Everyday Fandom: Fan Clubs, Blogging, and the Quotidian Rhythms of the Internet

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Abstract: With the rise of the Internet, fans have engaged in a variety of online discussions related to their interests: newsgroups in the “alt.music” and “alt.fan” categories are full of groups devoted to specific music genres and individual stars. But what is of interest in this context is the transformation of those other, more-or-less organized, “official” fan clubs, where the tensions between fandom and organized consumption are most evident. In this regard, online fan clubs have taken on a new dynamic: marked by the appearance of a more direct form of dialogue between artist and fans and a more regular, even daily, ability to connect both artists with fans and fans with one another, fan clubs are now regarded as a new kind of “community” by some and a new source of revenue by others. This paper discusses how Internet fan clubs have become an important mediating factor in relationships between fans and artists, and between fans themselves.

Keywords: Internet; Music; Fan clubs; Audience

Introduction
The recent market successes of Apple’s iTunes online music store and its iPod portable players have given the music industry reason to engage in cautious opti-
mism. After all, Apple’s vision of the future of music commerce on the Internet is not so radical: superstar performers (alongside a slightly more populated crowd of independent artists) are back in the limelight, offering “exclusive” tracks and videos; the hype has a familiar ring; and because it is Internet-based, it can be bolstered with an almost daily barrage of promotional material sent to millions of e-mail inboxes. Perhaps most importantly, a growing number of fans have demonstrated that they are once again willing to pay for the privilege of listening to music (at least for now). But if the industry is not exactly pleased with Apple’s policy of uniform pricing at 99 cents per song, it is at least content with the fact that consumers are coming back with increasing regularity. For the first time in years, it seems possible to envision an orderly, predictable world of production, promotion, distribution, and consumption, however tenuous.

Orderliness and predictability are, of course, key elements of the producer-consumer relationship that the industry has always tried (often in vain) to control. But while downloading and copyright infringement have dominated headlines in recent years, the industry has been quietly attempting to increase its influence in other dimensions of this relationship. Fan clubs, for example, have long been a feature of both the cinema and record industries; however, neither industry (Disney may be the exception) has pursued them as a regular avenue of profit, preferring to leave their organization and activities in the hands of fans themselves, artist management, and the like. With the rise of the Internet, fans have from the outset engaged in a variety of online discussions related to their interests: newsgroups in the “alt.music” and “alt.fan” categories were full of groups devoted to specific music genres and individual stars. But what is of interest to me in this context is the transformation of those other, more-or-less organized, “official” fan clubs, where the tensions between fandom and organized consumption are most evident. In this regard, online fan clubs have taken on a new dynamic: marked by the appearance of a more direct form of dialogue between artist and fans and a more regular, even daily, ability to connect both artists with fans and fans with one another, fan clubs are now regarded as a new kind of “community” by some and a new source of revenue by others. Internet fan clubs have thus become an important mediating factor in the relationships between fans and artists and between fans themselves, and thus warrant special attention.

In this article, I will discuss music fan clubs on the Internet as a kind of medium, as “a network of repeatable relations . . . a whole assemblage of connections, functions, institutions, and people” (Sterne, 2003, p. 210). Understood in this way, fan clubs become more than simple, isolated groups of individuals with a particularly strong attachment to an individual celebrity or media text. Indeed, fan clubs as a medium serve specific, though different, functions for both fans and the music industry: they act as a conduit through which the fans’ desire for contact with the artist is channelled, at the same time as they serve as a means for the promotion of tours and commercial releases. They can be used both to create a sense of identity and belonging and as a means of direct marketing.
By focusing on the tensions that exist within the medium of the fan club, I am breaking to some degree with the dominant ways in which fans, and popular culture more generally, have been theorized in recent years. Influenced largely by the ideas of Michel de Certeau (1984), theorists such as John Fiske and Henry Jenkins, among others, have tended to celebrate fan practices as a kind of oppositional culture. Indeed for Fiske, popular culture is, by definition, “of the people,” and it works against commodification (1989). In the present context, however, the fan clubs appear to operate in a more complex modality, with fan interests and industry interests feeding off of and reinforcing each other, rather than acting in opposition. Similarly, Jenkins has concentrated on the spectacular “participatory” cultural practices through which fans take control of videos and television texts, reshaping them and giving them new meanings (1992). While I certainly do not want to downplay the importance of similar forms of “textual poaching” in popular music—for example, recent musical practices such as the creation of “mashups,” a radical forcing together of recordings by disparate performers to create new, often satirical, meanings—such participatory strategies are more closely related to specific musical subcultures and exist in a different realm from more conventional expressions of fandom. To some degree, my portrayal of Internet fan clubs is perhaps closer to de Certeau’s original formulation of the notion of “everyday life,” where popular practices are always inscribed within relationships of power and are thus delimited by them in important ways.

And it is precisely not the spectacularity, but the “everydayness” of fan-club activities on the Internet that is important to the arguments presented here. Indeed, what is perhaps entirely new about Internet fan clubs is the way in which they encourage a form of daily interaction both amongst fans and between them and the music industry. Through the cultivation of a kind of fluctuating, quotidian rhythm, fandom becomes not so much spectacular but banal in its effects. To understand how this operates, I will pursue a strategy in which the relations of fan culture will be analyzed as a series of essentially temporal practices. In so doing, I will demonstrate how the interactions between fans and the music industry are organized in such a way as to anticipate, intensify, and prolong their relationship.

This strategy also breaks with the dominant ways in which the Internet has come to be understood. In popular discourse, the Internet is often discussed through a variety of spatial and temporal metaphors, but too often it is the spatial ones that dominate. For example, many websites devoted to fans promote themselves on the basis of the way in which they connect the “community” of fans over vast spaces. While spatial metaphors have also tended to dominate academic discourse about Internet communities, Bury (2003) has argued that the very notion of a “community” means relatively little in relation to the Internet unless it is understood as resulting from a series of consistent, sustained engagements in specific communal practices over time. For the music industry, understanding and exploiting the changing character of these temporal relationships and practices has become important in the development of new sources of revenue and new strategies for ensuring long-term survival of the industry itself.
Before turning to a discussion of fan clubs on the Internet, I would like first to explore this notion of the temporal organization of the relationship between artists, fans, and the music industry by focusing on a series of “moments” drawn from history. What follows is not intended as a comprehensive account of the relations of fan culture, but rather as an analysis of a number of key moments and case studies that are related to specific issues in the subsequent discussion of Internet fan clubs. These moments and case studies include the rise of the star system and the formation of star persona, the particular promotional needs and affective relations of touring and music performance, the emergence and function of fan magazines in cinema, and the character of early fan clubs. In each instance, the intent is to lend a degree of historical perspective to the discussion that follows, a sense of the degree of continuity and change evident in recent practices associated with Internet fan clubs.

Some moments in the history of the organization of fandom

It has often been remarked that the rise of fan culture is intimately bound up with the creation of the star system in popular culture. Indeed, they are inextricably linked: without the artificial buildup of star personae, there would be insufficient focus for the fan’s desire. In media studies, the rise of the star system is usually associated with the development of the film industry during the early years of the twentieth century. But others have argued that its roots stretch much earlier and range across virtually all the arts, including literature, theatre, and music.

In music, we see the emergence of the star in the virtuosi of the early nineteenth century: figures such as Paganini and Liszt. As Richard Sennett has argued, the virtuosi were not simply “better” than other musicians; they set themselves apart by the extraordinary character of their talent, their expressive power, and their ability to project a sense of physical struggle (1977). And if this virtuosity also implied that these artists possessed a certain power over the audience (Sennett does not use the term “fan”), it does not mean that the audience was entirely dependent upon the artist; indeed, it was necessary for the listener to invest the performer with a personality for them to become fully “real.” In so doing, nineteenth-century audiences were undoubtedly aided by the popular press (today, a larger range of media, including the Internet, play a similar role); to a large degree, they contributed to the erosion of any boundary between the artist’s public and private self. Sennett argues that the career of actress Sarah Bernhardt was a prime example of the way in which this confusion of public and private life was played out in the press: in the end, Bernhardt’s private life became theatre, a form of “personal mise en scène” (Joanna Richardson quoted in Sennett, p. 212). But while Sennett points to the press as a key player in the creation of the celebrity, he offers little detail concerning the way in which it accomplished this task.

For my purposes here, a historical moment that seems to embody the various technological and cultural forces at play during this period, especially those related to the rise of publicity and the newspaper as a mass medium, took place in the U.S. in the middle of the nineteenth century, mobilized most powerfully by the master of humbug, P. T. Barnum. In 1850-51, just a few short years before Barnum
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turned his attention to elephants and circus entertainment, he focused his sights on much smaller game: the so-called “Swedish nightingale,” Jenny Lind.

Lind’s first American tour was remarkable in a number of ways. Lind had already become famous in Europe singing opera but was beginning to turn to lighter fare, giving concerts of selected arias and some popular songs. Barnum had heard of her growing fame and, succeeding where others had tried and failed, he managed to book her for a series of concert dates in America. The tour was preceded by a massive publicity campaign, making reference not only to her vocal abilities, but also to her personal characteristics: her religiosity and her desire to use the concerts as a means of supporting various charities. (At least one commentator has argued that Barnum exaggerated these features of Lind’s personality so as to make her status as a public performer more acceptable within the boundaries of middle class values concerning gender—in a sense, domesticating her for the American audience; see Adams, 1997). On her arrival in New York, a crowd of 30,000 greeted Lind at the dock. Tickets to her first concert were auctioned off—the first concert grossing $10,000.

This buildup of public anticipation through advertising alone (or publicity, as it was then called) might have been difficult to sustain over the period of the tour had Barnum not supplemented it with sales of merchandise: there were Jenny Lind dolls, Jenny Lind scarves, Jenny Lind gloves and handkerchiefs. At times, it appeared that the momentum would be too great for even Barnum to control (Austin, 1975). Barnum thus not only managed to create a sense of anticipation and desire through his use of publicity, but also to give a commodity focus to the artist/fan relationship, allowing the experience of fandom to be prolonged and intensified through personal investment in a set of fetishized objects.

The success of Barnum should not be underestimated: in a period without modern communications media and technologies of sound and image reproduction, his work depended almost entirely on building Lind’s reputation through press accounts, word of mouth, connections with local concert promoters and charitable institutions, and merchandizing. Even the structural support of the touring system—which in Britain would take the form of purpose-built, syndicated musical halls and in the U.S., of the touring circuits that would eventually become vaudeville—had hardly begun to be put in place. What is equally remarkable, as I will demonstrate below, is that the promotional problems associated with touring and the affective investment of fans in live performance remain one of the driving forces behind the adoption of the Internet as a medium for both the industry and fans.

A perhaps more familiar era in the history of fandom began around 1910, with the appearance of the first fan magazines associated with early cinema. In order to guarantee the profitability of the expanding industry, it became necessary to increase the level of promotion and differentiation of film productions. Interestingly, the first magazines—among them, titles such as Photoplay and Motion Picture Story—initially attempted to accomplish this by focusing on film narratives. According to Joshua Gamson, when one of the magazines put out a call to
readers to send in letters about their favourite film stories, they respond with a
deluge of letters expressing interest in film actors instead (1994). To a certain
extent, it was the fans themselves who refocused the movie industry’s promotional
apparatus. The fans confirmed a perception that had already begun to emerge
within the industry: that film stars were among their most important commodities.
In response, the industry went about elaborately constructing their personae, both
on and off screen. They used the fan magazines—printing endless stories about
actors’ personal lives—and photography to enhance the sense of intimacy
between star and fan. In this way, the persona and the image of the star became the
nodal points through which a variety of needs and investments could be chan-
nelled.

The early movie magazines were significant, in themselves, for a number of
reasons. Firstly, as part of the general rise in specialized periodical publishing
during the early twentieth century, they provided a more focused vehicle for the
promotion of the early movies and movie stars. Equally significant, they offered a
more regular, measured, and detailed means for promotion and market feedback:
located, temporally, somewhere between the daily press and the more irregular
campaigns surrounding movie releases themselves, the fan magazines offered a
regular venue for sustaining interest in stars (and film productions) over time. As
Bernard Miège (1986) has argued, the cultural industries all have their own logics
and rhythms of production and reception; and even at this early date, it is impor-
tant to take into account the interplay between these rhythms in the overall produc-
tion of the celebrity/fan relationship. Finally, the movie magazines gave fans a
voice: while many letters to the magazines expressed a predictable blend of
fantasy and romance, others could be quite critical of the blandishments of the
Hollywood star system and its methods, and in this regard they can be taken, with
some reservations, as an indicator of fan attitudes toward the industry of that time
(Crafton, 1997).

The stars themselves, although their public and private lives were generally
under contract to the industry, also learned to use the media—the press as well as
radio and magazines—when it might benefit them over their film masters. For
example in 1922, silent-film star Rudolph Valentino, in the midst of a dispute with
Paramount that prevented him from making films, engaged in a radio broadcast
entitled “The Truth About Myself” in an attempt to solicit the support of his fans.
The reference to a kind of personal revelation in the title of his broadcast was, no
doubt, a manoeuvre calculated to wrest his image from the control of the industry.
Whatever outlet the fan magazines may have allowed their readership, how-
ever, the magazines remained firmly in the control of publishers and editors. Also,
as vehicles for fandom, they were perhaps too general in content—they did not
have the singular focus of the later fan clubs.

It is difficult to trace the beginnings of the modern fan club, but it is clear that
by the mid-1930s, stars such as Bing Crosby (who had a career that spanned the
film, radio, and music recording industries) had their own fan clubs, many of
which were run by fans.
“Club Crosby” appears to have been the premiere fan club devoted to Crosby: established in 1936, it is reputed to be the longest continuously running fan club in the world. In August 2003, the club merged with the “International Crosby Circle,” a British fan club, and was renamed “The International Crosby Club,” thus ensuring the continuation of its title as “longest-running” club (in the past, there has also been a Canadian branch of the Crosby Club and active societies in Australia and elsewhere). While the clubs were largely independent of Crosby during his lifetime and remain primarily independent of the wider entertainment industry—they elect their own presidents and conduct their own affairs—most have, at one time or another, maintained some kind of relationship with either Bing himself or members of his family and management.

The clubs function as a medium of communication between fans (Club Crosby has, from its inception, published a newsletter entitled Bingang, and the other societies have their own publications). In this way, they help to define the fan community and, perhaps equally importantly, they act as conduits for the circulation of memorabilia: like most fan groups, Crosby fans are obsessive collectors of old recordings, films, photos, and newspaper clippings. In this way, fan clubs create what John Fiske has called a “shadow cultural economy,” one “that lies outside that of the cultural industries yet shares features with them” (1992, p. 30). In relation to popular music, collecting is part obsession, part memory work and identity formation: every item collected by Crosby fans contains a piece of autobiography—personal memories related to the context in which the article was acquired, revealing individual histories of affective investment that can be recounted and actualized in the present (see, for example, O’Connell’s interviews with Crosby collectors, 1984, or more recently, Cavicchi’s account of collecting and personal identity among Springsteen fans, 1998).

Because fan publications operate either outside or on the fringes of the industry, however, they can sometimes reveal aspects of the star-making machinery that might otherwise lie hidden. For example, in a chapter devoted to arguing (not entirely convincingly) for the essential continuity of Bing’s on-screen and off-screen personae, Sheldon O’Connell’s biography of the star outlines the manner in which films were designed for Crosby as “properties,” elaborately constructing his public “image” (1984). Even the apparent intimacy projected in his many radio interviews is revealed as part sham: produced and distributed by Paramount during the 1950s, the “interviews” consisted of voice tracks recorded by Bing, accompanied by scripted questions that were to be read by local radio announcers, thus giving the impression of a locally recorded, real-time interview. While the activities of the various clubs associated with Crosby hardly appear to exhibit the characteristics of many of the dynamic fan cultures that have been the subject of much contemporary cultural criticism, it is clear that fan knowledge itself—often exhaustive in its scope and depth—ultimately places fans in an ambivalent position vis-à-vis the culture industry: in their quest to know everything possible about stars and their personae, fans develop a significant potential for cultural awareness and critique.
Music fan clubs and the Internet

Popular music had a substantial presence on the Internet long before it evolved into a mass medium. And what is interesting in this regard is that fans, once again, may have led the way: as mentioned briefly above, early Usenet groups devoted to music were largely fan organized and, by the late 1980s and early 1990s, there were “alt.” newsgroups, numbering in the hundreds, dedicated to virtually every style of music and to most major (and many not-so-major) artists. For the most part, the music industry and many of the artists themselves took relatively little, or at best bemused, notice of all this activity. Given the demographics of Internet use during this period, however, it cannot be assumed that offline and online fandom were necessarily contiguous phenomena: some “alt.” group fans may have been associated with pre-existing fan clubs, but many others were not.

As the Internet was gradually transformed from the relatively disorganized activity of the early days to the browser-mediated World Wide Web/information highway/dot.com boom of the mid- and late 1990s, the degree to which conventional fan-club activity shifted to the Web was remarkable. The magnitude of the shift was noted when, in September of 2002, the U.S.-based National Association of Fan Clubs (http://members.aol.com/lknafc/nafc) ceased operation. Established by fans some 25 years earlier, the Association had acted as a clearinghouse for fan clubs of all kinds, offering advice on how to set up and maintain clubs, putting clubs in contact with one another, and publishing an annual directory of clubs. In shutting down the Association, the site operator remarked on how widespread “Internet-driven” fan-club activity had become, how impossible it was to keep track of it, and how most of her time had become dominated by chasing down information on websites and groups she had never heard of before.

Indeed, the magnitude of official and unofficial fan-club activity itself poses a substantial problem to anyone attempting to study it. It is not even possible to get a clear picture of the number of fan clubs in operation, even for a single star or media text; for example, even before the recent shift to the Internet, Elvis fan clubs (Elvis still having the largest number of fan groups dedicated to him, even decades after his death) were estimated at approximately 500 in number (with one U.K. group alone claiming some 20,000 members). To put this in perspective, however, “Trekkie” (“Star Trek”) fan clubs are rumoured to number in the thousands worldwide. Obviously, important strategic and methodological decisions are required at the outset when attempting to do any kind of research in the area of fan clubs on the Internet.

For the purposes of this article, I have chosen to focus on a number of “official” music fan clubs and artist sites—sites run by or for artists themselves. (In many cases, the name of the site is the same as that of the artist; to avoid interrupting flow, I have generally refrained from citing URLs in the text and have instead listed them at the end of the article.) As noted above, official fan clubs have certainly existed in the past, both within the mainstream industry and among independently produced artists and labels. However, for a variety of industrial and economic reasons, they appear to have increased in number in recent years and to
have become a more significant focus of attention for artists and industry alike. Furthermore, in examining some of the activities of official fan clubs, the contradictions and tensions that exist between the interests of commerce and those of fans can be set into high relief.

Since the mid-1990s, it has become common for stars to have their own professionally run websites, and increasingly, these are associated with “official” fan clubs of one kind or another. These sites are run variously by the artists, their management, their record companies, or more recently, by specialized third-party interests. For example, “Fan Asylum” was established in 1984 as a fan-club-management group for the rock band Journey, and in 1995, it began offering Internet services to other artists. Its roster now includes big-name acts such as Melissa Etheridge, Matchbox Twenty, and Whitney Houston, among others. Fan Asylum has also put on special events in partnership with Ultrastar.com, a fan-club-management company that represents David Bowie, Destiny’s Child, Sting, and the Rolling Stones. Similarly, online fan-club services are offered by Music-today.com: founded by the manager of Dave Matthews Band (DMB), it now serves not only DMB, but also artists such as the Dixie Chicks, Eminem, Metallica, Nine Inch Nails, Britney Spears, and Shania Twain, among others. Undoubtedly, one of the reasons for seeking third-party services is both the cost and expertise required to manage an ongoing presence on the Internet: even a modest, professional website can cost several-thousand dollars to set up and hundreds of dollars a month to maintain; launching and managing an online fan club can cost several times as much. In addition, the third-party services collect data on fans and make it available to the artist; in this sense, “The Artist owns the customer relationship” (Musictoday.com, n.d.).

Most online fan clubs (and more generally, “official” websites devoted to artists) share certain features in common. Virtually all of them are dedicated, to one degree or another, to hawking merchandise (CDs, t-shirts, photos, calendars, sandals, jewelry, and a host of other products); they provide advance promotion on upcoming releases and concert tours; most trumpet the artist’s commitment to various charitable causes; and many offer some kind of “direct” access to artists and/or other fans (through bulletin boards, chat rooms, et cetera).

The emphasis on merchandizing is not surprising, of course: pop and rock artists have long relied on the sale of t-shirts and other merchandise, often sold directly to fans at concert venues, as an additional source of revenue. The websites, however, often cater to an elitist idea of the “fan-as-collector” by offering special, “limited-edition” versions of some merchandise: autographed or customized in some other manner, these special products are sold at several times the cost of the conventional ones. Traditionally, much of this secondary-level commerce in merchandise has been left to the artists themselves and/or their management. As record companies have begun to see the control of and profit from artists’ images as equally important to their operations as the sale of CDs, “image rights” have increasingly become a part of contract negotiations. Websites obviously enhance
the ability to profit from merchandizing schemes, because they make the products available everywhere and on a continuous basis.

Perhaps more surprising, however, is that the support of concert touring itself has been identified as the prime motivator behind the recent rise of Internet fan-club sites. Indeed, one of the most unique aspects of the contemporary music industry is that after over 100 years of sound recording and successive waves of electronic media (including radio, music-television, and the Internet), live concert touring remains an essential part of popular music culture. And if touring has traditionally been regarded by the record industry as simply a promotional activity—a necessary part of selling records—attending concerts remains, for most fans, as intense an expression of their relationship to stars as it was in the days of Jenny Lind. Again, until relatively recently, much of the organizational apparatus behind concert touring has been managed by a combination of regional operators and local promoters. Increasingly, however, touring arrangements have come under the control of larger corporate interests, at the national and international level, and even record companies themselves have become more involved (and more interested in the profits derived from touring). By offering preferential access to concert tickets for club members, fan sites are often able to exact annual membership fees of U.S.$100 or more.

While Prince and other artists have long made preferential seating available to their fans via their websites (Prince even offering “VIP members” access to pre-concert parties where he would be in attendance), the Dave Matthews Band (DMB) has been singled out as the “poster child” of the new online-club phenomenon (see Garrity, 2002). Over the past several years, DMB has been one of the top-grossing touring bands in the U.S., and while many artists reserve approximately 10% of the house for club members, DMB has been known to reserve 40-50% of available seating at some venues. In 2001, DMB charged only U.S.$30 ($35 in 2005) for a one-year subscription to its fan club, “The Warehouse,” but with a membership in excess of 80,000, it grossed well over $2 million in subscription fees that year alone. The mainstream industry, desperate to find new ways to make a profit from the Internet, is investigating the idea of subscription use in all forms (including fan clubs and subscription sites for downloading songs): they hope that subscription sites will help end their present problems with online file-sharing, but also, subscriptions are seen as a more general way of overcoming the irregular consumption patterns of fans over time and a means of removing some of the need for huge promotions timed with record releases and the like.

However, it is important to note that the character of fan involvement in this new form of cross-media interaction—Internet plus live tour—is not limited to the economic demands placed on it by certain artists or by the industry. For example, during the late 1990s, Sarah McLachlan’s “Lilith Fair” tour was supported by a website (likely one of the first of its kind in the world of pop); it offered tour schedules, profiles of performers in the concert lineup, a constantly changing selection of photos and videos from the various shows, and of course,
merchandise. It also offered a place for fans to post letters and testimonials about their experiences at the concerts. The latter often expressed the enthusiasm of the fans for the tour not simply as a venue for female performers, but as a special event for women; the feeling of togetherness that it fostered; and the deep significance that this had for them as individuals and as women. Contrary to early celebrations of the Internet as a forum where social identities were thought to be irrelevant, recent work has suggested that online interactions can reinforce both gender and class identities (see Bury, 2003). The success of the tour and the website in this regard may have been more than McLachlan had bargained for: in interviews surrounding her career comeback and the release of her new album, McLachlan stated that the tour had required that she take a break from public life, in part because it had placed too much responsibility on her as a representative of feminism, something that (she claims) she had never intended.

The essential continuity that exists between face-to-face and online interactions, such as that evident among fans of “Lilith Fair,” has been noted recently by a number of authors. For example, among members of the Goth scene studied by Paul Hodkinson (2003), personal friendships and social bonds within the subculture are often made and maintained through a combination of online and offline contact. In the case of hardcore Phish fans, codes of behaviour forged at live concert events carry over into online discussions, limiting the range of possible debate about the band; conversely, online discussions between fans and the band have been carried over into live performance contexts (Bennett, 2004).

In these ways, websites can lend concert tours—by nature, ephemeral events—an extended life online, one that allows fans to invest them with personal meaning, but to do so in a public forum. In a more general sense, the tour site both “synchronizes” fan interest with the tour as it is in motion, creating a sense of anticipation and ongoing involvement, and at the same time, offers a temporal extension of affective pleasure following the event as well. As Matt Hills has argued in a somewhat different context, the website becomes a vehicle where fans “perform their fandom,” consuming the concert and a textual representation of themselves as part of the event, thus intensifying their affective engagement with it (Garrity, 2002, p. 177).

The idea of synchronization as employed by Hills, however, suggests that there is a fundamental tension between the interests of fans and the demands of commerce. The idea also bears a resemblance to Hills’ notion of “serialization,” which he uses in referring to the timing of online fan activity in relation to broadcast-television schedules (2002); but in the case of tour sites, the synchronization occurs because of the ways in which the content is organized and the manner in which the sites solicit fan involvement, not because of the ways in which fans choose to organize their own interactions with one another. Indeed, recent tours by big-name acts such as the Rolling Stones and David Bowie have not only been supported by fan-club sites, but in the case of the Rolling Stones, the club was set up largely for the purpose of promoting the tour. Bowie’s “Reality Tour” (2003-04) was preceded not only by advance information on the site, but also by a series
of regular direct e-mails to fan-club members announcing the tour and providing links to the site. Once the tour began, but long before it reached North America, fans on this side of the Atlantic were again sent e-mails, sometimes on a daily basis, announcing the progress of the tour; the website contained pages of photographs (updated with each successive show), set lists, reviews, fan comments, and the like.

The inclusion of set lists and other information on the tour sites may appear innocuous, but it should be noted that this is precisely the type of information that previously circulated among fans on Usenet, chat pages, and other online discussion venues. By usurping this type of content, the tour sites interrupt the “ritual sharing of information” that is one of the foundations of much fan discourse and of the sense of commonality felt among fans (Kibby, 2000).

At the same time that the tour sites usurp these ritual functions, they offer club members special, advance deals on concert tickets at venues throughout the tour circuit: these pitches might appear odd (why would anyone in North America be interested in tickets for concerts in Germany?) until one realizes that ticket arrangements for fans of artists such as Bowie and the Stones now also offer the option of being combined with complete vacation packages at certain locations (5 days in Berlin, or 3 days in New York, complete with hotel accommodation and passes to pre-concert events). Within this context, the fan testimonials themselves, including photos of vacationing fans and letters stating how much fun they had at the show and elsewhere during their stay, become a form of promotional material.

While it is unlikely that most bands (or their fans) can assume the burden of such lavish consumer packages, there is nevertheless a tendency on many club sites to equate fan commitment with dollars spent. For example, now that DMB's Warehouse site has been in operation for several years, the band has instituted a program where long-term club members have priority access to the best seats in the house: “Seniority Status” is offered to members based on date of initial subscription to the club and continuous renewal, entitling them to priority seating. Similarly, bands such as Nine Inch Nails (NIN) have instituted two levels of fan-club membership: “Standard” and (at roughly twice the subscription price) “Premium,” with differential access to tickets and other benefits. A number of theorists have argued that subcultures are replete with various types of “distinction” and their own forms of “cultural capital” (Thornton, 1995); however, programs such as those of DMB and NIN distort this process and give the idea of fan commitment a purely financial quantitative measure.

This emphasis on fans as consumers extends also to the ways in which the artists’ involvement in charitable work is portrayed on many sites. As noted earlier, a commitment to charitable causes has long been a part of the public image of many performers, and such commitments have become especially common among pop and rock musicians, at least since the days of the various Live Aid events of the mid-1980s. A number of artists have even set up their own foundations, supporting a wide range of charities and social causes, and the club sites bear witness to the artists’ efforts in this regard. There are, of course, many ways in which
artists can use their celebrity status to draw attention to political and social causes (for example, Bono’s long-standing campaign in support of the relief of Third-World debt), but what is remarkable about the fan-club sites is the uniformity with which artists are portrayed as active agents and fans as consumers. Indeed, the particular appeal of most sites depends on the manner in which fans characteristically identify with stars: they suggest that it is our repeated acts of consumption that result in the support of the artist’s (and our) social goals, that we can somehow consume our way to a better world if our consumption is channelled through the agency of the star. And it is precisely through the accessibility offered by the Internet fan clubs that such repeated acts are facilitated and channelled.

What is perhaps most significant in the context of this discussion, however, is the way in which Internet fan clubs provide both a medium and a forum for a kind of ongoing, reciprocal interaction between stars and fans, and between fans and the fan community, that is unprecedented in the history of fan culture. The degree to which the potential of this type of access is realized on individual sites, and the character of the exchange that it facilitates, however, varies enormously. For example, some artist and tour websites (as opposed to online clubs) offer fans virtually no direct contact with the star or other fans at all; they act simply as promotional vehicles and derive income primarily from the sale of merchandise and concert tickets.

Some sites offer a forum for artists to post their views on a variety of issues, political or social—for example, Chuck D uses Public Enemy’s website like a microphone, regularly sounding off on political topics, but his posts are relatively independent of the interactions between fans—while others, such as David Bowie’s club site, offer fairly regular, though very controlled, question-and-answer forums between Bowie and his fans. Many also offer various types of bulletin-board services, chat rooms, and the like, where artists may occasionally post messages, but which are intended primarily for the fan community; conversations can be wide-ranging, often having little to do with the stars themselves, thus suggesting a certain independence on the part of fans. And finally, there are sites where artists and fans interact on a daily basis, creating forms of what might be referred to as “public intimacy,” personal and communal identification, or “affective alliance” (Grossberg, 1992, p. 59). Such sites are, in themselves, not uncommon on the Web, where boards and chat rooms are seemingly everywhere, but they are unique insofar as a star persona is central to the overall mix.

The use of the Internet as a kind of personal/public journal, diary, or “blog” (short for “weblog”) has come under the scrutiny of media theorists and popular commentators in recent years. For the most part, academic discussions have revolved around issues of “blogging” (and informal Internet discourse more generally) as an alternate source of news and information or as an extension, and possible revitalization, of the public sphere (e.g., Dahlberg, 2001). This emphasis on the informational and political uses of blogging has tended to mask the much more prevalent uses of blogging as a form of popular culture. One possible exception is an article entitled “Blogging and the Politics of Melancholy,” in which
author Michael Keren (2004) examines the creation of a cult-like following around an individual blogger, Jason Kottke, who first came to prominence on the Internet during the late 1990s. Keren's analysis of the cult following that formed around Kottke and his posts is certainly consistent with the character of the fan/artist relationship discussed here; however, Keren insists on too rigid a contrast between online and offline life by emphasizing the differences between the “virtual” and the “real.” As already noted, the online and offline lives of music fans offer an example of a greater integration, or at least a balancing, of the two realms, and the assumption of a preference for online interaction cannot be maintained where music fans are concerned. Furthermore, Keren argues that Kottke's blogging ultimately leads to a kind of political passivity or “melancholy.” Again, given the various political causes championed by popular musicians and fans, attempting to understanding the dynamic by which the political commitment of fans is symbolized, validated, and channelled through the star persona is a more fruitful avenue of analysis than the assumption of “passivity,” as such.

In Canada, singer Jann Arden is well known as a “blogger”; she regularly posts rants and banal details of her everyday life on her website for her fans to read and has even published a book consisting of little more than her journal postings. In this way, the confusion of public and private life that is so characteristic of celebrity finds a new outlet on the Internet and encourages similar behaviour on the part of fans as well. For the most part, however, while Arden's posts occasionally verge on a kind of political and social satire, they are not intended to mobilize her fans in any particular political direction.

Undoubtedly, the “kingfish of all bloggers,” as one commentator has referred to him, is Moby. Moby posts messages on his website virtually every day, and often several times a day. His posts range from the overtly political (expressing his opposition to the policies of the Bush administration and to the war in Iraq, and his support of John Kerry during the 2004 American presidential election) to the banal (how bad the food was on the airplane today), thus performing a balancing act between transgression and the mundane (Kahn-Harris, 2004). But in “performing” his persona in this way, Moby treats his stardom as peculiar kind of game between himself and his fans, a play between intimacy and spectacle, revelation and disguise, that is made all the more unusual because of the quotidian regularity with which it is played. The game, and its daily enactment, can also leave him unusually vulnerable, as when he has occasionally had to defend his changing political views on topics such as the war in Iraq over the past several years. On a more personal level, Moby was forced to apologize to his fans (on November 14, 2002) when, upon receiving an MTV Europe award for “Best Website,” he forgot to thank the many fans who also contribute daily to the website boards. In a technological environment that permits an almost instantaneous response time, the chorus of fan voices that rose up in criticism of Moby’s gaff demonstrated that even among fans, stars are not beyond reproach.

Moby’s fans synchronize their daily lives with his and with other fans, responding to his posts, posing questions, and carrying on conversations of their
own. For his part, Moby’s constant posting encourages continuous interaction and instills a sense of obligation, including his own: Moby demonstrates his feelings of obligation to his fans by apologizing profusely whenever touring or other responsibilities cause him to neglect his journal entries (indeed, it is precisely this sense of obligation and reciprocity that Moby violated in MTV gaff). Many fans respond by posting several times a day, and, as is common in cybertecture more generally, there exists an explicit hierarchy among the board members that is entirely quantitative in nature: based on frequency of posting, fans are given designations (assigned automatically by the board software) ranging from “newbies” to “members” to “divine members,” et cetera, up to the truly obsessed, who have logged literally thousands of posts. A new CD release inevitably results in an influx of new fans (here synchronized to a different kind of rhythm), most of whom are shunned by the old guard. In a sense, however, fans who have long frequented Moby’s site do not feel that their status is only quantitative in nature: they have developed ongoing relationships with other board members and, to a large degree, they feel that they are indeed posting to someone, not to an undifferentiated mass of fans. In recognition of the different character of their relationships, a group of the earliest Moby fans has occasionally withdrawn from the main site and appropriated little-used sections of the boards for its own purposes.

Unlike many chat rooms and other forums where critics have tended to celebrate the possibilities of disguising one’s age, race, or gender on the Internet, fans appear to be more interested in declaring themselves, in revealing aspects of their personalities and interests, and many even post photographs of themselves (this is as true of fans on Moby’s website as it is on Public Enemy’s and many others). Insofar as one can take fan postings at face value (and granted, there is clearly a danger in doing so), there appear to be few significant differences between males and females as regards the expression of their fandom. And what distinctions can be made between different websites appear to be based as much on genre as gender; for example, it should come as no surprise that the majority of fan postings on Public Enemy’s website are written by males.

The expression of fandom is further complicated, however, by the centrality of the star/fan relationship on artist websites. In the case of Moby, his posts occasionally describe his own feelings when encountering an artist who has had, supposedly, some influence on him in the past. For example, in one instance he described how incredible it felt to be simply in the presence of someone like Donna Summer at a fundraising event in upper Manhattan (October 29, 2003); in another, he states that he feels like a “giddy teenager” as he gets ready to go hear Devo perform and wonders whether they will play a couple of his favourite songs (July 22, 2004), and later, that he would like to just jump on a bus and follow the band around on their tour because they are such great performers. In these ways, Moby displays a shifting identity as both star and fan. More importantly, he performs what it means to be a fan—adoring, excited, devoted, and loyal—for his fans. This slippage between star persona and fan identity endears him to his fans, at the same time as it instructs them in an ideal mode of fandom.
The issue of persona/identity is an important one because of the affective investment that fans make in stars and in their connection to other fans. And here, the quotidian character of access to the Internet is perhaps a significant factor in the ways in which the club sites can be used as not only a means of expressing and validating a sense of community with other fans, but of affirming one’s individual existence and passions as well. This was perhaps evident in a series of posts on Moby’s site. One individual remarked on how it had been awhile since he had seen a post from an otherwise regular contributor to the board: Had anyone heard from her? Had anything happened to her? Was she all right? This was followed by another post that offered a rather philosophical reflection on how the writer sometimes wondered, given his relatively reclusive lifestyle, whether anyone would ever notice if he were to die; posting was one way of making sure he was not alone. This last bit of adolescent angst quickly became the object of a number of humorous responses, but perhaps the point had been made: in the world of online culture, one’s sense of individual existence, as well as communal identity, may hinge on the frequency and regularity of communication. In this way, as I have argued throughout this article, Internet fan clubs assert themselves as a kind of medium: “a network of repeatable relations” (Sterne, 2003, p. 210) that may be as essential to one’s personal life as it is to the world of commerce at large.

Conclusion
In describing Internet fan clubs as a medium, as a “network of repeatable relations,” I mean to emphasize, once again, the temporal and systematic character of this new phenomenon. For the music industry, the synchronization of tours and promotion with the everyday lives of fans through the medium of the Internet and the fan club is not an end in itself. The aim is to create an entirely new set of relations, to use the club sites not simply as a means of selling the occasional song, t-shirt, or concert ticket, but to involve fans in an ongoing way with artists’ projects and with the marketing needs of the industry: “We want this to be a destination for the fans to come 365 days a year” (Ahmek Richards, head of Arista Records, quoted in (Garrity, 2002). And in support of this new set of relations, it is interesting to note that even with regard to its nemesis, the file-sharing network, the industry has found ways to study the networks’ behaviour and extract information that can be useful to marketing and promotional apparatus (see Howe, 2003).

For both stars and fans, the Internet-based fan club offers a degree of access that is, without doubt, unprecedented in the history of fan culture. It offers the opportunity to perform their identities and relationships in an ongoing fashion, and what this performance may lack by way of intensity, it makes up for in the very quotidian regularity of its rhythms. In this way, a new set of relations may emerge that could help fans learn something about not only the stars that are the object of their desire, but also about themselves.

The fact that these two very different networks of repeatable relationships exist simultaneously, resulting in syncopated rhythms of manipulation and desire, profit-making and identity formation, should also come as no surprise, as they are
among the contradictions that have been a part of fan culture from its very beginnings in the nineteenth century.

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