

Gay for Johnny Depp:
Subcultural Anti-Marketing and
Record Label-Media “Incest” in the Capitalist Music Industry

When you go down
With your knees on the ground,
A reaction is the thing I crave,
A full-blown distraction,
'cause you're so well trained.

-GFJD lyrics from “Lights Out!”
The Politics of Cruelty, 2007.

But tell me, honey,
Tell me, Johnny,
What are we going to do about this?
And you blow me now, you bitch!

-GFJD lyrics from “At Least Be A Target”
Erotically Charged Dance Songs for the Desperate,
2004

Introduction

Brooklyn-based queercore band Gay for Johnny Depp (GFJD) has seemingly been met with every response but indifference. With lyrics that feature graphic details of the foursome’s sadomasochistic fantasies “about sodomizing [Johnny] Depp into a bloody pulp” (Sterry 2007), lead singer Marty Leopard hurls vulgarities at his audience in ferocious screams that straddle the line between Johnny Rotten and a hyena (Grayson 2007). There seems to be little about this band that would make it palatable to a wide audience. However, despite GFJD’s anti-mainstream image, the group’s first full-length album entitled *The Politics of Cruelty* has won praise from popular British media outlets like *New Music Express*, *The Guardian*, and *BBC Radio*—rare accolades for a hardcore band (Rose 2007). To be sure, this is a group engineered to make a splash.

In the best of lights, fans might see GFJD as a challenge to narrow constructions of gender and sexual identity, perhaps explaining the band’s recent positive media

response. For instance, their video for “Belief in God Is So Adorable” features a nearly naked, lipstick-wearing Marty Leopard who has donned little more than an animal-print scarf and some tighty whities. Leopard and his fellow pantsless bandmates become the focus of our aesthetic gaze as they perform ambiguous genders (Butler 1996). In addition, GFJD breaks away from restrictive sexual binaries: neither aligning themselves explicitly with heterosexuality or homosexuality, the band instead offers another identity, qualified queerness (or gayness for a certain individual), as if to defy discursively-constructed sexual categories (Jagose 1996). Here, the GFJD foursome perhaps becomes heroes of a postmodern queer community.

But is this the narrative through which GFJD wants us to interpret them? Or, more importantly, what is to be gained and for whom if we, the consumers, read them in a less benevolent light? Answering these questions, it would seem, pecks at the core of our notions of authenticity as we consider the lengths to which music producers will go in order to project a 21st-century subcultural image. I will examine GFJD’s perhaps unconventional relationship with the media how and the band constructs this image through anti-marketing. In addition, I will explore the ways in which GFJD functions in the context of the capitalist market they ostensibly wish to subvert.

Media-Saturation and Authenticity

In order to understand how GFJD operates in today’s music industry, we must first unpack the notions of “authenticity” and “mainstream,” noting how these ideas converge to influence subcultural consumer subjectivity. Ours is a world saturated with commercialism—at every turn, some producer is trying to sell a product to us (Frank,

1998; Ortner 1998; Mahon 2000). Even former safe havens like schools, churches, and urinals have been transformed into spaces for circulating advertising propaganda (Frontline 2003). As a result, many people have grown annoyed with and even distrustful of the media as they become increasingly aware of the ways in which it infiltrates their daily lives, attempting to manipulate their patterns of consumption (Frank 1998; Frontline 2003; Darke and Ritchie 2009). This is perhaps especially salient in light of the recent economic downturn and the public's increasing reticence to spend as freely in an unstable market (Miyazaki 2006; Gotham 2006; Darke and Richie 2009).

Market analysts Kent Grayson and Radan Martinec believe that contemporary consumers want to “escape from the phoniness that underlies most of today’s marketing practices” (Grayson and Martinec 2004) by seeking “authentic” products—products that have not been packaged and marketed explicitly for large-scale consumption (Grayson and Martinec 2004). In order for products to qualify as authentic, consumers must believe that they have been created for reasons other than simply earning a profit, and they must signify a connection to a particular spatiotemporal location or group of individuals (Grayson and Schulman 2000). In other words, a product is viewed as authentic if it is socially meaningful and culturally specific.

The notion of subculture helps to bring these ideas into focus. Sarah Thornton suggests that “subcultural ideologies are a means by which [consumers] imagine their own and other social groups, assert their own distinctive character and affirm that they are not anonymous members of an undifferentiated mass” (Thornton 1995). Subcultural groups tend to view themselves in opposition to the mainstream (Hebdige 1981), an imagined entity that ostensibly seeks to homogenize society and which serves as a

fictitious foil against which individuals create and perform alternative identities.

(Importantly, acknowledging that “mainstream” is a fictive entity also suggests the very same for “subculture” (Weinzierl and Muggleton 2004). Nevertheless, these categories prove meaningful in examining consumer identities, where this fluid and contested binary is often called into existence in constructing various subjectivities (Kondo 1997; Mahon 2000)). In order for a subcultural consumer to break away from the mainstream and avow his or her own subjective distinction, as Tim Taylor explains, he or she must “have increasingly individualized tastes, increasingly non-mainstream tastes, increasingly eclectic or unusual tastes” (Taylor 1997).

The challenge for musical producers who target the increasing number of these individuals is to create products—in this case, bands—that seem as if they have not been produced and marketed for large-scale consumption. One way to ensure this interpretation is to “break so many rules that [the musical product] becomes indigestible” for mainstream media outlets (Frontline 2001). Media theorist Douglas Rushkoff believes that fans experience such music as authentic because it ostensibly “hasn’t been processed by corporations, digested into popular culture, and sold back to them at the mall” (Frontline 2001). Here, commercialization is seen as a threat, as it signals an overt intent to make money through widespread appeal, thus undermining the product’s authenticity.

GFJD’s Anti-Mainstream Image Via Anti-Marketing

Keeping this in mind, we begin to understand the subcultural space in which GFJD functions. In interviews, the band’s lead singer Mary Leopard refers to popular

music journals like Britain's *New Music Express* as "the enemy," and when asked to comment for a press blurb in this widely popular venue, he screamed, "We don't want to be in fucking *NME!*," (GFJD homepage). Furthermore, by virtue of their lyrical content and raucous sound, such as in the song "At Least Be a Target,"—"Fucked you for pleasure, / Fucked you for pain, / Fucked you in ways that I just can't explain"—GFJD exempts itself from airplay on radio stations and televised commercials, mainstream music marketing tools *par excellence* (Taylor 1997). One reviewer observes that their music is "made with no regard for potential audiences, doing everything on its own terms" (Morgan 2007). As such, GFJD has seemingly positioned itself in opposition to a capitalist, moneymaking industry where catchy, twee-ish love songs are used to sell everything from potato chips to cars (Taylor 1997).

However, while they publicly disavow the media, GFJD still depends upon these outlets to circulate information about their product—but their relationship with the media departs from more traditional models. While the majority of their reviews are positive, the band particularly embraces acrid relationships with rock critics, prominently displaying negative reviews on its site. In fact, the first thing a browser confronts when visiting the band's homepage is one critic's extreme disapproval of and discomfort with the moral transgressions depicted in GFJD's press release: "If someone you knew had written this, you'd be passing it on to the police and they would probably end up on the sex-offenders register... This is a totally poor attempt to get people talking and I'm actually sorry that I've given them any coverage" (GFJD homepage). Another reviewer goes on to describe their music as "the live soundtrack to an unbearably upsetting snuff film, as delivered by a mentally deranged gay rapist narrator" (GFJD homepage).

Subculturally speaking, GFJD's embrace of these reviews makes sense, because, as Dick Hebdidge and Sarah Thornton have noted, wholesale media approval "tend[s] to lead to a quick abandonment of the key insignia of the culture" for fear that it will be appropriated by the mainstream (Hebdidge, 1981; Thornton 1995). However, prominently exhibited negative reviews like these accomplish more than simple censure—they are hidden commercials, part of a new wave of reverse psychology anti-marketing, according to market theorist Indrajit Sinha. As Volkswagen and the punk music industry have both deftly demonstrated, negative reviews create a sort of iconoclast mythology around a product, and, from the perspective of marketing, these are actually sensational appraisals—the very type upon which rebellious subcultures thrive (Frank 1996; Frontline 2003). In examining GFJD reviews, it becomes clear that even the most disapproving comments actually serve to sell the band's anti-mainstream image. Proudly displaying their subversion, GFJD is in fact eager to *brand* its unmarketability, thus legitimating the band's status as an authentic subculture. For the growing number of consumers who want to identify themselves as outside of the mainstream (Frank 1998), GFJD's musical product is thus highly seductive.

But how can GFJD ensure that they will always be read in this particular quasi-negative light? In other words, what are the social networks that bands like GFJD rely upon to circulate these kinds of narratives?

Record Label-Media Networks

Enter Ben Myers: talent scout, CEO, and Marketing Manager for Captains of Industry, the label to which the band was initially signed. Importantly, Ben Meyers is

also an independent music journalist, and as Sarah Thornton notes, “People in these professions often enjoy a lot of respect not only because of their high volume of subcultural capital, but also from their role in defining and creating it” (Thornton 1995). As an individual simultaneously representing many music industry voices, Myers has a lot of control over the band’s public image and can ensure that the proper anti-mainstream mythology is circulated. Among the dozens of popular music venues for whom he writes are *Mojo*, *Alternative Press*, *Kerrang!*, *Time Out*, *Q*—surprisingly, the band has received reviews in nearly all of them. Also notable is the fact that many of GFJD’s most sensational reviews appear in these publications, one penned by Myers himself in which he referred to the band’s first album, *The Politics of Cruelty*, as “a shot in the foot” (Myers 2007).

While the media outlets in which these reviews appear seem to have an illusory independence from the band’s record label, at least in this case, these industries are intimately related. Furthermore, in an advertising-cynical arena where obvious financial relations between the media and the record industry are seen as taboo (Kruse 1993; Lee 1995), quasi-negativity towards a product connotes an air of authenticity (Frank 1998). Indeed, for Myers, the negative review has proven to be an effective marketing tool: although the band was originally conceived as a single-EP group, following the success of their initial release, GFJD has continued to tour, and they are preparing the release of their second album, *Ski Mask Orgy*.

But, as positive responses appear with increasing regularity in major venues like *The Guardian*, *NME*, and even the *BBC*, the window is closing for this marketing strategy that thrives on a public belief of un-success. Dick Hebdidge warns, “As the

subculture begins to strike its own eminently marketable pose, as its vocabulary (both visual and verbal) becomes more and more familiar, so the referential context to which it can be most conveniently assigned is made increasingly apparent” and the subversive image of the band is perhaps deflated to the status of common culture (Hebdige 1981). Indeed, GFJD’s more recent reviewers have started to adopt the band’s rhetoric of sodomy, rape, and torture: just in time for the holidays, a critic writing for the formerly pessimistic *New Music Express* wrote, “Once you attune yourself to Marty Leopard’s adenoid yelp, it’s clear they’re spinning the blackest bile into doubly shiny gold. All said, it’ll make the perfect stocking-stuffer for your favourite undead nymphomaniac this holiday season” (GFJD homepage). Hanging in the balance between authentic obscurity and mainstream success, GFJD is positioned at an awkward moment. The possible outcomes seem clear: either the band fails to garner enough fame to sell its records or it makes it too big and is absorbed by the mainstream, thereby losing its claims to authenticity.

But Ben Myers may have a solution: ignite a fire, but snuff it out before it gets too large. Demonstrating his sales know-how, he writes, “In an art-form that thrives on myth-making and the creation of heroes and villains or...iconoclasts..., more bands should do us a favour and disappear, pronto. After all, the Sex Pistols built an empire in twenty-six months that is paying bigger dividends today than ever” (Myers 2007). On April 1st 2008, Ben Meyer’s Captains of Industry, the label to which GFJD was signed, suddenly dissolved leaving the band on its own. However, Myers assures bands like GFJD that “if your reputation is strong and your debut a belter, those royalties will come in time” (Myers 2007). In his popular blog “Ben Myers, Man of Letters,” Myers

disparages the ploys of capitalist producers in manipulating the unsuspecting consumer.

He writes,

As [Roland Barthes'] *Mythologies* showed, awareness of the ways in which everyday objects signify also suggests the power to alter this very process. The power, in other words, lies not just with the [consumer] but with the advertiser. The irony is, in drawing attention to semiotics and our power to alter what, and how, things signify, Barthes didn't necessarily educate the masses as to their own consumerist susceptibility, but in fact alerted new generations of marketing and advertising executives to their power to influence the channels of signification....Indeed, looking at *Mythologies* through the lens of contemporary culture, it is depressingly obvious that Barthes' theories, in teaching society about the way it controls its own meanings, actually enhanced and inspired the very world of advertising and marketing that he sought to question and warn us against (Myers 2007).

Admittedly, Myers' messages regarding his role as a music marketer are contradictory and ambivalent: at times, he identifies with the industry of cultural production and acknowledges his role in creating "heroes and villains or...iconoclasts," while at others, he positions himself as an outsider to this industry as he critiques the world of advertizing. Nevertheless, Ben Myers is a part of that very world. He and GFJD are out to sell a product in part by altering the signification of an album review in order to speak to contemporary media-cynical consumers who wish to position themselves as enemies of the mainstream economy.

But in spite of their reputations as cultural deviants, groups like GFJD are in fact developed "within the discourse, politics, and logic of late capitalism," and as such, their subversive challenges "never really threaten the existence of a dominant class or subvert the rules of the game" (Kondo 1997). To be sure, bands like GFJD depend upon our images of the mainstream, using it as a vague, undefined foil against which to construct an alternative identity, working within its economic system to exploit our conceptions of it in order sell their products. As such, "the consumer," Arjun Appadurai writes,

has been transformed through commodity flows into...a mask for the real seat of agency, which is not the consumer but the producer. These images of agency are increasingly distortions of a world of merchandising so subtle that the consumer is consistently helped to believe that he or she is an actor, where in fact he or she is at best a chooser (Appadurai 1996).

And yet, I remain hopeful that this is not an entirely accurate reflection of today's increasingly savvy consumer, one who can reason that anti-marketing is only a thin veil disguising the commercialism of subcultural musical production. Moreover, while the above analysis examines the ways in which subcultural images might be constructed and marketed (or anti-marketed, as it were), it says little about the ways in which the musical product is actually consumed. Cultural producers cannot control how commodities are used after they have left the producer's jurisdiction where they take on new meanings and significations (Hebdige 1981; Appadurai 1986; Mahon 2000; Brown 2001). It may be that in spite of the subtle construction of GFJD's identity, their music offers a compelling political challenge to the dominant culture (Weinzierl and Muggleton 2004). In considering this aspect of musical production, an important question remains to be answered for GFJD: as the band's image is circulated globally via the internet and beyond the narrow confines of the review, who are they actually reaching, and how is their product translated and used in other and newly emerging contexts?

Conclusion

GFJD and Ben Myers' marketing strategy is founded upon the assumption that contemporary consumers believe that the modern music industry represents a mainstream enemy. Together with Myers, GFJD seeks to offer an alternative to mainstream identity, reaching out to potential fans through a carefully constructed image of a subversive band

unaccepted by mainstream media. This strategy is visible in the print media available on GFJD's homepage, wherein the band embraces and prominently displays negative reviews, one of which was written by Ben Myers, the band's marketing manager. I suggest that in a cultural and economic climate where visible market forces increasingly draw distrust and skepticism, it is the band's perceived unlikeability and unmarketability—markers of authenticity in a contemporary world saturated with commercialism—that contribute in part to its recent media acclaim. However, GFJD's iconoclastic image is also likely unstable: as the band achieves wider success and positive reviews become more common, its anti-mainstream image is likely to be read as ersatz.

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