‘... This little ukulele tells the truth’: indie pop and kitsch authenticity

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Abstract

Indie pop, like rock and other independent genres more generally, has had a complicated relationship with mass culture. It both depends upon and simultaneously deconstructs notions of authenticity and truth. Independent genres have invited scholarly analysis and critique that often seek to unmask indie as ‘elite’ or to show the extent to which indie musics are, ironically, defined and shaped by consumer capitalism. Using songwriter Stephin Merritt’s music and career as a case study, this essay explores the kinds of authenticities at work in indie pop. Indie pop, I argue, is a genre especially adept at generating ‘personal authenticity’. It is useful to turn to the concept of kitsch, understood here as an aesthetic and not a synonym for ‘bad’. Kitsch functions to cultivate personal attachment in the face of impersonal mass culture; it is this aesthetic, I argue, that indie pop has cultivated through its lo-fi and often nostalgic sound world and through its dissemination, which has relied upon dedicated collectors. The ‘honesty’ of this music does not arise from an illusion of unmediated communication, but instead from the emphasis on the process of mediation, which stresses the materiality of the music and the actual experience of listening.

Introduction: indie pop and truth

I wish I had an orchestra behind me
To show you how I feel
Well, the orchestra remains imaginary
But this little ukulele’s real

I wish I had an orchestra behind me
When you lose faith, an orchestra gives proof
Well, an orchestra can tell you pretty stories
But this little ukulele tells the truth

Stephin Merritt, ‘This little ukulele’, from the soundtrack for Eban and Charley

Songwriter Stephin Merritt’s tiny tribute to his ukulele is a fitting anthem for indie fans. His song declares in its lyrics – and embodies in its musical substance – indie’s love of lo-fi sound: his fragile ukulele modestly eschews high production values in favour of nothing other than the ‘truth’. At the same time, the combination of Merritt’s low, vaguely misanthropic, Ian Curtis-like voice and his high-pitched,
wonky ukulele casts the song as tongue-in-cheek. Indeed, the act of self-consciously claiming that the music is ‘authentic’ immediately undermines that claim, inviting us to view the song as parodic. Infused with an insipid intellectualism, it reiterates the importance of ‘authenticity’ while also hinting at authenticity’s constructed nature. The song highlights the paradoxical nature of much indie pop: it depends upon, and simultaneously deconstructs the concepts of authenticity and truth, while its sound world borrows in equal measure the perceived ‘rawness’ of punk and the compelling sweetness and catchiness of mainstream pop.

In what follows, I explore the forms of authenticity at work in indie pop with particular reference to the music of Stephin Merritt. A prolific songwriter, Merritt is the mastermind behind several groups (The Magnetic Fields, The 6ths, Future Bible Heroes, and The Gothic Archies), has also done film soundtracks, and in 2009, he and playwright David Greenspan produced a musical version of the children’s book Coraline. The bulk of his creative output has been with The Magnetic Fields, where he has worked with Claudia Gonson, Sam Davol and John Woo, along with other guest musicians. The band has released nine albums and a handful of singles. The first four albums – Distant Plastic Trees (1991), The Wayward Bus (1992), The House of Tomorrow (1992) and Holiday (1994) – were put out on smaller indie labels (Red Flame, Pop Up Records and Feel Good All Over). Merritt later joined Merge Records and released three new albums: The Charm of the Highway Strip (1994), Get Lost (1995) and the three-volume 69 Love Songs (1999); Merge also re-released his previous albums. After 69 Love Songs, Merritt went semi-mainstream, moving to Nonesuch Records, and has released three more albums, i (2004), Distortion (2008) and Realism (2010). Though certain aspects of his style have remained the same throughout these albums – his wickedly clever lyrics and catchy melodies – the production values have changed markedly. Merritt therefore makes an ideal case study, since he has navigated the indie spectrum from the smallest labels through to semi-mainstream success.

Critiques of authenticity

Though indie pop is a particular subgenre of indie, and therefore often distinct from indie rock, its identity has nevertheless been bound up with and shaped by the same imperatives of and challenges to authenticity that helped form indie rock. Authenticity and anxieties about authenticity are central to the history and to the study of popular music. Rock, in particular, has always had an uneasy relationship with mass culture, since it faces the problem of espousing the aesthetics of rebellion and countercultural ideals while at the same time depending on the mechanisms of mass culture for dissemination and distribution. Its history can be read as unfolding in cycles of waxing and waning authenticities: the creation of an ‘authentic’ style, its transformation into a marketable commodity, followed by a push to renew authenticity by turning to a fresher style. Thus the ‘schlock rock’ of the late 1950s gave way to the new sounds of the Beatles, while the outrageously artificial and elaborate sounds of prog rock created the need for the Spartan chords of punk.

Authenticity has been an especially complicated site within the academy, and has given rise to a rich literature exploring both the concept and concomitant issues such as identity politics and the notion of subcultures. It forms the explicit focal point of many studies on musics from Nirvana (Mazullo 2000) and U2 (Moore 1998) to progressive
rock (Sheinbaum 2008) and the Spice Girls (Leach 2001); authenticity lurks implicitly in countless other studies. In the guise of ‘rockism’, Kelefa Sanneh declared it to be ‘imperial’ (Sanneh 2004). In 1992, Lawrence Grossberg rang the death knell for authenticity, arguing that the growing cynicism within popular culture rendered all ideologies untenable. Of the new postmodern sensibility, he writes, ‘This “hip” attitude is an ironic nihilism in which distance is offered as the only reasonable relation to a reality which is no longer reasonable’ (Grossberg 1992, p. 225).

In many ways, scholars’ obsession with authenticity in the study of rock and pop – whether studying its formation or deconstructing it – reflects the broader struggle faced by scholars of popular culture who had to battle Marxist and Adornian critiques of mass culture in order to justify discussing popular music as something other than a by-product of industrial society. As Simon Frith has argued, Adorno’s dismissal of popular culture reflects his basic assumption that popular media amounted to a corruption of European culture: all popular musics were standardised, inauthentic versions of a real culture under attack by the mass media (Frith 1981, especially pp. 39–60). In the wake of the Frankfurt school, scholars of popular culture have struck out in several productive directions. Frith, importantly, took the mass cultural aspects of rock not as a challenge to its ‘authenticity’, but as its life-blood; importantly Frith did not reduce rock to mass culture (Frith 1978). Yet the shadow cast by Adorno has been long and his influence powerful, and many scholars have argued, or struggled to argue, for rock’s critical capacity. Max Paddison attempted to carve out a niche in which rock – precisely because it speaks to a large community of listeners – could provide some sort of progressive social critique (Paddison 1982). Ultimately, finding rock’s dependence on mass media an insurmountable obstacle, Paddison reinforced Adorno’s belief that rock cannot perform a progressive function. John Alberti, however, argued for the real critical potential in the faux naïf music of Jonathan Richman, claiming that Richman’s childlike songs, with their signature amateur vocals and intentionally simplistic arrangements, have an inherently Brechtian function, and have the power to ‘destabilize any reified performance or marketing niche’ (Alberti 1999, p. 188). What is at stake in these discussions is not simply the status of rock as a force for social critique, but its acceptability as a topic for scholarly discussion. In R.J. Warren Zanes’s words, ‘popular music culture sometimes becomes the surface on which certain academic interests are both projected and, following this, protected’ (Zanes 1999, p. 37).

Within indie genres, issues of authenticity are especially prominent: indie was born in a utopian attempt to stop the inevitable cycle of bands being co-opted – and, it is assumed, corrupted – by the mainstream. Stylistically, indie’s origins can be traced back to the distorted music of the Velvet Underground, the rebellious screaming of early punk groups, and to some of rock’s more quirky and eccentric figures such as Jonathan Richman; the actual concept of indie music, however, crystallised only in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Before indie, rock had enjoyed an underground or alternative scene, and there were independent labels that have prized non-mainstream sounds. During the 1980s, a rich alternative music scene thrived that included groups such as Beat Happening, Built to Spill and perhaps most notably R.E.M. The popularity of Nirvana, however, brought mainstream attention to grunge, which quickly garnered mass appeal precisely because of its original underground status; indeed, within narratives of rock history, Nirvana and in particular Kurt Cobain are held up as paragons of authenticity with rock, its paradoxes, and its tragic consequences. ‘Alternative’ and ‘grunge’ became more or less synonymous.
Ryan Hibbett puts it nicely: ‘By the late eighties, the term ‘alternative’ was well in use, becoming a platitude of mainstream culture with the explosion of the Seattle bands’ (Hibbett 2005, p. 58). In other words, ‘alternative’ became a highly marketable style, simply another station on the radio. Because it signified a particular style and not the music’s relationship to the mainstream, other alternative groups were forced to actively define themselves against the newly mainstreamed grunge scene. Superchunk, for example, refused to sign to a major label when they were being hailed as the next Nirvana, and instead founded their own independent label, Merge. During the 1990s, a plethora of small labels flourished. Many of these are alive and well today; others are now defunct. Some, such as Miami-based Pop Up Records, proclaim their indie ethos on their websites in no uncertain terms:

We are a label run by artists, for artists and do not believe ‘indie’ to be genre-specific. The corporate structure crushes creativity, and our goal is to nurture our artists’ collective vision instead of chasing the latest commercially viable fad. We believe true talent perseveres and are more interested in creating a feeling than a marketable ‘single’.3

Of course, the proliferation of the small indie labels that support underground bands does not stop the mainstream’s co-option of indie styles, nor does it stop indie groups from moving to bigger labels if they become more popular. Indeed, though indie music’s dependence on notions of authenticity nominally links it with other musical discourses such as blues and country, it differs from these styles in its close, even parasitic relationship with mainstream popular music.4 Forever lingering on the margins, it occasionally lampoons the mainstream, and often unwillingly serves as an incubator for styles that later become co-opted by the mainstream. Holly Kruse observes:

… without dominant, mainstream musics against which to react, independent music cannot be independent. Its existence depends upon dominant music structures and practices against which to define itself. Indie music has therefore been continually engaged in an economic and ideological struggle in which its ‘outsider’ status is re-examined, re-defined, and re-articulated to sets of musical practices. (Kruse 2003, p. 149)

There is a deep irony surrounding indie music; in the utopian attempt to escape the mainstream market, indie musicians and producers risk being entirely defined by the market. Keir Keightley writes:

… indie rock’s valorisation of non-major label productions and of the act of purchasing music directly from bands themselves at gigs, missed the fact that indie and mainstream musical consumption are both part of consumer capitalism, different only in the degree of their complicity. Indie rock is defined by its concern for the scale of consumer capitalism, rather than by its radical rejection of an economic system. This concern with reduced scale may also be glimpsed in indie culture’s investment in the miniature: in boutique record stores, 45 rpm singles, small runs of home-made cassettes, or the reverent recreation of miniature models of past eras or albums. (Keightley 2001, p. 129)

Indeed, indie’s preoccupation with and fetishisation of the local and the obscure runs the risk of trading the mainstream for elitism. Ryan Hibbett addressed exactly this in his essay on the marketing of indie rock. Drawing an analogy between indie rock and high art, he uses Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital to explain the perceived value of indie rock: it has value precisely because it appeals (or appears to appeal) to a smaller elite segment of society. Yet, he argues, indie rock is highly marketable as a slightly exotic ‘other’. As evidence, he points to amazon.com’s clever
advertising tactics, which lead the consumer through a network of related bands based on their past purchases, and the existence of websites like ‘Soyouwanna.com’, which boil down the indie ethos into a few commercialised rules that inform the would-be indie fan how to play the part of the hipster indie rocker. He concludes: 

For all its proclaimed edginess, indie rock would appear to satisfy more than it challenges pre-existing social and economic structures. As poignantly demonstrated by recent ad campaigns, the desire for otherness, for distinction from the masses [...] is highly marketable. Volkswagen’s use of songs by Jay Farrar and Nick Drake; its small group of friends who conscientiously turn away from the party, preferring instead the select company and superior space of their car; the unanticipated sounds of Mogwai on both a Levi’s commercial and Sex and the City episode – all these suggest that the desire to be different is little more than commonplace, that the indie elite are more numerous than they would perhaps care to think. (Hibbett 2005, pp. 75–6)

Hibbett’s ‘unmasking’ of indie music as yet another marketable style is slightly anti-climactic: that it is subject to mass marketing tells us nothing surprising; any other cultural product is likewise marketable, be it Britney Spears or Beethoven. Hibbett’s criticism could be made of any argument that posits something which ‘satisfies pre-existing social structures’ simply because it can be swept into the mainstream. Hibbett ultimately tells us more about mass culture marketing than it does about the intricacies of indie music as a cultural practice. Secondly, though Hibbett recognises the intellectual aspects of indie music (which for him, stem from the challenge of navigating alternative media to keep abreast of developments in indie culture), he does not utilise the full implications of that intellectualism. Indeed, indie music is a discourse that is inherently critical: fans invest time and critical thought in order to follow indie music; fans and indie musicians alike take an explicitly critical stance towards mainstream music – the music is often seeped with intellectualism, manifest in clever lyrics, obscure citations, satire and self-analysis.

Merritt’s songs, for example, virtuosically pack in a panoply of references to a variety of people, places and things. These include everything from other musicians (Steve Earle in ‘Acoustic Guitar’, 1999), Napoleon’s first wife, Joséphine de Beauharnais (‘Josephine’, 1991) to characters from Westerns (‘Two Characters in Search of a Country Song’, 1994), from the Brill Building – the New York City song factory of the 1950s – (‘Epitaph for my Heart’, 1999) to Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (rhymed with ‘About love/I’m not so sure’, 1999); other songs refer explicitly to song writing (‘Crazy For You (But Not That Crazy)’ and ‘The Way You Say Goodnight’, 1999).\(^5\) The prevalence of such references has led one fan of the Magnetic Fields to start a blog entitled ‘Stephinsources: The Songs That Inspired the Songs About Songs’ and among the eight or so Stephin Merritt fan pages on Facebook is one entitled ‘Stephin Merritt fulfils me romantically, intellectually and existentially’\(^6\). Other indie songwriters, of course, engage in similar games of reference, often for explicitly parodic purposes. Don Lennon’s ‘Really Dave Matthews’ (2002) includes the following verse:

I had a hard time making friends
Until this girl just down the hall
Asked me to come into her single
She had Dave’s poster on her wall
When we were talking on her bed
She accidentally touched my hand
I was so happy that I lied
And said I liked Dave Matthew’s Band.
Also included on the same album is the cheeky ‘Matthews Comes Alive’ narrated from the imagined perspective of a Dave Matthews who is fully aware of the mediocrity of his output; two Dave Matthews Band-themed songs on a single album perhaps seem excessive, but the group is an ideal example of the bland mainstream, with its easy mass appeal and general lack of edginess; for Lennon and other indie artists, the Dave Matthews Band begs for satire and critique.

**Forms of authenticities**

Though indie’s ability to critique the mainstream is an important aspect of the genre, over-emphasis on its satiric and critical tendencies runs the same risk of reduction that creeps into Hibbitt’s discussion. Although indie rock is undeniably shaped by the mainstream and by the marketplace, and though it occasionally seeks to parody it, to discuss indie purely in those terms is to define it negatively: indie music is that which is not (yet) mainstream, that which is not sold in big record stores or not liked by masses of people. Like Grossberg’s notion of ‘ironic nihilism’ and ‘authentic inauthenticity’, these explanations cannot fully explain, in positive terms, how indie genres generate authenticity.

The crucial issue to confront is the kind of authenticity at stake. Contributing to the complexity of this subject are its many guises and forms, and the typologies of authenticity are the subject of studies in their own right. In his 2004 essay, Allan Moore waded through the many taxonomies and definitions of authenticity, and suggested his own typology based on the person or group being authenticated rather than on the authenticity of a particular object. Moore sets out what he calls *first, second and third person authenticities*: authenticity of expression, authenticity of experience and social authenticity (Moore 2002). Moore rightly notes that these forms of authenticity can overlap, but a thoughtful analysis must maintain their ‘virtual separation’ (Moore 2002, p. 220).

Of course, other typologies are possible: we could lay out authorial, cultural and personal authenticities based not on who is being authenticated, but instead on who can authenticate. Questions of authorship – did Ashlee Simpson actually sing or did she lip synch? – have yes or no answers that are, for the most part, straightforwardly factual and universally valid. Cultural authenticity is more relative; we can muster evidence – historical or anthropological – to support claims of cultural authenticity, but ultimately the question of whether an object or practice is an ‘authentic’ product of a particular culture can be argued for or against by different groups with equal validity. Finally, personal authenticity is the most subjective form of authenticity: it might be a feeling of honesty, sincerity, realness, but most importantly it is a *feeling* and what feels authentic to one person might seem fake and insincere to another. Indeed, personal authenticity often has the final word over cultural and authorial forms of authenticity.

Indie pop, I argue, is a genre especially adept at generating personal authenticity (which is closely related to Moore’s first person authenticity). Turning the focus to how indie generates personal authenticity involves considering indie as an aesthetic object, and not merely as a commodity. By aesthetics, I do not mean simply style; instead I want to appeal to the original conception of aesthetics as the study of sensation, and examine how both the sound world and the modes of indie rock generate particular experiences.
Music and kitsch

It is helpful to turn to the concept of kitsch. I am not trying to argue for the ‘authentic inauthenticity’ of kitsch, nor am I attempting to dismiss indie pop as bad. Kitsch has been a difficult concept to apply to music. Non-musical scholars who are comfortable identifying kitsch qualities of other forms of art become uneasy when faced with music. The collection *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*, for example, includes discussions of kitsch in politics and the cinema, ‘pornokitsch’, tourism and religion, but no essay is devoted to kitsch in music; music is only touched upon in much a broader discussion of kitsch and romanticism (Broch 1969). Some scholars question whether one can apply kitsch to serious music at all. Susan Sontag, for example, believes that ‘the distinction between inferior music, or music which is unpleasant, or unimportant or dated, and great, timeless music is fairly clear. If the notion of kitsch has some application to music it would be very limited. … Music which is folkloric or more mediocre is not called kitsch. In fact, I think as far as serious music is concerned, very little is called kitsch’ (Sontag 1990, p. 239).8 Tomas Kulka, who sought to define kitsch formally, argues that ‘paradigmatic examples of kitsch in serious music’ are difficult to identify because:

music is, by and large, non-representational. Our first condition for the application of the concept of kitsch, which emphasises the central role of its representational function thus cannot be met, at least not in the same straightforward manner as it is, for example, in paintings or novels. To the extent that this is the case musical works thus cannot be parasitic on the emotional charge of anything external to them. (Kulka 1996, pp. 101–2)

Hermann Broch singled out Berlioz as an example of kitsch, but as Kulka argues, this tells us more about his ‘personal dislikes than about the nature of musical kitsch’ (Kulka 1996, p. 101). In the end, for Kulka only Tchaikovsky’s 1812 Overture seems unproblematically kitsch, but only because of the use of cannons, which pushes the music into the realm of the representational.

Equally problematic is the application of the concept of kitsch to popular music: often the term is used synonymously with ‘bad’; I believe Broch is correct when he argues that ‘kitsch is certainly not “bad art”, it forms its own closed system, which is lodged like a foreign body in the overall system of art….’ (quoted in Kulka 1996, p. 43). To apply the notion of kitsch successfully to ‘serious’ or popular music, we have to consider how one might use the concept without recourse to ideas of representation or as a substitute for ‘not good’.

First we might consider the temporal aspects of kitsch: it can arise out of a kind of aesthetic distance. It crops up when old forms that were once steeped with meaning are reused out of their primary context; the original force and meaning are thus drained away and replaced with ossified stereotypes. Adorno, who, despite his indictments of mass culture – and the challenges that he posed for popular music studies – offers an insightful, and surprisingly sympathetic interpretation of kitsch:

Kitsch is the precipitate of devalued forms and empty ornaments from a formal world that has become remote from its immediate context. Things that were part of that art of a former time and are undertaken today must be reckoned as kitsch. On the other hand, the objectivity of kitsch is the source of its justification. For kitsch precisely sustains the memory, distorted and as mere illusion, of a formal objectivity that has passed away. (Adorno 2002, p. 501)

In other words, kitsch arises from kind of aesthetic time travel, when past art forms are resuscitated, but brought back to life in a new context where they have no place or
function. Within this more abstract notion of kitsch, it becomes clearer how we might begin to speak of musical kitsch: for example, music can manifest kitsch formally – instances where composers employ older forms or topoi as referents to the past (neoclassicism, for instance, might sometimes be called kitsch). Within popular music especially, kitsch can be evoked not just through use of ‘decontextualised forms’, but also through vocal timbre, instrumentation, arrangement and production values.

Indie pop highlights this idea of temporal and aesthetic disjunction by sounding wistfully outdated, thus preserving the memory of some distant and imaginary past. The characteristic lo-fi sound of so many indie groups is created though the use of simplistic forms, odd instruments, old electronics and amateur performances, and cultivates an aesthetic of memory. The childlike sounds of Beat Happening (e.g. ‘Our Secret’) or Jonathan Richman serve, in part, to conjure images of an imagined childhood. Belle and Sebastian’s rich and sweet orchestral arrangements, joined with the melancholic vocal timbres of the lead singer Stuart Murdoch, evoke a precious and fragile past. Bands such as His Name is Alive and The Clientele, which feature dreamy and atmospheric textures, often sound more like they are performing memories of songs than the songs themselves. This aesthetic distance is not cynical but nostalgic; it is not an absence of emotion, but its intensification.

The lo-fi sound world also functions on another level: it draws attention to the mediating technologies at work. Just as scratches on an old record or the hiss of cassette tape break the illusion of an unmediated experience with the music, so too the outdated instruments and amateur playing draw attention to the technologies behind the production. Here the ‘honesty’ of this music does not arise from the illusion of unmediated communication (which lurks behind so many ‘unplugged’ concerts), but rather from openly emphasising the process of mediation.9 It emphasises the materiality of the music and the actual experience of listening.

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The kitsch sound world of indie rock also functions as a generative and self-critical force. Here again, Adorno’s thoughts on kitsch are helpful: he makes an essential distinction between good bad music and bad good music. Good bad music preserves a living memory of a dead art, making no pretence that it is anything other than dead. He writes:

Someone once spoke of good bad books and bad good books. The difference is precisely applicable here. Good bad music: that is Tea for Two, the trio from Sunflower from the time of the inflation…. Bad good music does not need to be enumerated here. It is kitsch too – unrealised, illusory, living on false emotion. But the power of the dead forms has absconded from it. It has been eliminated…. The worst kitsch is kitsch with ‘class’, which is not recognisable in advance, but has compositional ambition. The only means of tearing off its mask is technical critique – elements of kitsch in music that is intended as ‘serious’ always give themselves always by technical anomalies. (Adorno 2002, pp. 502, 504)

By embracing the lo-fi sound ideal, indie music engages in a form of late 20th-century sprezzatura: a cultivated ‘nonchalance’ that works to ‘conceal all art and make whatever one does or says appear to be without effort and almost without any thought about it’ (Castiglione 2002, p. 32). Its sound world projects both a lack of presumption and an emphasis on its own self-aware identity as kitsch – but as good kitsch, that is, kitsch that is aware of its status as kitsch and does not attempt to masquerade as something with ‘class’. The lo-fi aesthetic highlights popular music’s
inherent flaws and, at the same time, lovingly embraces the music because of those flaws. In other words, the lo-fi sound not only acts as a self-critique, but as a self-justification – it declares through its production that it is unpretentious. Through this critical low-fi sound world, indie is free to indulge in unabashedly tuneful melodies, sentimentality, over-used clichés and other elements that we would usually discuss as traditional markers of mainstream music.10

Kitsch and the collection

So far we have only concentrated on the idea of kitsch that is manifest in the production of and experience of listening to indie music; the kitsch aesthetic also pervades the act of consumption in the marketplace. Here I am interested not in the ways in which indie music has been seized upon by mainstream media, but in how a devoted indie fan goes about putting together a collection of albums.

Because indie music is distributed on small labels and through alternative media, the task of finding new bands and labels requires time, effort and curiosity. In addition to listening to smaller, often college-run radio stations, the indie consumer may also seek out fanzines, follow websites of indie labels for news, and mine blogs for information and opinions about the latest groups. Devoted indie fans rarely confine their research to indie music. Rather, any music, particularly that shrouded in obscurity, may pique the curiosity of the indie listener: forgotten albums of the 1970s, psychedelic Brazilian music, jazz, early music. Because ‘indie rock’ encompasses a broad range of styles, it encourages a kind of eclecticism in its fan base; in addition, the very skills needed to be an informed listener of indie music allow for the exploration of other genres. Thus, indie listeners have taken a voyeuristic interest in ‘outsider’ music, such as amateur recordings made by elementary school bands and church recitals, as well as other oddities such as Raymond Williams, Joe Meek, and the Shaggs. ‘Indie’ therefore does not depend on any notion of authorial intention or even original production. ‘Indie’ encompasses ‘found’ music as well as the output of contemporary independent labels.

All of this is to say that the actual process and work of collecting indie music is an essential part of the process of creating the indie aesthetic. The individual, hand-picked items in a given collection may even include a few mainstream, top-40 albums, and it is almost inevitable that certain bands that were once obscure will garner mainstream attention at some point in the future; but the collection is the unique possession of its owner, and reflects the effort and work that the collector put into it. And this process of collecting indie music forms a large part of the indie aesthetic. Here again, the concept of kitsch is helpful.

Collecting culture is intimately tied to the idea of kitsch. Kitsch springs up where traditional notions of authenticity have become defunct, creeping in to compensate for the dehumanising effects of mass culture. If the possibility of mechanical reproduction, as Benjamin (1969) argues, robs artworks of their ‘aura’ – that nebulous quality of the work that arises when it is genuinely of its time and place – kitsch then attempts to cover up the holes where that aura once was. Building on Benjamin’s argument, Celeste Olalquiaga (1998) posits that kitsch crops up when artwork begins to be appreciated not for its original aura, but for its sentimental value: a sentimental aura replaces the aura of authenticity. Thus, she notes how a collecting culture emerges concurrently with the rise of mass culture: the 19th century saw the birth
of the home aquarium and a series of fads for collecting things such as ferns, shells and butterflies. No longer able to value a work of art because it is unique, consumers could value an object because of its place within their own particular collection.

Although indie genres may be defined by their relationship to consumer capitalism modes of consumption, they also aestheticise that relationship. Kitsch sentimentality might seem to be a flimsy substitute for the original aura of authenticity, but it nevertheless offers the possibility for some sort of personal attachment. The process of discovering new indie labels and bands is to create one’s own kitsch collection: though the objects themselves – the bands – are apt to be subsumed and co-opted by the mainstream, the collection remains unique. As Baudrillard has argued, collecting produces ‘loved objects’; he writes:

... the collection offers us a paradigm of perfection, for this is where the passionate enterprise of possession can achieve its ambitions, within a space where the everyday prose of the object-world modulates to poetry, to institute an unconscious and triumphant discourse. (Baudrillard 1994, p. 8)

Kitsch, a positive, redemptive kitsch – pervades indie music, from its consumption to its production. Thus, we can recast what it means when a song or band is co-opted by the mainstream: it loses its aura, not of authenticity, but of sentiment. Music of a band that is too easy and straightforward to find, risks losing its sentimental value for the collector. Alternatively, if a band ‘goes mainstream’, it risks losing its conscious kitsch identity. By embracing higher production values, the music risks crossing that tenuous border between good kitsch and bad kitsch. It loses its aural reminder that it is not to be taken too seriously.

As an example, we can turn to ‘I Don’t Believe You’, which the Magnetic Fields released as a single in 1998, and then again, in a new version, in 2004 on *i*. The first version of the song contains many of the elements that make the Magnetic Fields appealing to indie fans: the oxymoronic combination of Merritt’s deadpan vocals and cynical lyrics with genuinely catchy, up-beat melodies; strange subliminal voices echo in the background; and the music is swathed in Phil Spector-like quirky sonorities, including jangling tambourines and cheerful synth ‘claps’. The song does not play with gender ambiguities in the way that many of his songs do, but the lyrics – though not always intelligible – smack of cleverness. This is evident in from very opening (‘So you quote love unquote me’) and continues throughout: through a series of poetic somersaults, Merritt manages to include such odd phrases as ‘I’m not not cute’ and ‘so you’re brilliant, beautiful and/ampersand after ampersand’.

The song is a beautiful mess of sonorities, happy tunes and sweetly misanthropic sentimentality. It is also a rare object: the 7” single has been long out of print, though it is also available on an obscure indie compilation, *All’s Fair in Love and Chickfactor* (2002). To own the 7” single therefore involves some time and effort; like other hard-to-find indie gems, it can take pride of place in a record collection.

The new version of ‘I Don’t Believe You’, which *The Magnetic Fields* released in 2004, appears on their first album after moving to Nonesuch. As a whole, *i* sounds more deliberate than their previous albums. Ironically, it boasts ‘no synths’, which usually might imply a more lo-fi aesthetic, but here signals the opposite: Merritt’s voice, now recorded with higher production values, sounds smoother, as do most of the accompaniments. Gone are the endearing blips and bleeps. The slower
tempo, the Wilco-like arrangement, and the almost jarring clarity of the voice sap the song of its original power. Lyrics that sounded clever when you could only hear half of them seem more forced and awkward in this performance, where each word is clearly articulated. Put another way, the higher production values attempt to cast the song as something lofty, but the very act of polishing it transforms the flaws which, in the original version, had charm into something negative. In its seeming sincerity, it loses the redemptive qualities of its original unpresumptuous kitsch identity. Likewise, there is little work involved in finding this version of the song: the album can be purchased on iTunes and from amazon.com. The process of possessing this song does not necessary help to produce a ‘loved object’.

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The very existence of indie music – a discourse that actively embraces kitsch – is a telling phenomenon. It suggests that ‘authenticity’ is neither dead nor dying, but that which was once antithetical to authenticity – kitsch – has become a new form of authenticity. Kitsch may be yet another negative side-effect of mass culture, but for the indie fan, it is superior to the alternative; the slick songs of the top 40 charts are sub-kitsch. What truth, then, does Merritt’s ukulele tell us? By openly embracing kitsch, indie music declares that authenticity is personal: as we wallow in the tender melodies of Merritt’s songs, we can be aware that we are wallowing in kitsch, but a kind of kitsch we may call our own.

Perhaps today, however, the ‘kitsch authenticity’ may well be moribund. The early 21st century has seen the rise of ‘Web 2.0’, with services such as YouTube, which make easily available thousands of hours of music and music videos, and internet radio stations such as Pandora which analyze the listener’s taste and produce custom-made playlists. The record collection, likewise, is giving way to the newest generation of iPods, where it is possible to store 7,000 songs. With the entire history of music one internet search away, perhaps the notion of the collection is becoming increasingly meaningless. But just as kitsch authenticity crept into the place of traditional forms of authenticity, new forms of authenticity are surely on the horizon.

Endnotes

1. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers who gave me enormously useful feedback on this article; I would also like to thank Claudia Gonson and Don Lennon for granting me permission to quote lyrics from ‘This Little Ukulele’ and ‘Really Dave Matthews’.
2. For a discussion of mythologies surrounding rock’s history, see Keir Keightley (2001).
4. See also Matthew Bannister (2006).
5. On role of Nirvana in the solidification of indie, see Coyle and Dolan 1999.
7. Wendy Fonarow comments briefly on this in her chapter, ‘What is “Indie”?’ (Fonarow 2006). In the section ‘Indie as a mode of aesthetic judgment’, she quotes one of her ‘informants’: ‘I know what indie is: if it’s good and I like it, it’s indie’ (p. 57). Her discussion focuses primarily on the notion of ‘taste’ rather than the idea of eclecticism.
8. Part of the hesitation to apply the notion of kitsch to ‘serious’ music stems from the persistence of the idea of ‘absolute’ music in contemporary culture, which makes it appear that any music work that is part of the great canon of Western music is evidently beyond kitsch.
9. On ‘unplugged’ concerts, see Barker and Taylor (2006), ‘Where did you sleep last night?’; this is also, of course, redolent of Roland Barthes’ concept of the grain of the voice – where for him the ‘friction’ between music and language in...
Barthes praised the consonant-rich singing of Charles Panzera over that of the breath-focused performances of Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau in part for the truth content that he felt lay in Panzera’s singing: “... in order to fulfil the clarity of the meaning. Panzera recommended that in many cases [consonants] be patinated, given wear of a language that had been living, functioning, and working for ages past, that they be made simply the springboard for the admirable vowels. There lay the “truth” of the language – not its functionality (clarity, expressivity, communication) – and the range of vowels received all the significance (which is meaning in its potential voluptuousness)” (Barthes 1990, p. 296).

10. Hibbett notes how Lou Barlow, like many other indie musicians, refuses ‘(openly) to take his work too seriously’. (Hibbett 2005, p. 43), arguing that this is part of a Bourdieu–ian ‘interest in disinterestedness’.

11. On the aesthetics of consumption promoted by collecting, see also Susan Stewart (1993).

12. Though outside the scope of this essay, the presence of kitsch also often opens up space for a free play of gender and sexuality. See Butler 2007.

13. 69 Love Songs, with its encyclopaedic approach to the idea of the love song combined with its low production values, neatly embodies both aspects of kitsch discussed above.


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**Discography**

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