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Fandom as Magical Practice: Great Big Sea, Stockwell Day, and Spoiled Identity

PETER NARVÁEZ

BEGINNING IN 1977, AND continuing for over two decades, I taught undergraduate and graduate courses in folklore and popular culture that explored small group expressive uses of mass-mediated materials. Of the many paper topics fitting this theme, ethnographies of fandom predominated. Thus I discovered through my students' work that several basements in St. John's housed Star Trek main bridges bedecked with life-size cutouts of Captain Picard and Data, major Star Trek characters; that home shrines and displays lovingly devoted to Elvis were commonplace; and that carloads of young Newfoundland women made pilgrimages to the United States to see the Indigo Girls perform live. In general, the conclusions of my students stressed the positive activities of audiences, not the pathology of fanatics (see Jenson 1992) who Theodor Adorno would have viewed as the dupes of a monolithic popular culture industry (1991). In 1987 several of my graduate students' ethnographies of fans were published in a special section on "fandom" in the folklore graduate student journal, *Culture & Tradition* (Volume 11). These examinations highlighted fan creativity, their collection and display of artifacts, and their social networking.

Since then, fandom studies have burgeoned. Most notably, folklorist Camille Bacon-Smith's extensive study, *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth* (1992), developed a positive view of fandom further by detailing how groups of women have used the frame of *Star Trek* to creatively communicate with one another about mutual concerns and life values. Relatedly, cultural studies scholars have drawn on Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony to interpret fans as members of more active audiences than average consumers. These analyses have underscored the subversive nature of fan groups

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and activities in their oppositional and resistant readings of texts produced by dominant cultural industries (see John Fiske 1989). Combining cultural studies and gender perspectives, Lisa Lewis's close examination of Cyndi Lauper and Madonna fans emphasized that "female-fan response ... incorporates female forms of experience and expression.... the spectacular response of Lauper and Madonna fans comes directly from member interaction with mass-media texts and consumer culture" (170). Acknowledging but going beyond interpretations of fans as engaging in oppositional micropolitics, Henry Jenkins's influential *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (1992), inspired by a theory of Michel de Certeau, likened fans to marginalized poachers, who use what they salvage for both individual and collective purposes. In their playful readings, Jenkins maintained, fans are not resistant to cultural dominance so much as of the passive mundanities of everyday life. Taking a comparable approach, Cheryl Harris's examination of television fandom has argued that "the activity of fandom itself appears to lead to a stronger sense of influence and control, perhaps 'empowering' viewers in the face of a monolithic industry" (51). Other studies of fandom, most notably the neglected work of sociologist-folklorist Orrin Klapp (1969), have focused on the development of identity, in Klapp's case through individual fans' vicarious identification with popular culture celebrities (also see Grossberg 1992).

Fandom as Magical Practice

The folkloristic interpretation of fandom that I will forward here is unlike those cited, for it stresses the traditionality of the logic that most fan activities reflect, a mode of thinking that is essentially magical. In his classic multivolume comparative study *The Golden Bough* (1890), Sir James Frazer (1854-1941) reasoned that magic, the formulaic manipulation of the supernatural for specific ends, develops from a particular kind of associative thinking, namely, that things act in sympathy with one another. Further, Frazer maintained that in magical practices such sympathetic actions are driven by principles of similarity (homeopathic or imitative magic) and proximity (contagious magic). In the first regard, actions connected by likeness effect the same results in the likeness's referent. Thus when someone sticks a pin in an effigy for the purpose of injuring the person represented by the effigy, homeopathic thought is enacted. Frazer's second category, contagious magic, highlights links between things that have been in contact. The previously mentioned effigy, therefore, may contain items from the referent's person (hair or nail clippings) that are connected to the receiver of the magical action in order to significantly increase the effigy's magical potency.

Fans *act* like practitioners of magic. In attempting to achieve a sense of primary social relation with the celebrity-artist they admire, fans manipulate aspects

of their environment and personal circumstances according to principles of similarity and proximity. The social goal of fans is indeed super, or beyond, the natural, because at their core fan-celebrity relations are characterized by unidirectionality. That is, most often they occur between individuals and mediated personalities who in reality are unknown to their admirers. Fans, therefore, develop strategies and tactics to lessen this social distance. The central problem for the fan is one of emotion, how to feel socially closer to persons who you believe you know quite well and care a great deal about, but persons who do not even acknowledge your existence as an individual.

The first fan strategy involves similitude through emulation, attempting to master the same knowledge that the admired performer possesses by trying to understand and often to relive the artist's most important experiences and influences. In these capacities the fan may take on roles of researcher and collector, actively experiencing mediated performances and seeking out sources of biographical and performance data in order to copy aspects of lifestyle (fashion, hairstyle, habits). While fans entertain themselves through such activities, they may also consciously use these materials to alter their individual identities through what Klapp called "identity voyages," a mimetic process whereby a fan vicariously lives through a performer, imitating their speech, appearance, behaviour, and sometimes adopting their attitudes and ideas as well (211-256).

The second major strategy involves the spatial perspective of contagious magic, which I will refer to here as linkage. Practices of linkage make connections between performer and audience through obtaining items that have had direct contact with the artist (autographs, auctioned personal items); acquiring simulacra of various kinds (photos, calendars, posters, fanzines, CDs, tapes, DVDs) from mainstream sources (chain stores, Ebay), as well as more esoteric fan networks; making pilgrimages to live concerts; visiting geographical locations biographically connected with the performer; attempting to communicate directly with a performer by post, email, or making one's presence known in assembly contexts; and by networking with other fans via friendship groups, fan clubs, and virtual, or what I prefer to call "rhetorical communities," that have formed as a social function of the widespread availability of many forms of broadcast and Internet media (Narváez 1991).

In sum, a complex convergence of tactics enacting strategies of mimesis and contagion provides experience, information, and artifacts that contribute to a sense of fandom. Correct and appropriate usage of these essentials establishes fan status. Usage that is socially approved and deemed authentic may heighten one's social position within a fan community. Usage that appears bogus or inappropriate, however, can spoil identity and lower status.

A Canadian Illustration: Great Big Sea and Stockwell Day

As an illustration of fandom as magical practice, this paper will argue that in using popular music group Great Big Sea's song "Ordinary Day" to launch his political campaign in October 2000, Canadian Alliance leader Stockwell Day, a self-described big fan of GBS, committed a significant political error. Instead of successfully linking himself and his political party to an internationally popular Newfoundland-Canadian band, Day's ostensible fandom did not impress voters as genuine, and from the judgment of band members his use of the song was manipulative. The incident highlights the magical qualities of fandom as well as the political power of music.[1]

Often categorized as Celtic rock, Great Big Sea is one of the most popular bands in Canada (see Moore 2002). Since 1992, the vocal-instrumental group, comprised of Alan Doyle (guitar, mandolin, and bouzouki), Sean McCann (tin whistle, bodhran), Bob Hallett (button accordion, fiddle, and mandolin) and Darrell Power (bass), now no longer with the group, have sold over 1.5 million albums.[2] All eight of their Canadian CD releases have achieved gold status (in Canada, sales of 50,000 units), three of them platinum (in Canada, sales of 100,000 units), three of them double platinum, and two triple-platinum. Their CDs have been released in the US and various albums are available in Europe, Asia, and Australia. The band has received eighteen East Coast Music Awards, including seven for the coveted Entertainer of the Year Award. It also has been nominated for eight Juno awards. Their music has been used on many film soundtracks and was featured in the Hollywood film set in Newfoundland, *The Shipping News*.

During the latter part of October 2000, while Great Big Sea was engaged in a pre-release promotional tour for their live CD *Road Rage*, the band encountered Stockwell Day, leader of the Canadian Reform Conservative Alliance (formerly the Canadian Conservative Reform Alliance Party or CCRAP) since 8 July 2000. As Great Big Sea member Bob Hallett recalls:

> We'd played a promo show in Ottawa and we were returning to Toronto on a midnight flight in order to play Canada AM [national TV news show] the next morning. And we got on the airplane and [Stockwell] Day got there a few minutes later and one of the flight attendants said, I could hear them from three or four rows away, "You're not the only celebrity on the plane. The band Great Big Sea is here as well!" And he said, "Oh really? I'm a big fan!" And I thought "Yeah!?" [sarcastically] But I didn't say "Oh Mr. Day!" or anything like that. So anyway, as is often the case with bands, we were not sitting together on the airplane. And I happened to be sitting on the aisle of one row and on the window seat was our guitar technician and stage manager, a fellow named Danny Thomas, who has very long curly black hair. Anyway, Day came down the aisle and looked from side to side as you would when you're looking for somebody, spied Danny, who I guess he thought looked like he should be in the band and said

> "Oh!" and leaned in over me and introduced himself to Danny. And Danny [who] is not an idiot, quickly realized, he'd heard the same comment I had, realized that Day was faking, had no idea who we were or what we looked like and had picked the fellow with the longest hair on the airplane as being the most likely person. And so, five minutes into the conversation with Danny it became obvious that Day had no idea that Danny wasn't in the band and Danny was too polite to tell him that he wasn't in the band. So for forty-five minutes he sat between us and we had this absurd conversation where he assumed I was somebody involved with it, but he had no idea, you know, I had an earring, obviously I must be part of the deal here. But he had no idea that I was in the band and Danny wasn't. So we had this foolish conversation for forty-five minutes talking about everything under the sun. I didn't want to, you know the guy might become Prime Minister and I didn't want to make a fool of him, by saying, "By the way, this guy tunes guitars. The rock star [Alan Doyle], is across the aisle!" I didn't want to say that to him. (Hallett)

Perhaps the only revelation the humorous incident provided for the band was that Stockwell Day appeared to be merely posing as a big fan. Besides extensive national media coverage, particularly on TV and video, portraits of the band had appeared on every Great Big Sea CD. Thus band members could only be astonished at Day's presumptuous misidentification of Danny, simply because his image fit the long-haired stereotype of male rock stars. When I asked him about his conversation with Day, Danny Thomas emphasized that Day knew next to nothing about the band or its music.

At the time, Eastern Canada knew little about Stockwell Day, a former funeral assistant, auctioneer, outfitter, evangelical pastor, and school administrator, now a federal party leader, who had won a parliamentary seat in a September by-election. The band, like most other Canadians, however, was very aware of Day's first news conference after his election, in Penticton, BC, on 12 September, when he roared across Lake Okanagan in a Sea-Doo, climbed on the dock sporting a neoprene wetsuit, and held a dockside news conference. The stunt, later considered one of the Alliance leader's major gaffes, soon attracted merciless lampooning from the press and particularly from Mary Walsh of the national CBC satiric show *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*, who surprised Day in her own wetsuit. Many felt as did Louis Thomas, GBS's manager, who said,

> I mean I watched the whole thing [Day's campaigning] and I thought it was a joke. I remember [Day] coming down the lake on the Sea-Doo for a news conference and I was like, give me a break here! It almost insults your intelligence 'cause no one is that stupid. It just annoys me! (L. Thomas)

While the members of GBS have maintained a band policy of rejecting political and corporate affiliations, having put the kibosh on New Brunswick Liberal leadership hopeful Bernard Richard's campaign use of GBS's hit "When I'm Up (I Can't

Get Down)" in 1998 (Vaughan-Jackson), and having refused significant financial offers for affiliations from former federal minister and premier Brian Tobin, the Newfoundland Department of Tourism, and Alberta Gas and Petroleum, among others, Louis maintains that "if there were someone that the guys really stood behind on a bunch of levels maybe that would change" (L. Thomas).

No GBS support of that kind, however, developed for Stockwell Day. Yet, possibly because of his identification with GBS as a fan and his ostensible conversation with band members on the plane, Day felt confident that he could use "Ordinary Day" (written by Alan Doyle and Sean McCann), the positive keep-your-chin-up (e.g., "keep the faith and your ship will come in") first track of GBS's CD *Play*, as the Conservative Alliance's federal campaign song of 2000, without obtaining direct permission from the group. In desiring to adopt a campaign song Day may have been responding to pressures from other parties that were making political uses of music. The Liberals obtained permission and paid for their use of The Black and White Brothers' song "Put Your Hands Up," a recording of which accompanied Prime Minister Jean Chretien's campaign entrances. True to her roots, Alexa McDonough of the New Democratic Party made her appearances to the accompaniment of bagpipes and drums. In retrospect, however, the Alliance's neglect to obtain permission is perplexing, for in a parallel episode earlier in the same year Day was forced to stop using the 1972 Johnny Nash hit, "I Can See Clearly Now," for its lyric "It's gonna be a bright, bright sunshiny day," by the song's owner Dovan Music, Inc (Taber).

The choice of "Ordinary Day" may also have been influenced by the Alliance campaign organizing team who reportedly were big fans of Great Big Sea, who regularly played the song in the war room of the campaign office (Brooks). Thus, radio and TV reports at the outset of the Canadian Alliance's federal election campaign in Lindsay, Ontario, 23 October, broadcast Stockwell Day walking into a political rally with speakers blaring "Ordinary Day" by Great Big Sea. A party spokesperson explained, "we played it because we think it is an awesome song and Great Big Sea are an awesome band" (Vaughan-Jackson 2003). Other Alliance officials rationalized Day's choice of "Ordinary Day" by arguing that the song symbolized Day's ability to relate to ordinary Canadians ("Great Big Sea pulls plug"). Certainly, the Alliance judged that, properly used, the song alluded to the favourable image of the common man, a cultural myth used by many politicians during elections (e.g., wearing hard hats at construction sites).

Unfortunately for Day and the Canadian Alliance, actual fans of GBS immediately alerted band members and manager Louis Thomas. While use of the recording was paid for by the Alliance through the Society of Canadian Recording Artists and Publishers [SOCAN], as well as through obtaining a synchronous license, which allows for news reportage in contexts where music is being played, Thomas was advised by the band's attorney that GBS had the moral right to stop its political use.

Thus Thomas took what he considers to have been the soft route with the Alliance. He explains:

> I told the campaign manager, If you don't get rid of it then I'm going to get on the phone and I'm going to do every interview I'm being requested to do and I'm going to get the band on the phone doing them, and the band on the television, and I'll shut this down in two or three days. That's basically what I said to him. And they said, we'll get rid of it right away. (L. Thomas)

Interpreted in terms of the magical practices of fandom outlined earlier, Day's attempt to achieve fandom through linkage, i.e., contagious magic, failed because in attempting to contact the band, he chose not to admit, but nevertheless revealed, his ignorance of the group's work. Day failed the test of similitude, i.e., homeopathic magic, as well, for he was unable to convey knowledge of the band or its expressions. Needless to say, Day's political mistake on the first day of a federal election campaign received extensive media coverage, story leads often employing a play on words based on the name of the band and/or the candidate's surname (e.g., Great Big Sea Makes Waves Over Song Use [*Halifax Daily News*]; Day's Use of Song Could Be Great Big Problem [*The Halifax Herald*]; Night on Day? [*Montreal Gazette*]; Great Big Sea Pulls Plug on Ordinary Day [*The Standard* (St. Catharines)]; No Ordinary Day for Stockwell [*The Telegram* (St. John's)]; Alliance Receives Great Big Rejection from Popular Newfoundland Band [*Charlottetown Guardian*]). Aftermaths of the blunder also proved humiliating. Given Stockwell Day's predilection for having a campaign song that cited his surname, journalists suggested other alternatives such as: "Day-O," "On a Clear Day," "Never on Sunday," "Day After Day," "Day After the Revolution," "Day Begins," "Day at the Races," "Day Has Come," "The Day the World Turned," "Day-Glo," "Day in Day Out," "Day Tripper," and even blues songster Mississippi John Hurt's "Stockwell" (Bromstein; "Name That Tune"). In November, puns on Day inspired Rick Mercer of CBC's *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* to successfully develop a national petition to have Stockwell Day change his name to Doris Day, a mocking critique of the Alliance's proposed referendum formula which would allow national votes on any issue that could muster 3 percent of the eligible electorate. Mercer needed 350,000; within a month he received over 370,000 ("Doris Day Petition Hits the Mark"). A significant embarrassment for the Alliance Party, the Great Big Sea gaffe ultimately had repercussions for many voters, who judged the error as a laughable demonstration of incompetence. This in turn led to the Party's relatively poor federal election showing and Day's eventual losing of the leadership (see Harrison 2002).

Publicity photo of Great Big Sea in 1994. Left to right: Sean McCann, Darrell Power, Bob Hallett, and Alan Doyle. Photo courtesy Bob Hallett.

Notes

[1]I would like to especially thank the members of the Great Big Sea team I interviewed for providing critical information cited in this paper: manager Louis Thomas, technician Daniel Thomas, and especially band member Robert Hallett.

[2]In January 2003 Darrell Power left the group for personal reasons.

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