

The Screamers

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Abstract: While screaming during popular music performances (at least loudly amplified ones) has become unremarkable and even expected, the mid-twentieth-century United States witnessed a series of debates over the appropriateness and significance of screaming. These debates, fraught with moral judgment and often open panic, focused on issues central to American popular music: sexuality, race, class, and the rights and responsibilities of the individual. Tracing the discourse surrounding screaming audiences from the nineteenth century to the present reveals that observers have associated female screamers primarily with sexual impropriety while male screamers more often have been depicted as a potentially violent mob. While commentary on screaming often reinforces racial and gender stereotypes, screaming maintains its subversive power because it effectively dramatizes the tension among social expectations, group solidarity, and individual freedom.

In 2011, my friend of over twenty years, Jeff Burke (no relation), posted to YouTube a short video with the straightforward title “I Saw Iron Maiden.” It’s only two-and-a-half minutes long, and as of this writing it’s still online.¹ The video records Jeff’s good times at a recent concert by the titular heavy metal band, best known for such albums as *The Number of the Beast* (1982) and *Powerslave* (1984). Like many friends who attended my predominantly white, relatively affluent, suburban high school during the George H.W. Bush administration, I am fond of Iron Maiden; but Jeff, a fellow alumnus, remains a fan as in *fanatic*.

Although his video includes a few brief, grainy shots of the band on stage, most of its running time documents Jeff’s reactions to the performance. Jeff, who has maintained an adolescent *joie de vivre* well into his thirties, makes this more exciting than you might expect. He plays air drums. He raises his hand in triumph as Iron Maiden launches into a favorite song. He bangs his head in the quintessential heavy metal gesture. Although he never smiles, he maintains an ecstatic gleam in his eyes that betokens an almost frightening level of commitment to the music.

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Mostly, Jeff is *loud*. He sings along with every word of every song at a volume that allows his camera's microphone to pick up his voice clearly even over the roar of Iron Maiden's amplification system. When singer Bruce Dickinson lets loose with one of his famous high-pitched screams, Jeff joins him, not always nailing the pitch exactly but making a respectable showing. His efforts culminate at what seems to be the concert's grand finale with three blood-curdling shrieks that no longer match anything Dickinson is doing but seem instead to express a state of blissful transport.

Jeff's screaming prowess has attracted favorable attention from his YouTube viewers; the first comment posted reads "Awesome video, you are an epic screamer :D up the Irons \m/."² Within the video, however, there lurks a hint that not everyone shares this opinion. In a brief shot that appears to have been filmed after the concert in the parking lot, a fellow fan in sunglasses and concert T-shirt looks at the camera and says in a not entirely friendly voice, "Hey, but nothing against you man, you're doing your thing . . ." before stalking off. The preceding conversation is absent, but one speculates that the anonymous fan has just confronted Jeff about his concert-going etiquette, which, to be fair, was pretty unruly even by Iron Maiden standards.

Even though "I Saw Iron Maiden" may not reward critical scrutiny in quite the same way as, say, *Last Year at Marienbad*, it provides an excellent introduction to this essay's subject: the screaming audience. While screaming during popular music performances (at least loudly amplified ones) has become unremarkable and even expected, the mid-twentieth century witnessed a series of debates over the appropriateness and significance of screaming. These debates, fraught with moral judgment and often open panic, focused on issues central to American popular music: sexuality, race, class, and the rights and

responsibilities of the individual. When young women screamed, were they opening a safety valve to dispel unwholesome sexual energy, or was that energy dangerously heightened? Were white screamers learning a valuable lesson from the supposedly authentic, natural responses of black audiences, or were they undermining the values of restraint and composure upon which American – implicitly, European-American – civilization depended? Was screaming a democratic expression of individual freedom and excitement, or a symptom of irrational allegiance to a fascist mob? When we scream, are we just doing our thing? Or are we powerslaves?

My primary concern here is not with singing along, formal calls-and-responses initiated by performers, or hissing and booing at bad performances, although each of these practices overlaps at times with the kind of screaming that I am addressing. Rather, I am interested in screaming that expresses an audience's enthusiasm during professional musical performances but is not conventionally "musical" itself.³ This practice first drew widespread attention during the swing era of the 1930s and 1940s and has never really gone away since. I borrow my title from Amiri Baraka's 1967 short story "The Screamers," in which wailing tenor saxophonist Lynn Hope (a real-life fixture of the 1950s R&B scene) leads his African American nightclub audience, "ecstatic, completed, involved in a secret communal expression," screaming into the streets of Newark, where they march joyously until police arrive to break up the celebration with "sticks and bilies."⁴ Baraka's story highlights both the sense of power and release that audiences can find in screaming and the racial conflicts and fights for control of urban public space that often occur in response. As cultural critic Tricia Rose demonstrates, aggressive policing of black audiences continues into the hip hop era: "a hostile tenor,

if not actual verbal abuse, is a regular part of rap fan contact with arena security and police.”⁵ The screamers who have received the most press, however, typically have been young whites. In both cases, race and violence are never far from the surface of the critical discourse on screaming.

While screaming during musical performances did not become ubiquitous until the second half of the twentieth century, American audiences have been doing it for a long time, often in contexts including either African American performers or whites’ attempts to imitate them. Ronald Radano, an expert on the history of African American music, argues that Americans’ very notion of “black music” as a distinct category can be traced in part to the ecstatic singing and shouting at antebellum revival meetings in which whites as well as blacks participated.⁶ At the same time, in professional theaters, shouting of a more profane sort heralded the ersatz racial mimicry of blackface minstrels. Musicologist Dale Cockrell writes that the minstrel audience “felt fully in its right to respond spontaneously, forcefully, and vocally to events on stage.”⁷ Social historian Eric Lott points out that “the reported outrageousness of working-class spectators” formed the basis of a “whole genre of journalistic theater-crowd observation” of minstrel performances designed to titillate bourgeois readers.⁸ In short, minstrelsy’s audiences were themselves an important part of the show.

American audiences for European classical music did not act all that differently during this era. In his foundational study *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, historian Lawrence Levine cites a 1764 letter to the *New York Post-Boy* from a music-loving elitist upset that “instead of a modest and becoming silence nothing is heard during the whole performance, but laughing, talking very loud, squalling, overturning the benches,

etc. – behaviour more suited to a *broglia* Patrick
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than a musical entertainment.”⁹ While this account may depict rowdy socializing rather than screaming as such, by the nineteenth century, WASP critics regularly registered annoyance or bemusement with such disturbances as “delirious bravi from the Italian waiters who occupy the standing room behind the orchestra rail” or the “vociferous bellowings” of the “Teutonic” immigrants who attended Wagner’s operas.¹⁰ Diarist George Templeton Strong described an 1858 New York Philharmonic concert as “a square mile of tropical forest with its flocks of squalling paroquets and troops of chattering monkeys.”¹¹ As these references to immigrant ethnicities and primitive beasts suggest, urban elites saw it as their mission to civilize the supposedly less-evolved masses by constraining their wild behavior and promoting instead the moral uplift purportedly borne of quiet, private contemplation of sacralized masterworks. Cultural historian Daniel Cavicchi points out “an increasing association of the excessive behaviors of music loving with the divisive caricatures of class politics at midcentury.”¹²

By the century’s end, highbrow “arbiters of culture,” according to Levine, had largely won their campaign to “convert audiences into a collection of people reacting *individually* rather than collectively.”¹³ In 1871, Strong noted that “the vile habit of talking and giggling is much less general than heretofore,” and at around the same time, zealous conductor Theodore Thomas often interrupted pieces to chastise whispering couples and even cigar smokers who struck their matches too loudly.¹⁴ By the 1920s, renowned Philadelphia Orchestra conductor Leopold Stokowski seriously proposed banning applause itself, which he termed “a relic of the dark ages.”¹⁵ And such austerity was not unique to elite culture: Levine points out that vaudeville theaters also succeeded in squelching

raucous audiences. In 1898, impresario B. F. Keith recounted a performance at which he responded to “noisy demonstrations” from the gallery by walking on stage and announcing, in the voice of a gentle but firm parent chiding naughty children: “You can’t do that here.... I know that you mean no harm by it, and only do it from the goodness of your hearts, but others in the audience don’t like it, and it does not tend to improve the character of the entertainment, and I know you will agree with me that it is better to omit it hereafter.” He added, “As I walked off, I received a round of applause from the whole house including the gallery. And that was the last of the noise from the gallery gods.”¹⁶

The campaign to silence audiences did not succeed entirely. As social historian Richard Butsch argues, “[R]owdiness always survived on the margins.”¹⁷ Butsch cites a 1913 report on a “cheap vaudeville” theater by a Cleveland social reformer who complained that “the young men and boys stamped their feet, clapped their hands, many of them rising out of their seats, waving their hats, at the same time shouting vulgar suggestions to the performer.”¹⁸ Black audiences in movie theaters, which often featured jazz bands, also responded vocally to performers. In 1927, *Chicago Defender* columnist Dave Peyton “described the ‘freakish high-registered Breaks’ in a solo by Louis Armstrong as bringing movie ‘patrons to a howl’” and argued disapprovingly that “that class of music invites noise and frivolity.”¹⁹ As long as such behavior remained confined to predominantly black or working-class theaters, it attracted wider attention only as an exotic curiosity for white slummers or as a target for starchy moralists whose alarms went largely unheeded. The tone of the conversation changed, however, when the slummers’ children started screaming, too.

The excitement is palpable in the recording of swing idol Benny Goodman’s historic concert at Carnegie Hall on January 16, 1938.²⁰ As historian David Stowe reports, the Carnegie Hall audience “cheered, yelled, howled” at a break played by flamboyant drummer Gene Krupa; they “shouted, ‘Come on, drummer, go to town!’ and other encouragements.” Stowe, citing Levine, writes that “to hear the audience participation in the Carnegie concert, the spontaneous applause after solos, and the shouts of approbation from the ickies, is to recognize a performance dynamic very different from that required by high-culture codes and ensconced in American concert halls since the turn of the century.”²¹ Goodman failed to appreciate the most strident of these “encouragements” and complained later about “hoodlum jitterbugs,” a “noisy minority” who “blasted out the horns, yelled and stomped a dozen smooth passages of the trio into oblivion, wrecked a few numbers with trick ends completely.”²² Rival bandleader Artie Shaw grumbled similarly about his own fans: “there seem[ed] to be hundreds and thousands of crazy people pushing and shoving and crowding and milling around in mobs, shrieking for your autograph, or your picture, or something, or just plain shrieking for no reason on earth you can figure out.”²³ In 1939, the music magazine *Metronome* complained that the jitterbug’s “disgusting habit of shouting to his swing idols is most annoying to the musicians and ruins the music.”²⁴ Swing’s performers and promoters found themselves in the awkward position of asking their most fervent supporters to settle down.

Although attacks on jitterbugs were often expressed in aesthetic terms, broader social anxieties underlay them. Of particular concern were the most widely noted screamers of the swing era: the “bobbysoxers” who worshipped Frank Sinatra.

By most accounts, “Sinatramania” began on December 30, 1942, at New York’s Paramount Theater, where the singer played a minor role in a show headlined by Goodman. “When Sinatra walked out on stage, the audience, filled with thirteen- to fifteen-year-old girls, broke into shouts, screams, and whatever vocal expressions of excitement could fill the theater. Benny Goodman was startled.”²⁵ At first, these expressions may not have been as spontaneous as they seemed: George Evans, Sinatra’s press agent, later defensively offered to donate \$5,000 to charity if anyone could prove that he had paid young women to “screech,” but admitted “mysteriously” that “certain things were done. . . . It would be as wrong for me to divulge them as it would be for a doctor to discuss his work.”²⁶ Whatever its origins, the craze soon took on a life of its own. Another member of Sinatra’s publicity team explained that “the dozen girls we hired to scream and swoon did exactly as we told them. But hundreds more we didn’t hire screamed even louder. It was wild, crazy, completely out of control.”²⁷ Historian and music-business insider Arnold Shaw remembered that “the scenes at the Paramount, and later at broadcasting studios, were the nearest thing to mass hypnosis the country had seen until then, with girls moaning ecstatically, shrieking uncontrollably, waving personal underthings at him, and just crying his name in sheer rapture.”²⁸ The phenomenon peaked on October 12, 1944, when a Times Square mob estimated at 30,000, hoping to gain entrance to a Sinatra performance, “smashed shop windows and destroyed the Paramount ticket booth; more than 400 police reserves, 200 detectives, and 20 squad cars could not prevent what would come to be known as “The Columbus Day Riot.”²⁹

Cultural critics struggled to explain to uncomprehending parents why their chil-

dren (and most troublingly, their daughters) were rioting over a scrawny singer with a genial, unassuming stage presence. Composer, novelist, and critic Paul Bowles wrote in the *New York Herald Tribune* that “it is a slightly disturbing spectacle to witness the almost synchronized screams that come from his audience as he closes his eyes or moves his body slightly sideways, because the spontaneous reaction corresponds to no common understanding relating to tradition or technique of performance, nor yet to the meaning of the sung text.”³⁰ Many commentators tried to reassure readers by invoking historical precedent to demonstrate that civilized society had survived this sort of thing before. In 1946, *New Yorker* critic E. J. Kahn, Jr., cited Franz Liszt, Johann Strauss, and Ignacy Paderewski as examples of eminently respectable musicians whose “feminine followers” had been prone to hysteria at the sight of their idols.³¹ In *The New Republic*, Bruce Bliven dug even deeper, arguing of the “phenomenon of mass hysteria” surrounding Sinatra that “you need to go back not merely to Lindbergh and Valentino and Admiral Dewey, to understand it, but to the dance madness that overtook some medieval German villages, or to the children’s crusade.”³² While such popular manias had no doubt been worrisome in their day, readers could imagine a future in which Sinatramania, too, would be a historical curiosity. Other reporters looked for sociological rather than historical explanations, blaming “wartime degeneracy” or the response of “children of the poor” to seeing a “kid from Hoboken who got the breaks.”³³

But such explanations only deferred the real issue: bobby-soxers who screamed for Sinatra appeared to exhibit sexual desire in a disturbing and public new way. Arnold Shaw recalled twenty years later that “there was a sense of shocked embarrassment, as if mother or father had

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unintentionally come upon daughter in a moment of intimacy. The guardians of our heritage of Puritan restraint saw something unwholesome in the Sinatra hysteria.”³⁴ Tracing the etymology of *hysteria*, a word constantly employed to describe Sinatra’s admirers, leads us to the eighteenth-century belief that a supposed uterine pathology (the “wandering womb”) could cause women to manifest irrational, overwrought behavior.³⁵ By the beginning of the nineteenth century, European physicians “had succeeded in disassociating hysteria from actual female anatomy by linking it to the violent excesses experienced by the populace during the French Revolution, but the more subtle associations between hysteria and female sexuality would remain.”³⁶ In her study of the furor inspired by Lord Byron in early nineteenth-century Britain, literary scholar Ghislaine McDayter notes that “hysteria was thought to be aurally infectious.”³⁷ Bliven, in his analysis of Sinatramania, similarly depicted hysteria as an ear-borne pathology with his assertion that “trained nurses have to be on the premises in any theatre where [Sinatra] appears, to soothe the hysterical.”³⁸

Many critics attempted to explain Sinatramania with fashionable Freudian theory, which, as McDayter points out, emphasized “repressed desires and deferred pleasure” as the causes of hysteria.³⁹ Kahn wrote that “a great many psychologists, psychiatrists, psychopathologists, and other experts on the psyche have tried to define the relationship between Sinatra and young womanhood,” with conclusions ranging from “mass hypnotism” to “increased emotional sensitivity due to mammary hyperesthesia.”⁴⁰ Kahn himself preferred to blame “the desperate chemistry of adolescence,” while Bliven, even less precisely, believed that “just plain sex has a great deal to do with the matter.”⁴¹

One did not have to be a professional critic to espouse this view. Former bobby-soxer Martha Weinman Lear recalled in 1974 that boys loved to tease her and her friends: “In school they mocked us, collapsing into each others’ arms and shrieking in falsetto: ‘Oh-h-h, Frankie, I’m fainting I’m *fainting*.’ The hell with them.”⁴² While there were certainly male Sinatra fans, the dominant image of Sinatra’s audience involved hysterical women.⁴³

Some mental health experts understood Sinatramania more positively as a kind of therapy. Stowe quotes from a 1943 panel discussion sponsored by *Down Beat* magazine, in which one psychologist argued that the “extreme behavior” of the Sinatra fans “has its normal and healthy aspects, because it is a means of helping to solve *erotic* drives and of sublimating them.”⁴⁴ Many bobby-soxers probably would have agreed that their response was sexual while they sneered at the reassuring arguments about sublimation. Lear remembered that “the sociologists were out there in force in those mid-forties, speculating about the dynamics of mass hysteria, blathering on about how his yearning vulnerability appealed to our mother instincts. What yo-yo’s. Whatever he stirred beneath our barely budding breasts, it wasn’t motherly.”⁴⁵ Janice L. Booker, another former screamer for Sinatra, argues that “the screaming and moaning was a legitimate, socially acceptable catharsis for budding sexual longings, at a time when emotion was more internalized, when expressions of feeling were more constrained, when sexuality for young teenagers was not expressed as blatantly as it is now.”⁴⁶ Moreover, “participation in the bobby soxers phenomenon was a bonding experience for young women. Forty years later it might have been called ‘sisterhood.’”⁴⁷ This suggests that, in retrospect, Sinatramania might have repre-

sented not “mass self-debasement of women,” as jazz critic Gene Lees puts it, but rather a nascent feminist consciousness.⁴⁸

Some of the concern over screaming audiences during the swing era centered not on sexual freedom, but rather on a perceived link to fascism. Stowe cites frightened observers in 1938 who attacked swing as “musical Hitlerism” and depicted Benny Goodman’s fans calling for him “with the abandon of a crowd of Storm Troopers demanding their Fuehrer or a Roman parade greeting its Duce.”⁴⁹ Philosopher and sociologist Theodor Adorno, who had experienced the rise of Nazism firsthand in Germany before escaping into exile in the United States, pointed to the seemingly reflexive, irrational behavior of jitterbugs, as well as similarities between jazz and military music and such swing advertising slogans as “Follow Your Leader, Artie Shaw,” to argue that “jazz can easily be adapted for use by fascism.”⁵⁰

Adorno perceptively recognized that what he saw as the potentially fascist aspects of jitterbugs’ behavior were inspired by primitivist stereotypes of African American culture. Adorno himself was willing to entertain the racist idea that African Americans were naturally predisposed to “primitive” behavior; “how far the aboriginal Harlem jitterbug is the legitimate heir to primitive religious ecstasy and to what extent he is a commercial artefact,” he wrote in 1941, “is a question for the anthropologist.”⁵¹ As the latter possibility suggests, however, Adorno was deeply skeptical that a form of mass culture such as swing could somehow escape the all-encompassing control of the capitalist culture industry. He argued that if “a visitor to a Harlem jazz palace is struck by the changes from frenzy to apathy in the behavior of expert negro listeners . . . this behavior has more to do with the modern

factory than with the extreme moods of primitives.”⁵² White jitterbugs, then, were doubly inauthentic, as they badly imitated the allegedly primitive behavior of African American swing fans who were in fact far from primitive. “The aping by jitterbugs of negro strawmen is an apology for relieving boredom by pseudo-primitivism. The jitterbug’s primitivity resides in his modernity.”⁵³ For Adorno, the antics of jitterbugs constituted not a blow for personal freedom but rather a “pseudoactivity,” a practice that tricked young people who amounted to “mere centers of socially conditioned reflexes” into thinking that they were expressing individual agency.⁵⁴ While Adorno’s consistent use of the male pronoun in making his argument was typical of this period, it also highlights the reductive gender categories employed in most criticism of screaming audiences: female screamers were linked primarily to sexual impropriety, male screamers were more often depicted as a potentially violent mob.

The notion of a link among screaming men, black music, and a mob mentality persisted in the rhythm & blues and small-group jazz scenes of the postwar era. A frequent source of controversy was the ethnically mixed audience at Jazz at the Philharmonic (JATP) concerts, which were founded in Los Angeles in 1944 and frequently toured the United States and eventually the world through the 1950s. “The mainstay populations of his audience, according to JATP impresario Norman Granz, were large numbers of Italian Americans, blacks, and Jews, mostly in their teens and twenties. ‘I mean, these were people who got very emotional about their music and the musicians I had,’ Granz said.”⁵⁵ Critic Whitney Balliett claimed that while JATP audiences looked like the “spiritual offspring” of jitterbugs, they were actually “more warlike. They rarely move from their seats, yet they man-

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age to give off through a series of screams (the word 'go' repeated like the successive slams of the cars on a fast freight), blood-stopping whistles, and stamping feet a mass intensity that would have soothed Hitler, and made Benny Goodman pale."⁵⁶ Tad Hershorn, in his recent biography of Granz, defends the promoter from such charges, pointing out that the "issues raised about the alleged excesses of JATP's audiences were hardly novel" and comparing them to the nineteenth-century opera audiences discussed by Levine.⁵⁷ Hershorn argues that "Granz had democratized access to the concert hall and the prestige it afforded, with implications for jazz as a listening experience. JATP triumphed as entertainment in part because it encouraged the lively bond between artist and audience that was central to the creation of the music."⁵⁸

Nonetheless, Granz sometimes found himself obligated to chastise his audience much like B. F. Keith had a half-century earlier. He remembered:

I insisted that audiences respect the musicians, because in the early days some of the houses we played were not to be believed. . . . If anyone made noise, I stopped the show. I even passed out little handbills ("How to Act at a Jazz Concert"). Now it didn't make me well liked by the public, but I think the public that did want to hear the artist, and didn't want to hear noisy exhibitionists, liked it too.⁵⁹

Granz's policies were perhaps necessary if he was to continue staging concerts at all: Hershorn writes that "for theaters that did not publicly admit to racial or ethnic discrimination, disruptive episodes presented convenient rationales for banning JATP."⁶⁰

By the 1950s, the figure of the screaming fan had become a convention, a set of predictable gestures and responses that

audiences and their critics continued to deploy even as musical genres and social contexts changed. The gender lines established during the swing era persisted. We can trace panic over female sexuality through the succeeding history of the discourse on Anglo-American popular music, from Elvis Presley's devotees (satirized in the 1963 film *Bye Bye Birdie*) to Beatlemania (satirized in their British incarnation in the 1964 film *A Hard Day's Night*) to Ken Russell's 1975 film *Lisztomania*, which recasts Franz Liszt (played by the Who's Roger Daltrey) as a glam rock star besieged by shrieking women. In a giddily lurid satire (or perhaps an unironic warning?) of the simultaneous thrill and threat that female screamers represented, Liszt/Daltrey dreams that his ardent groupies' attention gives him a cartoonishly huge erection (much larger than the rest of his body) around which the women do a maypole dance before they chop it off with a guillotine. (YouTube it if you must.) Today, noted screamers include "Beliebers," admirers of Canadian teen heartthrob Justin Bieber. A YouTube search for the phrase "beliebers screaming" currently yields 483 hits. A recent report on Bieber in the *London Evening Standard* strikes a predictable tone of condescending concern over hysterical sexuality run amok:

As two silver people carriers pulled away, the 100 or so shrieking pubescent girls who had been trailing the teenage Canadian pop sensation all day gave chase. They swarmed across four lanes of traffic, not really caring that it was cold, rainy and the No. 9 bus was about to run them over. . . . "I could just die! I could just die!" panted one, fondling the blacked-out windows.

One Belieber stops the reporter to pass along a message to the star: "'Justin Bieber! I am legal! I'm 16 now!' said one of them into my Dictaphone, hoping I would relay this. Surely Justin doesn't go in for that

kind of thing? Doesn't he wear a chastity ring?"⁶¹

Conversations about male screamers, by contrast, have remained focused on race and violence, portraying what Richard Butsch calls "a bad audience, a crowd rather than a public."⁶² Take, for example, the white drifters in Jack Kerouac's 1959 best seller *On the Road*, who cut loose at nightclubs populated by stereotypical black "strawmen" like those described by Adorno. Iconic hipster Dean Moriarty starts yelling ("Blow, man, blow!") before he even gets inside the club, and joins a group of black screamers inside: "'Stay with it, man!' roared a man with a foghorn voice, and let out a big groan that must have been heard clear out in Sacramento, ah-haa! 'Whoop!' said Dean. He was rubbing his chest, his belly; the sweat splashed from his face."⁶³ Then leap forward a half-century to the Gathering of the Juggalos, an annual festival for fans of white rap duo Insane Clown Posse (whose "clown" makeup bears more than a slight resemblance to blackface): "During concerts, instead of clapping or cheering, Juggalos hoot en masse: 'Whoooooooop whoooooop!' It sounds like a flock of horned owls." Juggalos take their whooping seriously. "In 2010, when old-school legend Method Man kept shouting out, 'Illinois' at the Gathering as if the crowd's loyalty was geographic, and seemed confused by their repeated 'Whoop! Whoop!', someone in the crowd beamed him in the face, almost knocked him out, drawing blood."⁶⁴ While there are "Juggalettes," accounts of the Juggalo subculture typically emphasize its male membership and what one writer calls "the blatant misogyny condoned in the Juggalo community."⁶⁵ Whether one celebrates (like Kerouac) or denigrates (like most reports on Juggalos) male screamers, they retain a perceived, if sometimes deserved, reputation for thuggery, sexism, and racial stereotyping.

In 2013, does screaming retain any potential for social disruption? Much critical commentary on screaming audiences, rather than question the sexism, racism, classism, and heteronormativity that underlies American popular culture, seems simply to perpetuate these values through the constant repetition of clichés. The mutual influence between the practice of and the discourse on screaming has led to a certain ossification, with critics imputing female hysteria and male aggression to audiences who dutifully enact the outrages expected of them. If one looks more closely, however, it is not hard to find cracks in the conventional narrative. There are "Boy Beliebers," for example, although Wikipedia downplays their significance by reassuring us that they "are generally loved by their female counterparts due to their rarity," which suggests that they are both mercifully few and implicitly straight.⁶⁶ Juggalos, while they may exhibit deplorable sexism, have a more complex relationship to questions of race and class. Violent J of Insane Clown Posse has claimed that "you can't be a racist Juggalo. It sort of defeats the whole thing. If you call yourself a Juggalo and you have a racial prejudice, it's just not making sense to me."⁶⁷ Sympathizers point out that many critics' "hatred" of the Juggalos "is at least partially class-based: Juggalos tend to be poor and uneducated, from economically depressed small towns and broken homes." From this point of view, the group's "constant chants of 'Family! Family!'" might have as much to do with working-class solidarity as with patriarchal masculinity or what music critic Nathan Rabin calls "indulging an inner child focused on its most transgressive needs."⁶⁸ Screamers are often inane or offensive, but that is rarely the only story that can be told about them.

Screaming maintains its subversive power because it effectively dramatizes

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the tension among social expectations, group solidarity, and individual freedom. When we scream, we engage in an activity that is both personal and collective: we announce our own presence in a unique way even as everyone around us does roughly the same thing. Screamers are, in one sense, participating in a deeply democratic endeavor, with every voice given equal weight, but the resulting roar often fails to articulate any shared message other than its own loudness. Screamers engage at a visceral level with the question of what it means to maintain one's own identity within mass society, a question that doesn't presume a single answer. Moreover, the long and well-known tradition of the screaming audience forces today's screamers to view themselves in a historical context, even as they promise themselves that they will never fade out or quiet down as

their predecessors inevitably did. In her study of "Byromania," Ghislaine McDayter writes that the "fan-as-hysteric . . . revealed the contradictions at the heart of some of our most cherished cultural myths: the 'rational' nature of democracy and the fantasy of stable subjectivity."⁶⁹

By giving such contradictions sonic form, screamers do not resolve them, but at the very least they often provide an opportunity to consider new possibilities. The boy Belieber and the class-conscious Juggalo might be raising such possibilities when they scream, or they may simply be retracing and sharpening the lines around fixed identities. Whatever our conclusion, we need to listen to screamers, at least as much as we listen to musicians, when we make judgments about American popular music's power and significance.

ENDNOTES

- 1 "I Saw Iron Maiden," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oYSM_2yqXjc (accessed September 28, 2012).
- 2 "\m/" depicts the "devil horns" hand gesture associated with heavy metal.
- 3 Note that I am addressing only music audiences; screaming at sports events or political rallies is beyond my scope here, although these practices are undoubtedly related to those I will discuss.
- 4 Amiri Baraka, "The Screamers" (1967), in *Hot and Cool: Jazz Short Stories*, ed. Marcela Breton (New York: Plume, 1990), 267.
- 5 Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 127.
- 6 Ronald Radano, *Lying up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 115–139.
- 7 Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 58.
- 8 Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 157.
- 9 Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 179.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 86, 103.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 181.

- 12 Daniel Cavicchi, "Loving Music: Listeners, Entertainments, and the Origins of Music Fandom in Nineteenth-Century America," in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, ed. Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 245. Patrick
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- 13 Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 184, 195.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 187.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 192.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 196.
- 17 Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750 – 1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 120.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 118.
- 19 Mary Carbine, "'The Finest Outside the Loop': Motion Picture Exhibition in Chicago's Black Metropolis, 1905 – 1928," *Camera Obscura* 23 (May 1990): 29.
- 20 Benny Goodman, *Live at Carnegie Hall*, recorded January 16, 1938 (Columbia CD G2K 40244).
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- 32 Bruce Bliven, "The Voice and the Kids" (1944), in *The Frank Sinatra Reader*, ed. Steven Petkov and Leonard Mustazza (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 30.
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- 34 Shaw, *Sinatra*, 50.
- 35 Ghislaine McDayter, *Byromania and the Birth of Celebrity Culture* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009), 47.
- 36 *Ibid.*
- 37 *Ibid.*, 56.
- 38 Bliven, "The Voice and the Kids," 31.
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Screamers 42 Martha Weinman Lear, “The Bobby Sox Have Wilted, but the Memory Remains Fresh,” *The New York Times*, October 13, 1974.
- 43 See, for example, Derek Jewell, “From *Frank Sinatra: A Celebration*,” in *The Frank Sinatra Reader*, ed. Petkov and Mustazza, 53 – 55.
- 44 Stowe, *Swing Changes*, 147.
- 45 Lear, “The Bobby Sox Have Wilted.”
- 46 Booker, “Why the Bobby Soxers?” 75.
- 47 Ibid., 76.
- 48 Gene Lees, *Singers and the Song* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 102 – 103. Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess, and Gloria Jacobs make a similar argument about the Beatlemania of the 1960s, which they regard as “the first mass outburst of the sixties to feature women – in this case girls, who would not reach full adulthood until the seventies and the emergence of a genuinely political movement for women’s liberation.” See Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess, and Gloria Jacobs, “Beatlemania: Girls Just Want to Have Fun,” in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (London: Routledge, 1992), 85. For a related argument about Elvis fans, see Sue Wise, “Sexing Elvis,” in *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word*, ed. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (London: Routledge, 1990), 390 – 398.
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- 50 Theodor W. Adorno, “On Popular Music” (1941), in Adorno, *Current of Music: Elements of a Radio Theory*, ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), 324; Theodor W. Adorno, “On Jazz” (1936), in Adorno, *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 485.
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⁶⁷ Camille Doderer, "Insane Clown Posse Talk Juggalo Magic, Justin Bieber, Trekkies, and Being Rich," *Village Voice*, September 4, 2010, http://blogs.villagevoice.com/music/2010/09/insane_clown_posse_rich.php (accessed October 3, 2012).

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⁶⁹ McDayter, *Byromania*, 26.