

“It Was Amazing to Be There to Witness It”: Online Fan Reactions to Rufus Wainwright’s *All Days Are Nights: Songs for Lulu* Live Tour

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Witnessing an artist give himself over entirely to live performance is mesmerizing. Every movement, every breath, every fleeting emotion or thought becomes meaningful. Audience members still their bodies and quiet their breathing, fixing their gazes on the artist as he bares his soul. In one electric musical moment, a connection is made; the artist’s emotional freedom and vulnerability cuts through the natural barrier of strangers in a room together and the fan is captivated.

Canadian-American singer/songwriter Rufus Wainwright’s 2010 *All Days Are Nights: Songs for Lulu* international tour became a polarizing experience for his devoted fans. For the first time in his twelve-year career, Wainwright performed twelve original songs purposefully ordered as a classical song cycle rather than a set list of original songs with colorful between-song banter. A two-part show, the *Lulu* tour presented the song cycle without interruption; Wainwright performed wearing a lush, Victorian-inspired mourning gown to a nearly silent concert hall (the audience was given instructions prior to the beginning of the concert to hold all applause). After an intermission, Wainwright reappeared onstage to audience’s applause in bright clothing, full of stories about his travels and self-deprecating jokes. It was an evening of extremes with his mother and folk-singer Kate McGarrigle’s suffering and death from sarcoma in January 2010 underpinning every moment of the performance.

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Audiences took sharp notice of Wainwright's intensity, perceiving the unutterable grief accompanying the *Lulu* tour. The Rufus Wainwright Message Board (RWMB), the official fan forum housed on rufuswainwright.com, became the primary digital space where fans compared performance details and emotionally processed witnessing *Lulu*. As one Oslo fan proclaimed:

I think we sometimes forget that Rufus really is a very melancholic soul. Though we hear it in his music, he is always happy and perky on stage and meet and greets. I think his choice of doing the two parts was an excellent choice, where he can really live out his blue composer side in the first half, and completely focus on the music, and then come back and sort of change persona. (Mariannesn)

The deep connections with Wainwright's music and performances that fans expressed went far beyond celebrity obsession or harmless crushes; they were moments of self-discovery and mutual identification with Wainwright that created space for fans to mull over personal trauma, loss, or pain through shared musical performance.

This article explores the relationship between Wainwright and his audience during live tour performances of *All Days Are Nights: Songs for Lulu* to emphasize the significance and poignancy of Wainwright's grieving process, a journey that used art as a conduit to healing and visibility as a means of breaking down the stigma of male public grieving (Decca 2010). Not only did Wainwright's tour immediately following his mother's death, the work was marketed and performed live as a classical song cycle, a significant departure from his previous album releases and touring norms. The performances Wainwright gave disturbed, dismantled, or rerouted fans' expectations, ultimately queering the performance space. Taking "queer" to mean alternative, resistant, or "odd, bent, twisted", *Lulu* was a queer vehicle through which Wainwright processed grief (Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* 161).

Through a phenomenological approach, concerning myself with the lived experiences that shape how people act and react to different situations, I consider how Wainwright's audiences shared with the digital fan community their impressions of the performance and reactions to the emotional vulnerability that he displayed onstage. Two contrasting themes emphasize Wainwright's emotional vulnerability: 1) the emotional hangover, or the long-lasting impact of the

performance on the audience members, and 2) disorientation, or the rejection of emotionally aligning with the performance. While disorientation signals a refusal to connect emotionally with Wainwright, the emotional hangover is a sign of affective power and the emotional residue that stuck with audience members once they left the theater. The emotional hangover is thus one response to “sticky feelings that Wainwright’s fanbase carried with them, yielding feelings of sympathy and empathy” (Ahmed, *Promise of Happiness* 44). Though those who expressed displeasure with the *Lulu* performance rejected the vulnerability Wainwright displayed, their negative reactions indicate that affect stuck to them as well, driving them to share acerbic thoughts and bitter feelings on the message boards. Thus, any emotional response fans shared and discussed resulted from spending time within the queer performance space.

The emotional responses examined in this article allude to the great care and effort Wainwright fans took in engaging with each other digitally as they attempted to understand their individual concert experiences. Fan forum comments served as documented digital sources of fan reactions to the *Lulu* live performances, offering firsthand knowledge and accounts about Wainwright and his music while the reactions to performances were fresh. Using virtual ethnography, a practice that recognizes that the “field” is not a physical location where the researcher goes to study human interactions, allowed me to survey hundreds of fan forum posts about live performances. This “field” is within digital space, where users give the space meaning and purpose, interacting and creating connections based on their technological communication (Cooley et al.). This collection of digitally surveyed comments provides a framework for interpreting the intricate relationship between orientation, the circulation of affect, and emotional reactions within the performance space. In effect, the emotional vulnerability of the room is shaped and, at times, compromised by the silent, but palpable, connections between the artist and his audience.

Reading into Feelings: Phenomenology, Affect, and Fandom

How audiences negotiated their entertainment expectations and the actual intense emotional experience Wainwright provided is best investigated using a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology, as I apply it, draws on Edmund Husserl’s 1913 theory that considers how the “lived body” understands life through intentional consciousness; in other words, it’s a way of knowing through one’s

existence (*Ideas*). In the thirty plus years that scholars continued to build upon and deviate from Husserl's work, phenomenology focused on several different areas, including transcendentalism, realism, and existentialism (with Alfred Schutz, Max Scheler, and Martin Heidegger respectively publishing major works in these areas of philosophy). Maurice Merleau-Ponty, of the existential school of thought, considered embodiment to be the primary source of knowing the world and interpreting one's interactions within it (*Phenomenology of Perception*). Building upon phenomenological epistemology, late 20th century feminist scholars interrogated the relationship between the body and power dynamics in society (see Bartky; de Beauvoir; Butler). Sara Ahmed's work expands upon the idea of embodiment and affect, putting the "lived body" in conversation with queer experience and examining the relationship queer bodies have in the world as both within it and living outside of normative expectations (*Queer Phenomenology*).

For Wainwright, a gay man, performing as a vocalist and pianist was not merely a direct response to grieving; it served as a way of communicating and describing his pain to his audience. Linking music, space, and audience experience to phenomenology, Schutz notes that musical knowledge is both socially approved and socially derived; in other words, audience expectations of music, performances, and composers are tacitly agreed upon (*Collected Papers II*). Queering the performance space broke this social contract for Wainwright fans, privileging melancholy over jovial fan favorites. Fan conversations on the message board represent a collective effort to understand what Wainwright was experiencing. For example, a Melbourne fan thoughtfully reflected upon the atmosphere of the performance space:

[The silence] is a wonderful device on a lot of levels though – it forces each member of the audience to be alone with their own thoughts and feeling, to not be able to take their cues from the people around them, to experience some of that loneliness and aloneness that comes with grief – being surrounded by people yet unreachable. (roman_candle)

Another from the same tour stop disclosed their relationship to terminal illness: "Thanks Rufus for bringing me up when I've been down. My sister has cancer and its [*sic*] quite a traumatic time and we are hoping for the best outcome, but don't know" (vida). Not everyone was willing to take this journey, however, and their disorientation adversely affected other audience members, as a fan from Sweden

expresses: “Idiotic tardy people came in, sat close to me -and one of them started giggling! And he giggled through the rest of the set! I mean like a school girl! [...] *it really killed my buzz*” (Katzenjammer, italics in original). As these comments demonstrate, fan discourse went far beyond set list reports. Vulnerability and honesty became a pillar of fans’ online interactions, with responses ranging from gushing adoration to spiteful criticism.

Fans’ emotional responses result from what is felt but not seen within the performance space. Affect and its transmission have been defined, theorized, and applied to a dizzying array of concepts across several disciplines, including psychology, sociology, philosophy, and cultural studies (Gregg and Seigworth 6-7). My use of the term considers the ways in which affect “sticks” to the body, causing an emotional reaction to a particular stimulus. In this case, Wainwright’s music and his grief affect his audiences, for better or worse, in very personal and individual ways. This affect is possible as a result of the “inbetween-ness” in which affect arises, or “in the capacities to act and be acted upon” (1). As a result of being “found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise),” affect moves in, around, and on bodies (1). Bodies react, consciously or subconsciously, to the things (feelings, emotions, attitudes) that go on around or stick to them, but those reactions are not always logical or predictable (Ahmed; Brennan; Ticiento Clough). The so-called stickiness that Ahmed and Ticiento Clough discuss is a different theoretical take on the transmission of affect that, unlike Brennan’s, does not delve too deeply into the physicality of bodies that share physical space (e.g., the functions of pheromones and hormones, smell and room temperature). My concern is what fans identify thinking, feeling, and carrying with them once the performance is over, or what “sticks” to or slips “inbetween” audience members. This residue, so to speak, was recognized and then transferred online to the fan forum where individuals shared their interpretations of Wainwright’s performance with like-minded and passionate followers of his music.

The Rufus Wainwright Message Board (RWMB) exists as more than a fan site that is devoted to Wainwright’s musical fandom; it exists as a community of Wainwright fans and music lovers who use the digital space to process their own experiences and relate to others who share musical tastes and interests. Musical fandom is defined as a collective group that is self-recognized, performed, and encompasses a range of tastes, roles, identities, and practices (Duffett, *Popular Music Fandom* 7). Previous studies of fan culture and popular culture fandom have interrogated digital participatory culture, issues of identity, and meaning-making

within fan cultures (see Duffett; Grossberg; Hills; Jenkins; Radway). Fandoms are inherently social spaces in which individuals seek out like individuals who find enjoyment and meaning in the same modes of cultural expressions (Jenkins). Individuality and identity are not erased within fandom, but the group dynamic often supposes a lack of isolated interaction. As Mark Duffett explains, fans connect and compare their identities in group environments (e.g. online, at conventions, etc.), but their "initial identifications do not always (or therefore necessarily) appear... as the result of shared experiences" (*Understanding Fandom*, 27). Though Wainwright fans congregated at *Lulu* shows, collectively supporting this artist, their individual tolerance for and acceptance of emotional vulnerability marked some fans as empathetic and others as combative.

Sensing the Virtual Field

With fans strewn all over the world, RWMB becomes a common digital space that links these individuals' tastes, interests, and philosophies. The field of ethnomusicology recognizes digital space, the ubiquity of the Internet in the 21st century, and the role of phenomenology as integral to reaching communities and understanding the way that people use technology to relate to one another. Ethnomusicologists define, explore, and employ virtual ethnography as a methodology to study musical communities, musical practice, and phenomenology (Berger; Rice; Titon). Other scholars of popular music have employed (either wholly or in part) virtual ethnography mixed with discourse analysis to explore fan/participant interactions within popular musical communities, including the fandoms of Bruce Springsteen, Lady Gaga, Muse, the surfing subculture, and *American Idol* (see Baxter-Moore; Bennett; Click, Lee, and Holladay; Cooley; Dilling-Hansen; Meizel; Williams). Two graduate projects on Rufus Wainwright also employ virtual ethnography and discourse analysis, both emphasizing queer identity, but do not discuss emotional reactions to grief specifically (Jones; Schwandt).

While some of these scholars—such as Nick Baxter-Moore, Timothy Cooley, Matthew Jones, and Katherine Meizel, for instance—took an active role in the research by interviewing fan communities about reactions to performances and live experiences around the time of the performance or event, my work uses discourse analysis to read the room, so to speak, after the fact. Virtual ethnography with a phenomenological approach uplifts the Wainwright fan community as a global

example of how affect circulates and sticks to people after a performance. My research took place over five years from the conclusion of the *Lulu* tour, with the largest bulk of surveying and collection taking place in late 2015. I took note of the major themes that reoccurred throughout the posts about the 2010 *Lulu* tour and categorized the fan comments accordingly as they related to emotional hangover or disorientation. Upon returning to the “Live” *Lulu* threads in 2018-2019, despite a general update to rufuswainwright.com, the fan forum threads that had long grown silent remain intact. As of March 2019, 47,400 total members belonged to RWMB, and users must login to view any forum posts, though anonymity is allowed. The fan forum is broken down by topic, ranging from “General Rufus Discussion” to “Live” (where fans talk about live performances, the section that proved instrumental in my research) to “Family and History” (a thread devoted to Wainwrights, McGarrigles, and other family friends like the Cohens) to off-topic threads such as “Other Music You’re Listening To.” At the time of publication, the “Live” section had 113,517 total posts with over 3200 separate topics; the newest threads were devoted to Wainwright’s 2019 tour and the oldest date back to summer 2003. “Live” posts yield thousands of user replies, including pictures, video clips, press releases, and superfluous comments about Wainwright, other artists, and off-topic banter. The earliest thread about the *Lulu* tour was posted in mid-December 2009 and extended through the official end of the tour in mid-December 2010; these threads announced ticket sales, posed questions about the Wainwright live show, shared speculations about the tour, and discussed fans’ plans to meet up at various concerts continuing over the next four months.

For this study, I focused on around 300 threads that talked about the *Lulu* tour stops and concert-goer experiences. Of these, I closely reviewed 112 threads; many were dead ends with limited fan engagement or false starts to what would eventually become lively and substantial threads. The posts that stayed on-topic yielded the most robust discussions pertaining to specific performances. The quotes used in this article are drawn from a total sample of 74 posts from the pool of 112 threads concerning performances in the United Kingdom, Europe, Canada, and the United States. These examples demonstrate how some Wainwright fans communicated (and still do communicate) about post-*Lulu* performance (April 2010 through December 2010). The fan forum, after all, is not only a space to debrief among attendees about a show that happened, or anxiously countdown the upcoming performance; it is a space where fans who were not there could go to vicariously experience the performance. During the *Lulu* tour, this common fan

practice also became a way for fans to emotionally confront an extraordinary musical event set against the backdrop of the undeniably human process of grieving.

About Last Night: Negotiating "Sticky Affect"

Fan reports from shows around the world reinforced and validated the emotionally complex feelings attendees reported and grappled with after a *Lulu* show. Wainwright has indicated in a personal interview via email with the author that he was sensitive to his audience's emotional reactions to the song cycle performance. From the no clapping request to the overwhelming emotions that circulated within the performance space, Wainwright reflected on how his audiences silently expressed their feelings during the performance:

...[C]oming out and requesting specifically for no one to applaud at all actually fully gave me a much better sense of what the crowd was actually feeling at the time. That wasn't always a positive experience. There was [*sic*] definitely some people who resented the fact that I kind of muzzled them slightly and that they didn't really have the chance to unload their emotions and discard whatever feelings they might have had for a particular song. They had to treat it as a sole, broad experience. A lot of people enjoyed that or were into the concept of taking that voyage but there were a fair amount of people who felt kind of kidnapped and resented that fact. So I definitely had a better sense of how the audience actually felt and it was very interesting because it was a combination of that palpable emotion, which I couldn't really sense physically meaning with the sound or visuals--I didn't really see the audience so it was really kind of an instinct, but then also very much combined with the theatres themselves. I found that the better theatre I was in, with better acoustics, the more grandiose presentation or with the greatest history like Carnegie Hall and the Royal Albert Hall--that even kind of heightened the experience as well. I had a much better sense of both where I was and who [*sic*] I was

performing for and what they were really feeling. (Wainwright, Personal Interview)¹

As Wainwright's comments reveal, he was an extremely focused, yet emotionally vulnerable performer during the *Lulu* song cycle. His demanding music, in a way, freed him from focusing too much on his audience's reactions, allowing him to harness his physical endurance and maintain his professional and performative distance, eschewing eye contact with his audience. Audiences witnessed Wainwright play without stopping for longer than a moment to take a sip of water and prepare for the next song in the cycle. The performance practice challenged the audience/artist relationship, either overwhelming audiences with intense emotional reactions (the emotional hangover) or turning them off completely (disorientation).

“Still a Wreck this Afternoon”: The Emotional Hangover

The way an audience feels within a performance space is an important component to theorizing the queer aspects of Wainwright's performativity. In many instances, shared grief results from the circulation of affect within Wainwright's performance space, including the music itself, lighting, costume, and the projection of Douglas Gordon's film (featuring Wainwright's heavily made-up eye that was magnified, and alternated between opening, closing, weeping, or morphing into a kaleidoscopic array). Audiences who are receptive to pondering the process of death, dying, or grieving express strong post-performance feelings. Yet, these feelings are not necessarily identifiable. These posts declare emotional hangovers, or the experience of feeling bowled over by the performance and not having the language to adequately articulate those feelings. The emotional hangover is an intense feeling that comes as a result of Wainwright's sensitivity, vulnerability, and bold performance style in the *Lulu* song cycle. The culmination of the visual aspects of the performance (i.e., costume, Gordon's unsettling film), the sonic aspects of the performance (i.e., the *Lulu* text and piano part), and Wainwright's interpretation of the material (i.e., complicated by grief and technical performance challenges) led some audience members to a byzantine emotional space.

¹ I received HSRB approval for an interview with Wainwright in December 2015. Wainwright's management team facilitated this interview via email in April 2016.

I propose that the emotional hangover is a concept that encompasses many thoughts, feelings, and impressions leading to a delay in the ability to articulate what one is feeling accurately. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes that affects are “attached to things, people, ideas, sensations, relations, activities, ambitions, institutions, and any number of other things, including other affects. Thus, one can be excited by anger, disgusted by shame, or surprised by joy” (19). I suggest that Sedgwick’s descriptions of affect imply affect’s dynamic nature, and posit that audiences experiencing the *Lulu* song cycle were stimulated positively and negatively by the grief, intense concentration, and fatigue that Wainwright felt during these performances. The confusing and unclear feelings fans express on the message boards are part of their emotional hangover. For some, recognizing a stellar Wainwright performance does not solely yield joy or admiration, but devastation, an inability to clearly recognize an intense emotion, or the powerlessness to articulate any feeling through language.

These nameless or misunderstood feelings manifest due to the nature of the concept itself. No matter how decorated or dressed death is, it is a difficult concept to reconcile with the all-consuming fear or misunderstanding of the unknown and unknowable. Speaking to the general enthusiasm and approval of Wainwright’s audience that night in London, one poster explains that they “didn’t hear one negative comment – a guy next to me said to his friend that he didn’t know how he felt, he was stunned beyond words” (Domino). One fan describes this performance as having “emotion... passion, and... determination,” going on to share that they were “so taken by the whole thing that I could not move from my seat” when the song cycle concluded (aliceblue).

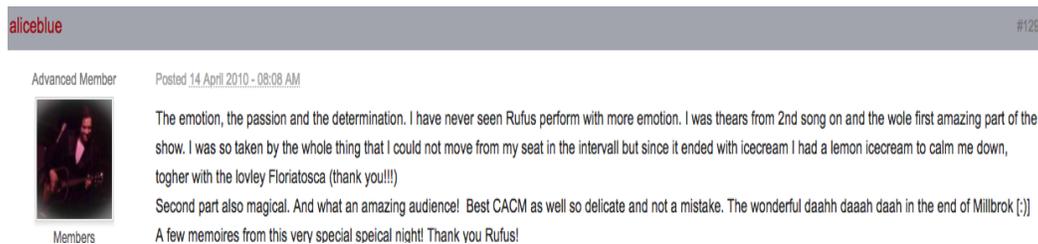


Fig. 1: aliceblue’s impassioned post after the Sadler’s Wells performance on April 13, 2010 in London.

Bowled over audience members who are left with an inability to express themselves post-performance embody the concept of queerness in relation to the circulation of affect. They walk into the theater expecting entertainment, and walk out marked by the performance they experienced, yet unable to adequately express the emotions they felt. Nameless or misunderstood feelings could potentially enhance disorientation for some, while for others orientation is merely redirected, a type of deterritorialization. The term “refrain” within affect studies links affects across “temporal contours,” allowing various “intensities” to morph, change, and extend in several directions (Bertelsen and Murphie 145-147). People reacting to multiple circulating affects likely feel many things at once rather than a single emotion or mood that encompasses them. As it takes time to sort out many different thoughts that bounce around the mind at times of stress or anxiety, audience members who followed Wainwright on his emotional journey were unable to compartmentalize the emotions after the song cycle was completed and could not simply move on. Many struggled to detach themselves from the concert experience, explaining in their posts on RWMB that they were left unsure of what to do with the emotions the performance evoked.

An audience member could choose to disengage themselves from the object (Wainwright’s emotionally vulnerable performance), thus failing to participate in the reorientation that occurs as a result of reacting to the performance. But those who engage, turn toward, or orient themselves toward Wainwright become disoriented and part of the queer space. Put another way, they share in the grief, McGarrigle’s presence and absence, and Wainwright’s act of performing for an audience while experiencing the constant turmoil that is fresh, or even waning, grief.

The Sadler’s Wells April 13 performance exemplifies how an audience member might lose their sense of emotional orientation due to an enthralling performance. “Is anyone else still a bit dazed and emotional?” a poster asks the day after the London concert (LMusic). Another individual reflects on their inability to articulate how Wainwright’s performance made them feel: “I still feel rather stunned after last night – when we came out I couldn’t quite put what I was feeling into words” (bella_vista). A different concert-goer describes Wainwright’s performance as “stunning,” noting that “Rufus was outstanding – he played and sang beautifully. It was so intense I am still a wreck this afternoon” (Nutmeg3000). The audience’s theatrical experience and Wainwright’s queer performance are entangled, contributing to the creation of aforementioned queer space that directly affects the

audience. Ann Cvetkovich writes in *An Archive of Feeling*: "Queer performance creates publics by bringing together live bodies in space, and the theatrical experience is not just about what's on stage but also about who's in the audience creating community" (9). The "public" created during *Lulu* performances is a community of audience members who together experience the transmission and circulation of affect.

This, of course, does not mean that each audience member has the same emotional experience or orients themselves positively toward Wainwright's performativity. In other words, some fans did not connect with Wainwright's *Lulu* performance, but instead perceived it as self-indulgent, incohesive, or simply boring. To be clear, affect circulating amongst an audience is not the same as emotional contagion. Ahmed acknowledges that emotional contagion is similar to the circulation of affect in a shared space, explaining that emotions involve "miscommunication, such that even when we feel we have the same feeling, we don't necessarily have the same relationship to the feeling. Given that shared feelings are not about feeling the same feeling... it is the objects of emotion that circulate, rather than the emotion..." (*Cultural Politics*, 10-11). Emotions appear to travel amongst a crowd, but *objects* in the room become sticky or laden with affect, and each person will relate to that object differently. With so many different emotions circulating within the same space, audience members were not only influenced by their own internal impressions of the performance, but the first impressions of their fellow audience members as well. Thus, one person's emotions as well as the feelings of those around them become crammed together in emotional space, making it difficult in the moment to distinguish one from another. This is the pitfall of the emotional hangover—intense joy might mingle with intense loathing, masking both and resulting in a confounded affect.

The relationality of emotion is the central focal point in regard to orientation or disorientation within space. In other words, emotions such as excitement, sadness, happiness, or anxiety travel through the *Lulu* audience in performance space, but Wainwright's grief and pain (being the object) is what becomes sticky. A fan that also attended the Glasgow performance reflects that the London performance was "brave, honest, and moving... which left me quite stunned and reflective" (samboss). A Sadler's Wells attendee shares that the performance affected their emotional connection to Wainwright's music: "My love for Rufus has expanded to new places after last night, I'm still on a high from the concert and can't seem to get out of it.... I have no more words" (mariemjs). Audience members who relate

to his grief and pain orient themselves positively toward him but are also suspended in their ability to totally process the performance. The emotional hangover confounds, likely temporarily, the lasting impact of the performance, giving an overall impression of a feeling rather than a crystal-clear reaction.

“He is a tit!”: Disorientation and Ugly Feelings

The disorientation, or failed orientation, toward Wainwright’s emotional state is the result of a person not feeling as if they belong where they are currently situated, whether in a particular space or hegemonic culture at large. For Wainwright’s less enthused audience members, their disorientation directly related to Wainwright’s grief-influenced music and the affect circulating within the performance space that made so many other fans empathize with his loss and pain. Not every fan loved *Lulu*, and those who were displeased with the album enthusiastically critiqued it on RWMB. Negative responses, however, indicate more than not enjoying the music; these comments show that audience members did not value how it was performed (as a song cycle with conceptual visual components), the restraint that Wainwright asked of the audience, or the mood of the first half of the show overall.

Resistance to the circulation of affect in the performance space revealed itself in myriad ways, but often came across most clearly in fans’ blunt reactions to the performance. A perplexed fan tries to find the word to adequately describe the live experience: “If I’m totally honest... the playlist of tracks from start to finish was hard to ‘enjoy’ being the best word I can find. [...] [W]hen he played the last note I was relieved knowing it was over” (Anto37x). Though this individual’s entire post is not wholly negative, the prevailing theme is that *Lulu* is not a gratifying collection of songs to sit through, does not mesh with the public image of Wainwright as charismatic, and the second half of the show (which employed “normal” pop/rock performance practice that encourages audience participation and enthusiasm) was what people paid to see. The fan’s comment thus represents a turn away from Wainwright (the object in mourning) and a failure to empathize as other audience members had. Similarly, a Los Angeles audience member bemoans the structure of the song cycle and the rigidity it brings to the performance space, saying that they were “not a huge fan of this show. The no-applause thing is a bit too much, it’s very uncomfortable and I felt like going to sleep due to the lack of audience participation” (xgunther). A common complaint about Wainwright’s decision to perform *Lulu* as a classical song cycle is that the prohibition of applause was jarring.

This decision left a lot of fans, particularly those not well-versed in classical performance practice, asking why a popular artist who loves attention and admiration would ask audiences not to praise his performance.

The refusal to accept his performance practice is precisely where the friction between bodies oriented toward and away from Wainwright's affect exists. While examples of fan comments up to this point have suggested overwhelming alliance with Wainwright's affect, and even empathetic and sympathetic feelings, audience members who failed to turn toward Wainwright react negatively and see the performance as an expression of hubris, self-indulgence, or even disrespect toward an audience's time and money. At a performance in Birmingham, England, which many forum members agree was one of Wainwright's best, a very disappointed individual shares their thoughts: "Looking at the sad faces around me, I know I'm not on my own making these comments. Perhaps others will follow with their cmmnts [*sic*]. It was a self indulged [*sic*] narcissistic performance. I go to be entertained and this time I wasn't" (lashurst). This person's play on the phrase "sad faces" is particularly biting given the thematic material of *Lulu* and the publicity surrounding Wainwright's grief over the death of his mother. Fans who react unfavorably may not have aligned themselves with similar emotions to Wainwright's or other audience members' affects, but they prove that affect worked on them within the performance space. Whereas they expected to spend an enjoyable, relaxing evening listening to Wainwright's music, *Lulu's* melodrama stressed out, bored, or enraged these fans.

Rather than embracing the change and attempting to relate to the affect in some way, negative fan reactions imply that some individuals went the opposite direction, echoing Sedgwick's description of affects being attached to other affects. In the above examples, fans attach disappointment and sarcasm to Wainwright's grief and other audience members' empathy or sympathy. They did not have tender or sentimental feelings but are unmoved or disgusted that they did not get what they signed up for (i.e, an entertaining night of song, chatter, and well-known favorites). For them, the affect transmitted "sticks" to them, but is attached to ugly feelings or sensations. Some of these undesirable feelings may in fact be related to loss, grief, or pain, but these individuals' resistance to vulnerability transforms whatever they are relating to in their minds to outwardly projected displeasure. Sedgwick's concept of "beside" within space sheds light on the murky concept of circulating affect that translates to strong or confusing feelings as described above. For Sedgwick, "beside" "compris[es] a wide range of desiring, identifying,

representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivaling, leaning, twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attracting, aggressing, warping, and other relations” (170). The notion of “beside” within queer space bonds individuals who experience intense, though not necessarily similar or even identical, emotional reactions to the affect in the performance space. The shared experiences of Wainwright’s audience members yielded moments of recognition with the affective object so powerful that they stuck with these individuals well into the next day or possibly longer.

An angry audience member who attended the Ipswich performance posts several negative views: describing the show as “rubbish,” noting that they walked out of the performance; lobbing thinly veiled insults at other posters on the thread; and referring to Wainwright as “Mr. Wainwright Jr,” a dig at Wainwright’s folk-singer father, Loudon Wainwright III. “Mr. Wainwright Jr” may have been an honest error, though his belittling comments about Wainwright’s songwriting suggest otherwise. This poster’s strong dislike for the performance, the artist, and the online community are apparent in the initial post: “Rufus’ dad was right - He IS a tit man - well he is a tit!!!...Well done to the heckler who repeatedly pleaded for him to ‘just sing his songs’. But I had better things to do with my time than listen to caterwailing [*sic*]. How disappointing” (Emperor).² This outright resistance to the group affects in Birmingham and Ipswich exemplifies how some audience members experienced disorientation despite their choice to attend the performance. For these people, the song cycle performance failed to cohere as other performances had, and thus became unrecognizable.



Fig. 2: Emperor’s scathing review of the April 29, 2010 Ipswich, UK performance.

² The song “Rufus is a Tit Man” was written by Wainwright’s father, Loudon Wainwright III; it appeared on the elder Wainwright’s 1975 album, *Unrequited* (Columbia Records).

Further, the pervasive “stickiness” of this type of affect is not a value judgment, and thus is not only associated with positive orientation. As several fans expressed, the discomfort and disappointment of the performance affected audience members as intensely as those who had an extremely memorable and emotionally powerful experience. Positive or negative, enjoyable or miserable, audiences had an emotional reaction to Wainwright’s performance night after night, city after city. Men and women were left with the “stickiness” of Wainwright’s gutsy and, at times, fragile performance, emphasizing the power that emotional vulnerability has cross-culturally. Disoriented audience members rejected the emotional engagement one needed to comprehend the song cycle as a narrative that was born of trauma, drama, and the fearlessness to confront death directly. Yet, in the end, the performance still succeeded in moving them.

Conclusion

Audiences all over the world connect with Wainwright’s performances in ways that foster a perceived personal connection with him. *Lulu* evoked empathy through Wainwright’s careful and vulnerable performances of grief. Moreover, the circulation of affect within the performance space influenced audience members’ relationship to Wainwright’s emotional expression on stage. Some fans readily and willingly opened their hearts and minds to Wainwright’s performance, finding themselves stunned and wading through a muddled collection of feelings. Emotionally hungover, these fans lost the ability to adequately express themselves and define their *Lulu* experience. Such inadequacy resulted, in part, because affect clung to everyone in the room, knitting contrasting emotional reactions together and leaving strong but ill-defined impressions on individuals. Fans who utterly rejected Wainwright’s performance, disorienting themselves from his performance practice and musical narrative of grief, contributed to shifting the mood of the musical community and unsettling the performance space as a whole. Those who turned away from Wainwright’s emotional expressions left the performance closed off and unwilling to engage with the feelings the performance evoked.

Digital fan forum engagement allowed audience members who witnessed Wainwright’s emotional vulnerability to express how *Lulu* resonated with or repelled them. In a culture that fixates on online identities, recognizing that

emotional pain affects people both online and offline is a step toward reconciling the relationship between lived experience and temporality. Just as grief is a long-term journey, the emotional side effects of a musical performance that stir up memories, experiences, and feelings cannot be simply or quickly catalogued and forgotten. Artists such as Wainwright draw upon intense, scary feelings to express painful, traumatic, or uncomfortable emotions using musical performance to connect with as many people as possible. Audiences who engage with the performance are left to grapple with that which they may not understand, a test of empathy, introspection, and vulnerability in the sometimes isolating digital age.

There is value in this process. Attempting to understand the intricacies, hierarchies, and identities that exist within a musical fandom gestures toward recognizing and negotiating difference that is mirrored in society. Carrying “sticky feelings” and sharing emotional responses online encourages individuals to engage and interact with people who might otherwise never speak to them in everyday life. As people increasingly disengage in public spaces, focusing their attention on their digital devices through headphones, online debate and discussion creates an opportunity for people to explore their humanity and interact with strangers without having to reveal themselves. This safety net is particularly useful for the exploration of subjects that are difficult to discuss, and in deconstructing stereotypical perceptions.

To this end, RMWB is a model of digital safe space in which fans can present unabashed responses without suffering combative abuse from internet trolls. In a small but significant way, the fan forum elevates human fragility and emotional vulnerability, subtly encouraging visitors to connect with one another.

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