

Nicola Robey: Example of my writing

Music Article for A.R.T Magazine

'How important is training to be a successful musician?'

Success in the music industry is one of the most widely desired aspirations of budding performers in contemporary culture. This accolade, despite its coveted admiration can be a tentative, fleeting and precarious, since the very notion of success inhabits a broad and ever shifting spectrum. Considering the formula for what may amount to popular reception, critical acclaim and musical industry acknowledgement

it may fall to exploring successful musicians' paths to gauge their position in the cultural fabric of the present. The question to be posed is 'In the pursuit of acclaim, how important is training to be a musician?'

The routes available for contemporary performers to pursue their musical talents are becoming ever more multifaceted. Private tuition has always been an option for developing an understanding of an instrument, whilst the national curriculum becomes ever more influential and the number of varying specialised institutions and academies offering diverse musical experiences extends almost annually. Yet preconceptions align themselves to each route, with academic musical establishments such as the 'Royal Academy of Music', conjuring images of dusty bourgeois conductors, Andrew Lloyd Webber and classically trained orchestral members. It is easy to forget that academic preparation from this institution

has also produced iconic and groundbreaking figures such as Elton John and Annie Lennox, evidently not known for their grasp of the cello. Not only are students here encouraged and expected to explore their musical personality, which is developed through a 'creative lineage' but also the appreciation of 'passionate advocacy and 'entrepreneurial purpose'.

The Academy of Contemporary Music, Guildford, represents an innovative focusing on the student's grasp of musical theory, but also extends this to creative sound engineering and production techniques, generating performers who are progressing scenes and creating their own. Former students include Alex Drury aka. Metric, one of the most exciting talents on the breakbeat scene, whilst Toby Couling is making a name for himself as drummer for Mercury Award winner 'Speech De Belle'.

However, professional training amounts to a very small proportion of popular and successful musicians, and often education has nothing to do with it. Self taught techniques and bedroom production, although often frustratingly aligned to a Daniel Bedingfield subtext, conveys the need for unwavering dedication and independent skill in order to reach the bounds of notoriety. Take for example the complex and evoking clutter of electronic, folk and at times psychedelic combination of self-taught production skills of Kieran Hebden aka Four Tet's music.

His pastoral melodies can be seen to induce a reverie upon his audience through both their texture and rhythmic command. His quintessential musical individuality is symbolic of an unassuming dedication to the love of what he does, claiming that it's 'the musical ideas behind everything that are important, Not trying to be like a rock star or anything, I'm trying to do things no one has imagined or heard before.' Hebden's musical career can be traced back to the somewhat renowned and surprising institute of the Elliot School. The growing array of innovative talent parading from the corridors of this undistinguished and conventional Putney Comprehensive, with former alumni including Joanna Newsome, Muse's Matt Bellamy, the XX, Alex Turner of the Arctic Monkeys and the majority of Hot Chip clearly suggests that their music department must have more than a bent tambourine and a pair of spoons. Music Teacher Jill Bird asserts that Muse's dedication was evident at a young age 'Other kids would be having a laugh with their guitars, but they were so committed, so determined, so ready.'

This array of talent highlights the range of individuals who either chose not to follow an academic path into music or quite simply didn't have the luxury of taking private lessons. Their unconventional route into the industry could then be recognised as instilling within the individual works a flourishing sense of creative energy, feeding off the inspiration of contemporary

and iconic artists, encouragement by both teachers, peers and families and own guiding of personal talents in new directions.

In this light, it is important to recognise that many of popular music's most iconic performers have grappled from the realm of obscurity through the very merits of raw talent alone, evading rigid boundaries, challenging genres and scorching themselves upon the mindset of popular culture. It is naive to envision that talent is tantamount to success and often education and professional training play a back seated role in the careers of certain performers.

Consider the vanguard of punk and progressive music, which grated against the ear drums of unaccustomed and hostile audiences, epitomised by bands such as the Ramones, The Sex Pistols and The Clash. Their unruly and demonised presence symbolised a scornful rejection of stagnant political idealisms through the virtue of their 'supposed' lack of skill. This musical presence could be recognised as outweighing musical talent, which acted as a catalyst for the emergence of cultural innovation and change.

This too can be reflected in the 90's resurgence of the punk movement of Riot Grrrls, embodied by groups such as 'Bikini Kill' and 'Bratmobile' who fervently aligned themselves to sub cultural diffusions and bitchily exclaimed their anti-establishment rhetoric.

Disputes of talent have always been surrounded popular musical figures, with the technical dexterity and musical talent of certain artists often overshadowed when preceded by their image.

One of the most notoriously image conscious and aesthetically manufactured popular artists is the provocative Lady Gaga, and you would be excused for assuming that she is merely a highly produced figure for a highly sexed mass culture. Delve beneath the Linda Farrow glasses and terrifying geometric garments and you'll discover both an astute business

woman and a classically trained performer. Her adeptness on the piano learnt during her scholarship to New York University somewhat carves her out as possibly more deserving of her position, that menacingly looms above the manufactured 'dead wood' that infiltrates our heads with their catchy lyrics and technically established formulas. Exploring the lyrical technicality of Eminem's early tracks reveals a similar image based precedence, yet on further listening reveals a highly skilful command of lyrical engineering and layering of beats and samples. Something that the dazzling bleached hair and hockey mask may have obscured from critical view.

When it comes to musical success, the overarching criteria seems to outline that raw talent, unwavering dedication and an ability to interpret and develop exciting new approaches to genres often catches the audiences' attention. It may also be a case of it's not what you know, but who, and whilst image plays a large role in certain genres, it's worth remembering that if Shane MacGowan and Lil Wayne made it, so can you.