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Bluesfest crushes:

an exploration of fandom at a regional blues festival

ABSTRACT

Each Easter, outside the iconic beachside town of Byron Bay, thousands of music fans converge for Bluesfest – a five-day blues and roots festival where international musicians from rock, blues and roots traditions perform alongside rising local talent, as well as some of the more eclectic musicians from Australia and the rest of the world. Crucially, as part of the live music experience, the music festival enables ticketholders to engage in activities vital to being a fan. While fandom is an elusive concept, it may be partially measured through several indicators: buying artist merchandise, queuing for CD signing and/or photos, and attending musicians' Q&A sessions. Through such activities, festival participants signal their legitimacy as fans and, often via social media, their membership of a larger cohort of fans. This research utilises university media students to query festival participants about their engagement in these participatory activities and their perspective on 'being a fan'. What type of engagement and memorabilia is most valued by fans, and how is it acquired? What roles do social media play in the fan relationship? Our analysis identifies specific groups of fans, by their demographics, their newcomer/repeat visitor status, and their reports on how and why they chose to engage in fan-related activities while at Bluesfest. A further concern of the data analysis was to explore the possibility of an underlying 'economy' of fan relationships in the digital age.

KEYWORDS

Bluesfest
Blues
fandom
live music
merchandise

INTRODUCTION

The music festival has long attracted not only audiences but also scholarly investigation. Often, these analyses come from the fields of tourism and leisure studies, with a focus on promoting the festival from at least three viewpoints: economic benefits to the region (Gibson 2002), enhancing community engagement, and the demarcation of attendees into groups based on their levels of involvement with the festival (Bowen and Daniels 2005, Mackellar 2006 and 2009). In Australia, the cultural geographers Gibson and Connell have developed extensive data sets describing the demographic and economic profiles of music festivals (2012; see also Gibson 2007). There are further studies of leisure activities that explore the motivations of attendees, split between studies of product involvement, that is, purchasing of related goods or merchandise (Block and Bruce 1980, Cummings 2006), as well as the experiential research that explores motivations of attendees to participate in festivals.

Fans and their activities have been viewed through the lens of identity work introduced by Dick Hebidge's seminal text *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979). Here, festival-goers are seen to partake in a specific type of collective engagement: in music 'scenes', 'clubs' or 'neo-tribes.' These participatory responses from music audiences have been linked to the need to 'brand' themselves as members of a particular group or sub-group (Bennett 1999 and 2001, Bennett and Peterson 2004, Cummings 2007, Maffesoli 1996). As Cummings suggests, that the 'neo-tribe' can persist in a rapidly changing society 'is a result of their seductive capacity, which is often tied to consumption practices especially in relation to music, taste and style, as they are imagined vehicles of individual self-definition' (Cummings 2007:2; see also Cummings 2006). Other scholars in popular music studies have looked to the festival as a significant way for live performance to survive in a world of YouTube and digital downloads (Frith 2007).

This paper draws on these perspectives but seeks to take the discussion to a specific exploration of fandom at a regional music festival. While exploring the activities of participants – how often they attend this annual regional festival, what they purchase, etc. – we question how participants define fandom, that is, what does being a

fan actually mean to them? (for clarity, this paper employs the word participants rather than festivalgoers or attendees). Furthermore, it should be noted that the festival format itself has become a key component of the event and entertainment industries. As popular music scholar Simon Frith explains,

Because live music matters to its audiences, its promoters have been able to follow two strategies, in particular, for dealing with their cost problem. They have, first, expanded audience size—by increasing the capacity of venues, by broadening the scope of 'the tour', and, above all, by growing a new sort of musical event, the festival (2007: 5).

BLUESFEST: NEAR BYRON BAY, NEW SOUTH WALES



Figure 1. Festival participants arriving at Bluesfest 2013. Photo: Naphtali Abraham.

Each Easter, outside the iconic beachside town of Byron Bay, thousands of music fans converge for a five-day blues and roots festival that features both newcomers along with established Australian artists as well as an impressive list of international headliners. Bluesfest began in 1989 in a small park in Byron Bay and has grown substantially over the past 24 years. The festival is now held on a private tea tree farm at Tyagrah, 11km north of Byron Bay. In 2013 it offered 129 bands, involving over 1000 artists

performing over 180 performances on seven stages. The festival reported a cumulatively totalled attendance of 104,244 people over the five days of the 2013 festival (see www.bluesfest.com.au).

In addition to the seven performance stages, the festival features a large merchandise and CD sales area, a CD signing table, and several question and answer (Q&A) sessions on one of the smaller stages in the Cavanbah tent. At the Q&A sessions, participants are invited to get 'up close & personal' with festival artists who are interviewed by media professionals. Here, participants can hear the artists discuss their music and lives in a more intimate setting and ask them questions as well.

The CD signing table, the Q&A tent and the merchandise tables are important from several standpoints. Firstly, the CD and merchandise tables provide the necessary economic opportunities that allow the regional festival to continue as viable. As noted, the regional festival is of particular concern to the smaller towns in regional Australia, that can struggle for economic equilibrium in times such as the global financial crisis (GFC) or during natural disasters such as the Queensland floods of 2009-10, when tourism numbers were greatly reduced. Gibson et al. note the inherent tensions between the staging of artistic and cultural events in smaller communities and economic realities, suggesting that, 'festivals capture many of the broader contradictions and tensions that emerge when the arts and culture are more fully imagined within economic spheres' (2010: 281). Despite recent economic downturns in regional New South Wales, Bluesfest has performed well:

. . . in numbers of attendees, music festivals were amongst the largest of all [NSW] festivals, including Tamworth's annual country music festival, Tweed Heads' 'Wintersun' Rock and Roll/1950s nostalgia festival, Goulburn's Blues Festival, Lorne's 'indie' Falls Music Festival, Byron Bay's East Coast Blues and Roots Festival [now known as Bluesfest] and Splendour in the Grass (Gibson et al. 2010: 285).

A report commissioned by Bluesfest found the festival contributed 2.1% to the Byron Shire's total Gross Regional Product (The Music 2013).

Secondly, the three distinct sites offered the opportunity to ask questions of participants about their engagement with the different sorts of activities on offer, and to

collect their perspectives on how they engaged with the activities involved in 'being a fan'.

RESEARCH METHODS

The research was undertaken at Bluesfest 2013 under the direction of lead researcher Jeanti St Clair. This research sought to explore participant activity around the three sites listed above. Participants were surveyed on what merchandise they bought or intended to buy while at Bluesfest, and why they made those purchases. Participants in the CD signing queue were queried about why they were queuing, about what item they intended to have signed and why. Participants attending the Q&A sessions were interviewed about the personal value of attending such sessions. All participants were asked for basic demographic details and for their definition of being a fan.

Data collection was undertaken by three Southern Cross University Bachelor of Media students who were supplied with microphones, audio recorders and question and permission sheets. One student operated as a photographer with a digital camera to collect images of some participants on location. Students approached participants according to their proximity to the survey sites and adopted a question/answer survey methodology to engage the participants in conversations that lasted between one and five minutes. Other researchers have found the survey conducive to the festival environment (Bowen and Daniels 2005). In this research, conducting live survey interviews is advantageous in a crowd, where questions can be posed and answers provided in a casual manner. Surveys via short on-site interviews provide a quick 'snapshot' of what is happening without formal interviewing techniques that may interrupt the participant's experience of the festival.

While most large-scale surveys of festivals are done anonymously via the Internet, or even by mail (Kim et al. 2002), live surveys offer the researcher many advantages (see Robson 2002). Firstly, spontaneity is an important attribute in a crowded festival; secondly, the opportunity to back up the survey with the interviewer's observations; and thirdly, photos can be taken in real-time, illustrating participants as they appear in the context of the festival's atmosphere The short recorded interviews and

photographs were taken with permission of the participants, with a signature from the participant required on the researcher's paperwork for photographic documentation, and by recording the verbal permission from the participant along with their spoken declaration of first name and age, which was required by the ethics approval procedures for conducting this research. While the data collection in the CD signing queue was curtailed due to heavy rain, enough participants were interviewed to offer a meaningful collection of responses. A total of 43 questionnaire responses were recorded from across the three sites and related activities.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Some discussions of festival audiences have described categories of engagement, as in Mackellar's groups of social [attendees], dabblers, fans and fanatics (2009). Bowen and Daniels clustered their data by factors such as 'Just Being Social', 'Enrichment Over Music', 'The Music Matters' and 'Love It All' (2005: 159). This suggests that researchers can describe festival attendees through various categories of engagement. Our categories of fandom were captured directly from the words participants used when responding to the interviewers. In other words, we grouped participants by their definitions following the question, 'What does being a fan mean to you?' Within those answers, we found 'listen', 'enjoy', 'appreciate' and 'support' to be valuable as markers of increasing involvement with the festival as well as with the performing musicians. Fandom is then defined from the following keywords: listen(ers), enjoy(ers), appreciate (appreciators) or support(ers).

We also found that 'enjoy' is the mid-point for most attendees, irrespective of gender, age or site where they were interviewed (in the CD signing queue, near the merchandise tables, or after attending a Q&A session with the artists). As expected, participants in the CD signing queue and Q&A sessions showed a higher commitment to the artist they were waiting to see. Older participants (both male and female) tended to indicate 'support' as a key factor in fandom more often than the middle range of ages at the festival. Some of the younger attendees (aged between 18 - 25) mentioned support, which was strongly linked to their aspirations about what it takes to become a muso (an Australian term for musician, especially popular musician). Table 1. (below) shows the

tabulated results.

| CD signing queue | Listen | Enjoy | | Appreciate | | Support | |
|--------------------|--------|-------|---|------------|---|---------|----|
| # participants = 9 | ı | r F | М | F | М | F | М |
| $N/A^1 = 1$ | | | | | | | |
| 18-26 | | 2 | | | | 1 | 3 |
| 27-39 | | | | | | | |
| 40-55 | | | | 1 | | | 1 |
| 55+ | | | | | | | |
| Totals | | 2 | | 1 | | 1 | 4 |
| Percent (100%) | | 2 | | 1 | | 1 | 50 |
| | | 5 | | 2 | | 2 | |
| | | | | | | | |
| | | | | 5 | | 5 | |

| Merchandise table | Listen | Enjoy | | Appreciate | | Support | |
|---------------------|--------|-------|---|------------|---|---------|----|
| # participants = 20 | I | F | M | F | M | F | M |
| N/A = 1 | | | | | | | |
| 18-26 | | 2 | 1 | | | | 2 |
| 27-39 | | 1 | | | 1 | | |
| 40-55 | | | 4 | | | 2 | |
| 55+ | | 1 | 1 | | | 1 | 1 |
| Totals | : | 4 | 6 | | 1 | 3 | 3 |
| Percent (100%) | | 2 | 3 | | 5 | 1 | 16 |
| | | 1 | 1 | | | 6 | |
| | | | | | | | |
| | | 0 | 5 | | | | |

| Question & Answer | Listen | Enjoy | | Appreciate | | Support | |
|---------------------|--------|-------|---|------------|---|---------|---|
| Tent | | | | | | | |
| # participants = 14 | f I | F | М | F | М | F | М |
| N/A = 1 | | | | | | | |
| 18-26 | | 2 | | | | 1 | 1 |
| 27-39 | | 2 | 1 | | | | 1 |
| 40-55 | , | | 1 | | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| | | | | | | * | |

 $^{^{1}}$ N/A in these tables refers to participants who were unable to decide on an answer to the questions.

| 55+ | | | | | | 1 |
|----------------|---|---|---|---|---|------|
| Totals | , | 4 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 4 |
| Percent (100%) | 7 | 3 | 1 | 7 | 7 | 30.7 |
| | | 0 | 5 | | | 5 |
| | 7 | | | 7 | 7 | |
| | | 7 | 4 | | | |
| | | 5 | | | | |

Table 1. Reports from the three sites with results from participants, by age, gender and level of engagement.

REFLECTIONS ON THE RESEARCH: FOUR THEMES

Discovery

The theme of discovery runs through responses at all categorized levels of fan engagement. As Bowen and Daniels (2005) indicate, discovery can be a vital concern for many festival attendees. They note that the theme of discovery is linked to issues of 'knowledge, culture, community, and personal renewal' at the festival, rather than 'music attributes' (2005:162). Kim et al. also note that novelty was a primary motivation for festival attendees (2002: 132). Across all the levels of engagement listed in Table 1., discovery of new types of music and new artists was mentioned by many during the interviews. Here, participants use the festival as a specific opportunity to discover artists/bands previously unknown to them.

The festival works therefore as a 'collection point' for fans, where they can begin to develop new relationships with different artists/bands. These relationships can happen on several different levels. For example, Sarah² 32, calls herself 'a collector' of experiences who is not inclined to buy anything while at the festival (Q&A tent). Trent rushes to show economic support by purchasing the CD of those new talents he is most impressed by, 'What I do is appreciate the music played by the creative musicians who come here, and I find new people, if you wander from different tents, to different tents, you find some really incredible talent, that young Englishman, 24 year old, Michael - ah - unbelievable talent. There's lots, it's all great, but I went out and bought his CD,

² The names of all participants have been anonymised as a standard procedure.

straightaway' (Trent, 55, Q&A tent).

Purchasing festival merchandise

As noted earlier, sales are important for the growth and maintenance of regional festivals. Simon Frith highlights this:

. . . the gathering of fans in one place is a good opportunity to sell them products that they could, in fact, buy elsewhere. Thus jazz, folk and classical concerts have long been important opportunities for performers to sell their CDs. But something more is at stake in rock merchandise: what is being sold is a memento of being there, a product unique to the event (2007: 5).

Similar results were found at Bluesfest. In the merchandise sales area, over 90% of the T-shirt purchasers interviewed on the day used the word 'memento'. While one CD purchaser responded that she was 'too lazy to download' music, others were more engaged in 'supporting' the artist, having purchased CDs signed. For other participants, the purchase did not connect them with supporting the artist economically, rather the CD provided a tangible *aide de memoire* once the festival was over.

A good day out

The festival also appears to provide 'a good day out' for those in the middle age range (30s and 40s) who had many other responsibilities and were just glad to escape for the day. Alice notes, 'This is a really nice enjoyable festival, great line up, good people. It's close to home, so it's great to come down and enjoy the music' (Alice, 32, Q&A tent). On one day, Jeanti St Clair noted the festival was like a 'pram jam' as many of the participants were there for a family outing (personal observation).

Other participants made similar comments about the festival, saying 'I enjoy the musical atmosphere, the camping environment' (Luke, 32, Q&A tent). While enjoyment is a major motivator for festival participants, they may be less concerned about the list of performers. For example, Matt comes every year 'regardless of what the poster says about the line-up, you just come for the experience' (Matt, 38, Q&A tent). Furthermore, the Q&A tent provided 'a break from being in the pavilions and dancing and stuff'

where we 'get to listen to the musicians talk as people rather than [performers] and you get to hear them play a little bit' (Ted, 40, Q&A tent).

Inspiration

The theme of inspiration is under-explored in the literature about festival attendance. In this study, inspiration was often mentioned by those who also indicated they were very supportive of the musicians. Participants more frequently mentioned support for the artists in the younger (years 18-24) and older (years 50+) groups of both sexes. Some participants are practising musicians themselves, and one participant in the CD signing queue noted:

I just want to say thanks for the music, and I don't know, just keeping acoustic music alive, really. I love seeing just one guy and a guitar up on stage, you don't really see that anymore. It's really cool.

Interviewer: When you get to the front of the queue, what are you going to do with him?

Say hello, cheers for the music, and try to work out how I can get my guitar signed, I'm not sure about that (Josh, 20, CD queue).

It did appear that some of the older participants were concerned about their legitimacy as fans, as they felt too 'old' for the festival scene. Others could tap into their family relationships as significant, as Vicki said, 'Of course I support them. My son's a musician' (Vicki, 52, merchandise table). Yet, for other older participants, the festival's longevity (24 years in 2013) represented an ongoing cultural inspiration in their lives. One participant, a musician with a long and personal connection with the festival, said the festival reflected his own culture: 'I do play, so it's a part of my celebration of my culture, of the Fender electric guitar. This is a festival of that, for me' (Roy, 61, merchandise table). As Tim comments, the festival provides an opportunity to tap into artists who 'can really give you a big bolt of inspiration'. He continues, '[I] just went to see Mavis Staples then, and Jimmy Cliff the other night. It's given me a lot of inspiration about, I guess, ageing. At my age I'm like, "I'm getting old", but you see people like that.

They are still doing their thing, well into their 70s and just full of energy, and just loving life. And you go, yeah, I've got plenty of time left' (Tim, 48, Q&A).

CONCLUDING REMARKS: TOWARDS A SOCIAL ECONOMY OF FANDOM

There is still much to learn from the participants in this study, and how they perceive fandom through attending a regional music festival. This 'snapshot' of activities on the far north coast of NSW shows a detailed set of interactions between participants, their families and friends, their social relationships with each other, and the perceived level of closeness between participants and artists/musicians.

An initial observation is that a social economy of fandom appears to operate now in the social media and digital age, where participants place a social value on how they show support. Qualman's (2011) term 'socialnomics', which can be defined as using social media to generate value through word-of-mouth in a particular market, and to influence outcomes, which may be economic, political, cultural or relational, is useful here. However, while face-to-face experience is not only 'exciting [and] more personal' for participants, and sometimes a 'once in a lifetime experience' (Gail, 40, a 10-year veteran of Bluesfest), the relationship between fans and musicians is clearly a two-way relationship. Nancy Baym writes that musician/fan engagement through social media has benefitted musicians through the creation of new personal relationships and, as such, they have received 'support through instantaneous feedback' from fans via social media (2012: 294). As participants in the CD signing queue clearly indicated, the face-to-face experience provides an opportunity for the fan to communicate their support and appreciation to the artist directly. 'Selfies', or self-portrait digital photographs, taken of the participant posing with the artist at the CD signing table are frequently posted to social media websites such as Facebook. Participants felt they gained social media kudos for posting from their circle of 'friends', and were also able to promote that artist within these social circles. This finding builds on seminal work on social capital from cultural theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu in the 1980s, and more recently the commentary on specialist subcultures (such as club cultures) from Sarah Thornton (1996).

Despite digital mediation, the intimacy can be very real, not just for the fan but for the musician as well. The social-mediated relationship can balance out the power differential between 'celebrity' and 'fan' (Baym 2012: 312). The artist is given a 'pat on the back for doing such a good job' (George, 49, CD queue), and the participant shows approval simply by being part of the queue, and being able to demonstrate the level of support by contributing to the length the queue, '[It] lets them know that they have fans with the five-block-long line (Mary, 18, CD queue). These activities provide both social and economic value to the artist, and are offered to performers by participants as part of an exchange relationship. Participants buy merchandise and CDs to 'show support' to the artists as well as to retain mementos of the festival. These purchases and activities form part of a social economy which functions through the exchange of the fans' time and money for the sense of enjoyment or appreciation they experience through consuming/collecting the music and artists'stage performances, as well as the more personal interactions in face-to-face encounters and staged Q&A interview sessions.

In conclusion, this snapshot of participants at a popular regional blues festival opens up a number of further research trajectories, in particular the contrast between aging fans and younger ones (Herrmann 2012). As expected, the younger participants were more likely to mediate their festival musical experiences through interactions with social media, but there were notable exceptions. One older participant was almost obsessive in logging new talent on his music blog, while others followed online fan clubs of particular musicians via Facebook and Twitter. Where this study differs from others cited is with the emphasis on the value of the music on offer. Novelty-seeking and/or a 'good day out', while important to some, were overall of much less importance than scholars have found elsewhere (Bowen and Daniels 2005; Cummings 2007). The extraordinary numbers of spectators attracted to Bluesfest annually, and the fact that in 2014 Bluesfest will celebrate its Silver Anniversary (25 years), demonstrate its popularity. The research reported here indicates that participants of all ages, newcomers to the festival or repeat visitors, depend on Bluesfest to provide a quality and varied musical experience. It is the music that counts.

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