he made jokes about forgetting to take his medication as an explanation for his at-times erratic behaviour.[18] The self-deprecating humour not only serves to

[16] For another example of how embodied gestures influence an audience's perception of an artist's interiority, see David Ake's (2002) exploration of Bill Evans.
[17] Notes made by author at concerts on 7 March 2014 and 11 August 2015.
[18] Notes made by the author at concert on 7 March 2014.

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Figure 2. Reproduced with the kind permission of William Fitzsimmons.

humanise Fitzsimmons, but also provides a breathing space for both performer and audience – even if each joke segues into (yet another) slow tune tinged with melancholy. The contrast with the sleek production values and overt appeals to spectacle valued by many pop stars is both stark and deliberate.

Fitzsimmons's virtual presence is likewise alluringly open, with a Twitter feed filled with concert information, often-amusing tour anecdotes and photos of his home life. His profile reads 'Singer. Former psychotherapist. Enjoys whiskey and plaid shirts. Still not convinced by the Warren commission'.[19] This self-conscious and self-deprecating – yet to all appearances genuine – description blends the identity markers of Fitzsimmons's dual work-related identities with references to rural Americana and political scepticism that could be simultaneously read as either sincere or firmly tongue-in-cheek. This openness is reflected back to him and refracted to other members of his audience by users who regularly comment on his online activity with suggestions that they should interact socially, whether by enjoying whiskey together or simply 'hanging out'. The overall impression that emerges is of an unpretentious, down-to-earth personality that harmonises with the music's blend of indie folk and electronica.

Finally, a quasi-homemade style of authenticity is visible in the packaging and marketing of Fitzsimmons's music. In his earliest work, Fitzsimmons produced,

[19] William Fitzsimmons, Twitter feed, https://twitter.com/wfitzsimmons.

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performed and mixed the albums almost entirely on his own, with resulting wry notes such as that found in the acknowledgements for *Goodnight*: 'William Fitzsimmons – vocals, guitars of various types, banjos, piano, melodica, drum stuff, uncomfortable lyrical self-disclosure' (Fitzsimmons 2006). The centrality of Fitzsimmons as an individual is reinforced on *Goodnight* by using hand-drawn art featuring a heavily bearded man in a variety of everyday situations throughout the CD's promotional material. These seemingly personal touches connect audience and creator; as Susan Luckman argues in her discussion of crafting, 'handmade objects are imbued with touch and therefore offer a sense of the "authentic" in an inauthentic world' (Luckman 2013, p. 254). Although *The Sparrow and the Crow* was produced in a professional studio and incorporates more musicians and producers than Fitzsimmons's earlier work, it continues to foreground the person of Fitzsimmons by using a photograph of the artist in profile as the album cover. The album is even subtitled 'A True Story by William Fitzsimmons' (Fitzsimmons 2008). In the way Fitzsimmons's work is produced and marketed it promulgates the ideal of the artist as personally authentic and emotionally communicative – precisely as I have argued might be expected within the confines of the confessional indie genre.

It is tempting to dismiss this positioning of Fitzsimmons within the trappings of a particular music genre as purely a marketing choice driven by commercial concerns. While there are certainly rewards for successful marketing, to speak of the perception of authentic intimacy without mention of the choices made behind the scenes to create and reinforce such a perception creates a false dichotomy. The collection of these attributes comes together in Fitzsimmons to create a persona that plays on ideas of self-revelation, truth-telling, vulnerability and emotional connection. By perpetuating this image, audiences are not only reinforcing the ideals of the confessional indie aesthetic, but are participating in what Adam Krims calls 'the *design intensive production of the self*' as a person who values these attributes (Krims 2007, p. 139). The subjectivities thus produced are, in the words of Johan Fornäs, 'product[s] of both nature and intersubjective identity work' and the ideals upon which such performances are based are 'constructed through complex cultural practices which use both illusions and technology' (Fornäs 1995, p. 275). Together, Fitzsimmons and his audience construct a performative space in which the ideal of the confessional song as a means for creating and sustaining personal connection is celebrated.

Unbearable intimacy and 'getting over it' through music

The perceived intimacy of confessional indie's self-revelation encourages listeners to form intense emotional attachments to the singers. In Fitzsimmons's case this can be clearly seen in the comments left on his YouTube videos, especially those that accentuate the ideal of personal communication. Three official music videos were made for *The Sparrow and the Crow*: one for 'If You Would Come Back Home' (Fitzsimmons 2009a), one for 'After Afterall' (Fitzsimmons 2009b), and one for 'I Don't Feel It Anymore (Song of the Sparrow)' (Fitzsimmons 2009c). The first is a visually striking and symbolically rich montage following Fitzsimmons as he walks through barren fields and into an abandoned house draped in tangled red thread. As the camera follows the strings around the rooms it becomes clear that Fitzsimmons himself is entangled – a point driven home by a lingering shot of the artist's left hand still

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wearing a heavy gold wedding ring and clutching a fistful of string. The second matches the introspective mood of the lyrics with black-and-white videography juxtaposing night-time shots of the solitary artist with a bleak winter landscape. The video's depiction of Fitzsimmons's physical isolation is heightened by the addition of the sound of a rushing wind in the underscore. As the music's final, unresolved chord sounds, the video's visual imagery challenges the foregoing trajectory by turning to a colour shot showing Fitzsimmons silhouetted against the pink and purple shading of a dawn sky. Each of these videos uses videographic techniques to construct a subject position that emphasises intimacy with the artist as the camera's eye, and therefore the viewer's attention, follows Fitzsimmons as a silent observer.

In contrast to these professionally produced music videos, the last of the three is of a solo acoustic performance of 'I Don't Feel It Anymore (Song of the Sparrow)'. The nearly four-minute video is shot from a single camera angle and shows Fitzsimmons in casual clothes and a beanie sitting on a couch with his acoustic guitar. The setting is nondescript, yet domestic – other than a single lamp for illumination and an electric guitar on a stand there is nothing to hint of any particular location. In the limited light, it is difficult even to see Fitzsimmons's face, but his quiet voice projects clearly over the fingerpicked guitar. The static frame and homemade quality of the videography suggests that there is no overt narrative shaping the video, but the very fact that it appears as though an individual (Dennis Adler, according to the video's credits) has picked up a camera in order to capture a seemingly spontaneous performance is itself a narrative which leads listeners towards interpretations of the performance as authentic, intimate and unmediated.

That this framing of the performance is successful is evident in YouTube comments such as user Jakobsiler's: 'This is music. Not that shit they play on mtv. The music industry sold out talent for money. If people would stop listening to no-talent, bullshit. Maybe people like this would get the recognition they deserve.'[20] Other listeners respond to the perceived intimacy of the video with revealing confessions of their own, from commenter sparkle712's admission of suicidal tendencies ('Thanks for being around, William, Especially on the days I'm not sure if I want to be anymore.') to acknowledgement of personal difficulties, as in the case of MsJoshsmommy's divorce ('I started listening to him last year during my divorce ... his music really helped me identify with the feelings I had during that time. This man is amazing. His talent is beyond description!').[21] The intensity of these reactions is not unusual for comments left on online platforms such as YouTube, but the consistency with which people impart a therapeutic value to Fitzsimmons's music suggests that the affective community that has grown up around him is one that identifies strongly with both the perceived sincerity of his performance and the efficacy of his music as a means of coping with and understanding their own lives. Furthermore, they actively perpetuate this interpretation through their interactions with the artist and with each other, creating a reinforcing cycle of confession that extends beyond the confines of a specific performance.

The projection of vulnerability in Fitzsimmons's performance is not universally accepted, with at least one YouTube user ('ventilatedzygote') rejecting it as

[20] Jakobsiler, comment on 'I Don't Feel It Anymore – William Fitzsimmons'. Note: all comments are undated.

[21] Sparkle712, ibid.; MsJoshsmommy, ibid.

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inappropriate for a heterosexual adult male: 'This guy is a tedious fag and if you're a guy older than 20 and you're listening to this for any reason other than shameful nostalgia, you should question your sexuality'.[22] The stigmatisation of confessional openness as associated with both (shameful) youth and homosexuality – and thus, implicitly, with the feminine – reveals the enduring strength of association between confession and gender stereotypes which has been fruitfully explored in a number of areas (Coward 2013; Jamison 2014; Aleshire 2002). Beyond such derogatory comments, there are also those for whom the performance rings false or who wonder why the artist doesn't 'just get over it'. If, as Fitzsimmons has stated, *The Sparrow and the Crow* truly contained 'the final words I needed to say before the matter was put to rest for good', why do certain songs from the album, including 'I Don't Feel It Anymore (Song of the Sparrow)', still regularly appear on his setlists?[23] For some listeners, this smacks of a discomfiting commoditisation of emotion that manipulates audiences by capitalising on the affective character of his music. Although there are undoubtedly economic implications for his choice, the simplest reason for Fitzsimmons's continued performances of his early work is that these songs and the confessional attitude they represent are the foundation of his musical career: although the trauma of a relationship's dissolution is by its nature transient, in Fitzsimmons's case it has become emblematic of his artistic persona. Even though Fitzsimmons's recent albums reflect happier changes in his personal circumstances, he is nonetheless constrained by fan expectations and by generic conventions from entirely severing his musical persona from his personal past.

Writing of the similarly emotive performer Jeff Buckley, *Revolver* and *Chicago Tribune* reviewer Greg Kot asserted: 'There's a fine line between drama and melodrama [. . .] I saw Jeff perform several times and it was almost unbearably intimate at times. You were either pulled in or you brushed it off as self-indulgence. But there was no in-between' (Kot 2001, p. 120). The framing of Buckley's performative intimacy as simultaneously appealing and troubling echoes the contrasting reactions to Fitzsimmons's confessional style. To be intimate with another human being is to be vulnerable, and 'for fans, the pleasure of intimacy is mingled with the pain of self-examination and feeling exposed' (Goldin-Perschbacher 2007, p. 223). It seems that for some, the self-revelation found in confessional performers is a source of pleasure; for others, it is an unwelcome intrusion. The extreme intimacy that Fitzsimmons's performances provoke thus confirms a confessant–confessor relationship between performer and audience in ways that highlight the tension between therapy and self-flagellation that underlies performative confession.

Who's listening?

Thus far, I have left unexamined the question of exactly who are Fitzsimmons's listeners who participate in this construction of his confessional performance. Indie music, and indie rock in particular, is known as a preserve of the guitar-playing white male. Likewise, the audiences for indie rock, indie folk and indie pop have a

22 Ventilatedzygote, ibid.

23 Fitzsimmons, 'Biography' (n.d.); at concerts attended by the author in March 2014 and in August 2015, roughly 20% of the sets were songs from *The Sparrow and the Crow*. Further information about his setlists can be found on http://www.setlist.fm/setlists/william-fitzsimmons-5bd65730.html.

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reputation for being young, white and largely suburban. Within the subgenre of confessional indie, a more feminised image of both performer and audience is common, in part owing to the influence of the female singer-songwriter tradition from Mitchell to Carole King to Alanis Morissette, and in part (as I mention above) owing to lingering gendered implications of emotional confession in Western societies. The perception of indie music audiences as essentially homogenous – in Chelsea Wilson's description, as 'twenty-something, Urban Outfitter-clad, hipster followers of unknown bands' – has led to claims (Minnick 2013; Sahim 2015) of indie music's racial and social exclusivity.

The combination of these stereotypes has led some reviewers to characterise Fitzsimmons's audience in terms that suggest adolescent angst – witness Will Kyle's description of Fitzsimmons's audience as 'an onslaught of young women with hungry, faraway looks in their eyes' (Kyle 2014). Others pick out different features, as in Ryan Reed's portrayal of the same as a 'string of 14-year-olds in girls' jeans (both sexes)' (Reed 2011). In their fixation on youth, these criticisms have a touch of the facile, and seem at odds with the audience one might expect of a heavily tattooed guitarist nearing 40 years old whose lyrical themes of love, loss and failure are shorn of the demonstrative excess associated, for instance, with the thematically similar musical category of emo. Fitzsimmons's audiences do exhibit demographic markers but they are not as extreme as those suggested by the above reviewers: for instance, his concert audiences tend to be white and young (although more likely in their twenties and thirties than in their teens), but with a reasonably even gender balance. A survey of his online fans reveals the demographic range to be still larger, whilst the strikingly high proportion of stops in Germany and the Low Countries on his concert tours suggests an unusual appeal in certain parts of Europe. In short, skinny jeans, flannel shirts and beards may be more prominent at a Fitzsimmons concert than in the general population, but they are not required for admission.

The motivation for these groups' evident interest in music predicated on confession is not immediately clear. If, as Andy Greenwald suggests, emo offered a vicarious experience of emotion that became 'the sound of self-making' (Greenwald 2003, p. 4) for a generation of adolescents, does confessional indie offer a similar means of identity-making for more grown-up fans? Possibly, but *The Sparrow and the Crow* is not an album about trying to discover oneself; it is an album about how the dark sides of the self manifest in relationships with others. For many, it seems, the clarity and humanity with which Fitzsimmons explores this darkness are themselves a compelling inducement to listen.

Fitzsimmons's audiences are of course aware that the tortured and repentant character heard on *The Sparrow and the Crow* and in subsequent performances is not the same as the individual man who gives him voice. Likewise, few listeners would imagine that after years of performing *The Sparrow and the Crow* the relationship between Fitzsimmons as human, performer and titular 'Crow' is the same now as it was when the songs were created. Nevertheless, the persona Fitzsimmons has cultivated continues to influence listeners' engagement with his confessional performance. By drawing on the aesthetic ideals of the confessional singer-songwriter, Fitzsimmons crafts a performance that allows him to engage in Frith's 'double enactment' (Frith 1996, p. 212) of persona and character while maintaining the impression that both entities are self-revealing. In this performance, artist and audience collaborate in a suspension of disbelief that allows them to construct the experience as a distinctively confessional act.

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Conclusion

To close the poem 'A Dedication to My Wife', T.S. Eliot wrote to his second wife, Valerie: 'But this dedication is for others to read:/These are private words addressed to you in public'. This is a fitting end to the poem's warm celebration of lovers' intimacy, but it nevertheless resonates with the spectacle of Fitzsimmons's performative confession through which the audience is drawn into a shared relational space created by his private emotions expressed in public words. In this space, audience members negotiate the accepted boundaries of the confessional genre and authenticate Fitzsimmons's performance within it, but they also engage with the performance as a way of understanding and narrating their own experiences of betrayal, guilt and confession.

Confessional narratives in contemporary Western society take many shapes, from memoirs to blogs to photo essays on social media. Within popular music, I suggest that alongside conventional 'kiss-and-tell' revelations there are forms of confessional performance that alter our expectations about the relationship between performer and audience. In this essay I trace the development of the confessional aesthetic from small-scale characteristics such as sound, lyrics and gesture through to larger-scale features of technology, marketing and reception. In contrast to an understanding of confession as a one-way communication, I propose that this aesthetic is better understood as a dialogue that is created and maintained through the actions and choices taken by many different people in any given performance.

In what I have called 'confessional indie', a performance may mobilise generic conventions, aesthetic characteristics and a plethora of musical paratexts in order to create an experience I describe as confessional. By examining the interaction of these in detail, I suggest that confessional indie is predicated on a sense of performative authenticity that moves beyond assessments of fidelity to inherited traditions or even of a performer's sincerity to encompass a new sense of negotiation between performer and audience. Despite the widespread acknowledgement of multiple mediations, the participants in confessional indie persist in creating an atmosphere of intimacy that belies both the emotional excess of confessional pop and the ironic distance prevalent in some other indie genres. This is refracted not only through the immediacy of a performance, but also through parallel interactions on- and offline.

Ultimately, this suggests a necessary extension of the idea that emotional modelling is a key function of popular music. It is not just 'as if we get to know ourselves via music' (Frith 1987, p. 142) or even (in the words of Emma Thompson's character in the film *Love Actually*) that listening to Joni Mitchell could '[teach] your cold English wife how to feel'; it is that by making their experiences (however mediated) available, confessional artists lead audiences into a distinctive relational sphere predicated on a sense of reciprocal confession. That is to say, audience members respond to performances in ways that indicate their integral participation in the socially agreed-upon rituals of confessional indie. In the case of psychotherapist-turned-singer Fitzsimmons, the result is that at times it is hard to tell who is on the couch.

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