

## Rockumentaries: Documenting Music on Film

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There is something awkward about the idea of documenting *music* on *film*, of translating a predominantly *aural* phenomenon into a predominantly *visual* representation. Can you actually *see* pop and rock music? Is there *anything* to see? It seems no coincidence that the term 'rockumentary' was coined in *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984) – a mockumentary, that is, a fake documentary about the fictional heavy metal band Spinal Tap. The film is seen by many as the most successful attempt to produce what looks like a classical documentary of a rock band – it reveals all the drama that (apparently) goes on behind the scenes of a touring band. Alas, it documents nothing (real).

In the following, I will attempt to unfold a paradox that seems to be lying at the heart of the genre 'rockumentary' in general, and which is cleverly revealed in *This is Spinal Tap*. Pop and rock music, although an aural phenomenon to start with, has been just as much obsessed with its visual *image* as with its *sound*. From Elvis to The Who, from the Beatles to Britney Spears, artists and record companies have always attempted to produce and control their visual image: on record covers, in movies, in music videos, during live performances, with their clothes and haircuts, the 'visual design' of their promo videos, the cars they drive, etc. (cf. Fuchs 1999). While the experience of music, just like that of literature, might evoke a set of images in the listener's mind, these individually created images stand in competition with already existing, prefabricated images. Pop music, and that distinguishes it from other forms of music, is inseparable from its medium, its physical manifestation and the sensory properties of this medial manifestation; although an aural art, it is inseparable from a) the figure of the individual that lends its voice to it, and b) the 'medial carrier' that transports it into the listener's home. Documenting pop music on film therefore means to document, at least partly, an already fabricated image: pop music always already has an image. When trying to film pop and rock in documentary's favourite fly-on-the-wall mode, these films often show great difficulties penetrating the visual image bands and record companies have produced themselves. If a film attempts to go beyond the prefabricated image, it has to create new, hitherto unseen images. But is that still 'documentation'? The fictional band 'Spinal Tap', on the other hand, has no image that the film *This is Spinal Tap* would have to take into consideration in the first place – and consequently the film succeeds in giving an (ironic) inside view into the life of an exemplary rock band.

## 1. Documentaries before Rock

The modern ideal of a documentary is the result of technical as well as institutional developments within the world of cinematography.<sup>1</sup> Factual films actually did exist before fictional films were first produced: most of the early experimenters in the new medium of cinematography simply pointed their cameras towards already existing real life phenomena. However, a definition of the documentary as a genre was only developed in reaction to the fictional films of the 1910s and 1920s. Documentaries were attributed with a stronger, more authentic claim to truth than fictional Hollywood productions. But they were also distinguished from other, more prosaic forms of factional films: newsreels and reportage, for example. Documentary makers did produce non-fiction, but they produced more than mere news: they claimed to show a realer reality than both fictional and (simplistic) factional films. However, cinematographic equipment – developed with Hollywood productions in mind – was posing significant restrictions on the documentation of actuality, of life as it *really* happens: unless there was bright sunshine, additional lightning was needed, and synchronized sound could only be achieved in a studio environment; consequently, re-enactments of key scenes and voice-over were preferred to synchronous sound and image. Real reality had to be (re-)created.

By the end of the 1950s, however, filmmakers were beginning to take advantage of and at the same time pushing the development of new lightweight camera equipment capable of handheld operation and synchronous location sound captured on portable tape recorders. This development made it possible to record synchronized sound and image at the place of filming without extra equipment or a large crew; it also made it possible to enter physical and social spaces hitherto impenetrable. Until this time, most films were produced with funding from governmental or corporate bodies like the Empire Marketing Board, Shell, Ford or the General Post Office. The new, lighter and cheaper equipment made it possible to produce films independently funded, or at least supported by semi-independent film boards. Most importantly, the new equipment made it possible to come closer to the (new) documentary ideal of capturing the sound and image of reality as it happens without intervening, without having to use actors or sets, artificial lighting or voice-overs.

The most important conception of the documentary evolving from these developments is known as Direct Cinema. Here, filmmakers used the new equipment to create documentaries that bore as little trace of the filmmaker's involvement as possible; life was to be presented as unchanged, un-staged and as unmediated as possible; the filmmaker should be nothing more than a 'fly on the wall' capturing 'life caught unawares'. The advent of video in the 1970s furthered such possibilities to make (relatively) cheap movies with small crews that could go wherever they needed to. What such films have in common is that they promise to show something that is otherwise withheld from, or at least yet unknown, to the general public. Although the technical possibilities to make a modern documentary are a result of the evolution of audio-visual

1 For a more detailed history and less simplifying genealogy, as well as references to further historical materials and analyses, see Huck/Kiefer (2007) as well as the special issue of *Sight & Sound* on documentaries (2007).

mass media, most documentary filmmakers aim to go beyond the reality these mass media create. They promise to show a 'realer' reality than the reality of the mass media – or at least a more reflective stance towards this reality.

## 2. Going Backstage

The possibility to record synchronized sound and image combined with the will to show a reality beyond the one portrayed by the 'official' mass media almost inevitably lead documentary filmmakers to the realm of rock music. Arguably, the first modern documentary, using specifically designed hand-held, light sensitive, sound synched cameras, was indeed a rockumentary: *Lonely Boy* (1962), a portrayal of twenty-year old Canadian pop sensation Paul Anka. Donn Alan Pennebaker, one of the foremost figures of the Direct Cinema movement, actually specialised in rockumentaries: from *Dont Look Back* in 1967 to *Monterey Pop* in 1968, *Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* in the 1970s and *Depeche Mode 101* in the 1980s he produced numerous portraits of singers, bands and events. And rockumentaries are by no means a marginal genre. Two of the ten most successful documentaries at the UK box office were indeed rockumentaries, as is the most successful documentary of the current season: Julien Temple's *Joe Strummer: The Future is Unwritten* (cf. *Sight & Sound* 2007, 38). Some critics even claim that rockumentaries show the "most widespread use of Direct Cinema" (Thompson & Bordwell 1994, 668; cf. Beattie 2004, 97). However, what these rockumentaries concentrate on is not a documentation of rock (*music*), as the term might suggest, but a revelation of the *man* behind the music and the star-image. Their aim is to authenticate the rock star – a belated reaction to the artificial world of pop.

Most rockumentaries follow a generic formula. Pennebaker's *Dont Look Back* is, as one critic writes, "the prototypical rock performance/tour movie, a genre that promises an all-access pass to the onstage, backstage, and offstage arenas of the life of a public figure" (Lee 2006, 316). Ever since the 1950s and 1960s, most mainstream media corporations treated rock musicians with suspicion, concentrating on hysterical fans, immoral lyrics and the sex and drugs affairs of rock'n'roll stars. As if to counter this, Pennebaker's *Dont Look Back* (1967) followed Bob Dylan on his 1965 tour through Britain; the film contrasts the 'public', mainstream media image of Dylan with the 'real' Dylan as he reveals himself backstage to the apparently unobtrusive and unnoticeable camera. One half of the film shows Dylan's backstage-life and the preparations before going on stage; the other half observes the reactions of the mass media to Dylan, observing the constructions of his observers.



Bob Dylan: 'Backstage' and 'Behind the Scenes' © Leacock-Pennebaker

On the one hand, the viewer can observe Dylan tuning his guitar before going on stage, drinking with friends after a gig, jamming with Janis Joplin in a hotel room; on the other, the audience is enabled to observe Dylan reading his own reviews in the papers, giving interviews, holding press conferences. The film contains no interviews of its own and no noticeable narrative plot; furthermore, the presence of the film-crew is hardly ever acknowledged.<sup>2</sup> Instead, the viewer is asked to believe that he is enabled to observe what would have happened anyway, whether a camera is there or not, in a space socially and physically impenetrable by the mass media and the general public. The film promises to let Dylan speak for himself, to reveal the man behind the mask he wears on stage, *and* to deconstruct the distorted image the mass media have created of Dylan.<sup>3</sup> A more liberal medium (documentary) attempts to show a more liberal artist (Dylan).

Such early examples of Direct Cinema appear like a medial embodiment of one of the most popular sociological analyses of the time: Erving Goffman's examination of the presentation of self (1969 [1959]).<sup>4</sup> Goffman, employing the well-known metaphor of the world as a stage, describes social interaction as a scripted performance, intended to present impressions of selves to others. He sees individuals as dramatic performers preemptively acting out the expectations of society: "Thus, when the individual presents himself before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society" (31) – or, as in the rock star's case, rebel against these "officially accredited values of the society". However, Goffman stresses – and Direct Cinema seems to be build around this conviction – that we are not always performing on stage, but that there is also a "backstage" region (97), "typically out of bounds to members of the audience" (111):

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- 2 Rothman (1997) suggests that one time "Dylan seems deliberately to pass close by the camera so he can share a giggle with it" (162); I, however, have to admit that I missed this scene while first viewing the film, and I guess many other viewers might have also. Beattie (2004, 101-102) even argues that there are several open acknowledgements of the presence of the camera.
  - 3 For a detailed analysis of Pennebaker's film as a (liberal) critique of mainstream media, see Hall (1998).
  - 4 The obvious parallels between Goffman's theory and the practice of the rockumentary have been noted before, but not been explored further; cf. Beattie 2004, 100.

It is here that the capacity of a performance to express something beyond itself may be painstakingly fabricated; it is here that illusions and impressions are openly constructed. Here stage props and items of personal front [Goffman's term for a 'social mask'; C. H.] can be stored [...]. Here grades of ceremonial equipment, such as different types of liquor [!] or clothes, can be hidden [...]. Here costumes and other parts of personal front may be adjusted and scrutinized for flaws. [...] Here the performer can relax; he can drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character. (97/98)

It seems as if Goffman's analysis is reacting against the same cultural predicament as Direct Cinema: through the newly emerging audio-visual mass media we 'meet' more and more people performing a specifically created reality, and consequently it becomes more and more important to see beyond this mediated reality.

Goffman even gives advice about how to observe the difference between stage-persona and backstage-self best:

One of the most interesting times to observe impression management is the moment when a performer leaves the back region and enters the place where the audience is to be found, or when he returns therefrom, for at these moments one can detect a wonderful putting on and taking off of character. (105)

It is this passage from backstage to stage that becomes a staple of the rockumentary genre. Indeed, this passage is so topical that it is mocked excessively in *This is Spinal Tap*: here, the band gets lost on its way to the stage, ending up – after searching for several minutes – in the boiler room (cf. Hall 1998, 224).

This powerful conceptual metaphor of the 'un-staged' behaviour off stage seems to have organized most rockumentaries until today, following the blueprint laid out by Pennebaker and Dylan: the camera constantly goes where the normal fan (and the normal media) can never go – to the almost mythical 'backstage' area (cf. Romney 1995). The secrecy of what is shown seems to determine not only its attractiveness, but also its truthfulness; our suspicions against the mass media, i.e. that they manipulate and distort the truth, seem to imply the pseudo-logical conclusion that that which is normally hidden from the mass media is a more true and undistorted form of reality.

One of the most successful rockumentaries of recent times, Metallica's *Some Kind of Monster* (2004), announces right from the beginning that it will show what other, 'normal' cameras cannot see. The film opens with a sequence where a member of Metallica's entourage invites several journalists to a pre-listening event in order to promote their new album – however: "There are no cameras allowed, no video". However, the camera of the documentary filmmaker is allowed; this camera intrudes into an otherwise unobservable space and therefore enables a look at the *real* Metallica, which, in a next step, is distanced from the superficial constructions of the mass media. Immediately following the 'no cameras'-sequence, the film shows extracts from several promotion interviews following the release of the new album: the documentary camera includes the interviewer's superficial questions, the stupefied interviewees *and* the medial set-up in its observation of Metallica's observers.





Metallica: 'No Cameras' & 'Behind the Scenes' © Paramount

To a certain degree this strategy actually works as the filmmakers are allowed to observe the group therapy sessions the disengaged band members have to undergo – a space as private as it normally gets. However, as the film is released as an official Metallica outlet with the artists' and the management's consent, the movie's plotline of overcoming obstacles (drugs, exhaustion, personal disputes) towards a happy ending (a highly successful new album) is all too obviously scripted along a familiar (romantic) plot.

It fell to Madonna to openly reveal the absurdity of this construction, of the idea that the image-producing machine of rock and pop stars comes to a halt when they go backstage, and that the real person behind the mask would come to the fore once the performer leaves the stage (cf. Romney 1995, 90-91). Her famous *In Bed with Madonna* (1991) promises to follow the rockumentary-formula to the bone. On the DVD cover the fan reads:

Madonna. This film reveals her beauty as she really is, on stage and off [...]. Join her and experience an intimate backstage look at her 'Blonde Ambition' tour. From her hotel room to her dressing room, from her stage show to her boudoir, here is Madonna – outrageous, hilarious, uninhibited. See what it's like ... (*In Bed With Madonna*)

However, as might have been expected, the queen of self-invention is no more – or *no less*, for that matter! – 'authentic' off stage than on stage. Like most rockumentaries the film begins with the backstage preparations for a gig. We can see Madonna putting on her make-up, in a state of undress, preparing her stage-persona. The sequence is filmed in black and white, suggesting a bleaker, less glamorous and therefore more truthful representation of reality. This sequence, then, is immediately and explicitly contrasted with the artificially created, colourful, sound-enhanced world on stage. (Which, unfortunately, in the medium of academic print, can only be reproduced in a silent (documentary) black and white.)



*Who's that girl?* 'Madonna without Make-up' & 'Madonna with Make-up' © Boy Toy, Inc.

However, as it becomes clear throughout the film, what we see in the black and white sequences is not a documentation of life as it really happens, but another form of reality specifically enacted for the camera. As the final scenes show, the most intimate, private and apparently un-artificial place, Madonna's bed, becomes just another stage.<sup>5</sup> The credits at the end of the film reveal not only that there are hundreds of people involved in the production and especially post-production of the movie, but that Madonna herself is the executive producer of the film. She has given consent to everything we see, she is in (total?) control of the images produced.<sup>6</sup> Ever since the Rolling Stones successfully sued to prevent the release of an overly revealing documentary of their 1972 USA-tour, entitled *Cocksucker Blues*, access to all areas is no longer given to any filmmaker. What the audience is allowed to see is another side of 'Madonna', not (Madonna) Louise Veronica Ciccone – as she was christened –, just as we watch 'Bob Dylan' backstage, not Robert Allen Zimmerman. What we see is an artist performing a different role, not, as W. B. Yeats once had it, the bundle of contingencies that sits down for breakfast. What we see in *Dont Look Back* is, as Pennebaker himself wittily remarked, a person "acting out his life" (qtd. after Lee 2006, 317). Even the man behind the music is a performer.

### 3. 'Art – I – Ficial!?'<sup>7</sup>

Next to the promise of a more authentic reality behind the stage performances of the stars, the promise to show the man behind the music, there has always been a different attitude to the reality of music. Michael Winterbottom's *24 Hour Party People* (2002), which 'documents' the rise and fall of the 1980s Manchester music scene through re-enactments of pivotal moments states explicitly what it sees as the reality of pop. After the film has shown the narrator's (music impresario Tony Wilson played by Steeve Coogan) wife having sex on the toilet with a musician at a gig, the camera pans to an

5 Indeed, as Romney stresses, a bed is actually part of Madonna's stage routine (1995, 87).

6 What she cannot control, however, is how the beholder reads the image.

7 I owe this reference to X-Ray-Spex's 1978 battle cry against rock's chimera of authenticity – taken from their song 'I am a Cliché' – to Diedrich Diederichsen (2007, 323).

older man cleaning the toilets. The man says: "I definitely don't remember this happening." The image friezes and the narrator's voice-over comments:

This is the real Howard Devoto [the young man in the film apparently re-enacting the sex scene with Wilson's wife]. He and Lindsey [Wilson's wife] insist that we make clear that this never happened. But I agree with John Ford: 'When you have to choose between the truth and the legend, print the legend!'

While Winterbottom's film still adheres, at least partly, to the idea of a preceding reality, albeit one that can only be *subjectively* re-presented, it also hints at a reality pop music is *creating* instead of *representing*.

In a central sequence, the film intercuts real documentary material from an early Sex Pistols gig with re-enactments of the audience of that gig. In the (re-enacted) audience we see Tony Wilson, who then addresses the camera:

June the fourth 1976: the Sex Pistols play Manchester for the very first time. There are only 42 people in the audience, but every single one of them is feeding on a power and energy and a magic. Inspired they will go out and perform wondrous deeds.

Wilson goes on to project the future careers of some of the visitors, who will become international pop stars with the Buzzcocks, New Order and Simply Red. This verbal narration is underlined with cuts to documentary material from future gigs of these bands. What we can see is how the performance on stage creates effects in the real life of empirical persons, and these effects are unimpressed by any apparently 'realer' reality behind the band's performance. It is of little interest to Winterbottom who the musicians portrayed in the film *really* were; instead, he creates off-stage episodes to accompany the on-stage personas; he does not set a real reality against the artificial world of the stage; rather, he creates a backstage world that supplements the world created on stage.



'This is Howard Devoto' & 'An Audience with the Sex Pistols' © Revolution Film

Indeed, already the above discussed apparent fly-on-the-wall documentary about Bob Dylan opens with a sequence that calls into question the whole project of a documentary of rock/pop. While the filmmaker 'documents' Dylan dropping cards with extracts from the lyrics of one of his songs ('Subterranean Homesick Blues'), the scene itself is obviously staged (on this 'prologue' cf. Rothman 1997, 148-153). In later years, this sequence from a film of one of the most famous documentary makers has



actually been used by MTV as a music video. In this opening sequence, the music takes centre-stage, and the images produced by filmmaker and singer/songwriter are merely accompanying or supplementing the music: the images indeed follow the rhythm given by the music. The image Dylan cuts in this act of self-presentation is the very 'Bob Dylan' that *affected* and influenced millions of young and not so young people all over the world: the cool, slightly arrogant, bohemian folk-music rebel, merging Woody Guthrie with James Dean. In this sense, the sequence actually 'documents' *and* co-creates this very reality. Rather than revealing a 'realer' reality behind the stage-performance, the sequence acknowledges the reality of performance.

There seems to be an important difference between recording that which can be seen and that which can be heard. While the visible, physical world might remain relatively unchanged by the intrusion of an observer, there is no point in claiming that pop and rock music is not performed explicitly for an audience. While the idea of an uninvolved observer might be feasible in the realm of the visible, pop music – with its engaging rhythms and its individual voice – always involves a degree of address, even hailing. Pop music is always performed for somebody, even if this somebody is not the camera – it has no other existence. While the visible physical world might be content in itself, unimpressed by the absence or presence of an observer, pop music is explicitly designed to be heard, to impress. Consequently, while a filmic representation of the visible world has an obvious diegetic referent, the diegetic vector of pop music is less clearly defined. If anything, pop music has its reality in the act of reception, not in what it might re-present: the presence is indeed total.

#### 4. The Reality of the Mass Media

What happens when rock/pop music becomes the object of a documentary? First of all, the relationship between a record and a song performed in a studio is markedly different from that between a filmic record and that which has been filmed. The pop song exists solely on the record, it is no document – no record, indeed! – of anything preexisting, but a complicated assemblage of various layers of sound, recorded and created at various moments. Secondly, pop music has no clear-cut semiotic referent: the sound may induce feelings and atmosphere, and the lyrics might suggest parts of a diegetic world, but all in all there is no 'other', preceding reality a pop song represents – not even a fictional one. Images accompanying pop music, therefore, create reality rather than document it: there is no 'real', filmable reality when it comes to pop. On-stage *and* back-stage performances are supplementary realities that only come into being because of the realities pop creates.

Today, it seems almost impossible to decide whether rock and pop artists on film are consciously acting 'like rock-stars' for the camera or whether they have actually incorporated what they think others expect a rock star to behave like, whether their behaviour, on and off stage, *is* indeed that of a rock star. The reality of the pop star is a medial reality first and foremost: it follows medial models and reproduces these, it follows behavioural expectations and creates these at the same time. The audience would find it difficult to detect 'real' backstage behaviour, if they had not learned the codes of such behaviour. Indeed, Goffman lists a lengthy number of features that

characterise a "backstage language of behaviour", while the "frontstage behaviour language can be taken as the opposite of this" (1969, 111). It is the 'realer' reality backstage that has to be performatively created. In the end, the difference between an 'authentic' rock musician and an 'artificial' pop star becomes academic: they all learn their trade by observing the performative reality of the mass media.

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