

Selling Madness: How Mental Illness Has Been Commercialised in the Music Business

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ABSTRACT

As history shows, madness has fascinated human minds for centuries. I reveal how this fascination has led to the establishment and, at times, dangerous exploitation of the 'mad musician' gimmick - a profitable commonplace in the music industry. After a historical outline of social definitions of madness, I determine the trope's contemporary relevance and profitability through an analysis of contrasting 20-21st-century case studies. I build a multidimensional narrative addressing not only how these case studies were marketed, but also ethical and sociological issues arising from evocations of mental illness and suicide, gender and genre attributions, and the role of music journalism in systematic, occasionally post-mortem exploitation of mentally ill musicians. By undertaking this research, I intend to demonstrate that in music studies 'madness' should be placed alongside other more obvious tropes, such as sexuality, and studied in conjunction with its infinite commercial potential granted by its socially constructed, fluid definition.

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of madness is socially constructed and, therefore, fluid. As Walser quotes Roy Porter, mental illness challenges the discourse of the normal (Walser, 1993, p. 122), which is dependent upon the status quo. As a result, any behaviour can be labelled as 'abnormal' if it does not conform to the society's expectations and does not fit within the prescribed framework of societal norms of the times. A commonplace in the music business, such behaviour can be easily regarded as theatrical, as it draws attention to itself through its irrationality and inexplicability and showcases the individual's uniqueness and 'otherness'.

In this research paper, I aim to show how mental illness has been commercialised in the music industry. First, my narrative will focus on the key stages in the history of our fascination with mental health issues in order to outline various social definitions of madness. This will allow me to analyse the formation of the audiences' relationship with madness and explain how and why mentally ill musicians came to be seen as a fascinating spectacle and, consequently, a profitable commonplace in the music industry. Then, these definitions will serve as a springboard for the analysis of two case studies which have successfully commercialised mental illness: Nirvana's 'Lithium', eventually followed by Kurt Cobain's suicide, and Evanescence's 'Lithium'. To assist the analysis, other case studies, ethical issues, genre attributions, the nature of the established artist-audience relationship and the response of music journalists will also be addressed. By doing so, I

intend to provide evidence of the high level of profitability of the 'mad musician' gimmick'. Furthermore, I will consider the prominence of gendered madness in the contemporary music business. All in all, my analysis will allow me to demonstrate that in the music business studies madness should be placed alongside more obvious and widely discussed tropes such as gender and sexuality.

II. FROM ASYLUMS TO CHARTS: A BRIEF HISTORY

Diverse factors, such as advances in medicine and sociocultural changes, have contributed to the fluidity of the definition of mental illness. In music, varied attitudes towards madness came to occupy the whole vast equilibrium between fascination and condemnation. As this section will show, each of the presented definitions has strong selling points and commercial potential gained through the audience's deep interest in transgressions of societal standards.

Amongst the most popular and earliest mentions of madness is Plato's 'divine madness', which portrays inspiration as an uncontrollable product of the genius (Hyland, 2008, p. 70). A good example of this concept's application to music is the 19-century German Lied. Its ideology connected one's subjectivity, the nature, and the sublime, linking a creative human being to the forces unattainable by 'ordinary' individuals. An artist, in this case, is separated from the rest of the society through a set of extraordinary qualities - extraordinary and, therefore, fascinating. In the music business, this model has been widely used to establish the gimmick of the true artist: lonely, gifted and cursed by inspiration and talent, separated from the society through their 'otherness' but still an appropriate candidate to speak for the society.¹ This very 'otherness' also justifies the artist's transgression of social norms: if they are not like us, how can we expect them to be?

Madness as a medical condition has also come to be seen as a fascinating spectacle praised for its theatricality. Bethlem, England's first hospital for the mentally ill, remained open for public visitors for five centuries (Andrew et al., 1997, p. 152). Later, in 19th-century Germany, after the emergence of psychiatry, fascination was accompanied by fear, as musicians, such as Robert Schumann, evoke madness in their works (Rosen, 1995, pp. 646-648). Developments in psychiatry were not unnoticed by the 20th-century artists either, when many artists, such as Pink Floyd, Alice Cooper, and David Bowie supported the anti-psychiatry movement. The movement criticised inhumane methods of medicinal treatment and questioned biological causes of mental illness. Instead, mental

¹By this observation, I also refer to the fact that people seek to identify themselves with songs' protagonists.

illness was perceived as ‘the product of social circumstances’ or even as a mere failure of an individual to conform to the social norms (Spelman, 2012, pp. 1-3).

At first, sociocultural factors were ignored by psychiatry. A men-run discipline in a patriarchal society, it gave rise to another artistic trope – female hysteria. In *The Female Malady*, Showalter describes how femininity, female sexuality and nonconformity were equated to insanity. This way, what was a normal behaviour for men was seen as pathology in women, resulting in an unequal female-to-male patient ratio. Soon, the artistic potential was acknowledged: Charcot, one of the greatest theorists in the realm of neurology, turned his female patients’ hysteria into a public spectacle so theatrical that many contemporaries believed that it was staged, while his female patients established a kind of a performing career within the asylum (Showalter, 1987, pp. 145-154).

The mad musician gimmick proves to be more promising for some genres than others. Rock and heavy metal employ ‘otherness’ as an ideology, often taking it to extremes. This has led to accusations by music scholars (e.g. Stuessy’s *The Heavy Metal User’s Manual*)² and even trials (e.g. Judas Priest, 1990, Walser, 1993, pp. 139-147)³. In America, in 1985, the Parents’ Music Resource Center (PMRC) was established with the aim to launch a music censorship campaign protecting young people from dangerous or adult content, chiefly targeting rap and heavy metal (Walser, 1993, pp. 137-138). Such reception may lead to a conclusion that rock and metal are often understood as ‘madness’ on their own. After all, depression and suicide – two rather prominent metal discourses – immediately encourage medical treatment. Here an ethical issue arises: performed by youth idols, such hits as ‘A Tout le Monde’ (Megadeth, 1994), ‘Last Resort’ (Papa Roach, 2000) and ‘Suicide Solution’ (Ozzy Osbourne, 1980) may become dangerous and even manipulative when heard by someone already considering such a ‘last resort’. While it is easy to object to this assumption (for example, see Walser, 1993, p. 147), it is much harder to disconnect a mere mention of suicide and self-harming from the notion of mental illness. Consequently, a parallel can be drawn between rock and metal subcultures (e.g. famously prone to self-harming goths or antisocial punks) and mental illness. In this case, mental illness is an ideology, a genre’s ‘religion’, which forms not only the audience’s musical taste but also their lifestyle. Rock and metal underline the importance of madness as a trope - so successful in the music industry that an entire genre and its numerous subgenres’ ideology can be based on it. This also allows one to suggest that ‘otherness’ – any type of it – is the key prerequisite of the success of the mad musician gimmick, while ‘divine madness’, ‘medical madness’ and ‘female hysteria’ are mere examples of numerous possibilities of the trope’s realisation.

III. LITHIUM: TWO CASE STUDIES

In *Lithium: What You Should Know*, Eshom starts his strictly scientific prose with a reference to the song ‘Lithium’ - one of the singles released by Nirvana (1992) from their second studio

album *Nevermind* (1991). Eshom’s description of lithium sets the scene for Nirvana’s song: ‘a “miracle” drug that supposedly erases all negative and sad feelings’, used to treat mood disorders and ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) (Eshom, 1999, p. 13). Cobain’s protagonist indeed seems to experience all of the above-mentioned. Despite rather cheerful exclamations (‘hey, hey, hey’, ‘I’m not sad’), he expresses rather disturbing ideas (‘I killed you, I’m not gonna crack’) and resorts to inadequate and unsound solutions to his emotional crisis (‘I’m so lonely but that’s okay I shaved my head’). The sections with repeated ‘I’m gonna crack’ could either symbolise a relationship struggle or a bipolar disorder – a struggle between the two sides of his personality.

It is not surprising to find a reference to Nirvana in such an ‘unmusical’ book. *Nevermind*, sometimes described as ‘the album of a generation’, has brought Geffen Records alone \$80 million dollars (Frith et al., 2001, p. 204). One of the causes of such success is the album’s vivid depiction of adolescent frustration (Frith et al., 2001, p. 204) - the discourse with which, in one way or another, any young person can identify. At that point, depression and frustration with life had been approaching one of its historical peaks in the USA: 13.6 suicides per 100,000 people aged 15-24 (1994), with a particular rise in the 15-19 group (from 5.9 per 100,000 in 1970 to 11.1 in 1990) (Evans et al., 2012, p. 434). Although it is hard to estimate the exact number of people who suffered from various types of mental illness, both diagnosed and undiagnosed, it is clear that at the time when ‘Lithium’ was released it openly addressed a growing trend – and an enormous audience. With Kurt Cobain’s suicide in 1994, young people all over the world saw their idol jumping to the ultimate solution, which by that time had spread like a disease amongst the American youth. The story, however, did not educate the corporations and the press on the dangers of selling mental illness. On the contrary, it allowed for even more systematic exploitation (Frith et al., 2001, p. 204), giving a real-life feel to Cobain’s lyrics and stage persona.

It is important that in the 1994 media reports surrounding Cobain’s suicide we see neither an individual who gradually lost his struggle with depression nor a typical rock star death. Instead, journalists presented the news as a story of a noble death of the true artist who could not take the pressure of corrupting ‘mainstream’ (Leonard, 2007, pp. 70-71). This way, the fluidity of the definition of mental illness was exploited at its best: from a medical diagnosis further complicated by Cobain’s substance abuse, his suicide was elevated to the status of ‘divine madness’.

Without any doubt, such transformation may increase sales, but it victimises the artist and attaches a romantic image⁴ to the extremely problematic discourse of drug and alcohol addiction, and mental illness. Furthermore, the publicity surrounding such case studies renders them representative of the current status quo and inspires a dangerous identification of the entire generation with the fate of their idols. As much as it raises concern, it could possibly contribute to an increase of suicide and depression rates. With the death of Cobain, his self-

²Joe Stuessy’s “The Heavy Metal User’s Manual”, which accused heavy metal lyrics of being violent.

³According to the suit, *Stained Glass* (1978) contained ‘subliminal messages’ which inspired fans to commit suicide.

⁴It is an old perception that gifted musicianship – or artistry in general – always somehow leads to the ultimate sacrifice.

branding strategy was altered and applied posthumously as a commercial master plan. As Jones points out in his 'Better off Dead', after Cobain's death *Billboard* noticed a significant rise in sales of Nirvana albums, while one author in *Entertainment Weekly* described Cobain as 'a licenser's nirvana' (Jones, 2005, p. 8). All in all, it leads to two conclusions: first one is that in terms of commercial success being 'better off dead' is not a purely classical music phenomenon, and second that an artist's mental illness has become a selling point and a profitable commonplace in the music business, in particular, when it culminates with a suicide.

Later, the title 'Lithium' was adopted in 2006 by the American alternative metal band Evanescence. Destroying old gendered madness stereotypes, the female protagonist faces a similar struggle, although despite her illness causing her lover's drinking problem, she refuses to take lithium.

It seems unlikely that the band's focus on lithium was not affected by Nirvana's song. Despite the gothic image and frequent references to death in Evanescence's lyrics, their 'Lithium' is not a definite ideological counterpart to Nirvana's. *Rolling Stone*, in fact, insisted that Evanescence's 'Lithium' is an ode to Kurt Cobain (Sheffield, 2006), so is it an attempt to evoke sympathy or even 'save' Cobain in retrospect? Or simply to adopt Cobain's commercial success by applying a similar, dangerously romantic gimmick? However, unlike Cobain's protagonist, Amy Lee's protagonist rejects lithium treatment, which in real life still could be followed by deterioration and suicide. The band does not suggest a possibility of a magical cure, as the minor mode ending seems to imply the tragic outcome. Whatever was their goal, the gimmick of a mentally ill individual facing side effects of lithium has made its return in 2006, becoming US *Billboard* 200's no. 1 and selling 447,000 copies in the first week (*Billboard*, 2006).

IV. IS COMMERCIALISED MADNESS GENDERED?

It seems that the historically crucial trope of female hysteria has lost its social pertinence, and gendered madness is no longer relevant enough to be widely employed. A lot of rumours surround the stage persona of Lady Gaga, who, through explicit self-branding, shocks her audience with a provocative style and music. In an interview to *Daily Mail*, she has confessed that her costumes are inspired by her suffering from a mental illness earlier in life (Cogan, 2013). A rather familiar story of depression and drug abuse, it allows to suggest that the rise of feminism and gender equality has laid the groundwork for the annihilation of gendered attributions of madness. One could also argue that Nirvana's 'Lithium' presents a kind of male hysteria, and so do many other world-famous hits depicting abnormal or antisocial behavior amongst males (one the most explicit ones is Rammstein's 'Mein Teil', which presents a true cannibalism story of two men meeting for the purpose of one eating the other) (Wiederhorn, 2004). At the same time, the music business has made female madness more masculine: the life of Courtney Love, as an example, is not particularly different from the life of her husband (Leonard, 2007, pp. 77-82). Female hysteria as a gender defining trope was also rendered irrelevant though the rise of 'agender' artists (e.g. feminine males), while the perception that musicians are already outside social norms has made irrelevant the whole reason why female hysteria came to being. Such historical

changes, once again, demonstrate that madness, unlike female sexuality, is an extremely flexible commercial trope which has remarkably easily adapted to changes in gender politics. However, the ethical issue remains the same: like sexuality, madness is rather vulnerable in the eyes of parental censorship, should campaigns like PMRC target it.

V. CONCLUSION

In this research paper, I have outlined how and why mental illness has become a profitable commonplace in the music business. I have demonstrated the application and the commercial success of the mad musician gimmick by looking at a number of case studies. I have also considered gender and genre attributions, as well as social and ethical aspects of the trope's application.

All conclusions drawn in this research suggest that madness can indeed be awarded the title of a music business trope. There are many other numerous examples of its commercial success, and whether they evoke sympathy for the mentally ill, present the world through the eyes of the mentally ill, or both, the findings I have presented suggest that this trope is not prone to 'running out of steam'. First of all, it is largely defined by the social order, which in its turn is in a state of constant flux. Secondly, it demonstrates the society's reaction to the social order. Finally, as the history has shown, its commercial success has been granted by the actual existence of mental illness which has challenged the human mind for centuries.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank Ruard Absaroka who taught me for my intercollegiate Music Business module at SOAS and provided the advice I needed to write this paper and take the first steps in my research into music and madness.

I also wish to thank Katerina Koutsantoni (King's College London) whose interdisciplinary module 'A Beautiful Mind: Art, Science and Mental Health' helped me to discover my passion.

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