

Liveness in livestreams

How liveness and authenticity function in the Twenty One Pilots

Livestream Experience

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Introduction

On May 21st 2021 an American rock band from Columbus, Ohio named Twenty One Pilots performed a livestreamed concert as promotion for their new album named *Scaled and Icy*. Because of the global pandemic, the band, consisting of Tyler Joseph (vocals) and Josh Dun (drums), would not be able to promote their album through the regular channels. Therefore the Twenty One Pilots Livestream Experience was organized. Starting three hours before the actual livestream, the band showed archived footage from previous tours, engaging the audience in a trip down memory lane. Twenty One Pilots was founded in 2009 and exists in its current form since 2011 when the present drummer Josh Dun joined the band. They gained mainstream success in 2015 with their song *Stressed Out* for which they received a Grammy nomination¹. With their song *Level of Concern*, released in 2020, the band managed to gain a world record for longest music video. With their endless music video, fans could send in their own content to add to it. In watching this livestreamed performance, two areas of performance come into question. Namely, liveness and authenticity. Firstly, liveness is experienced much differently in an online, livestreamed concert than when the audience is physically present at a concert in a concert hall. This makes an interesting point to study as livestream concerts are a relatively new concept which many artists have been forced to utilize because of the aforementioned global pandemic. There are many ways to construct such an event but Twenty One Pilots chose to plan out every second and even add an overlapping storyline which is not common practice yet. Secondly, through this different

¹ "Twenty One Pilots," Grammy, <https://www.grammy.com/grammys/artists/twenty-one-pilots/20162>.

mode and experience of liveness, a different form of authenticity is constructed. Through their performance personae and a set precedent in their live shows Twenty One Pilots perform their authenticity. The question is then: how does liveness work in the Twenty One Pilots Livestream Experience and how does this contribute to the experienced authenticity?

Theoretical Framework

Liveness is often understood through a ‘traditional performance paradigm’ which Paul Sanden explains as ‘performers communicating musically within a shared time and place.’² The way in which Philip Auslander describes liveness is still regarding the traditional performance practices, but the technological developments from the last twenty years and the forced switch to online performances during the last year have required a new perspective on the concept of liveness. In an online environment, corporeal and interactional liveness are hard, if not impossible to replicate. When watching a livestream, it is impossible to physically be in the same space as the performer. This means that corporeal liveness must come from the performer itself, meaning that it is required to imply liveness through the bodily presence of the performer instead of the bodily copresence of the performer and audience. In the traditional performance practice interactional liveness is important because it creates a feedback loop. This feedback loop is already interrupted when screens are utilized during performance according to Erika Fischer-Lichte.³ The interruption may grow to a full stop when the performance is done through livestream as it is near impossible for the performer to interact with the audience when using this medium. The use of a livestream as a main performance practice creates both a larger and at the same time smaller distance between the performer and the audience. On the one hand, the distance is widened as there is no longer any bodily copresence between performer and audience, they are no longer together in the same space. However the move from watching an artist in person in a concert hall to watching on a mobile device may create a greater sense of intimacy. Auslander values the traditional performance paradigm very highly: ‘The resulting assessment of the situation of live performance in a culture dominated by mass media has not made me optimistic about its

² Paul Sanden, “Rethinking Liveness in the Digital Age.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Music in Digital Culture*, ed. Nicholas Cook, Monique M. Ingalls, and David Trippett, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 178.

³ Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, trans. Saskya Iris Jain (New York: Routledge, 2008), 73.

current and future cultural prestige, as understood in traditional terms.⁴ However, with the continuing technological developments and the growing importance of digital resources, liveness might very well get a different context. Sanden offers an interesting perspective on ‘liveness in the digital age’. Where Auslander describes the opposition between live and mediatized performances, Sanden argues that especially now, in the digital age, live *is* mediatized.⁵ However, Auslander did add nuance to his argument in a 2012 article: ‘Understood in this way, the experience of liveness is not limited to specific performer audience interactions but refers to a sense of always being connected to other people, of continuous, technologically mediated temporal co-presence with others known and unknown.’⁶ Sanden then moves to introduce his concept of ‘virtual liveness’: ‘In some cases, music can be live in a virtual sense even when the conditions for its liveness (be they corporeal, interactive, etc.) do not actually exist. Virtual liveness, then, depends on the perception of a liveness that is largely created through mediatization.’⁷ In this new form of liveness, which breaks away from the aforementioned traditional performance paradigm, the rigid requirement of temporal, corporeal and interactional liveness is changed. Liveness no longer only encompasses performances in which performer and audience have ‘bodily co-presence’ as Erika Fischer-Lichte called it.⁸ Auslander, however, does challenge the inferiority of mediatized events as opposed to unmediatized events: ‘Live performance now often incorporate mediatization such that the live event itself is a product of media technologies.’ Auslander argues that current live performances cannot exist without some form of mediatization. This statement is especially true in today’s performance practices because, as said before, many bigger performance utilize screens and other forms of media. Furthermore, the past year nearly *all* performances had to be mediatized as artists were forced to perform for an online or limited audience because of the global pandemic. One benefit of this move to online performances is that the artist as well as the audience were no longer required to even be on the same continent to be able to execute a performance.

The question of what constitutes liveness also brings a question of what constitutes authenticity. In the traditional performance paradigm, mediatized performance can be valued

⁴ Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999), 4.

⁵ Auslander, *Liveness*, 4; Sanden, “Rethinking Liveness,” 181.

⁶ Philip Auslander, “Digital Liveness: A Historico-Philosophical Perspective.” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 34, no. 3 (September 2012): 6.

⁷ Sanden, “Rethinking Liveness,” 183.

⁸ Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 67.

as less authentic than unmediatized performance. Fischer-Lichte argues that ‘live performance seems to carry remnants of “authentic” culture that fortifies the opposition to mediatized performance as product of commercialism created by market interests.’⁹ Keir Keightley argues that ‘authenticity can be thought of as the compass that orients rock culture in its navigation of the mainstream.’¹⁰ He then goes on to name a number of factors that weigh in to determine inauthenticity in rock-music. According to Keightley, authenticity goes hand in hand with originality. The closer an artist stands to their music, the more authentic it is perceived to be. Furthermore, authenticity is a construct that exists between the audience and the performer. Naming several examples, Keightley demonstrates how actions that are seen as inauthentic to some, can be seen as authentic to others. In the same vein as Auslander, Keightley notes that inauthenticity somewhat stems from mediation.¹¹ This could be connected to the traditional performance paradigm mentioned before. Using an important distinction between Romantic and Modern authenticity, which contain different characteristics, Keightley emphasizes the different ways authenticity can be interpreted within rock music.

Another interesting aspect of authenticity can be described through Auslander’s concept of performance personae. Auslander argues that performance personae are ‘always negotiated between musicians and their audiences within the constraints of genre framing,’ just like authenticity is construed between audience and performer. Furthermore, performance personae evolve through time and through changes within the genre in which the persona exists. According to Auslander musical performance is ‘framed in at least four ways, which could be labeled the music frame, the performance frame, the genre frame, and the social frame.’¹² Framing a performance is especially interesting with regards to a livestreamed performance as the normal context for performances is shifted. Using Auslander’s terminology: when livestreaming a performance, the event is keyed differently to a ‘regular’ performance. A livestream is a much more mediatized performance and therefore framed firstly as a performance, but much more noticeably as an online performance. Through this online performance, different types of personae may shine through. Nicholas Cook utilizes

⁹ Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 67.

¹⁰ Keir Keightley, “Reconsidering Rock,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*, ed. Simon Frith, Will Straw, and John Street, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 131.

¹¹ Keightley, “Reconsidering Rock,” 133.

¹² Philip Auslander, “Musical Personae,” in *In Concert : Performing Musical Persona*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021), 92.

Dennis Waskul's three levels of role playing: person, player, and persona in his description of sociality in music. In the aforementioned levels of role playing, the concept of persona most closely resembles Auslanders performance or musical personae. Cook describes the persona as 'whatever you represent yourself to be in the game'.¹³ Whereas Auslander adds more nuance to this concept, the underlying idea is more or less the same.

Liveness in the Twenty One Pilots Livestream Experience

The aforementioned concept of liveness is an interesting point to examine in the Twenty One Pilots Livestream Experience. The livestreamed concert was a highly mediatized event. So much so that the first impression makes it seem that it was not live at all. However, when going back and looking at the details, multiple forms of liveness become apparent. Firstly, temporal liveness. This type of liveness is the only form of liveness from the traditional performance paradigm that can survive in an entirely mediatized, online performance. Temporal liveness exists in this livestream, most simply said, because the audience was watching at the same time the band was performing. But how does this become apparent throughout the livestream? On first glance the high production value, use of multiple cameras, many costume changes and use of different sets make the livestream seem more like a movie than a concert. However, small details do show temporal liveness. Firstly, the use of handheld cameras. If the concert were prerecorded, unintentional shaky camerawork would lead to a redo of the take. The fact that the concert was in fact live makes a redo impossible. Therefore, especially in the beginning of the livestream some seemingly unintentionally shaky movement can be seen. Another fact that makes the temporal liveness of this livestream more believable is that the livestream could only be watched during the official broadcast. That is why people in Europe had to stay up until 02:00 a.m. CET to be able to experience the concert. Furthermore, there were no official recordings made. Lastly, Sanden compares a livestream to a live broadcast: 'For instance, temporal liveness would be the liveness perceived in a live broadcast – a broadcast of something at the time of its happening.'¹⁴ This statement holds true for the Twenty One Pilots Livestream Experience as well.

The so-called feedback loop mentioned by Fischer-Lichte that is so important to experience interactional liveness could not exist during this livestream. However, Tyler

¹³ Nicholas Cook, "Social Scripts," in *Beyond the Score: Music as Performance*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 259.

¹⁴ Sanden, "Rethinking Liveness," 182.

Joseph does attempt to emulate a regular show. During a song called Morph, the backdrop for the set is distorted video of fans jumping and singing along from a different show. Tyler calls out to the audience: ‘hello out there, repeat after me...’ This form of interactional liveness works very well during a regular show but here the audience interacting is not a live audience as a track from another show was used. During another part of the livestream, the singer moves to a set that is set up like a café where you hear the murmur of people talking as if they’re not there to watch a performance. The Twenty One Pilots Livestream Experience does not contain any actual interactional liveness with regards to a feedback loop with the audience. As Fischer-Lichte noted in relation to stadium concerts which utilized large screens: ‘these recorded sequences at least seemed to interrupt the feedback loop. The spectators watched the video images but could not influence them.’¹⁵

Sanden argues that virtual liveness can exist when the traditional conditions for liveness do not. According to him, temporal, corporeal and interactional liveness do not have to be present in an online performance for it to still be perceived as live. Liveness, then, is experienced ‘*through* mediatization’. Sanden then goes on to argue that some aspects of the traditional sense of liveness can still persist in virtual liveness.¹⁶ As mentioned before, this holds true in the Twenty One Pilots Livestream Experience. Some form of temporal and interactional liveness still exists in this entirely mediatized performance. Furthermore, corporeal liveness can be noticed in the performance as well. This is most noticeable in Tyler Josephs singing. When listening carefully, small cracks in his voice as well as imperfectly executed breath control can be heard. If the livestream were to be prerecorded, these imperfections would be redone and taken out. Also, small changes in melodic properties of some songs were made which seem to be improvised. This aspect further adds to the sense of liveness given in the performance.

Authenticity in the Twenty One Pilots Livestream Experience

The second important aspect to study is authenticity. As Keightley noted, authenticity in rock music can be categorized through two main concepts, namely: Romantic and Modernist authenticity. As Keightley mentioned, many artists fall into either one of these categories. However it is not impossible for an artist to convey their authenticity through a mix of Romantic and Modernist authenticity. This is true for the band Twenty One Pilots and

¹⁵ Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 73.

¹⁶ Sanden, “Rethinking Liveness,” 183.

can be seen through the Twenty One Pilots Livestream Experience. The first characteristic in the list of Romantic authenticity is tradition and continuity with the past. Where the band did not replicate a regular concert entirely, they did hold true to fan's expectations by utilizing certain props (such as a burning car on stage), outfits (both band members wearing a ski-mask) and backdrops that are used in regular concerts as well. This can be linked to a point that Auslander makes with regards to a statement by Simon Frith: 'authenticity can be heard in the music, yet is an effect not just of the music itself but also of prior musical and extra-musical knowledge and beliefs.'¹⁷ The use of these props and outfits is part of the extra-musical knowledge fans have through which the band can perform their authenticity. One very important thing they did break with, is the ending of the show. Normally, the show ends with the statement: 'We are Twenty One Pilots and so are you'. This statement is used to create a sense of community, another aspect in the list of Romantic authenticity markers. However, during the song *Level of Concern* the speech is changed to 'In a world where this is as good as it gets. And we miss you, we really miss you.' This statement, again, creates a large sense of community among fans.

Where this livestream breaks from the Romantic sense of authenticity is in its musical style. Within Romantic authenticity, 'folk, blues, country, rock'n'roll styles' are valued whereas in the Modernist authenticity the emphasis lies on 'classical, art music, soul and pop styles'. Especially in this album, more of a pop aesthetic is created through funky rhythms and timbre. This retro vibe can also be seen in the staging of some of the sets used during the performance. The livestream starts off with a short staged segment where Tyler Joseph acts as if he is performing for a talk show. This talk show is staged in seventies colors and patterns, just like the actors hired to be the hosts. Another important aspect of the Modernist authenticity is celebrating technology instead of hiding it. This is done very noticeably in the livestream as there are more instruments, samples and sounds used than there are people performing. The use of a prerecorded track has always been the case as the band consists of only two people.

Where two types of authenticity cross in the livestream experience is through sincerity and directness on the one hand and irony and sarcasm on the other hand. The audience is addressed directly by Tyler Joseph when he sings to the camera. The irony and sarcasm is seen through the staged talk show where the hosts make statements such as 'I thought there were 21 people, but it's just two guys!' And 'can you play Stressed Out?'. The talk show

¹⁷ Auslander, *Liveness*, 66.

functions as a satirical take on mainstream medias treatment of the band as the previous statements were often said by media outlets and have become a running joke between annoyed fans. By acknowledging the inauthentic portrayal by the media, the band emphasizes their own authenticity to their fans.

Lastly, the band's authenticity is shown through their performance personae. During the livestream, Cooks person, player and persona can be seen. At the very end of the show, an overhead shot of the warehouse is shown while the crew cheers and applauds. The bandmembers can be seen bowing, waving and subsequently making funny faces at the camera. The player is present throughout the entire performance as both bandmembers are constantly busy with their instruments. Lastly, the personae come in through the entire performance as well. Throughout the performance, Tyler Joseph and Josh Dun perform multiple personae. Most noticeably the 'guest at talk show', 'guy singing in café' mentioned before and most importantly the personae that the fans have come to know and love over the years. As Auslander noted, 'theatricality is a significant variable in the construction of a musical persona.'¹⁸ This theatricality is performed in the livestream as well through dance sequences, outfit changes and Tyler Joseph connecting with the audience through the camera.

Conclusion

To come back to the originally posed question: how does liveness work in the Twenty One Pilots Livestream Experience and how does this contribute to the experienced authenticity? Liveness does not work in the traditional sense in the Twenty One Pilots Livestream Experience. Using Sanden's understanding of virtual liveness, a hybrid form of liveness is construed through this performance. Whereas temporal liveness still exists in this form of performance, there is no bodily co-presence and therefore a lesser, but not nonexistent, sense of corporeal liveness. Through Keightley's Romantic and Modernist authenticity models it is established that the livestreamed concert utilizes many different tools to convey the band's authenticity to the audience. Through the perceived virtual liveness of the performance, part of the band's authenticity is construed. The effort made for the concert to be experienced as live adds to which extent the band's performance is perceived as authentic. This is mostly done through the little interaction that was possible within the chosen medium as the band did not include any interactional technology in the livestream. In analyzing this livestream, more information on digital culture and livestreamed concerts

¹⁸ Auslander, "Musical Personae," 96.

would be preferred to make a better case. Furthermore, as the use of this medium for performance is such a relatively new concept, more research on the effects of online or virtual concerts is needed to be able to more effectively conclude how virtual liveness contributes to the audience's experienced authenticity in musicological context.

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