

ALISON BLAIR

University of Otago

Ryan Adams and Fandom as Symbolic Resistance

ABSTRACT

Singer-songwriter Ryan Adams has re-articulated the figure of the country music outlaw throughout his fourteen-album solo career. This paper examines Adams' 'outlaw-ness' in terms of his troubling of the generic and symbolic conventions of not just country music, but alt-country itself. This is in large part due to Adams' self-construction as an urban (as opposed to rural) figure possessing 'indie' cultural capital. Specifically, Adams' 'outlaw-ness' manifests itself through his very public expression of fandom; that is, his public persona as a music fan resists the genre labels that his music is given by the corporate hegemonic music industry – primarily the labels of 'alt-country' and 'singer-songwriter' – thereby resisting the industry's imperative to neatly 'package' and classify its artists into easily-identifiable genres. By identifying himself with marginal music subcultures (most notably heavy metal and indie rock), Adams' expression of subcultural capital – his public expression of fandom – offers a kind of symbolic resistance, a counter-hegemonic articulation of defiance, by way of deviance from the symbolic conventions of music industry-defined 'genre'.

KEYWORDS

alternative
country
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fandom
post-subculture
subcultural
capital

INTRODUCTION

Singer-songwriter Ryan Adams, emerging from alternative country band Whiskeytown, has throughout his fourteen-album solo career re-articulated and reinvented the figure of the country music outlaw. The rebel; the 'out of control', marginal and somehow 'dangerous' character has existed in country music since Johnny Cash, Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson enacted an ideological departure from the politically conservative cultural output of the Nashville country music scene. In the 1980s and 1990s Nashville artist Steve Earle's articulation of 'outlaw-ness' coalesced around not only his literal law-breaking but also his

anti-conservative political activism – which stood in stark opposition to an increasingly sanitized and conservative country music scene.

Ryan Adams' point of departure from former bands Earle or the Highwaymen however is in terms of cultural capital, subcultural capital, his involvement in the post-subcultural movement and symbolic resistance - that is, it is expressed in his identification with marginal music subcultures and the way that he defies the hegemonic generic conventions of the music industry itself. He places himself outside of those conventions by privileging and prioritizing his fandom of bands and music genres that are unrelated to the alt-country and singer-songwriter genres. He is, then, the postmodern outlaw whose fandom offers a symbolic resistance - even stating at one point that he 'hated' country music, the genre that for so many years defined him.

CULTURAL CAPITAL, SUBCULTURAL CAPITAL AND SYMBOLIC RESISTANCE

Bourdieu (1986) states that cultural capital in its embodied state 'presupposes a process of embodiment, incorporation' which in its assimilation 'costs time which must be invested personally by the investor. Like the acquisition of a muscular physique or a suntan, it cannot be done at second hand' (Bourdieu 1986: 49). Such is the nature of fandom and of subcultural capital which Thornton delineated (1997).

Thornton notes that this form of capital extends to the media and hence fandom and is less bound by class distinctions than Bourdieu's conception of cultural capital. It does however extend to the distinction between 'mainstream' and 'hip' and the establishing of an alternative hierarchy. Thornton also states that subcultural capital can either denote deviance and dissent or discrimination and distinction (Thornton 1997: 208-209). Adams' indie and heavy metal subcultural capital, or his fandom – his personal investment in those genres of music – situates him in opposition to the often mainstream categorization of his music as well as demonstrating an in-depth knowledge of those musical subcultures. This public expression of fandom and sense of both deviance *and* distinction began to emerge from the first track of Adams' first ever solo album, *Heartbreaker* (2000).

RYAN ADAMS' INDIE MUSIC FANDOM: THE SMITHS

Heartbreaker begins with an in-studio argument about Morrissey, the British 'indie rock' singer-songwriter and former lead singer of the Smiths. Aptly titled 'An Argument with

David Rawlings Concerning Morrissey’, the track demonstrates Adams’ indie subcultural capital as a Morrissey fan – and it does so as the *preface* to Adams’ music. Rawlings and Adams banter about whether Morrissey’s song ‘Suedehead’ features on the album *Bona Drag* or *Viva Hate* or both.

Adams bets Rawlings five dollars that the song is on *Bona Drag* because *Bona Drag* is a collection of singles. This display of indie cultural capital immediately disassociates Adams from the conservative hegemonic country scene and places him within something more *subcultural* – British indie rock fandom. The rest of the album, having set itself apart from its generic classification from the outset, moves through rockabilly to country ballads.



Figure 1: Screenshot from the ‘New York, New York’ video. *Ryan Adams Vevo* at https://youtu.be/hmHgY_J63Ik.

Adams’ ‘indie’ persona is also expressed through urban imagery as opposed to the conventional rural imagery of country music: the inner sleeve of *Heartbreaker* pictures him at the checkout of a convenience store and the video for ‘New York, New York’ (2001) depicts Adams, dressed in a shirt and double denim, singing in front of the Hudson River with the iconic Twin Towers behind him framing himself as a kind of ‘urban cowboy’.

Promotional material for the *Ashes & Fire* (2011) album pictures Adams standing on a city street at night. This ‘urban slacker’ imagery is entwined with connotations of Adams’ indie music fandom: we imagine a night life of bars and gigs in small clubs with days spent purchasing and listening to vinyl records, probably on the record player he is pictured with in

the sleeve of the *Gold* (2001) album. We might guess that he is listening to The Smiths or another indie rock band.

Adams also displays his fandom by wearing band t-shirts including Smiths t-shirts. His visit to Salford Lads' Club in Manchester, the site of an iconic Smiths photo, led to the self-admitted 'fanboy' behaviour of having his photo taken outside the club. He also left a handwritten note in the Smiths Room for the club owners detailing the depth of his Smiths fandom and the fact that he had made a fan pilgrimage to Salford Lads.

HEAVY METAL FANDOM AND POST-SUBCULTURE

Adams' affinity with indie music subculture begins to show us that his fandom positions him as someone who is on the margins of the genre that he is associated with. The fandom, however, that fully asserts his deviance from the mainstream is his affinity with heavy metal music and most of its sub-genres, particularly Scandinavian black metal. The now infamous incident where Adams brought out his iPhone during a *Songwriters Circle* television performance with Neil Finn and Janis Ian so he could bid for a Satyricon t-shirt on eBay reflects not only his fandom of Satyricon but also his resistance to the rules of television performance (BBC Four, 2011); by arguing with Finn and Ian online afterwards he also broke the unspoken rule of showing deference to these more experienced, respected performers. In breaking these rules he acted as the 'out-of-control' symbolic 'outlaw'.



Figure 2: Adams displaying his subcultural capital, wearing a Black Sabbath t-shirt.
<http://www.switchblade.com/mp3/ryan-adams-wasted-years-iron-maiden-cover>

In the importance Adams placed on bidding for the Satyricon t-shirt, he asserted his fandom *above* the rules of television performance and outside of the established hierarchy of his genre. Finn and Ian, Adams' seniors within the industry, publicly expressed their annoyance. The Satyricon t-shirt, however, is a signifier of Adams' fandom, and we might say that his actions privileged that fandom *over* the established rules of the music industry. Adams further displays his fandom with metal band t-shirts, and band patches sewn onto his denim jacket – we do not know whether the Satyricon t-shirt made it into his collection.

Further demonstrating not only his fandom and metal cultural capital but *also* his post-subcultural capital, in 2014 Adams produced a parodic black metal 'music show' for his YouTube channel. The show was titled *Night Sweats* and featured Adams as the host with a ghoulish black metal co-host. The set design and graphics included candles, bats, skulls, pentagrams and a gothic castle. The comedic theme song, performed on a banjo, invited viewers to 'get the Night Sweats'.

Throughout the show Adams introduced various metal music videos along with a comedic interlude about a dancing pizza. In introducing his own non-metal video, 'Lucky Now', he self-reflexively mentions the 'feelings' of the song. In doing so he parodies his own image as a singer-songwriter and throughout the show he parodies the black metal subculture from within – demonstrating his 'insider's knowledge'.



Figure 3: An animated dancing pizza slice, Adams, and *Night Sweats* co-host, the ghoulish Balphazar. Screenshot from <https://youtu.be/ThzkcCfRq2Y>.

The video for ‘Chains of Love’, despite being a song about the emotions and dynamics of a romantic relationship, employs imagery that is both urban and metal. Adams performs on a city rooftop in a leather jacket with a backup band of women dressed in black jeans and black t-shirts. There is a display of guitar pyrotechnics at the climax of the song, which is completely incongruous with the style and sentiments of the ballad. This parodic humour points to Adams’ own awareness of the limits of genre. As he steps outside the bounds of generic conventions, he both demonstrates a knowledge of the genre that he works within and ‘outlaws’ himself from those conventions, all the while using post-subcultural parody to demonstrate his own subcultural knowledge.

1989 AND TAYLOR SWIFT

This awareness is the principle at work in Adams’ most recent expression of fandom, except that this time there is no parody. His latest album, *1989* (2015) is his interpretation of Taylor Swift’s *1989* (2014) which he released on his own PAX-AM label. Stating that he wanted to rework the songs in the style of The Smiths, the album is a guitar-driven version of Swift’s pop album. Adams updated the fans and Swift on Twitter during the recording process, complimenting her on her song-writing.

Adams fans were divided over whether they could still respect him. Despite negative comments even from his own fans, here Adams defied the hegemonic, often gender-biased conventions of what it means to be a ‘serious’ singer-songwriter. Once again he prioritized his fandom, even going so far as to post his own Taylor Swift fan art on Instagram. While some commentators questioned whether Adams was ‘mansplaining’ Swift, he asserted that he just loved her songs.

CONCLUSION

Ryan Adams rebels against what it means to be a ‘marketable’ alt-country artist or singer-songwriter. He is an artist who writes and sings about love and heartbreak yet through his fandom he refuses to conform to the conventional image of one who does so. But more than this he shows us what it is to be a fan, revealing his personal identifications – his fandom – to the public whether that fandom is on the fringes, imbued with street cred, or perhaps most riskily, within the traditionally ‘unhip’, ‘feminized’ realm of chart pop music. In doing so, he defies the conventions that define the most recognizably marketed images of the country singer or singer-songwriter.



Figure 4: Screenshot from Adams' Instagram. <http://www.instagram.com/misterryanadams>.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Alison Blair is a Master of Arts candidate in the Department of Media, Film and Communication at the University of Otago. Her Masters research explores the 1970s work of David Bowie and of Marc Bolan of T. Rex in relation to the carnivalesque and she has further scholarly interests in alternative country music, Ryan Adams and British music from the 1970s to the 2000s.

Contact: alison.blair@otago.ac.nz.

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