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❖ **Just Because We Can: Instantaneous Recording of Music Concerts**

Collette Snowden - University of South Australia

Open air and stadium-based musical events have been held in most societies for hundreds of year, but in recent decades, sound amplification technology, supplemented with large screen video, have enabled such events to be held in an increasing range of venues and circumstances and on even grander scales. Large music events, festivals and indoor arena concerts have become significant businesses, more recently providing a significant source of revenue for artists whose incomes have been compromised by falling sales of albums as a result of music downloading and file sharing.

At the same time as live music events and festivals have become entrenched in the entertainment industry, recording technology has enabled events to be recorded for commercial purposes such as documentary film and live album production. Through the development of different technologies – from film to VHS to digital video, from vinyl to cassette to CD to MP3, from photographic film to cell phone camera – over time live music events also became recorded events.



The technology also has allowed individual audience members to record events, and good quality bootleg recordings of live music performances became widely available from the late 1960s on (Heylin, 1996). One example of this was the recording of two live concerts by The Rolling Stones at the Oakland-Alameda County Coliseum, which produced the bootleg recording, *LiveR Than You'll Ever Be*. Assisted by a positive review from rock critic, Greil Marcus, the recording was so successful that The Rolling Stones' record company, Decca, produced an

official live album from the same tour in response to consumer demand. Marshall (2005) has noted other similar examples, where bootleg recordings played a significant role in promoting or maintaining the public presence of an artist or band.

In the past, however, individual audience members were mostly prevented from using the technology by the imposition of security checks on entrance to a performance and during live music events, but also by the limitations imposed by the size, weight, and technical capabilities of the technology. Now, compact, light, high fidelity recording media that are difficult for event organizers to control, allow audiences to record performances and other aspects of live music performances in many ways.

The use of cell phone cameras to take photographs or short videos at concerts and distribute them immediately is a new and noticeable phenomenon. And while the practice of holding cigarette lighters up at concerts has been replaced by smart phone applications that provide an image of a flickering flame on mobile phone screens, there are also ultra small video recorders – the same size as a mobile phone on which longer, higher quality recordings of live performances can be made. Such discrete, mobile recording technology allows concertgoers to record and upload material to internet sites such as YouTube or Twitter during shows and to submit text messages to a screen on the stage and to identify songs from audio samples and lyrics. While it is still possible in seated concert venues for the use of recording technology to be monitored and checked, at larger arena venues, festivals, and clubs it is now near impossible to prevent.



This mediated engagement with the concert by the audience through the use of mobile technology has produced unexpected consequences for the live music experience. One of these is the intrusion on the line of sight of the stage for audience members as people hold their cameras up to take pictures or record segments of the concert.



As one blogger put it bluntly, receiving more than 60 responses in reply,

One thing that you would never miss at these events are the thousands of people, who instead

of watching the act onstage, they watch it through their video phone or digital camera. This fuckin' behaviour then impedes the vision of the people behind you cuz not only do I see your camera LCD, both your arms are in the way too. And for what? Some pixelated footage of the band with terrible sound quality and even worse, a shaky camera that you're to blame for (2010, <http://www.motwister.com/blog/2010/3/20/does-digital-video-recording-at-concerts-annoy-you.html?currentPage=2>)



While the speed of the technology is a critical enabling factor which leads people to spontaneously record the moment of what they perceive to be a significant or memorable event, it is clear that this is not always the motivation for the practice. There are now many internet sites providing technical advice and equipment specifications for people who want to record or photograph concerts, which indicates a level of intention and premeditation on the part of many who record performances. Just as the technology allows rapid recording, individuals are developing skill and making adaptations to their experience as audience members with the same rapidity in order to record material that is meaningful and useful to them.

Another potential consequence of the recording of performances is a loss of the unique or special nature of the experience of a concert, particularly as images and recordings are distributed widely and rapidly. For artists who rely on the temporal quality of live performance, this poses special problems. For example, for comedians whose material is best appreciated as a spontaneous experience, the uncontrolled distribution of their material forces them constantly to develop new material because once a punch line is exposed, it loses its impact. Performers who have previously relied on spectacle as a feature of their performance are likely to find that the ability to surprise and delight audiences with effects, costumes and choreography, is compromised. Ultra-compact technology enhances the speed of production of recorded 'bootleg' material, because it is so much easier to be covert, and to capture material. With improvements in the quality of the image capture and recording capabilities the exclusivity of events and occasions is increasingly compromised.

Canadian singer/songwriter Feist commented on the practice in an interview with journalist Thor Christensen (2008)

"To me, a gig isn't supposed to be for posterity," she says. "It's supposed to be a bunch of people tossed together in a room, making a mood, and then it's over. You can't see the world through a viewfinder."

Additionally as performers lose control of the recording of their performances, they also lose control of their images, reputations, and their history. All aspects of an artist's performance

become open to manipulation and interpretation with extensive recording of their performances. Some popular artists have hundreds of short recordings of concert footage made available, and equally as many images. Whereas in the past, poor performances or mistakes might be reported in reviews, the capacity for the recording and permanent display of fallibility is likely to create additional pressure for performers, and to lead to different assessments of their art and craft.



The question of what individual audience members gain from recording an event, rather than experiencing it directly, remains open to exploration and speculation. While the action of recording appears to impair the experience of being at the concert, this negative factor apparently is of less consequence because it can be done with speed and without much effort. The consequences for performers, audiences and the industry of the practice will not be apparent as quickly.



Photographer Peter Thurmer is a musician who has played in blues, r'n'b and jazz bands in Adelaide for 35 years. He is also a producer and teacher of media production. He has a long-standing interest in the intersection of music with photographic and film media. The photographs here were taken in January 2010 at the Ragamuffin Festival in Melbourne.

The Ragamuffin Reggae Festival is one of many outdoor music festivals held each summer in Australia. The photographs were taken of the audience at the Sidney Myer Music Bowl. Rather than recording the concert they record the audience recording the concert.

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About the author

University of South Australia

Contact Details

Email: Collette.Snowden@unisa.edu.au