



Recreating Refractions of Bob Dylan

Cat Power Sings Dylan: The 1966 Royal Albert Hall Concert

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Abstract: This article examines Cat Power's project *Cat Power Sings Dylan: The 1966 Royal Albert Hall Concert* through the lens of authenticity discourses in popular music. Using a critical fan review as a point of departure, the study reveals audience expectations centered on technical mastery, performative authority, and the handling of canonical repertoire. Drawing on theoretical frameworks by Alan Moore, Ralf von Appen, Philip Auslander, and Emma Mayhew, the analysis investigates Cat Power's recreation of Bob Dylan's 1966 Manchester concert across the dimensions of personal, sociocultural, and emotional authenticity.

The article argues that Cat Power constructs authenticity not through reinterpretation but through performative restraint and historical proximity to Dylan's original performance. Her fragile vocal delivery, reduced instrumentation, and controlled stage presence produce an aesthetic of reverence that frames authenticity as attentiveness and canonical fidelity. From a gender perspective, her vocal vulnerability challenges dominant rock conventions that associate authority and authenticity with masculine-coded vocal strength and expressive assertiveness. Ultimately, the project demonstrates authenticity as a negotiated cultural effect shaped by staging, performance, audience reception, and gendered listening practices.

Keywords: reenactments; gender politics; folk music; liveness; staging

Primer

I start my exploration of Cat Power's concept of recreating Bob Dylan's concert at the Manchester Free Trade Hall in May 1966 with an online review of an audience member who attended Cat Power's show at the Moore Theatre in Seattle in March 2024. Reportedly, he had high expectations which the musician failed to meet. Even though the term authenticity is not mentioned in the discussion, the review implicitly articulates expectations that are closely tied to specific notions of authenticity. He had hoped to see a show "with a command of the material and confidence on the stage," describing the songs as "Dylan masterpieces."¹ These expectations point toward a form of executional authenticity, grounded in technical competence, instrumental control, and

authoritative stage presence. The late start of Power's performance combined with "lackluster guitar support ... and mere vocal atmospherics" made the performance "one of the biggest disappointments," the reviewer recalls, even though the "electric set rocked." Here he shows a glimpse of enthusiasm. Though the author of the review presumably enjoyed the second part of the set, the first part, specifically Cat Power's acoustic set, evidently disappointed him so much that his dissatisfaction pervades his appraisal of the entire concert. Notably, the review does not criticize Cat Power for lacking emotional sincerity or personal expressiveness; rather, it frames disappointment in terms of craftsmanship and performance authority. The implied notion of authenticity is thus neither biographical nor emotional but closely aligned with expectations of mastery and faithful handling of canonical material. From this perspective, the reviewer's demand for "command of the material and confidence on the stage" can be understood not simply as personal dissatisfaction but as a condensed articulation of executorial authenticity norms within the Dylan reception tradition. His disappointment already anticipates the tension between historical fidelity and performative authority that structures the following analysis. Read in this way, the review serves less as an evaluation of Cat Power's artistic identity than as a revealing articulation of audience-side authenticity norms. But how did Cat Power fail to fulfill the user's idea of authenticity?

On her live album *Cat Power Sings Dylan: The 1966 Royal Albert Hall Concert* (2023),² Cat Power (Charlyn Marie Marshall) recreates Bob Dylan's concert at the Manchester Free Trade Hall in May 1966, which was bootlegged and mistakenly labeled as having been recorded at the Royal Albert Hall, going down in pop history along with the wrong venue name. Cat Power corrected the error almost sixty years later by relocating a performance with the identical dramatization from 1966 to the Royal Albert Hall in London in 2022. She reenacts Dylan's set, which sparked controversy due to the artist's switch to electric instruments halfway through. The show includes a person shouting "Judas!" at the singer in the same way an audience member did to Dylan during his Manchester concert in 1966. This moment became a fulcrum for Dylan's career. Labeled as the "spokesman of a generation,"³ he was perceived as the leading songwriter of the American folk music revival in response to his albums *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* (1963) and *The Times They Are a-Changin'* (1964). In Cat Power's own words, she "wanted to present the album in a sort of protected manner,"⁴ as close as possible to the original. The singer's statement can be

applied to the various dimensions of authenticity, especially regarding her and her listeners' appreciation of Bob Dylan, sharing a base assumption about "essential(ized), real, actual, essence."⁵ Whereas Bob Dylan embodies Gilbert and Pearson's identification of the requirements of "'authentic' rock, wherein artists must speak the truth of their (and others') situations,"⁶ Cat Power relies on Auslander's concept of rock ideology as conservative, describing authenticity as "often located in current music's relationship to an earlier, 'purer' moment in a mythic history of the music."⁷ Cat Power's use of an "earlier, purer moment"⁸—namely Dylan's 1966 concert, which created a myth itself as the recording was bootlegged and mistakenly labeled as having been recorded at the Royal Albert Hall—enables her to encounter her own ideas of authenticity.

In his study "Feigning or Feeling? On the Staging of Authenticity on Stage,"⁹ Ralf von Appen analyzes social and individual functions of authenticity while developing awareness for the different strategies employed to suggest authenticity on stage. Appen differentiates between four types of authenticities: personal, sociocultural, executional, and emotional. He argues that the sociocultural authenticity of the musicians, the sharing of common values, is expressed in aspects such as the closeness of the stars to the fans or in their communication with the audience. Announcements and the behavior of the musicians on stage allow conclusions to be drawn about their personal authenticity, while executional authenticity is easier to judge when the musicians' playing can be observed directly on stage. Meanwhile, emotional authenticity can be seen more accurately in the (relatively) direct encounter with the musicians.¹⁰

In this article, I analyze Cat Power's aforementioned promise of authenticity by examining the singer's sociocultural authenticity and the sharing of common values, her personal authenticity in the process of recreating the 1966 concert, and her emotional authenticity by observing her voice on the record as well as her gestures and facial expressions in live performances. Paying particular attention to gender politics in this context, I begin my inquiry with a discussion of the key terms of authenticity in popular music studies, liveness and staging, to explore Cat Power's authentication strategies on the basis of the album and its live performances. By drawing on Negus and Astor's assumption that "in the end, what matters is not what authenticity is (a visual representation, a sound, a gesture, a fabricated meaning) but what it does,"¹¹ I'm ultimately interested

in the processes and effects of Cat Power's recreation of refractions of Bob Dylan regarding his concert at the Manchester Free Trade Hall in May 1966 and the controversy surrounding it.

Concepts of Authenticity in Popular Music Studies

Within popular music studies, authenticity has predominantly been theorized in relation to folk- and rock-based traditions, where live performance, bodily presence, and vocal expression function as central markers. Lawrence Grossberg emphasizes the importance of live concerts for the authentication of musicians "in the fact that it is only here that one can see the actual production of the sound, and the emotional work carried in the voice. The demand for live performance has always expressed the desire for the visual mark (and proof) of authenticity."¹²

Philip Auslander similarly situates live performance as a key site of authentication in rock music, where credibility and artistic legitimacy are negotiated within historically specific genre conventions.¹³ Simon Frith complements these perspectives by shifting attention from biography to performance itself: audiences respond to what they see and hear on stage, so that "truth of feeling becomes an aesthetic truth, not a moral one."¹⁴ Taken together, these approaches describe authenticity as a performative effect grounded in liveness, vocal presence, and embodied musical action. Importantly, these concepts do not claim universal validity across popular music genres. They emerge from a discourse shaped by folk and rock music of the 1960s and 1970s and are less applicable to genres such as electronic pop or hip-hop. For this reason, authenticity in this article is not treated as a general category of popular music but as a historically situated concept directly relevant to Cat Power's recreation of Bob Dylan's 1966 concert.

Alan Moore further refines the discussion by locating authenticity not within musical or lyrical material itself but in its reception.¹⁵ Authenticity, for Moore, is an ascription made by listeners rather than an inherent property of a song.¹⁶ While performers may display intentions, values, or emotions, authenticity only becomes effective when audiences perceive these displays as sincere and meaningful.¹⁷ Moore distinguishes three overlapping modes of authenticity that are especially relevant here: first-person authenticity, in which performers are perceived as giving a direct account of lived or emotionally credible experience;¹⁸ second-person authenticity, which validates listeners' own

experiences and creates a sense of belonging;¹⁹ and third-person authenticity, which refers to the convincing presentation of a specific social or historical context, such as stylistic fidelity to earlier musical traditions.²⁰ These categories provide a flexible framework for analyzing how authenticity is constructed in performance rather than derived from authorship alone.

Moore's reception-oriented approach resonates with Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor's emphasis on authenticity as a historically shaped expectation within folk and rock culture, particularly in relation to autobiographical expression and the singer-songwriter persona.²¹ Emma Mayhew likewise understands authenticity as rooted in romantic ideas of individualized authorship, sincerity, and expressive unity between performer and material. Her work is especially relevant for singer-songwriter traditions and feminist critiques of authorship,²² highlighting how authenticity is often tied to the perception of a coherent performing subject rather than compositional originality alone.²³ Similarly to Moore, however, Mayhew also notes the adherence to certain variable codes in material and performance as a prerequisite for a potential sense of belonging and for being authentic for the audience, whatever particular parameters they may favor.²⁴ Furthermore, Mayhew supports Simon Frith's view that the voice is an essential tool in the creation of authenticity, as it is physically linked to the person performing it and thus allows conclusions to be drawn about their true personality: "Like other expressions of bodily practices, the voice is a place where identity can be projected."²⁵ Moore, Mayhew, and, in a broader sense, Frith all see authenticity in the pop song as a mutually constructed attribute that is, so to speak, created in cooperation between the author and the audience.

Rather than attempting a comprehensive mapping of authenticity in popular music, the following analysis concentrates on three interrelated dimensions. First, executional authenticity plays a central role, as audience expectations, such as those articulated in fan reviews, are closely tied to instrumental competence, vocal control, and authoritative handling of canonical material. This dimension is particularly relevant in the context of Dylan's songs, which are widely regarded as technically and historically charged significant works. Second, emotional authenticity is foregrounded, especially with regard to the voice. According to Frith and Mayhew, the voice functions as a key site where sincerity, vulnerability, and emotional credibility are negotiated, making it crucial for understanding both Cat Power's interpretative choices and their reception. Third, sociocultural authenticity is considered insofar

as Cat Power positions herself in relation to the folk-rock canon and to Dylan's mythologized 1966 performance. Here, authenticity emerges not from biographical identification or autobiographical truth but from the perceived legitimacy of engaging with an "earlier, purer moment"²⁶ in rock history, as described by Auslander.

I consciously set aside other dimensions of authenticity discussed in the literature, such as biographical authenticity, the alignment of "real person," "star persona," and "song personality," or broad claims about authenticity across popular music genres. These aspects do not substantially inform the analysis of Cat Power's performance practice and would risk obscuring the specific mechanisms of authentication at work in this case study.

Staging

The term staging has thus evolved over the course of time, from its first appearance until today, from a very specific term of the theatre stage to a rather broad term that is generally used to describe a constructed form of representation, a way of creating a deliberate illusion and realizing an illusion and the transposition of a work from one medium to another. The German theatre scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte assumes that drama is inherent in human nature and that consequently people always stage themselves.²⁷ In terms of the aesthetic aspect of entertainment media and the anthropological aspect of self-presentation, Fischer-Lichte sees staging as more than the mere bringing to the stage of a dramatic piece, as well as the simple manner of presentation, and describes the term as an aesthetic and at the same time anthropological category, aimed at creative processes in which something is designed and brought to appearance. These processes are specifically characterized by imaginary, fictional, and real empirical in relations to one another. Accordingly, staging is far more than simply transporting content into another medium. It is rather a restructuring, a recreation and molding of an object, which, through creative work, is given a fresh face with which it presents itself to the outside world as well as (re-)defines itself. Furthermore, Fischer-Lichte describes a performance as the basis for staging as an event that arises from the confrontation and interaction between two groups of people who assemble in one place at the same time in order to experience a situation together in the form of a bodily co-presence²⁸ generated and determined by a self-referential and ever-changing feedback loop.²⁹ She makes a clear distinction

between staging and performance, defining staging as the conceptual planning process that must precede every performance. She asserts that staging is the process of gradually developing and testing strategies based on factors such as when, how long, where, and how things should appear to the audience. This approach positions staging as a deliberate creation strategy, underscoring the necessity to differentiate between staging and performance, as the audience's perception and reaction constitute a performance. Therefore, the staging process is definitive, but the performance varies every evening.³⁰ The negative evaluation offered in the review presented at the beginning of this article demonstrates the risks inherent in this variability. The reviewer's reaction illustrates how audience perception ultimately determines whether staging strategies are interpreted as artistic restraint or as a lack of authority. It is precisely the unplanned, the unstaged, and the unpredictable things that can occur during the performance that create moments of indeterminacy.³¹ This distinction is crucial for the case of Cat Power, whose recreation of Dylan's 1966 concert relies on a highly controlled staging that nevertheless unfolds differently in each live situation.

According to Martin Seel, the concept of staging becomes relevant in applying Fischer-Lichte's ideas to musical performances, "when ... performance is linked to a scenic movement relevant to their character as music—as is almost always the case in popular music and not infrequently in avant-garde music."³² Ralf von Appen points out that at concerts the layout and the movement radius of the musicians on the stage may be seen less as a factor in the visual staging concept than as necessary from a functional standpoint, as the musicians have to be able to see, hear, and communicate with each other.³³ Props, costumes, and technical equipment are therefore seen as part of the stage action, which is defined by the conventions of the respective genre. In particular, breaks with these conventions, such as refraining from bowing during the final applause, or audience animation, such as inviting people onto the stage, can therefore be seen as consciously intended.³⁴ Breaking with such conventions—for example by minimizing audience interaction or avoiding expressive gestures—can therefore be read as a deliberate staging decision. This perspective allows staging to be discussed not as a general aesthetic category but as a concrete strategy through which Cat Power negotiates control, restraint, and historical reference in her performance. The audience's invocation of Dylan's songs as significant works reflects precisely the canonizing discourse that elevates such

material into an almost untouchable authenticity benchmark, thereby intensifying the evaluative pressure placed upon reinterpretations.

Liveness

In terms of media history, the concept of liveness became significant with the establishment of the record. Through the possibilities of recording music, the concept of liveness was developed as a counterpart to media forms that could be played over and over again. Philip Auslander mentions that radio was the first medium to mark the boundaries between recorded and live music as permeable; the music played was usually pre-recorded, but the presenters' comments were live.³⁵ In addition, the audience could not see the source of the music, which meant that they could not clearly distinguish whether it was performed live or recorded. Peggy Phelan links liveness to the aspect of presence, explaining that a performance, even if repeated, is not the same performance but a different one that contains slight changes that make it unique compared to previous performances of the same staging.³⁶ This leads to the question of how the aspect of liveness can be considered when audience and performers are not in the same space, as live performances are generally defined by their event character.

In the context of live performance, economic, cultural, and social value is associated with enhanced aesthetic experiences and the experience of community. Wicke et al. link liveness with a sociable environment, the power emanating from a collective experience, the perceived intensity of the music-making, or the visual accessories in a stage show.³⁷ Martin Pfeleiderer associates live music with the shared experience of musicians and listeners, in which a communal event can arise.³⁸ Live performances draw on this fascination and appeal essentially through their specific mediality, which is particularly associated with immediacy, unmediatedness, and present presence and is thus connected to transience, fleetingness, and unrepeatability,³⁹ staged as a special quality of experience.⁴⁰ These aspects are central to Cat Power's project, which deliberately reenacts a historically fixed concert while presenting it as a live event.

Cat Power's Personal Authenticity

Ralf von Appen defines “those who are successful at aligning their inner convictions and their outward behavior ... as authentic. People who follow their own inner compass in this way are perceived as sincere and reliable in terms of knowing what one can expect from them.”⁴¹ This is a standard that has also applied to rock and pop musicians from the 1960s onward. The countercultural generation adopted the idea that rock was “unmistakably a folk-music form,”⁴² and rock musicians were perceived as artists connected to the representation of an authentic “truth to experience”⁴³ rather than as entertainers. An alleged independence from social restraints was linked to the idea that musicians remain authentic by being radical in their self-realization and by embodying a notion of idealistic freedom in contrast to the everyday life of their audiences. Musicians working outside the capitalistic structures, primarily in DIY contexts associated with independent labels, who are responsible for their production-related decisions, are perceived as particularly authentic. Consequently, the length of the concert, announcements, and the behavior of the musicians on stage allow conclusions to be drawn about their personal authenticity, for example when the impression of joy in playing and fun in interacting with the audience is created.⁴⁴ Within this framework, personal authenticity is not a static trait but becomes visible through concrete performance decisions, including phrasing, pacing, vocal delivery, and bodily presence on stage.

It is important to note that Cat Power chronicled Dylan's songs before recording the album *Cat Power Sings Dylan: The Royal Albert Hall Concert*. In 1999, she performed in a series of shows musically accompanying the silent movie *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928).⁴⁵ The performances combined covers with original songs, and parts of the sparsely arranged material were released on Cat Power's album *The Covers Record* (2000). During a *Peel Session* broadcast in June 2000, hosted by English radio presenter and journalist John Peel, Cat Power performed eleven covers, including her own interpretations of Bob Dylan's “Hard Times in New York Town” and Oasis's “Wonderwall.”⁴⁶ In 2008, Cat Power released her second covers album, *Jukebox*, featuring Dylan's “I Believe in You.” On her eleventh studio album, *Covers* (2022), the musician released “Unhate,” a new recording of the song “Hate,” from her album *The Greatest* (2006). Re-recordings of older songs have appeared on each of Cat Power's cover albums, an approach inspired by the live performances of Bob Dylan, who habitually rearranges his own songs when touring. Cat Power clarifies: “When I saw Dylan,

I noticed he was always singing his own songs, but he was composing a whole different music through the songs."⁴⁷ Importantly, these earlier performances were often characterized by strong interpretative intervention. For example, in live renditions of "She Belongs to Me" prior to 2022, Power occasionally reframed the song as a first-person statement, verbally commenting on the lyrics ("I'm an artist, I don't look back") and thereby foregrounding her own persona. Consequently, Cat Power transforms Dylan's ideas into her versions, creating her choices for pacing, how she interprets the lyrics, and which lines she chooses to emphasize.

In 2022, at Cat Power's re-enactment of Bob Dylan's "Royal Albert Hall Concert" in London, the acoustic set starts with "She Belongs to Me." When singing the song in the past, Cat Power would sometimes turn it into a first-person narrative, changing the lyrics to "I'm an artist, I don't look back."⁴⁸ Nonetheless, for the Royal Albert Hall show, she sang the original lyrics, written "with respect for the composition ... and the great composer."⁴⁹ This shift can be understood as a different strategy of staging in Fischer-Lichte's sense: instead of emphasizing interpretive freedom, Power stages restraint, discipline, and submission to the original structure. Personal authenticity is thus expressed not through self-assertion but through the conscious limitation of agency. Furthermore, this approach becomes audible in songs such as "Visions of Johanna," where Power closely follows Dylan's phrasing and melodic contours, avoiding the rubato-heavy vocal liberties characteristic of her earlier performances. Her slowed pacing and reduced dynamic range emphasize attentiveness rather than reinterpretation. The song occupies a central position within Dylan's 1966 repertoire and functions as a particularly revealing case for examining Cat Power's authentication strategies. The song's length, narrative density and famously elusive imagery have made it a touchstone for interpretive authority within Dylan's canon. Any performance of the song therefore implicitly negotiates questions of authorship, persona, and legitimacy.

In Dylan's original 1966 performance, "Visions of Johanna" is characterized by forward momentum, relatively strict phrasing and a vocal delivery that balances detachment with urgency. Power's rendition at the Royal Albert Hall departs from this model in subtle but significant ways. She noticeably slows the tempo, allowing extended pauses between verses and lines, which shifts the song's affective center from narrative progression to contemplative suspension. Vocally, Power avoids dynamic peaks and refrains

from emphasizing climactic lines such as “the ghost of ‘lectricity howls in the bones of her face.” Instead, she maintains a consistently restrained timbre, marked by breathiness and reduced projection. This decision minimizes rhetorical emphasis and redirects attention toward the texture of the voice itself. Following Frith and Mayhew, emotional authenticity here is produced not through expressive excess but through vocal vulnerability and audibility of effort. Returning to the review discussed at the opening of this article, the reviewer’s dissatisfaction suggests that vocal vulnerability, often read within feminist and alternative performance traditions as an authenticity marker, may be interpreted within Dylan-oriented rock discourse as insufficient authority. This restraint can be read as a deliberate staging strategy in Fischer-Lichte’s sense.⁵⁰ Rather than using expressive gestures, spoken commentary, or rephrasing, techniques Power has employed in earlier performances, she stages self-withdrawal. Her physical stillness, limited bodily movement, and fixed orientation toward the microphone reinforce an image of disciplined attentiveness. Staging here does not add meaning but restricts it, producing authenticity through limitation. From the perspective of persona, Power temporarily suspends her established performance identity. Unlike earlier renditions, in which she occasionally reframed Dylan’s lyrics as autobiographical statements, the Royal Albert Hall performance avoids first-person commentary or interpretive signaling. In Moore’s terms, authenticity is grounded not in first-person expression but in ascription: the audience recognizes sincerity in Power’s refusal to appropriate the song as her own.

Liveness further complicates this process. Although “Visions of Johanna” is performed as part of a meticulously planned reenactment, the live situation remains audible in micro-variations of timing, breath control, and intonation. These elements, preserved on the live recording, contribute to what Auslander describes as the productive tension between staging and eventness.⁵¹ The performance is live not because it is unpredictable but because its fragility is perceptible. Altogether, Power’s rendition of “Visions of Johanna” exemplifies how authenticity in this project is negotiated not through reinterpretation but through disciplined proximity to the original. From the user’s perspective, this very proximity may be interpreted as insufficiency, revealing how fidelity can be heard either as reverence or as a lack of artistic agency, depending on the listener’s authenticity framework. By slowing the song down, withholding expressive emphasis, and foregrounding vocal vulnerability, Power stages

authenticity as attentiveness, restraint, and historical alignment. The song thus becomes a focal point where personal, emotional, and sociocultural authenticity converge, not as abstract concepts but as audible and visible performance decisions. In this sense, Power's personal authenticity lies precisely in her decision not to foreground her own expressive idiosyncrasies but to align her performance practice with her long-articulated admiration for Dylan.

Sociocultural Authenticity

According to Appen, sociocultural authenticity—alongside the demand that musicians remain true to the values of their audience, in particular the local or social subculture from which they emerged—is linked to “the ideal of personal authenticity.”⁵² The audience expects their connection to this subculture to remain intact, even in the event of success and social advancement, so as not to compromise those who feel represented by them in return. Furthermore, this ideal is found when bands and fans want to distinguish themselves from the mainstream.⁵³ Ultimately, the sociocultural authenticity of the musicians, the sharing of common values, can be seen in the proximity of the musicians to the fans, in their communication with the audience, in their clothing, in the ticket prices, and in the choice of songs.⁵⁴

An example of how adhering to one's own values as a form of personal authenticity on the one hand and aligning oneself with subculture values as an aspect of sociocultural authenticity on the other can bring an artist into a conflict is Dylan's use of the electric guitar at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival.⁵⁵ While Dylan was perceived as “true to himself”⁵⁶ in sticking to his personal principles and following a path of artistic development, parts of his folk music audience accused him of being a sellout. They saw the use of electric instruments as a financially motivated attempt to build on the success of bands such as the Beatles. This moment became a fulcrum for Dylan's career.⁵⁷ Accordingly, that moment in rock history can be used as an example of how adhering to one's own values and aligning oneself with subculture values can sometimes contradict each other. Cat Power's project explicitly engages with this historical fault line. By reenacting Dylan's 1966 concert, including the acoustic/electric divide, she positions herself within the folk-rock canon while simultaneously reflecting on its mythology. The staging of

the acoustic set, sparsely lit and visually restrained, evokes the concert hall rather than the rock venue, aligning Power with the listening-oriented values of folk culture.

Cat Power describes Bob Dylan as having been an inspiration to her “since she was five years old,”⁵⁸ calling him “‘God’ instead of Bob,”⁵⁹ a “deity to all of us who write songs.”⁶⁰ Her admiration of Dylan is connected to her and Dylan’s fans’ appreciation of the artist. In her performance of the Royal Albert Hall Concert, the staging of the acoustic part seems more radical than that of the electric part in today’s context. The stage is only sparsely lit by six studio lamps in the background, similar to Dylan’s recent stage illumination, comparable to the staging of a classical concert with the audience seated in front of the stage. Cat Power, who usually dresses casually on stage, wears a black suit and high heels, generally taking off the shoes when the performance starts. Her sartorial choices reinforce this positioning. The black suit and barefoot performance function as visual markers of counter-hegemonic femininity, resonating with Samantha Holland’s observations on alternative femininities regarding how the use of black clothing sets women of different ages apart from hegemonic presentations of femininity.⁶¹ Performing barefoot can be defined as one of the trademarks of Power’s staging concept. In the early twentieth century, the barefoot dance movement, pioneered by Isadora Duncan, anticipated the women’s liberation movement and challenged the perception of bare feet as obscene at the time.⁶² In Power’s performance concept, which is reminiscent of classical music concerts, the musician might bow to Dylan as a Nobel Prize winner and at the same time honor her feminist predecessors. In her self-representation, Cat Power distances herself from prevailing power dynamics as part of a counter-movement. Here, sociocultural authenticity is negotiated at the intersection of folk tradition, feminist self-positioning, and reverence for a male-dominated canon.

Explaining how the project “Cat Power sings Dylan” came about, Cat Power remembered that she got a call asking if she wanted to play the Royal Albert Hall. She supposedly said: “Yes, but I’ll be singing Dylan’s 1966 concert.” After a long silence at the other end of the line, the booker asked her if she wanted to reconsider, but she allegedly just hung up.⁶³ Power recreates the myth of the Dylan record in playing the Manchester concert that was falsely bootlegged as a Royal Albert Hall show. Moreover, she adds her alleged own story to the narrative. Cat Power’s sociocultural authenticity is evident here; she refers to

the great composer and sees herself in the position of the recipient, who, like the audience, adores Dylan so much that the lyrics are not adapted.

"Ballad of a Thin Man" occupies a pivotal position in the electric set of both Dylan's 1966 concert and Cat Power's reenactment. Historically, the song has been read as an address to an alienated outsider and thus functions as a marker of folk-rock antagonism and subcultural boundary-making. In Cat Power's performance, sociocultural authenticity emerges most clearly through her handling of the song's historical symbolism rather than through musical alteration. She follows Dylan's original arrangement closely, preserving the song's confrontational tone and repetitive structure. By doing so, she aligns herself with the values of the 1960s folk-rock counterculture, in which musical repetition and lyrical insistence served as tools of exclusion and critique. The performative climax thus occurs when an audience member shouts "Judas."⁶⁴ Although the interjection happens earlier than in Dylan's original concert, its very anticipation demonstrates the audience's familiarity with the historical script of the event. Sociocultural authenticity here is co-produced: the audience actively participates in reenacting a moment that has become emblematic of folk-rock history. However, they crowed "Judas" a little too early in the reenactment, before "Ballad of a Thin Man" and not before "Like a Rolling Stone," to which Cat Power ingeniously summons "Jesus."⁶⁵ Cat Power told the *NZZ* that she wanted Courtney Love to come and shout "Judas," to which she responded that she would only shout "Jesus." Courtney Love didn't appear, so Cat Power answered "Jesus" to the interrupting "Judas," adding "for Courtney. Another woman who was dropped by the world."⁶⁶ Power's response transforms a historically masculine confrontation into a gender-conscious intervention. This intervention does not break with the canon but renegotiates its values from within.

From the perspective of staging, this moment exemplifies the feedback loop⁶⁷ between planned reenactment and unpredictable performance. While the overall structure of the concert is tightly staged, the timing and interpretation of the interjection remain contingent on audience behavior. Sociocultural authenticity thus arises not from strict historical accuracy but from the successful activation of shared cultural memory. Finally, the communal response to "Ballad of a Thin Man"—audible reactions, heightened attention, and the charged atmosphere leading into the subsequent songs—illustrates Wicke et al.'s notion of the "power emanating from a collective experience."⁶⁸ Authenticity, in this sense, is located less in Power's individual expression than

in the collective enactment of a historically loaded confrontation. "Ballad of a Thin Man" therefore functions as a key site where sociocultural authenticity is negotiated through canon awareness, audience participation, and the conscious reworking of folk-rock mythology.

Emotional Authenticity

This dimension relates to the need for the true authorship and craftsmanship of musicians. Accordingly, plagiarism and—depending on the situation and genre—lip-synching, the use of playback or auto-tune, and other pretenses of competence are rejected.⁶⁹ The indignation about the pretense of non-existent competence combines the work ethos of "honest craftsmanship,"⁷⁰ which is widespread in country music, rock, and especially heavy metal,⁷¹ with the possibility of identification for the musician's audience. Emotional authenticity is connected to the claim that music that moves emotionally has its origins in the personal lives of the musicians. According to Appen, this desire for authentic emotional expression is based on three basic assumptions:⁷² First, music is understood as a cultural medium that serves to communicate important life experiences. People use music to relate their own emotional experiences to those of others, to imagine how it feels to be in certain situations, to not be alone with their feelings, and to hear how others are doing in joy or sorrow. This is especially possible, according to the second basic assumption, if the emotional expression is autobiographically rooted. Unlike actors, pop and rock musicians are hardly believed or expected to play different roles for different songs,⁷³ but rather the emotional expression of their songs is thought to be fueled by their own emotional life.⁷⁴ Accordingly, in many stylistic areas, performers are expected to write their own songs or at least put their personal stamp on covered songs. Third, the romantic notion that emotions are more suitable for conveying something true about human relationships to the world than language and reason, that there is a "real truth" only in feeling and not in thinking,⁷⁵ continues to prevail among parts of the audience. Emotions expressed through gestures, facial expressions, and music in particular are still regarded as a direct, unadulterated expression of the self: "Feelings and emotions are keys for unlocking who I am, my authenticity, how I perceive and how I discover my 'real self.'"⁷⁶ This conviction goes hand in hand with a rejection of technical aids and too much rational influence on the creative process. Emotion should not be destroyed by too much perfection,

auto-tune, or other computer technology; music should sound unpolished and natural rather than smooth, inhuman, and expressionless.⁷⁷ Consequently, in a direct encounter with the musicians, fans believe that they can judge their emotional authenticity better than in a thoroughly styled studio production, for example by their voice, facial expressions, and gestures.⁷⁸ Consequently, feelings expressed through voice, gesture, and sound are perceived as unmediated access points to the performer's self. This belief fuels skepticism toward excessive technological intervention and favors sonic markers such as fragility, imperfection, and restraint.

In live performance, emotional authenticity is therefore often judged through vocal presence, bodily expressivity, and the perceived vulnerability of the performer. Concert situations are assumed to offer a more reliable basis for this judgment than studio recordings, as they foreground liveness and corporeal immediacy. Cat Power's recreation of Dylan's show received reviews that challenge ideas of authenticity, especially emotional authenticity, in reenactments. *Mojo* stated that "the crackle of original Dylan electrifies Marshall's voice, she finds her own phrasing, both robust and reverent, as she ringmasters 'Ballad of a Thin Man's mystic forces, or brings a limpid empathy to 'Like a Rolling Stone,'" ⁷⁹ while *Uncut* wrote that "for the acoustic half, she genuflects a little too readily, but the limberness of her voice shades new contours for the songs; the electric half takes a while to ignite, but 'Like a Rolling Stone' is gorgeous."⁸⁰ *Exclaim!* summarized that "Marshall's embodiment is largely faithful, even reverent, to Dylan's interpretations, except on the occasions that she injects a little subversion into the setlist" and that the album "showcases Marshall as devotee, student and messenger."⁸¹ *The Line of Best Fit* discovered there to be "no revisionist re-interpretations to irk even the biggest Dylan purist,"⁸² even though Cat Power's "steadfast adherence to the original 1966 arrangements can also seem like a missed opportunity to dust off the classics."⁸³ The reviews of Power's attempt to recreate Dylan's show align with Appen's stance that "emotion should not be destroyed by too much perfection ..., music should rather sound unpolished and natural."⁸⁴ These assessments reveal a discursive tension between reverence and emotional autonomy: authenticity is not denied, but its mode is debated. Importantly, these reviews function as secondary material that frames how Power's emotional authenticity is perceived. They do not merely describe sonic qualities but evaluate them against genre-specific expectations of expressive risk, vulnerability, and immediacy.

Accompanied by harmonica and acoustic guitar for the first half of the performance, Cat Power concentrates entirely on her smoky, deep, fragile voice. Power's performance cannot be described as an exact replica of the 1966 Manchester concert, as Dylan accompanied himself solo for the first set, but still Cat Power indicates that she approaches the material with "heartfelt reverence."⁸⁵ Cat Power reduces the songs to their lyrical melody and lyrical substance. If a given song begins with an instrumental vamp or ends with a harmonica solo in Dylan's version, it does the same in Cat Power's. Unlike Dylan in 1966, who performed while playing guitar and wearing harmonica headgear, Power stands unaccompanied at the microphone. This reduction of instrumental mediation increases the perceived exposure of her voice and body, heightening the sense of vulnerability. From a sonic perspective, Power's vocal register is consistently lower and warmer than Dylan's, and her timbre markedly less nasal. While Dylan's 1966 performances are characterized by sharp nasality and rhythmic urgency, Power's voice is rounder, darker, and more evenly sustained. Although a systematic spectrographic comparison, for instance via Sonic Visualiser, is beyond the scope of this article, attentive listening reveals how Power's restrained nasality softens the semantic sharpness of the lyrics and redirects attention toward their emotional resonance.

Even when arrangements and lyrics remain unchanged, Power's acoustic performances tend to be slower and more contemplative. This temporal expansion allows syllables to linger and creates space for emotional reflection. In songs such as "Desolation Row," which runs slightly longer than Dylan's 1966 version, Power's phrasing suggests a careful, almost analytical engagement with the text. Emotional authenticity here does not arise from overt expressivity but from deliberation and control. Particularly revealing are songs like "Visions of Johanna" and "Just Like a Woman," in which Power retains the male lyrical perspective. Rather than re-gendering the songs, she transforms them through vocal affect. In "Just Like a Woman," Dylan's detached and at times misogynistic distance gives way to a tone that appears more compassionate and conciliatory (see the section "Gender Politics in Cat Power's Performance" below). Power's warm timbre and softened articulation recode the emotional stance of the song without altering its textual surface.

Power's rendition of "Mr. Tambourine Man," concluding the acoustic set, stands out as the most emotionally individualized interpretation. Replacing Dylan's strummed guitar with fingerpicking and restrained keyboard textures,

Power alters the song's rhythmic feel and melodic emphasis. Subtle deviations in timing and melody foreground her interpretative agency while maintaining structural fidelity. Describing the song as "the hardest and most emotional"⁸⁶ for her to sing, Power connects its affective charge to her own biography, calling it "a testament to having faith in a fucked-up world."⁸⁷ This statement retroactively frames the performance as emotionally autobiographical, reinforcing Appen's claim that emotional authenticity is often ascribed when listeners can plausibly link musical expression to lived experience.⁸⁸

Altogether, emotional authenticity in Cat Power's reenactment emerges not from radical reinterpretation but from vocal exposure, temporal restraint, and affective reframing. By minimizing technical mediation and foregrounding the embodied voice, Power enables her audience "in a direct encounter"⁸⁹ through touring the show to "judge [her] emotional authenticity better than in a thoroughly styled studio production, for example by [her] voice, facial expressions and gestures."⁹⁰

Gender Politics in Cat Power's Performance

Cat Power's rendition of "She's a Woman" can be understood as a radical reconfiguration of the relationship between lyrics, voice, and gender in popular music. Rather than affirming the song's textual propositions, the performance subjects them to a process of sonic destabilization in which meaning emerges only through the material conditions of sounding. From the standpoint articulated in the review presented at the beginning of this article, such sonic destabilization risks being heard not as critical intervention but as atmospheric vagueness. The reviewer's complaint about atmospheric vocal effects therefore unintentionally exposes the gendered listening conventions that privilege assertive vocal projection as a sign of authenticity. Drawing on Nina Sun Eidsheim's conception of sound as vibrational practice, the voice in this recording does not function as a transparent medium for lyrical meaning but as a corporeal event whose significance is generated through resonance between body, space, and listener.⁹¹ This shift becomes audible already in the opening line, "She's a woman." Delivered with a hesitant onset, audible breath, and unstable intonation, the phrase loses its declarative force and cannot be heard as a stable act of gender attribution. Meaning does not precede the sounding of the lyric but arises in and through its vibrational realization. Eidsheim's claim that voice exceeds the vocal folds and resonates

across bodies and materials⁹² is thus enacted at the level of performance. The line does not define its referent; instead, it exposes the fragility of the act of definition itself. When read in conjunction with L. J. Müller's feminist critique of sonic sexism, this fragility takes on a critical dimension. Müller demonstrates that popular music listening practices have historically coded female voices as emotional, unstable, or lacking authority, while male voices are heard as neutral, reliable, and narratively coherent.⁹³ Cat Power's performance does not attempt to counter these norms by adopting vocal strength or clarity; instead, it foregrounds instability as a material fact of the voice. In doing so, the performance reveals the gendered assumptions that govern how vocal qualities are interpreted, shifting the focus from expression to perception.

A similar dynamic shapes the treatment of subsequent lyrics, such as "I can see her through the window" and "As she lights the lamp." Although the text evokes visual mastery and observational distance, the sonic realization undermines any sense of narrative control. The markedly slowed tempo and restrained dynamics suspend forward motion and replace visual dominance with temporal hesitation. In Eidsheim's terms, sound here does not represent perception but materializes it as a relational process unfolding in time.⁹⁴ What the lyrics claim is less significant than how the voice inhabits them. The repeated return of the phrase "She's a woman" further intensifies this destabilization. Each iteration functions as a singular sonic event rather than a reaffirmation of meaning, enacting Eidsheim's assertion that each sounding is irreducible and non-repeatable.⁹⁵ From Müller's perspective, this refusal of stabilization is politically charged: repetition in popular music often serves to consolidate identity categories.⁹⁶ Cat Power's repetitions, by contrast, generate difference rather than certainty, allowing gender to appear as a contingent effect of vocal practice rather than a fixed attribute.

This tension between lyrics and sound becomes especially pronounced in the lines "She doesn't make me nervous / She doesn't talk too much." While the text appears to articulate reassurance, the vocal delivery undermines this reading through breathiness and pitch instability. Müller identifies such lyrical formulations as symptomatic of sexist norms that frame feminine restraint and quietness as desirable.⁹⁷ By voicing these lines in a manner that sonically communicates unease, Cat Power exposes the latent power structures embedded in the song's language and redirects attention toward the affective labor of listening.

The song's conclusion offers no resolution. The final iteration of "She's a woman" fades without closure, leaving the lyric suspended rather than affirmed. This open ending reinforces Eidsheim's understanding of sound as event rather than object:⁹⁸ the song does not culminate in meaning but dissipates as vibration. At the same time, it resists the expectation, identified by Müller, that female vocal performances should stabilize emotion and identity.⁹⁹ Instead, Cat Power's voice remains precarious, relational, and unresolved, rendering gender audible not as an essence but as an ongoing negotiation between sound and listening. Taken together, Eidsheim's vibrational ontology¹⁰⁰ and Müller's feminist critique of listening practices¹⁰¹ make it possible to hear "She's a Woman" not as a reinterpretation of Dylan's song but as a performative intervention into the sonic conditions under which gender is produced and perceived in popular music. Cat Power's cover does not seek to correct or clarify the lyrics; it exposes their instability by allowing the voice to remain materially vulnerable. In the process, the performance shifts attention away from what the song says and toward how it comes into being as sound, an event that is at once embodied, gendered, and irreducibly situated in the act of listening.

Conclusions

American Songwriter author Hal Horowitz opined that Cat Power "applies her stamp on material she loves, the live atmosphere enhances the enthusiasm, the audio is crisp and the show successfully accomplishes what it sets out to do," describing the show as "no replacement for the real thing,"¹⁰² while *Exclaim's* Nicholas Sokic labels the musician as "devotee, student and messenger."¹⁰³ These assessments already indicate that authenticity here is evaluated not in terms of originality or replacement but in terms of relational positioning toward a canonized work and its creator. Returning to the review cited at the beginning of this article and the question of how Cat Power fell short of the audience member's expectations of authenticity, this can be connected to her intention to present "the album in a sort of protected manner."¹⁰⁴ The reviewer's statement thus frames the entire project: it exemplifies how authenticity is neither stable nor universally agreed upon but emerges through competing listening practices shaped by genre history, canon formation, and gendered expectations of vocal authority. Following Alan Moore, this discrepancy can be understood as a clash of ascriptive

frameworks: while Cat Power offers cues intended to invite authenticity attribution, the audience member applies a different interpretative horizon, thereby withholding authentication.

By observing Cat Power's promise of authenticity, subdividing the term into personal, sociocultural, and emotional authenticity, I drew in this article on Negus and Astor's assumption that "what matters is not what authenticity is ... but what it does."¹⁰⁵ This functional understanding of authenticity aligns with Moore's reception-oriented model, in which authenticity only becomes effective when it is recognized and confirmed by listeners. Appen's definition of personal authenticity¹⁰⁶ can be found in Cat Power's concept of covering Dylan's songs throughout her career as well as re-recording her songs, inspired by Dylan's idea of constantly rearranging his work. By transforming Dylan's ideas into her versions, Cat Power creates her own perception of Dylan's work, integrating selected songs into her repertoire. This process resonates with Frith's notion that authenticity does not lie behind performance but emerges through the act of performance itself, where "truth of feeling"¹⁰⁷ is produced aesthetically rather than biographically. Cat Power's sociocultural authenticity is evident in her high culture staging, consisting of a black suit and high heels, as well as in her singing the original lyrics written "with respect for the composition ... and the great composer,"¹⁰⁸ positioning herself as a recipient, as a part of Dylan's audience. Here, Fischer-Lichte's distinction between staging and performance becomes relevant: the deliberate staging choices establish a conceptual framework that precedes and structures the performance, while the audience's reactions ultimately constitute the performance event itself.¹⁰⁹ Power's choice of naming the album and tour not only after the misnamed venue but after a completely different concert provides a "special quality of experience"¹¹⁰ for her audience. In Auslander's terms, this strategy draws on rock's historic authentication through reference to a mythologized live moment, thereby invoking third-person authenticity in Moore's sense: the convincing presentation of a historically charged musical situation.¹¹¹ Moreover, aspects of emotional authenticity can be found in the semantics of the lyrics. Cat Power lengthens the words and retains many of Dylan's vocal twists, moving through Dylan's lyrics with the courage of a carefully dissecting artist, affirming Appen's stance that the emotional expression of songs is fueled by the musician's own emotional life.¹¹² Following Mayhew, the voice here functions as a bodily site of identification, where sincerity, vulnerability, and emotional credibility are negotiated.¹¹³ Dylan's work has been covered for years, but Cat Power

approaches Dylan as a phenomenon through her promise of authenticity, her ability to mimic Dylan in performing his songs, playing with the delivery of her vocals in a way similar to Dylan, and bowing before the artist. In this sense, Eidsheim's critique of essentialist notions of vocal identity is instructive:¹¹⁴ Power's vocal resemblance does not index an "authentic" inner self but rather demonstrates how vocal meaning is culturally learned, historically situated, and relationally perceived. By unifying the ideals of personal, sociocultural, and emotional authenticity, Cat Power's recreation of Dylan's 1966 Royal Albert Hall Concert offers her audience a stage to feel represented and to identify with. As Müller suggests in their work on performance and mediation, authenticity emerges here as a negotiated effect between staging, medial framing, and audience expectation rather than as an inherent property of the musical act itself.¹¹⁵ Ultimately, Cat Power's reenactment demonstrates that authenticity in folk- and rock-based performance is not a matter of faithful reproduction; rather than replacing "the real thing," it emerges as a shared, fragile, and historically situated achievement that only comes into being in the encounter between staging, vocal embodiment, historical reference, artist, material, and audience.

Notes

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