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CATHERINE PARSONAGE

The popularity of jazz - an unpopular problem: the significance of *Swing when you're winning*

Jazz has entered the academy through the efforts of its supporters to establish it as an important art form in its own right, and as a result, jazz has received academic attention as a field of study largely separate from both contemporary musicology or popular music studies. Interestingly, just as in the classical sphere, the history of jazz has been written, its 'great' performers and composers documented and its 'works' canonised, and recently these processes have been subject to criticism in a similar way to work undertaken by 'new' musicologists. Whilst this 'high art' reading of the music is more compatible with conventional scholarly activity and has ensured that jazz has become a valid subject for study at educational institutions, such activity has not always emphasised its popular origins that might undermine its status as an academic discipline. Jazz has remained a specific and marginalized area within twentieth century music scholarship, although with a history that spans the period, it has played an integral and influential part in the evolution of music in the modern world, particularly multifarious popular forms.

With this in mind, it is ironic that jazz has been largely excluded from serious consideration in popular music studies, a situation due in part to the current trends in research in this field. The focus on recent popular music has led to the approach to research where one work, be it a song or an album, is analysed in detail in terms of its musical structure and within its sociological context, but where consideration of its musical-historical context is often lacking, or is at best perfunctory. The incorporation of a range of popular musics, including pre-rock forms such as jazz, into the popular music studies arena can provide valuable historical and evolutionary perspectives on other more recent developments. In addition, the musical material that is the subject of academic discussion and debate in jazz and popular music studies is often not actually very popular. This neglect of the popular was addressed by Robert Walser, who, at the Leeds International Jazz Education Conference in 2002, argued convincingly for the study of Kenny G alongside Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and other well-known jazz musicians. Walser explained that although Kenny G would be seen as abhorrent to many jazz fans due to his technical style of playing, his race and his financial gains from music, the undoubted fact of his massive

success means that the academic establishment should not merely ignore him. Rather, there is an argument that Kenny G's popularity should be examined as a priority. Furthermore, Walser has stated in his book on heavy metal:

I see "the popular" as an important site of social contestation and formation, and I find unconvincing the common assumption that culture that exists either at the margins of society or among a prestigious elite is necessarily more important, interesting, complex, or profound than the culture of a popular mainstream.
(1993: xiv)

Hence, although the reasons for the popularity of an album by Kenny G or, indeed Robbie Williams, may be apparently relatively easy to discern, there is a clear need for development of methodology that examines the multifarious "significances" of such popular culture. My interest in this area developed when, like millions of others, in November 2001 I watched with fascination a broadcast of a concert given by Robbie Williams at the Royal Albert Hall in London. Williams performed mostly 'covers' of songs made famous by the likes of Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis Jnr. and Dean Martin and one original song written by Williams with his long-term collaborator Guy Chambers. I then witnessed the single *Somethin' Stupid*, on which Williams' duetted with the actress Nicole Kidman, achieve the 2001 Christmas number one. The album *Swing when you're winning*, released in November 2001, was also number one in the album chart for several weeks over the Christmas period.

This album is primarily significant as a fascinating artefact of popular culture in the early twenty-first century, but to merely assess it as 'popular', on the basis of quantitative data such as chart performance and sales figures, is an extremely limited approach, as Simon Frith has pointed out:

The equation of popular culture with market choice is problematic. It means that 'popularity,' by default, is consumption as measured by sales figures and market indicators...Even if such figures were accurate (which is doubtful), they provide no evidence as to why such goods are chosen by their consumers nor whether they are actually enjoyed or valued by them.
(1996: 15)

This essay responds to the challenge of writers such as Walser and Derek Scott, who has called for the consideration of mass consumerism as a creative act (see Scott's Introduction to *Music, Culture and Society* (2000)). This means that music of the popular sphere has a claim to be evaluated as a work of art that has significance primarily constructed through its inherent popularity. This essay develops a methodology that combines cultural and musical theory in assessing the significance of popular music by breaking down the concept of "significance" into interlinked areas of importance (to whom and why), meaning (which may be socially located and constructed) and which mediates in the final aspect of meaningfulness (communication and reception). The article will particularly draw on writing by Lucy Green, Krin Gabbard, Albin Zak III, John Fiske and Allan Moore and will make reference to around 100 reviews of the *Swing when you're winning* album posted by members of the public on the retail website <http://www.amazon.co.uk> as a source of opinions of those who bought the *Swing* CD.

Importance

Swing when you're winning is clearly important to three main groups of people; Robbie Williams himself and the other musicians that perform on the album, people within the music industry which range from those close to the artist such as managers, and those that are more distant but bound up in the cycle of production and consumption that fuels the economics of the record industry, and finally the consumers themselves who purchase the record.

Robbie Williams

Arguably it is the *Swing* album above all others that has particular importance for Robbie Williams, as it was recorded at a particularly significant time in his dual life as a pop star and as a person. Williams has shown that he has a clear understanding of the nature of this dual identity:

"Rob is different from Robbie. Robbie is the one who gets on stage every night and goes, "Let me entertain you". If I'm off-stage I wouldn't ask anybody if I could entertain them....I'd be scared if they said "no". (McCrum, 2002: 72)

Until the start of his 2001 European tour, Williams had been heavily dependent on alcohol and drugs, but made the decision to quit and began the tour as a self-professed alcoholic and drug addict. It seems that his

personal and public life had merged during his period of dependence on drugs, leading to a lack of sense of his own identity. Having come clean, he expressed repeatedly in the documentary film *Nobody Someday* and an accompanying book *Somebody Someday* his need to find a clear identity as a person, which involved the expression of considerable personal self-doubt as well as critical reflection on his identity as a star. His manager, David Enthoven, pointed out the conflict between Williams' identity as an artist and a person that were no longer synchronous: 'He's trying to find Robert, but then he's having to go out and be Robbie. That's the dichotomy of the thing.' (McCrum 2002: 115) and McCrum illuminates the necessity of Williams' reliance on his familiar stage persona during the 2001 tour:

...when it comes to showtime...The doubting, unhappy Rob has been replaced by the upbeat Robbie, confidently leading the band, as they prepare for the gig...
(2002: 73)

The problems of dealing with the Rob/Robbie dichotomy surface in Williams' complete lack of enthusiasm for performing that he expresses throughout the film. Although this is clearly contradicted within the film, it is clearly significant that Williams expresses fear about getting on stage (even before he had been epically pushed off the stage later in the tour by an attacker) and boredom and self-loathing with his performance style and persona. He describes 'Robbie' as a front that he has created for the purposes of performance so that the audience have no awareness of how he really feels. After his performance at the Roskilde Festival in 2001 he stated "I'm really bored with Robbie...after November, I'm just going to kill him off. I'm everywhere. It must be really boring for people." (McCrum 2002: 291).

Furthermore, this boredom also extended to the music that he was performing, as in the film *Nobody Someday* he denigrates several of his most popular songs, most revealingly *She's the one* because 'it's not my song'. For many years, Williams had written only the lyrics for his songs, and had collaborated extensively with musician Guy Chambers. The desire to participate more fully in the musical aspects of his act are clearly illuminated in the film, with Williams learning to play the guitar on the tour bus and apparently composing music and fitting lyrics to it. His split with Chambers in Autumn 2002 might indicate that Williams wanted to become more in control of the musical material and through it recreating his pop star persona. In this context, then, *Swing* seems to represent a

neutralising, cleansing function as the musical material is specifically located away from the rock world and provides an opportunity for Williams to appear, on the surface at least, as a figure separate from the politicised extremes of 'star' or 'real person', both of which were problematic identities for him at that time. Particularly relevant in this respect is that Williams chooses to imitate Frank Sinatra, not only vocally but also in dress, as is shown in the extensive photographs within the booklet to the *Swing* CD, and performance style, as in his Royal Albert Hall concert of *Swing* material just prior to the album's release in 2001.¹

Williams' choice of the musical material of *Swing* as a catharsis can be shown to be deeply personal. McCrum describes that backstage on the 2001 tour 'On the wall facing the stage are framed photos of Rob's heroes, numbered from 1) to 4). They are Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis Jnr, Mohammed Ali and Dean Martin.' (2002: 75) In particular, Sinatra was a figure that Williams could clearly relate to both personally and musically:

"He had an amazing voice. I'm also scared of him because he had Mafiosi links and there was a dark side to him that I can pick up on and I can see. But he was also a born leader and people respected him. He was such an amazing performer that he didn't have to do anything. He just sat there and sang. I try to pick up a sense of his character and a sense of his power."
(McCrum, 2002: 75)

The choice of 'Rat Pack' material for a new album was not only due to admiration of these singers but was also more deep seated and related to Williams desire, explained above, to engage with music. It becomes clear that Williams does not identify himself as a musician, rather as an entertainer who sings:

"If the audience sing to me and if the audience smile, if the audience jump up and down, then I have a good time. If they don't

¹ Dr. Tony Whyton has pointed out in a seminar at Leeds College of Music in 2003 that such impersonation can be viewed as a continuation of a Williams trend when viewed in the context of previous material. For example, Williams has appeared as a fictional Formula 1 driver racing Jackie Stewart in the video to *Love Supreme*, as whole teams of footballers on the cover of *Sing when you're winning*, and as James Bond on *I've been expecting you*. I would argue that Williams' imitation of Sinatra on *Swing* is less superficial than his previous impersonations, being based on a non-fictional and musical personality, and thus extending from influencing the visual imagery through to the choice of musical material and performance style of the whole album.

do that then I don't have a good time. A lot of people, a lot of artists, don't want their audiences to do that, they want them to listen to the music. I don't give a shit. I want them to jump up and down, smile, sing, laugh, cry. I work hard at that.”
(McCrum, 2002: 230)

Previously to *Swing* in his professional career, Williams had never really had to perform an interpretation of a song as his performances were inextricably bound up with his stage persona and increasingly his 'own' personality as well. However, when walking on to the stage began to become increasingly difficult it was natural for him to recourse to his early learning experiences, which he describes as:

Every Sunday I would go into the front room and put on records. I would always be Nat King Cole, Sammy Davis Jnr, Dean Martin, Frank Sinatra, Sarah Vaughan and Ella Fitzgerald. I would learn the words and memorise the songs and disappear into that era. I think the first CD I ever bought was Glen Miller.
(McCrum, 2002: 197)

Swing is important to Williams, then, as the resumption and the continuation of the learning process of becoming a musician. Lucy Green prefaces in her excellent study *How Popular Musicians Learn*:

I did not interview any major pop or rock 'stars'. Although their lives as star musicians may be rather different to the lives of the musicians I interviewed, there are no reasons to suppose that their *learning practices* have ever been significantly different.
(2002: 11)

Robbie Williams' *Swing* clearly exemplifies this claim, albeit that his learning practices are played out in public. Green states that 'by far the overriding learning practice for the beginner popular musician, as is already well known, is to copy recordings by ear' (2002: 60), and most interestingly, makes a point that is important when considering the relationship between Williams and Sinatra on this album:

Popular music, especially in its highly commercial forms, is often associated with the idolization of stars by their fans. The difference between being a fan and being a musician is not cut and dried...especially for younger musicians who are just starting out, the move from listener-fan-mode into musician-fan-mode is likely to

fluctuate backwards and forwards for some time before they identify themselves as a musician at all...being a fan can provide a public or a private means of accruing kudos and constructing a positive personal identity through image-identification with the star. For the musician-fan such image-identification can translate into actions that produce the same or similar music to that of the star. (Green, 2002: 119)

It is clear that *Swing* provided an important opportunity for Williams to 'construct a positive personal identity through image-identification' with Sinatra. Williams' status as a 'musician-fan' as identified by Green is clearly shown by his decision to record *Swing* in the Capitol studio in LA where Sinatra made many recordings, his imitation of Sinatra's vocal delivery, and the use of similar arrangements performed by musicians who played in Sinatra's band, thus producing 'similar music to that of the star'. This could be seen as commercial exploitation of the musicians and Sinatra's legacy for Williams' own artistic and financial gain. However, although the presence of musicians such as Bill Miller (Sinatra's pianist) and Harold Jones (a drummer with the Basie band) on the album undoubtedly invests it with a degree of 'authenticity' (a concept which will be discussed extensively later), it is also clear that making the album was also important for these musicians, albeit in different ways than for Williams. Apparently, and not surprisingly, many of the musicians did not know who Robbie Williams was, meaning that for them he was just 'a young person doing this old music' (Harold Jones quoted in McCrum, 2002: 298). Indeed, the re-recording of the musical material more than fifty years after it had first been released may well have represented a nostalgic look back for these musicians, providing them with the opportunity to validate their careers and ensure the longevity of the music that they had helped to create initially. As Jones said: 'I wish him all the luck in the world, because the world needs to hear this music' (McCrum, 2002: 298).

Clearly, Frank Sinatra and the musicians involved in Williams' re-recording fulfilled an important educational function for Williams. This may be compared with Sinatra's own early work with the Tommy Dorsey band, as both Williams and Sinatra relied on the musicians of the bands with which they worked to develop musically, particularly in respect to their jazz feel and sense of timing. However, despite this, the album clearly demonstrates Williams' limitations as a musician and performer. It is informative to compare Williams' performances with Sinatra's, as they are basically very similar, an indication that Williams worked directly from the

original records. In the song *One for my baby* (included on the album *Frank Sinatra Sings for Only the Lonely*), both singers are accompanied by the same pianist, Bill Miller. The song is an intimate narrative song addressed to a (silent) bartender, Joe. John Rockwell has pointed out the subtleties of the song in which the protagonist 'never even tells just exactly what has happened; by alluding to the plot without actually revealing it, his story becomes everyone's story. The mood is forlorn and alone, yet it rises to an emotionality in the final chorus that is all the more painful for its very muted helplessness.' (quoted in Petkov and Mustazza 1995: 72).

The subtleties of the song are inherent in Sinatra's performance, which is delivered in *rubato* style, with considerable variety in dynamics, vocal colouration and articulation commensurate with the conversational style and emotional content of the song. The vocal drifts off into the distance at the end of the song, 'leaving the silent bartender and his pianist alone by themselves in the bar' (Rockwell, quoted in Petkov and Mustazza 1995: 74). The recording itself is spacious, with Sinatra front and centre, Miller's piano in the distance where it later merges with warm strings placed slightly to the left, and a breathy saxophone is placed to the right.

Comparative listening exposes the lack of flexibility in Williams' performance, particularly in respect to his rhythmic interpretation, although superficially the performance imitates Sinatra closely. Unlike Sinatra, in the coda of the song Williams completes the phrase 'long winding road' and a brief post-performance dialogue with Miller is retained, which destroys the idea of a fantasy narrative and illuminates the track as a more egotistical performance in which Williams is clearly 'playing' himself. In comparison with the Sinatra recording, the Williams' version sounds somewhat brittle with the piano very much to the fore throughout, and the sound of the strings and saxophone is more direct. The compressed sound with all elements placed towards the front of the mix demands rather than invites attention and leaves little to the listener's imagination.

Therefore, Williams' version is 'safe' in terms of both performance and production. Although many popular musicians use recordings for inspiration, even transcribing and learning the material, the end result of this is often the incorporation of elements of this material or performances into their personal style. The musical similarities between Williams' versions of the Sinatra songs show that he may not have the artistic capacity or the desire, itself intimately linked with the economics of record

production, to take unnecessary risks. The use of pop production techniques may have been a compromise towards the expected market for the CD of those that would normally buy pop/rock music. Therefore, analysis of this CD demonstrates that the musical coherence of the recordings is subservient to the ability of the artist and the demands of the record industry.

Industry

Although his managers at the time were not initially that keen on the idea of the *Swing* album, saying that Williams was 'ubiquitous' and that they were 'trying to keep him out of the press' they agreed on the basis that it was 'completely different to anything Rob had done before' (McCrum, 2002: 290). Once again, this demonstrates the perceived neutrality of the *Swing* concept through which positive press coverage could be created. EMI records, however, stated that they thought that the project was not 'commercially commensurate' (McCrum, 2002: 290). This shows the essential difference between artist managers who are concerned with the long-term image of their artist, and the record industry, whose immediate concern is album sales, especially as for EMI this was to be Williams' final album under the negotiated contract (McCrum, 2002: 290).

Although EMI did agree to the record, it was probably in the knowledge that undoubted demand would be created for the *Swing* album through the 'one night only' concert that Williams gave in the Royal Albert Hall in October and was broadcast on the BBC on the weekend before the album was released. The prime importance of this widely anticipated and disseminated live performance of the material contained on the album cannot be underestimated. As mentioned above, Williams clearly identifies himself more readily as an 'entertainer' rather than a 'musician', and in many ways comparison between the live performance and the album demonstrate this. The visual aspect of the live performances resonate with layers of meaning that the recording alone does not possess to the same degree, rendering the performances greater apparent interpretive depth as they become more than merely 'karaoke Sinatra'. The clearest example of this is in Williams' version of *My Way*, the climax of the Albert Hall concert, which obviously references Williams' personal life but which is not included on the CD album. Indeed, many

reviewers on Amazon bought the album on the strength of the live performance:²

I saw the Albert Hall concert on BBC1 and was mightily impressed. He might not have Sinatra's voice, but he is enough of a performer to carry the songs off.

Having watched the wonderful BBC1 concert, I was eagerly awaiting the CD release, and rushed out to buy it as soon as I could. Sadly, even though I've been playing the video of the concert over and over, I didn't think so much of this CD.

I think it lacks some of the pizzazz of the concert, and Robbie's voice doesn't seem to come across as strongly as it could have done.

And I was amazed to find that *My Way*, one of my favourite Robbie songs, wasn't on the album at all! Which considering it's an old swing song I think is bizarre.

It's still a good album, but nowhere near as good as I expected considering the brilliance of the concert. My advice would be, unless you're a die-hard fan, forget the CD, and buy the concert on video or DVD.

For viewers of the concert, the album becomes a momento through which details of the concert may be recalled, although as in the review above, several of them found the album disappointing. For Williams' management, the *Swing* project enabled cleansing of Williams' image as well as balancing the demands of the artist with commercial considerations. By promoting the album through the concert, EMI were undoubtedly playing to Williams' strengths as an entertainer and concealing his weaknesses as a musician.

Consumers

Swing when you're winning was such a success although it was a radical departure from Williams' musical style because in some way it could be seen to expose the person behind the rock and roll image. Frith points out that 'the up-front star system means that pop fans are well aware of the ways in which pop performers are inventions' (1996: 185) and that pop biographers fuel the fans desire to know the 'real' person behind the star.

² The production of the CD album may have influenced such opinions, consciously or subconsciously, as although the live performance sound (on the DVD of the concert) has a natural resonance and ambience, the CD sounds more 'produced' as the sound is heavily compressed, resulting in a restricted dynamic range, as discussed above.

The *Swing* album presented the musical side of William's unprecedented self-exposure at this time through the documentary film and book. Ironically though, it is difficult to assess how much of the material contained in the film and the book really exposes either Williams the star or Williams the person. Interestingly, when Williams' expounds his reasons for wishing to appear in a documentary film, he refers to his star persona in the third person, he speaks of the film showing the 'real Robbie' and 'what Robbie is'. Therefore, it is the music of his *Swing* album rather than the typical pop 'exposure' genres of biography and film that appears to be a more directly personal expression and certainly has more potential to be freely interpreted by audiences, particularly fans with knowledge and interest in Williams as a star, and in some instances perpetuating their intrigue:

The question that lingers is is William's imitating Sintra [*sic.*] for the showmanship or is this really Robbie Williams.

Robbie Williams new C.D is I think his best so far. It is very different from his previous but very enjoyable to hear his new style of music. I was very impressed and glad I bought it. Definately [*sic.*] makes me want to buy his Autobiography.

In the live performance of material from the album, Williams plays upon the knowledge that his fans have of his personal life, but yet little is stated explicitly. A particular feature of the *Swing* project is the confusing messages that it presents about Williams' sexuality, at that time being debated in the media. *Somethin' Stupid*, the duet with Kidman, sparked rumours of an affair between the two and *Me and my shadow* references his friendship (or maybe more?) with Jonathan Wilkes. When listening to the album alone, some of these references may continue to resonate but may not be clear at all for those who had not seen the live performance. Some songs are open to certain interpretations for those with 'knowledge' of Williams, so that *It was a very good year* becomes autobiographical and *One for my baby*, *Mr. Bojangles* and *Straighten up and fly right* can seem to be about Williams' acknowledgement that he is an alcoholic and a drug addict.

For the Sinatra fans that bought the album, this was probably a gesture of validating their own taste, similarly to the musicians on the recording mentioned above, as it could be seen that the popular music of their time was still popular, as well as having nostalgic value. One Amazon reviewer mentions that 'As a bonus my teenage daughter now has a taste for swing

and jazz and might even buy herself a real Frank Sinatra album - a job well done Robbie Williams!' However, for many Sinatra fans the songs that he sang became 'his' songs, and Williams' recordings of this material for obvious personal benefit was tantamount to an act of theft. In addition, the fact that Williams' versions closely followed Sinatra's performances meant that the album could easily be criticised comparatively, particularly on a musical level.

Therefore, *Swing when you're winning* is of prime importance to the artist and the industry, which therefore exert their control over its content. The album was probably purchased for three main reasons; interest in Robbie Williams, interest in Frank Sinatra (and the 'Rat Pack'), and in addition many people would have bought the album that were interested in both Frank Sinatra and Robbie Williams, and thus had the potential to reach a more balanced evaluation. Amongst all those who bought the album, some people may have seen the Albert Hall performance and others not. The album is therefore important to different consumers for different reasons, but it is clear that personality and background both of the performers (Sinatra and Williams) and individual audience members have a vital role in ensuring the significance (importance) of the apparently straightforward performances of the musical material.

Meaning

Therefore, it seems that the meaning of this album is socially located and constructed as it results from the interaction between perceptions of Sinatra, 'Rob' the person and 'Robbie' the star, within the specific social, cultural and historical context and experiences of individual listeners. Therefore, it is important to examine the wider implications of historical context in which the album, released in late 2001, should be placed. Without the benefit of distance of time from events it is difficult to evaluate their long-term importance and significance, or to gain a clear perspective on processes of change and development. However, after the build-up to the new Millennium, it is hardly surprising that some sense of directionlessness might be experienced in the early years of the twenty-first century. Indeed, it is informative to compare our present situation in time with the previous *fin de siècle* where there was a sense of progress in science, technology and art but yet this was coupled with some fear of change and heightened awareness of the problems of society that had been exposed by increasing freedom of expression. Around the turn of the present Millennium there were certainly traces of cynicism, scepticism, and uncertainty, which found expression in, for example, criticism of the

Millennium Dome and fear of the Millennium bug, as well as a sense of anti-climax when the big night was finally over. The traces of fear of the unknown present at this time were confirmed by the September 11th tragedies of 2001, where the vulnerability of all in the Western world was made clear. The result of these factors has been a perceptible mood of nostalgia and retrospection in many areas of everyday life, including culture and fashion.³ The *Swing* album is inextricably linked with the 'retro' characteristic of the early twenty-first century, and may therefore come to be regarded as in some way representative of trends in popular culture in this period.

The album is linked with popular film of the time, most overtly with the film *Bridget Jones' Diary* released in April 2001, which included Williams' performance of *Have You Met Miss Jones?* (later included on the *Swing* album). Although the song itself is not used as a significant part of the soundtrack its title inevitably creates references to this film and also it is heard over the closing titles, the last memory an audience might have which confirms the 'feelgood' nature of the film. According to Mark McCrum 'Screenwriter Richard Curtis and music supervisor Nick Angel reckoned Rob was the only performer they wanted, a contemporary Sinatra; and Rob was excited to take up the challenge.' (2002: 289) Indeed, several Amazon reviewers mention having bought the album in response to hearing this song:

I am not a huge Robbie fan but liked his version of 'Have You Met Miss Jones?' on the Bridget Jones Soundtrack, and brought this album on the strength of it.

In addition to *Bridget Jones*, further links with the world of film and television were established through the celebrities that collaborated with Williams for the album's numerous duets: Jane Horrocks, Joe Lovitz, Rupert Everett, Jonathan Wilkes, and Nicole Kidman. It is probably significant that Williams did not chose to collaborate with other singers, rather with celebrities known primarily as actors, in order not to threaten his rather fragile self-confidence as a musician himself. The most prominent duet on the album is *Somethin' Stupid* with Kidman, which was

³ Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that 1950s clothing fashions became prominent at the turn of the century, alongside the interest in swing music and dance. Hadley Freeman wrote in the *Guardian* in late 2000 'The 50s are making a fashion comeback next season...High street outlet Jigsaw has picked up on this trend and, as of January, you will be able to buy 50s fashion - real vintage items, and modern copies - from selected branches. Fashion houses from the 50s are themselves making a comeback...'.

released as a single and became number 1 for Christmas. Kidman had not been known as a singer until her role in Baz Lurhman's *Moulin Rouge* which had been released in the UK in September 2001, and her inclusion on *Swing* shortly afterwards makes reference to the retrospective and nostalgic musical eclecticism of the film which has its mass of intertextual meanings and references.

The turn of the Millennium was marked by the rise of 'reality TV' which began with Big Brother in 2000 and which turned to the popular music business with Pop Stars, Pop Idol and latterly Pop Stars: the Rivals and Fame Academy. These programmes can be viewed as an extension of the traditional 'talent competition' or 'karaoke competition' (previously seen on TV in the UK as 'Stars in their eyes' and many other programmes which expose new talent). Through programmes such as Pop Stars and Pop Idol, where extensive coverage enables viewers to gain insight into the 'behind the scenes' aspects of pop performances such as vocal and dance coaching, it is possible for the public to become more objectively aware and critical of pop music performances, in particular vocal quality, and are actually given the opportunity to engage in the performances on this level through public votes that form an important part of the decisions that are made in such competitions.

Interestingly, one of the rounds of the Pop Idol competition featured a big band with the contestants singing 'Rat Pack' songs, and these were later recorded and released on an album in 2002. Since almost all the songs performed by contestants in competitions such as Pop Idol are covers, there is undoubtedly reference to the 'original' or most well known versions of the songs and their performers, which sets up comparison between the 'stars' and the 'unknowns'. This scheme of reception parallels talent competitions such as 'Stars in their eyes' in which the contestant is relatively anonymous and uninteresting to the audience, and it is the magic of the transformation into a known personality (remember the dry ice!) that is the focus. However, the Pop Idol CD is most interesting for people who have watched the programmes and have come to know the personalities involved, similar to a karaoke competition, which is more entertaining or amusing for those that know the performer well. It is when these two schemes of reception are active simultaneously that real interest can be derived from the entertainment (for example Celebrity Big Brother, Celebrity Stars in their Eyes), and this can be used to explain the appeal of Williams' *Swing* album, which becomes much more meaningful if the listener is 'acquainted' with Williams, Sinatra, or preferably both.

Listeners' expectations of an album such as *Swing when you're winning* are likely to be very different depending on their previous experiences. However, 'it is not enough to assert that commodities only become culturally valuable when they are made "meaningful" by consumers: they can only be consumed because they are *already* meaningful, because musicians, producers, and consumers are already ensnared in a web of genre expectation.' (Frith, 1996: 94). Thus, consideration of genre and labelling is vital to the understanding of the reception of *Swing when you're winning*, as the album demonstrates a conflict of stylistic expectations through conventionally used terminology. Sinatra albums containing similar material to Williams' album would not normally be found in the 'Pop and rock' category but more usually under 'Easy Listening', where Williams' album would not normally be placed. The album would of course normally be found under Robbie Williams within the 'Pop and Rock' category in record stores, although the material contained within it would not conform to expectations of a typical Robbie Williams album. However, there are additional factors other than location in a record store to link this album with Williams' previous releases, not less the title, which plays on his previous album *Sing when you're winning* with its pictorial references to a football match. In this context, *Swing when you're winning* has a more personal reference to Williams himself, 'winning' at the game of music or the even the game of life. The use of the word 'swing' in the title also acts as a genre descriptor and has particular historical and cultural resonances with the 'swing' dance tradition, still very much alive in clubs and societies. The style and instrumentation of most of the album clearly associates it with the big band jazz canon, that may be defined in an Adornian sense as standardised clichés distinguished only by pseudo-individualisation with reference to band leaders, soloists and vocalists. Interestingly, although the album cannot normally be found under 'easy listening' in record stores, it is classified as MOR by the BPI, where it accounted for almost one in five of albums sold in the genre in 2001 (<http://www.bpi.co.uk/pdf/TypeofMusic2001.pdf>).

After considering all of this, all that is clear is that 'Nowhere are the genre boundaries more fluid than in popular music...pieces within a popular genre rarely correspond to slavish criteria' (Walser, 1993: 27). The British Phonographic Industry report on 'Sales by Type of Music' identifies a fundamental problem in the production of their figures: 'some titles fit easily into more than one genre and individual artists can have a significant effect on overall results by being included or excluded from specific categories.' (<http://www.bpi.co.uk/pdf/TypeofMusic2001.pdf>). The

Swing album is at once jazz, easy listening, pop and dance music; and it is often the performer, rather than the nature of the music itself, that determines the way in which the music is defined in terms of genre. Where, then is the music itself to be positioned?

One argument could be for the adoption of 'middle of the road' canon as a theoretical concept for dealing with such music, and it is conventionally in this area that jazz and pop can be seen to converge, an area, then, that is ripe for academic consideration but is most frequently subject to scholarly (particularly musicological) derision. As Derek Scott has pointed out, easy listening has an extensive history stretching back to the start of the twentieth century and beyond as 'light music' (1995: 68). 'Easy listening' is the category name that is more often seen today but the implications of this term are not always very helpful: 'The whole notion of Easy Listening was until recently considered to be the domain of music prepared for people who didn't really like to think about music. It was considered pre-digested for easy consumption: baby food for the ears!' (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/music/easy/guide.shtml>) The BPI definition of middle-of-the-road (MOR) includes 'Frank Sinatra, Nat King Cole, Neil Diamond, Celine Dion, Dean Martin and The Carpenters' (<http://www.bpi.co.uk/pdf/TypeofMusic2001.pdf>). However, the expression middle-of-the-road, meaning firstly 'moderate; avoiding extremes' and secondly 'of general appeal' (Collins Concise English Dictionary), is of greater relevance and could be applied more widely than conventionally across established genres, for example to 'chart' pop, 'dinner' jazz and popular classics. The expression 'middle-of-the-road' could also usefully be applied to old popular music that achieves canonical status over time, for example the Beatles.

It is clear that jazz has an important role to play in the construction of the MOR canon. The concept of the 'jazz canon' has been examined extensively by Krin Gabbard in his essay in *Jazz Among the Discourses*, and although he is mostly concerned with the way in which jazz has been incorporated into the academic mainstream, he acknowledges here and elsewhere the increasing use of jazz in advertising and film and that 'jazz can now signify refinement and upper-class status, once the exclusive province of classical music' (1995: 2) due to its position in the cultural mainstream. It is relevant to the current analysis that Gabbard notes that the canonisation of jazz should be defined more precisely as the 'canonization of certain jazz artists and styles' (1995: 2). He makes particular reference to the canonisation and institutionalisation of the big band style as the 'popular' form of the music, restating the well-known

assumption that 'Jazz was transformed from a popular to an art music through bebop' prompting a 'revolt against big bands as multiply faceted popular cultural institutions' (1995: 58). Of course, this division in jazz did not happen overnight, with bands of Woody Herman, Stan Kenton and Dizzy Gillespie remaining popular and representative of the latest directions in jazz for several years. More significantly, this was by no means the first time that such a split had occurred within jazz, and arguably, such a division was present in some degree from the early twentieth century with 'hot' and 'sweet' bands existing side by side, and in many instances using the same musicians. Gabbard points out that 'the commodified white bands of the early forties, such as those led by Jimmy Dorsey, Tommy Dorsey, and Glenn Miller, were never simply jazz bands, or even dance bands, but transmitters of various style of popular music.' (1995: 60) This is surely the crux of the matter, and evidences the importance of the consideration of the relationship between jazz and popular music which has been under negotiation from way before Robbie Williams' album, and even way before the be-bop era. The fact that over time more big band music becomes accepted into the 'middle of the road' canon is significant as this style is so clearly representative of the point at which jazz and popular music merge.

The formation of the MOR canon is undoubtedly indebted to modern technology, which has played an important part in shaping and disseminating late twentieth/twenty-first century popular song. Singers increasingly 'embraced the microphone both as an aspect of vocal technique and as an expressive tool...[and] crooners developed a performance style that was inseparable from technology' (Zak, 2001: 9). The word 'croon' originally meant to sing softly to a baby, but from around the 1930s, came to imply a specific style of soft sentimental singing, normally by a male vocalist with dance/big band accompaniment. The intimacy of the close miking of the voice undoubtedly produced an illusion of personal intimacy between singer and listener, which was overwhelmingly magical for early radio listeners still fascinated with the technology of broadcasting. Such singing had a comforting, soothing effect on listeners but historically, was recognised as having clear sexual overtones which led the BBC to try to put a stop to the practice of crooning in the 1930s. Of course, it was only natural for (female) listeners of radio and records to want to know more about the men who 'spoke' to them so intimately, and it is therefore not surprising that singers such as Bing Crosby, Rudy Valle and later Frank Sinatra became household names and huge celebrities.

Furthermore, recording has clearly been influential in enabling particular performances in popular genres to achieve canonical status, for instance certain performances of jazz standards or popular songs become 'definitive', (although it is, of course, the goal of many jazz musicians to deliberately break away from these canonic versions). However, the MOR canon thrives on specific personalities such as Frank Sinatra to perform the music. In most cases these personalities are easily replaced by others who may update the musical content of the MOR canon, but Frank Sinatra's longevity has led to an unprecedented creation of a canon within a canon. Not only is the Sinatra repertoire upon which *Swing* is based unequivocally middle of the road, it is also unequivocally Sinatra. This means that not only the music but also the performance of the music is canonised.

Therefore, lack of interpretive freedom may be identified as a feature of the middle of the road canon. Attempts to re-interpret the musical material tend to bring it out from the middle into the particular sphere related to be performance style. However, in cases such as *Swing when you're winning*, the imitation of the canonised performance does not permit such radical redefinition, the album can be interpreted as 'Robbie Williams sings Sinatra' but remains MOR. In this way, the music is opened up to intertextual interpretation within its canonical position, as Sinatra's personality remains an indelible part of the songs. John Fiske points out that 'in popular culture the object of veneration is less the text or the artist and more the performer, and the performer, like Madonna, only exists intertextually. No one concert, album, video, poster or album cover is an adequate text of Madonna. Intertextual competence is central to the popular productivity of creating meanings from texts' (Fiske, 1989: 125). Similarly, Mustazza sees Frank Sinatra as a 'cultural product' (1998: 2), and in the case of the *Swing* album, a plethora of intertextual meanings are possible, resulting from the collision of two performers.

This section on meaning has introduced some social, historical, cultural factors that may give *Swing when you're winning* meaning as an artefact of popular culture. However, it is fundamental to recognise that any combination of these factors may mediate in the meaningfulness that the album has for a particular individual. In other words, the meaning of the album is not fixed, and, indeed, popular culture is heavily dependant on the productive nature of the consumer to make a particular product meaningful.

Meaningfulness

John Fiske's concept of popular texts as 'producerley' is helpful when considering the final aspect of this essay – the meaningfulness of *Swing*; that is, how it communicates and is received by audiences. Fiske takes Barthes model of a 'readerly' text which invites a passive, receptive, disciplined reader who accepts its meaning as it is made; and a writerly text that challenges its reader to re-write it to make sense of it. He argues that a producerly text lies between these two extremes, and that this positionality is desirable for popular texts. A producerly text, then 'offers itself up to popular production, it exposes, however reluctantly, its vulnerabilities, limitations and weaknesses of its preferred meanings; it contains, while attempting to repress them, voices that contradict the ones it prefers; it has loose ends that escape its control, its meanings exceed its own power to discipline them, its gaps are wide enough for whole new texts to be produced in them- it is, in a very real sense, beyond its own control.' (1989: 104). In Fiske's model, for a text to be popular it should have relevance to the audience but should be open to varying interpretations (1989: 146).

In this respect, Fiske sees a need for a double focus in the analysis of popular texts, both the deep structure and 'how people cope with the system, how they read its texts, how they make popular culture out of its resources. It requires us to analyse texts in order to expose their contradictions, their meanings that escape control, their producerly invitations; to ask what it is within them that has attracted popular approval' (1989: 105). Although popular art is often perceived as simple, Fiske notes that

Reading texts is a complex business; and the complexity of popular texts lies as much in their uses as in their internal structures. The densely woven texture of relationships upon which meaning depends is social rather than textual and is constructed not by the author in the text, but by the reader: it occurs at the moment of reading when the social relationships of the reader meet the discursive structure of the text.
(1989: 122).

For Richard Middleton, 'any approach to music which aims to contextualise it as a cultural expression must foreground discussion of 'authenticity' since 'honesty (truth to cultural experience) becomes the validating criteria of musical value' (quoted in Moore, 2002: 212). The

concept of 'producerly' popular texts is commensurate with Allan Moore's idea of 'authenticity as authentication'. Moore argues that 'authenticity is a matter of interpretation which is made and fought for from within a cultural and, thus, historicised position. It is ascribed, not inscribed... Whether a performance is authentic, then, depends on who 'we' are' (2002: 210). Similarly to the neutral status of the music in the MOR canon discussed earlier, Moore does not see 'authenticity' residing within the music that we hear, but that it is a 'construction made in the act of listening' and therefore dependent on asking who, rather than what (a piece of music, or activity), is being authenticated (2002: 210). Moore proposes a tri-partite typology (2002: 209) depending whether it is the performer herself, the performer's audience, or an (absent) other who is being authenticated, through which to consider authenticity of popular music (2002: 220):

Authenticity of expression is first person authenticity and 'arises when an originator (composer, performer) succeeds in conveying an attempt to communicate in an unmediated form with an audience.'
(2002: 214)

Authenticity of experience (second person authenticity) occurs when a performance succeeds in conveying the impression to a listener that that listener's experience of life is being validated, that the music is 'telling it like it is' for them.
(2002: 220)

Authenticity of execution (third person authenticity) occurs when 'a performer succeeds in conveying the impression of accurately representing the ideas of another, embedded within a tradition of performance.'
(2002: 218)

Using Moore's model, it can be seen that many of the performances of the Sinatra songs on Williams' album can be seen to be authentic from two or more of the three categories, as they validate an absent other, present apparently unmediated expression from Williams and also authenticate the audience's experiences in some way.

First person authenticity: Authenticity of expression

In rock discourse, 'unmediated expression, by which is assumed the possibility of the communication of emotional content', becomes the

validating criterion of musical value (Moore, 2002: 212). In authentic rock, the performer shows their 'real self' without pretence, and their motives for performing may appear not to revolve around their bank balance (2002: 211). For many of Robbie Williams' fans, this presence of evidence of this type of authenticity in the *Swing* album is of prime importance, as their interest is in Williams and normal listening would be within the pop/rock paradigm rather than the Sinatra-type material. Indeed, although there are considerable differences in style between this album and Williams' conventional pop/rock style, the album can be seen to address some of the attributes associated with first person authenticity of expression. As was indicated earlier, there is a paradox that in impersonating Sinatra, Williams could actually be perceived as revealing the reality behind the star persona. The departure from his stylistic norm is significant as the album could be perceived as commercially risky and demonstrates the artist apparently acting on a spontaneous and impulsive whim to record an album, thereby authenticating it as an expression apparently unmediated by commercial concerns, although, as discussed earlier this is probably not entirely accurate.

However, the fact that this is an album of 'covers' is a significant departure from norms of authentic rock, in which the singer/songwriter figure attributes authenticity to the music. If the singer is performing his own song, the emotions expressed are seen as consistent and genuine. This type of authenticity is of course present most strongly in the opening 'original' song *I Will Talk and Hollywood will Listen* in which Williams reverts to a more conventional high vocal range- authenticating the song with his own voice as a star literally. However, it is also true to say that audience has a role in projecting first person authenticity onto these performances. Moore states that 'Particular acts and sonic gestures (of various kinds) made by particular artists are interpreted by an engaged audience as investing authenticity in those acts and gestures- the audience becomes engaged not with the acts and gestures themselves, but directly with the originator of those acts and gestures.' (2002: 214). There is a strong sense of first person authenticity present here which is attributed rather than inherent in the material itself. It is significant that the musical material of the album is in the main canonised and neutral as this allows the whole album and the choice of many of the individual songs within it to be interpreted as Williams' personal expression.

A pre-requisite for first person authenticity is the presence of emotional content in a song or the performance (2002: 212), and this is most obviously present in the Sinatra numbers included in the *Swing* album.

This material resonates with the public knowledge of Williams, including his sexuality and substance abuse as discussed earlier, and in this way, undoubtedly conveys a sense of 'this is what it's like to be me' from the artist. As Moore identifies, however, this form of authenticity is problematic, and questions of 'how trustworthy is this expression?' and 'is it mere illusion?' arise. In this context, it is important to consider not only *what* is performed but *how* it is performed, and hence how the material addresses the criteria for authenticity of execution.

Third person authenticity

Several of the Sinatra songs on the album convey not only 'this is what it's like to be me' from Williams, but also a sense of 'this is what it was like to be Sinatra', therefore by re-performing these songs Williams authenticates Sinatra's performances. Moore uses a similar example of tribute bands where 'faithful reproduction in order to recover the reality of ordinary performances can be widely found.' (2002: 217). Moore notes that 'for [the Genesis tribute band] ReGenesis (and for their fans) it is the song which has an identity, which is the key to the experience' (2002: 218), moreover, I would add 'the performance of the song' as other interpretations of the song might not be regarded as authentically executed in a 'third person' sense. It is important, ironically, that since Williams' versions are so close to the canonised 'Sinatra', that his performances are not noticeably 'different' or 'better'. This ensures that the songs remain intact within the MOR canon and also authenticates the performance as a personal veneration of Sinatra rather than a financially motivated act (which would require polished performances), an important factor for the popular success of the album.

This is clearly where the great part of the authentic qualities of the *Swing* album lie, but yet authenticity of this type is clearly not always compatible with first person authenticity as is conventionally defined in rock discourse, and Moore notes the parallels between third person authenticity discussed here and 'one tradition of European concert practice, whereby contemporary performers attempt to re-create for contemporary ears the aural experience of earlier performance, via the re-creation of earlier instruments' (2002: 218). We can see that considerable effort has been made to address the notion of authenticity of execution in the production of the album, including the recording location and musicians. However, for most listeners, authenticity of execution arguably revolves around the voice. Possibly the most significant aspect of the album vocally is the noticeably lower range that is used compared with

Williams' other released material, and although some of the keys were changed from the 'originals', Williams still struggles to reach some of the lowest notes. But it is important that the songs are in this range for many reasons. If they were put into a higher tessitura, they would lose their authenticity as they would no longer reference Sinatra's well-known and distinctive voice- they would become parodies rather than tributes. This also ties up with first person authenticity- this is not Robbie Williams the manufactured and commercially oriented pop star; this is the 'real person'. I suggested earlier that the 'Pop Idol' phenomenon has allowed greater critical depth in audience evaluations of singing. Certainly, many of the Internet reviewers comment on Williams' vocal inadequacies compared to Sinatra,

Nicely recorded, arranged and accompanied but let down by a voice that has such a narrow range, that it sounds trapped and strained.

There is a particular richness & timbre of the voice that doesn't carry through.

Where he fails badly, and not because his heart is not into the music and genre, but because his voice lacks the tonal colour, and his ear lacks the sympathy/empathy with the music that the truly great singers he is covering here, had naturally or learned through experience. His narrow voice, with which he has achieved so much, is badly exposed.

However, for many people this doesn't matter since the performances on the album are so obviously authentic as a personal tribute to Sinatra:

He may not have the world's greatest voice, as is made plain when he 'duets' with Sinatra himself on 'It was a Very Good Year', but what he lacks in range he more than makes up for in delivery.

He might not have Sinatra's voice, but he is enough of a performer to carry the songs off.

Second person authenticity

In discussing this type of authenticity, which relates to the validation of the audiences' experiences by the performance, Moore refers to the concept of 'centredness' or 'a place of belonging' in a cultural product that offers

'an affirmation, a cultural identity in the face of accelerating social change...'. Centredness implies 'an active lifting of oneself from an unstable experiential ground and depositing oneself within an experience to be trusted, an experience which centres the listener' (2002: 219). We have seen that the album has relevance to the individual listener's experience of life, particularly through specific references to other forms of contemporary popular culture (film and TV). Listeners of the album can be removed from the instability and uncertainty of everyday life into a stable, central position in which their experiences are validated. Moore suggests that 'centredness' in a cultural product results 'in large part because it itself had no history apparent to its participants' (2002: 219). In this instance this is clearly not the case, as nostalgia has a large part to play in the social relevance of *Swing when you're winning*. The central 'place of belonging' into which listeners are removed is here utopian- it is desirable as it distances them from the problematic aspects of everyday life and affirms their experiences through nostalgic identification with a more stable past. Significantly also, the use of 'Sinatra' material on the album creates a 'centred' sentimental theme of romantic love, nostalgic in a cultural sense in the post-sexual revolution age, but also, of course, personally to individual listeners.

Clearly, then, it depends who the listeners are as to whether a performance is considered 'authentic', and this accounts for the varying reception of the album under consideration here. In addition, 'siting authenticity within the ascription carries the corollary that every music, and every example, can conceivably be found authentic by a particular group of perceivers and that it is the *success* with which a particular performance conveys its impression that counts, a success which depends in some part on the explicitly musical decisions performers make.' (2002: 220), ranging from repertoire choice to the minutiae of performance. Equally, there are listeners for whom the performance could not be considered authentic or successful. With these points in mind, I shall now turn to examination of the reception of the music using the reviews posted on the Amazon website which gives an indication of the wide range of reactions from people who, presumably, had already bought the album.

The main reasons for giving the album a low (1 or 2) star rating were

- Robbie Williams' lack of vocal ability
- Robbie Williams lack of knowledge/ability in the genre
- Lack of interpretation- imitation, copying, parody of Sinatra et al.
- The album was a purely commercial move

It is significant that the criticisms of the album focus on ideals of authentic rock and perceptions of genre around Robbie Williams as a pop/rock artist. Grudgingly, several of the reviewers that gave the album 1 or 2 stars acknowledged the 'educational' potential of the album, which represents validation their own tastes by encouraging further participants. Some also acknowledged that the live performance was much better in comparison with the CD, again reflecting notions of rock authenticity grounded in live performance (as well as the relative production quality). A few reviewers who gave the album a poor star rating did go as far as to indicate that they considered that the album represented a risk rather than a sure-fire commercial success for Williams. As this conforms more to conventional notions of 'first person' authenticity, the reviewers indicated that Williams deserved some recognition in this respect.

However, it seems that these listeners may tend to be those not absorbed within the central, popular position in which the album is located. They may want the performances to be more 'writerly' or 'readerly' and may not be prepared or equipped to be 'producers', or be looking to apply rationale of authenticity from other musical genres, rather than popular MOR. We have seen that popularity and lack of variation of interpretation may be considered an integral part of MOR, but these listeners appear to be looking for a new experience that leads them to question themselves or look more widely at the world, rather than validation of their lives.

In the same group of reviews, the main reasons for giving the album the top rating of five stars were

- Identification as a Robbie Williams fan
- Performances representative of characteristic Robbie Williams
- Diversity of Robbie Williams' ability as an artist
- Reference to the live performance
- Interaction of Williams with the other personalities in the duets-comedy and fun
- Identification as a Sinatra fan
- Robbie Williams showing reverence/respect for Sinatra etc
- Validating tastes of an older generation
- Recreation of an ambience/sentimentality/nostalgia/timelessness

The reviewers that rated the album highly often indicated that they considered Williams to have some vocal weaknesses, but as discussed previously, this gives the album certain authenticity as spontaneous and

personally motivated expression, whilst allowing for reverence and respect towards the original versions and their performers. In the case of these reviewers, it can be seen that identification with personality is key to the appreciation of the album. These listeners use their 'producerly' capabilities to derive insight into Robbie Williams through the album, and also to validate their own tastes and experiences. Thus, in these reviews, Williams' is presented as a role model and diverse and talented artist who fits within the MOR canon through his reverential reproductions of Sinatra's interpretations. These reviews draw strongly on extra-musical elements, illuminating the album as presenting not only musical performances, but also comedy and entertainment in a more general sense, which could be seen as a characteristic of MOR culture.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis in this paper establishes the musical material of the *Swing* album as fundamentally 'centred' between various extremes. As such, the album is relatively neutral, but has considerable significance through its extra-musical associations. The album is popular with audiences that have similarly central position, as it is from this perspective that the album appears at its most significant in terms of importance, meaning and meaningfulness. Although 'middle-of-the-road' music may be regarded with derision by the musical and academic establishments, it has undoubted significance to the performer, musicians, industry and most importantly the audiences involved with it. Jazz has a vital role in the construction of this middle ground, and there is a need for further research that examines the relationship between jazz and popular music. Consideration of this relatively unpopular area will ultimately strengthen the academic study of jazz by ensuring that it becomes a fundamental part of the discourse on popular and contemporary music.

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