Identity value in the public eye

TEFLONRABBIT ARTICLE No.313

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Why you should never meet your idols

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The world of UK festivals represents a sizable industry that endures even the wettest of British summers. Along the way the lives of millions of people are enriched through the communal apreciation of spectacles in light and sound. Home to possibly the most famous music festival in the world, the festival scene provides employment for tens of thousands of people on an annual basis. One of the main perks of working festivals is perceived to be getting closer to the celebrities than the ticket holders.

Popular Music *Britain* *Legal* *Culture* *Technology* *What is TEFLONRABBIT*

In July 1996 the penultimate Phoenix Festival in Long Marston was in full swing with major headline acts and an estimated attendance of over 200,000 people. The author was engaged in his normal activity of misusing his security credentials to pester celebrities into signing set lists. Working security in the stage crews is quite an unusual role. Like most security it's phenomenally boring for the most part. Duties commence with the first band somewhere in the vicinity of 10:30AM. Most of the daytime is conducted with two separate teams. A team does an hour preventing any foolhardy crowdsurfers from splitting their heads open on the security barriers, handing out water and trying not to watch the acts. The band finishes and the teams swap over. This means that for one hour out of two, there are at least a dozen pit crew lounging around behind the stage. The time is used to catch up on sleep, eat, re-hydrate and perhaps partake of the odd loosely rolled marijuana cigarette. When things start to get busier with the more prominent acts circa 6-7pm the crowd dramatically increases in density and two teams become one team. Then it's all hands on deck all the way through until midnight or 1:00 AM by which time the sunstroke should be properly kicking in.

The author was of the opinion that this one hour out of every two could be put to better use. After all there's only so much you can sleep, eat, drink, smoke or even play football. Given the amount of money involved in these promotions, the author was compelled to pursue any other revenue generating schemes. Free food was easily obtained through a classic security ploy:

> Yes, nice looking Pizza you're selling there my man. Be a terrible shame if there was any trouble and none of us were available to help you out ....eh?

Most festival vendors are quite accustomed to being shaken down. After all they're probably paying somewhere in the region of a thousand pounds a day to the promoter just for the opportunity to hock their wares to a captive audience. As such they generally complied and that saved a few quid on calorific requirements. In terms of actually generating revenue the options are quite limited. The traditional method would be to use the free access that a security badge guarantees to bring a carrier bag full of ecstasy into the event and pass it on to your associates in the crowd, who will then turn over several thousand pounds. However this is generally frowned upon by those with any tenure in the industry. So much so that reports of those foolhardy enough to attempt it involved an impromptu stop on the bus journey home, a heavy duty kicking and being left coughing up blood, lying in a field somewhere in England. This didn't really appeal to the author as the entire thing was supposed to be a working holiday from less convivial security work.



The access you get with security clearance at a festival is pretty much 100%. The production elites can get a bit snooty and insist that their production area bars are kept free of drug addled off duty security types. But for the most part the uniform and the ID get you past any form of checkpoint. This means that acquiring the set lists taped to the floor of the stage is not particularly difficult. First port of call is the roadies working on the stage. They have literally a matter of minutes to get the stage cleared of the last acts gear, hand it off to other roadies and get the gear in for the next act. It's a slick operation and the people doing it are well practiced. The set lists represent a piece of history to many people. They have spent literally hundreds of pounds and have sometimes traversed international borders just to experience their favourite artists in a live context. As such they hold set lists in high esteem. If they can acquire a set list which has been signed by the act, it's the next best thing to being invited on their tour bus and given a blowjob by one of their groupies. The author recognised this as potential opportunity. Browsing the offerings of people like Christies of London or other autograph dealers illuminates quite how lucrative this market can be.

It doesn't take a master of social engineering to identify who the roadies are. Neither does it require much in the way of social skills to invent a pretext to have a conversation with them, pass them a joint or buy them a beer. With this accomplished all that remains is to attract their attention during the thirty second window before the set list is ripped off the stage, screwed into a ball and tossed into an industrial sized bin bag. Not particularly difficult, but incredibly time sensitive. Then it's a matter of getting backstage and getting access to the band. This is where things get much, much more difficult. As mentioned security access is good but it's not absolute. The higher profile the act the higher the value of the set list. But logically the greater number of entourage flunkies that need to be bypassed in order to get the set list signed. This involves a lot of blowing smoke up peoples assholes. The average tour flunky is a toxic narcissist, ego obsessed imbecile. They're generally not anything to do with the act, but because they bathe in their celebrity status for the duration of the tour, they feel that they have some form of ownership. In the production pecking order they are of the opinion that the stage grunts are a caste beneath them. Consequently this part of the task can actually be quite difficult. It's also the point that most often decides the fate of the set list. The difference between the value of a signed and an unsigned set list is substantial.

This particular event had some high profile acts including the Prodigy (as usual), Neil Young, Alanis Morissette, Massive Attack, Björk, David Bowie and the Sex Pistols. Consequently the author was determined to acquire the signatures of as many of these acts as possible. Through sheer persistence, The Prodigy task had been completed at a previous event with some notable success. The set list was pristine having been produced straight out of the tour managers briefcase. the signatures had been obtained by the bands in-house dancing aficionado 'Leroy' and Keith Flint had used something resembling a crayon to scrawl his particular brand of graffiti all over the set list - Job done. However the Prodigy were major festival whores and were well known for their appearances, consequently if a set list couldn't be obtained at a gig, it was no big deal and there would be another opportunity in a few weeks. Acts like Bowie and the Sex Pistols represent something completely different. This was the second gig in Britain put on by the Sex Pistols in over twenty years. trying to get anywhere near them represented a major obstacle.

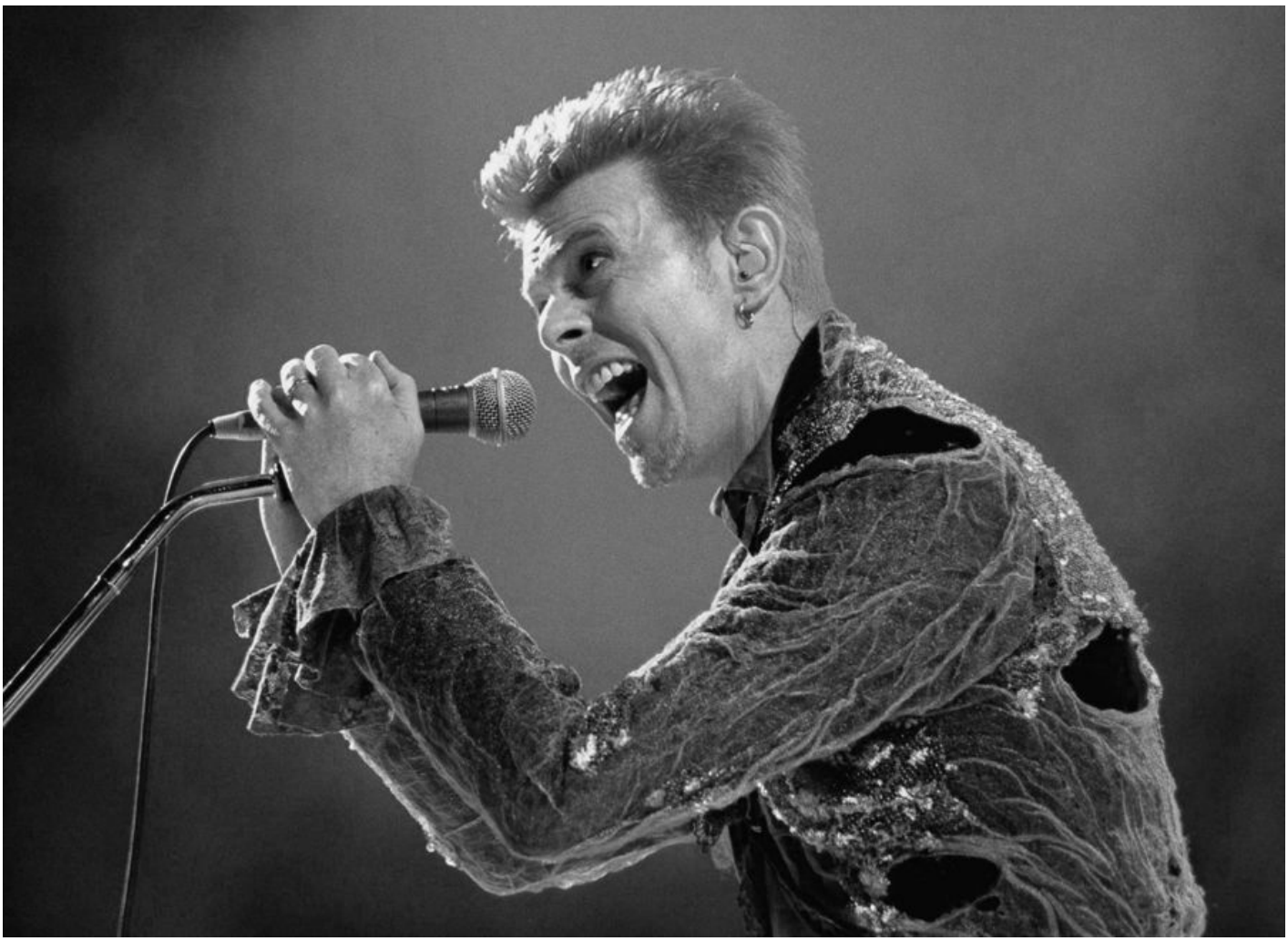


Getting close to Alanis Morissette was much easier than expected, In fact the author was minding his own business supervising the mainstage off ramp when some entourage flunky approached him and said:

> Hey so you're security yeah.... so I'm gonna need you to provide backup for me while I walk the act to their bus.

The entire premise was total bollocks. No members of the public are ever allowed anywhere near the backstage area and all the production staff are well informed in terms of not pestering the celebrities with any fanboi bullshit. What he could possibly have been expecting is not clear. It may be that she'd had some negative shit go down at some other gig. Judging by this guys professional demeanour it wouldn't come as a huge surprise to learn that he'd dropped the ball elsewhere. Kevin Costner he wasn't. Nonetheless the author acquiesced, after all she was a massive artist at the time with several gold discs under her belt. This would surely provide a unique opportunity to acquire her signature on the set list and no need to blow smoke up anyones ass - hurrah. At this point it should be noted that despite having spoken with numerous high profile acts, the author had never been subject to the awful malaise of being star struck. That was until the whole off ramp, bus walk, off

the cuff close protection thing happened. Certain artists have something that can only be described as a highly tangible aura about them. As mentioned Morissette was a huge star at the time and was well known for speaking her mind whilst not giving two shits what anyone thought about it. Anyway, the walk to the tour bus was the correct opportunity to get the set list signed but for the life of him, the author couldn't bring himself to interrupt her equilibrium. This rather petite woman was literally glowing. It could have been due to the fact that she had just walked off stage after performing in front of 50-60,000 people or possibly she was some kind of yoga supremo. But regardless the simple fact is that she practically had a halo as she casually walked through the production area with her acoustic guitar slung over her shoulder. The author had never seen anything like it and as such was too intimidated to speak to her. The bodyguard thanked him for his time, Morissette provided a parting smile and the entire thing was consigned to the history books - sans signature. Job (not) done.



The previous day, the author had managed to secure duties within the artists compound which is yet another checkpointed area with the production or backstage area. This was Bowie day and obtaining this signed set list was going to be a major operation. After having to endure a whole load of superficial flim flam from various underlings, he eventually got to the tour managers wife. At last, time to work the old smoke, ass, blowing thing. A stout lady in her early forties, the tour manager's wife was not quite as boorish as many of the other production sycophants and as such the conversation went quite well and only cost the author a couple of pieces of chewing gum. Again a pristine set list was obtained by this entirely engaging woman from the recesses of the tour managers portakabin. When she presented it her lips thinned and she asked:

> Were you wanting to get this one signed then... were you?

The author was about to concur, but she interjected:

> No he doesn't do autographs. Says if he did one, he'd have to do them all.

This was highly disturbing news and the tour managers wife was absolutely resolute in this regard. Somewhat dejected, the author considered blowing off the artists compound duties and heading back to the pit crew. However gaining the duties had required a bit of political wrangling so he figured he may as well hang on for a few more hours. During the mid day comings and goings, the author spotted David Bowie speaking to a representative of the Performing Rights Society. A man who we shall call 'PRS Pete' was a well known figure as his main job seemed to be travelling the UK festival scene to obtain PRS release signatures from artists. This means that in addition to the fee they collect from the promoter they also receive a royalty payment for performing their own songs in a public setting. It should be noted that in comparison to their performance fee, the PRS cheque represents some truly small potatoes. During a conversation with 'PRS Pete' the subject had come up as to the actual value of these PRS payments. Basically an artist of Bowies stature would expect a payment of somewhere in the region of a hundred quid. As such, seeing David Bowie going out of his way to sign the waiver was a bit of a kick in the balls. Bearing in mind that part of pit work is occasionally facilitating the needs of disabled attendees. Some of whom are often children and have been permitted access to the pit area so that they get an unparalleled view of the artists without being crushed to death in their wheelchairs whilst vying for position in the crowd. Most of them have autograph books with them and they all ask for the opportunity to obtain the autograph of the act in question. David Bowie wouldn't sign them, but he would make a point of signing for his hundred quid PRS payment. This struck the author as being pretty shitty on the part of the thin white duke and the mystique of Bowie's visionary work took a bit of a nose dive.



The day continued and circa 7:00PM there was a bit of a contrived PR stunt in the middle of the artists compound. The Prodigy were on site with their usual lack of concern for anything approximating civility and there was a hint of an electric atmosphere among the production sycophants. A bit of a crowd had formed in the open area between potakabins. Keith Flint and David Bowie who were both dressed in their full stage costumes engaged in what appeared to be some form of high profile (probably masonic) handshake while the spectators marveled at this inter-generational idolatry.

Awroight Keeef!

Awriiiight Dave!

Cue the theatrical pumping of handshakes and general approval from the entourage flunkies.

In the background of this highly inorganic event was Bowie's super model wife, the legendary Somalian beauty that is Iman. On her shoulder was a 1990's JVC Camcorder complete with extended battery pack slung around here entirely attractive waist. Sure enough she had somehow managed to time things perfectly in order to catch this meeting of musical worlds in a field outside Stratford upon Avon. As she captured the event in glorious 520 line PAL / SECAM the author was suddenly gripped by what can only be called the spirit of vandalism. With the whole '*no autographs for Leukemia children*' thing still fresh in his mind, the author was fixated on basically telling David Bowie to fuck right off. It did also appear to require very little effort to mess with what was occurring before his very eyes. Without further ado he moved out of his existing position into full view of the camera and performed what can only be described as a master 'Lurk' with accompanying stupid grin and over the top gesticulation. Job (totally) done.

While this may have appeared as a singular and quite crass move, there was some method in the author's madness. This was not a media camera crew. Neither was it a freelance photographer who would be whoring the images left right and centre. This was *the* Mrs Bowie and she was filming on her own personal equipment. This meant that this arguably historic content would be highly unlikely to make it into the hands of any major media types. It would remain in their personal collection and be rolled out on occasion:

> Hey look kiddos, here's when your papa met the Firestarter when we were in England, come see - it's awesome.

Only to be dashed on the rocks of crass mediocrity:

> Momma who's that asshole security guy lurking in the background - this is terrible - can we play Nintendo instead?

Obviously being a fly on the wall for the predicted anti lurker epithets in Château Bowie would be something that the author would just have to imagine. But sure enough that imagery never made it into the public domain.

With any luck it was played at Bowies wake, the stingy prick.