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**Jennings, Ros (2012) It's all just a little bit of history repeating pop stars, audiences, performance and ageing. In: Rock On: Women, Ageing and Popular Music. Ashgate Popular and Folk Music . Ashgate, Farnham, pp. 35-52. ISBN 978-1409428411**

EPrint URI: <http://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/2606>

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Published by Ashgate, and available online at:

<http://www.ashgate.com/isbn/9781409428411>

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**It's all just a little bit of history repeating: pop stars, audiences, performance and ageing – exploring the performance strategies of Shirley Bassey and Petula Clark.**

Ros Jennings

This chapter examines the dynamics of performance in relation to ageing popular music stars and their audiences. As Simon Frith suggests: ‘the meaning of pop is the meaning of pop stars, performers with bodies and personalities; central to the pleasure of pop is pleasure in a voice, sound as body, sound as person’ (2002: 210). This work explores the impact of ageing on these meanings and pleasures in relation to two internationally successful British popular music stars, Shirley Bassey and Petula Clark. For female pop stars, whose star bodies and star performances are undisputedly the objects of a sexualized external gaze; the process of publicly ageing poses particular challenges.

Focusing on two specific performances, this chapter provides a comparative case study of their performance strategies as older female performers (aged 72 and 76 respectively at the time of the performances being examined) and analyzes the ways that the strategies that they employ work simultaneously to both repress and express not only their own ageing but also that of their audiences.

During careers spanning more than fifty years, Bassey and Clark have both amassed a diverse repertoire of popular songs that are closely associated with them in the public imagination. Both performers have produced work that covers a wide range of popular music genres from show tunes, torch songs and movie soundtracks to, and perhaps most famously, a string of international hit pop songs. Within this commercial pop context, they have also constructed marketable star personalities and performative identities that have

won them a loyal fan base. All star performers negotiate their musical performances in relation to the expectations of, and their responsibilities to, their fans but as ageing women, I argue that Bassey and Clark have had to renegotiate this relationship. As Andrew Blaikie explains, 'Whilst perceptions and evaluations of age are socially created, the ageing process itself is ultimately a biological one' (1999: 6). Their performative renegotiations therefore engage with the social/cultural and biological aspects of age. The issues of gender and sexuality at the heart of female performance and audience relations are thus inflected by ageing as are the physical performative demands of commanding the stage and producing the vocal performances to 'do justice' to the songs so famously associated with them.

This study considers not only two distinct UK performances by Bassey (BBC Electric Prom, broadcast from London's Roundhouse, 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2009) and Clark (concert at Cheltenham Town Hall, 11<sup>th</sup> June, 2008) but also two different audience experiences (one televised and one live) in order to problematize the dynamics of performance, audiences and ageing. In the case of both these performers, there is a lifetime's worth of material at play forming the intertextual sound and imagescape of their contemporary performances and this chapter acknowledges the strategies of their performative renegotiations in relation to this and examines the extent to which the dynamics of their performative histories play out for performer and audience.

### **Women performers and ageing**

Anne Davis Basting asks if 'stardom somehow catapult[s] a performer beyond the mundane realm of the mortal to the realm of the timeless and ageless' (1999: 249) and this question is something that also preoccupies me in the analyzes of the performances of

Bassey and Clark that follow. Dominant discourse in western cultures would point in a different direction however. Despite the advent of ageing studies with the academy, the increasing awareness of growing ageing populations in public policy and the resultant media panics, contextual evidence would, suggest that the current constellation of historical, social, cultural and biological perceptions still looks on women and ageing as mostly problematic, disempowering and in consequence, negatively. As Kaplan indicates, 'Women's social positioning as 'to be gazed at' may make ageing especially traumatic in relation to the sheer external changes in the human body' (Kaplan, 1999: 174). The post-menopausal woman is an especially troubling figure in dominant heteronormative discourses as commonly held conceptions still seem to be closely allied to the Freudian model. As a result, there remains a 'struggle to 'contain the concept of gender as distinct from sexuality' (Woodward, 1999:149). Within this context, therefore the temptation to produce a youthful masquerade (Basting Davis, 1999; Kaplan, 1999) is powerful and Kaplan's (1999) analysis of Marlene Dietrich provides a disturbingly frank example of the extreme care and control that Dietrich took over her image in order to maintain her image/self-image as a glamorous woman when she was giving cabaret performances in her seventies.

In cultural theory, authenticity is a highly contested term but one that is often attached to the critical judgments about good and bad music and good and poor performances. In relation to performance per se, and that of ageing performers more explicitly, I would agree with John O'Connell and Chris Gibson's proposal that research suggests that authenticity is at odds with the 'trappings of showbiz' (2003: 29) but would additionally suggest that it also provides a vital tension in the bricolage of performance strategies employed by ageing

female pop stars. What Davis Basting refers to as the ‘stickiness of history’ (1999: 251) is another textual layer that informs the performance for both star and audience and, when read in conjunction with notions of authenticity and masquerade that I have introduced above, it contributes to a complex and I would argue an inherently contradictory response by the female performer to the culturally perceived trauma of ageing. As I will argue below, also central to this mix are a range of feminist camp practices (Robertson, 1996), which challenge the dominant and negative associations of ageing, gender, sexuality and performance.

Popular music performance constitutes a realm of intense emotional experiences, which in many ways is a collaborative creation between performers and audiences. Thus, if, as Simon Frith asserts, ‘pop songs and pop stars mean more to us than other media events or performers’ (2004: 37) and indeed moreover they create pleasures of identification (Frith, 2004:38) the impact of ageing in this ‘collaboration’ is both important and under researched.

### **There’s nothing like a dame! Bassey and the evolution of the queenly diva**

Caroline Sullivan’s review of Bassey’s BBC Electric Prom concert for *The Guardian* newspaper concludes with the phrase ‘Regal to the end, Bassey threw flowers to the front row before departing. Marvellous’ (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2009/oct/25/shirley-bassey-review>). Her positive review for this concert confirms Bassey’s status as British pop royalty. In the same way that other great Dame Commanders of the Order of the British Empire (e.g. the actresses, Judi Dench and Helen Mirren) have, as they have aged, gone on to play/perform the roles great

British queens (Elizabeth I, Victoria and Elizabeth II) on screen and to assume the mantles, respectively, of national treasure and one of the world's sexiest older women, Dame Shirley Bassey has come to embody both these aspects (she is a national signifier and from my perspective, still most definitely sexy). She has established herself within the British cultural imaginary as one of the most successful female popular music artists whose star persona is that of queenly diva. I bring the terms queenly and diva together here as means to create a synthesis of her multiple and simultaneously contradictory significations. At one and the same time she is a national signifier of both her native Wales and, more usually outside the UK, of England/Britain (certainly for Wales and possibly for the UK as a whole, she is a national treasure). She is of mixed race (English mother and Nigerian father) and is simultaneously black and not black in her cultural presence; she has risen above her impoverished childhood in the Docklands of Cardiff's Tiger Bay to reside as a tax exile in that exclusive European playground of the rich, Monte Carlo. In a recording career that began in 1956 (aged 19), she has shifted effortlessly between pop songs, show tunes and torch songs; maintaining not only diversity in terms of genre and output but also retaining a contemporary edge by consistently re-inventing and updating her repertoire to re-engage with the British pop charts (e.g. a version of Pink's 'Get the Party Started' (2007) and her collaboration with The Propellerheads for 'History Repeating' (1997)).

The complexity of her star persona contributes to her wide and diverse appeal and also, I would argue, her longevity. For instance, for older fans, her signature glamour has endured the ritual humiliation of that former British cultural institution the 1971 *Morcambe and Wise Christmas Show* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Xvln035znM>) which simultaneously confirmed her glamorous persona (i.e. it was the signifier under the assault of Eric

Morcambe and Ernie Wise' humour) and laid some of the foundations to her claim to 'national treasure status (i.e. she conformed to long held British cultural construction of the 'good sport/good egg'). More recently, she 'wowed' a new generation of fans in the rain and mud of the 2007 Glastonbury festival. Donning diamante monogrammed wellington boots (D.S. B., for Dame Shirley Bassey) teamed with a shocking pink gown she playfully remind the audience of her status and as music royalty whilst at the same time conveying popular solidarity (though of the fabulous/glamorous kind) with her fellow sufferers/participants in the inclement circumstances. Additionally, she also conforms here to the long-standing notion of the 'trouper' (Doty, 2008; Davis Basting, 1999) or 'soldier on stage' (Kaplan, 1999: 178) which is a well known strategy of the diva - for a diva is undoubtedly what Bassey is.

On, inspection, Shirley Veronica Bassey's career presence can be seen to be following typical trajectory of divadom (Bradshaw, 2008; Doty, 2008). Spurred on by a huge talent, she has overcome the hardships of poverty and the discrimination and prejudice that she undoubtedly encountered in her early life: (being black and a teenage single-mother in 1950s Britain would have deemed her a social pariah). Then, once success came (the Bond theme 'Goldfinger' [1964] made her an international star), it came, of course, at a price (failed marriages and public scrutiny of the death of her daughter Samantha who died under suspicious circumstances in 1985). Both on stage (with her powerful voice and her commanding presence) and in private she is known for being fiery. As Simon Hattenstone explains, 'She was giving journalists, police officers and personal assistants hell before Naomi Campbell was a twinkle in the media's eye' (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2009/oct/24/shirley-bassey-interview>).



### **Mediating the spectacle: viewer, text, performance**

According to the BBC Radio 2 website: ‘the Radio 2 Electric Proms: showcases unique performances from world class artists. These concerts are not just another date on the tour, but a show especially created for the BBC by the world's most loved musicians to create new moments in music. The shows are broadcast on BBC Radio 2 and BBC 2.

Performances may include exclusive collaborations, using orchestras or something completely new played out to an intimate audience at the iconic Roundhouse, London.’

(<http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio2/electricproms/2010/about/>).

I sat down to watch Bassey’s Electric Prom partly as a researcher and partly as fan. At the time of viewing, I was already working on projects about women and ageing and I had already given a paper on Petula Clark in relation to this topic for a ‘Women, Ageing and Media’ conference, which will form the basis of the later section of this chapter. I have been aware of Shirley Bassey for most of my life. My father was a fan and her records were played in our house. He had an eye for exotic glamour that had been honed when growing up in 1920s-30s France in the heyday Josephine Baker. For the then proto-lesbian tomboy, however, Bassey’s displays of glamorous femininity were a source of both fascination and discomfort but, as always with me, music always triumphed over other factors (my father also endowed me with the love of a good tune and a great voice). Sometimes my liking of Bassey’s music was explicit and sometimes not. My appreciation for her oeuvre and her star diva presence has definitely increased as I have aged and (also after being engaged in this research) as she has aged. I distinctly remember driving through France with my father in the 1970s and arguing over what to play in the eight track cartridge player that we had plugged into the cigarette lighter of the car. I wanted to listen to Kraftwerk and he wanted

Shirley Bassey's greatest hits (Kraftwerk won as I now realise that my father obviously thought 'having to listen to that racket' was preferable to the moaning of a petulant teenager). As I approached the Electric Prom some 33 years later, I no longer listen to Kraftwerk but I do occasionally listen to Shirley Bassey. Bassey's songs and voice have most definitely informed the soundtrack of my life and consequently have mediated the ensuing analysis.

The Electric Prom concert under scrutiny is of course also mediated in other ways as it is a televised and not a live event. In addition to directorial choices about shots (of Bassey, guest musicians, the BBC Concert Orchestra, the audience and the venue) a brief foray on to *You Tube* reveals how sanitized the version broadcast is, particularly in relation to sound. The live fan recordings posted on *You Tube* reveal an extremely active noisy audience who sing along, who gasp in awe and who call out and demand interaction. In the broadcast version adoration is not as raw and raucous. The audience noise is subdued and rendered appropriately well-behaved (as evidenced as enthusiastic cheers and ripples of applause). As a broadcast event (also simultaneously broadcast on radio) the quality of musical sound quite rightly takes precedence' as does Bassey's verbal addresses to the audience. The result of the televisual mediation of the concert is to create the viewer as spectator and only partially participant (there are audience point of view shots at moments which do invite this kind of identification). This form of presentation works to compound Bassey's performative control and place her firmly on top of her game as queenly diva. As Sullivan suggests, this is akin to a 'command performance' (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2009/oct/25/shirley-bassey-review>) constructed to support Bassey as not just good for her age but as the incomparable ageless performer.

What is interesting about this event however is that although the external production codes promote this reading, the internal ones (the concert's actual musical content and onstage *mise-en-scène*) invite the viewer (both in the live and in the television audience) to bring the subject of age squarely play in their understandings, readings and experiences of viewing and participating. Not only do the classic songs from her repertoire (e.g. 'Big Spender' and 'Goldfinger') encourage comparisons with current and past performances and voice but six of the 17 songs performed on the night consisted of material from her newly released album *The Performance* where songs composed by new (e.g. k.t. Tunstall, Rufus Wainwright, Tom Baxter, James Dean Bradfield, Richard Hawley, Gary Barlow) and old (John Barry, Don Black) collaborators have penned songs that serve mostly as biographical vignettes of Bassey's life.

**There's no denying who I am - the girl from Tiger Bay gives the performance of her life**

For performers with extensive back catalogues, the weight of expectation in judging how much new material to include in a set list is not without its difficulties. For stars who have attempted to keep their repertoire current as they age and as their career extends (as Bassey undeniably has) there is a balance to be struck between old and new as the fans want to hear their favourites and the performer wants to demonstrate that they are continuing to grow as an artist. With Bassey at the electric Prom, the recycling of previous material and references is re-negotiated in a highly intelligent way. The main hits are there (including the bump and grind choreography that has always gone along with 'Big Spender'— though here played knowingly with consummate camp timing) and the new songs (and in many ways the Electric Prom is a showcase for her album, *The Performance*) tend to manipulate the

concept of nostalgia as part of their inherent substance and meaning (musical nods to Bond themes weave their way through ‘The Girl from Tiger Bay’). The fact that she is synonymous with two iconic Bond themes permits composers to incorporate musical intertextuality along with autobiographical intertextuality (for instance, her diva autobiography is well enough known to be recycled in new material and her judicious placing of her hits ties in her fans to the momentum of the performance).

The performance is paced to support the best use of her voice. She has worked with a voice coach since the 1980s and her rehearsals for the event itself were meticulous (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2009/oct/24/shirley-bassey-interview>). Even with a well-managed regime, ageing does have physiological effects. Where she once relied on raw talent, she now maintains her status by hard work. There are times when her voice falters briefly but these are few and far between. To my ear, the ageing process has made the version of ‘Goldfinger’ that she performs at the Electric Prom far preferable to listen to than the original 1964 recording (the power of the voice is still magnificent but the colour of her voice is much richer).

Bassey’s glamorous diva has always been a sexually charged one, specializing in the performance of a supremely confident heterosexual femininity. As she revealed in an interview just prior to the concert, she is aware of her stage diva presence as a role (one that she takes on and off at the stage door). What the fans get is the ‘authentic diva’ and not the ‘authentic Bassey’. Because this is a persona that she has always cultivated and always publically manipulated, she is able to draw on multiple layers and legacies of signification in order to simultaneously deflect and embrace the effects of ageing on her star persona. If she ever did (which I doubt), she certainly does not play her diva role

‘straight’ but employs the strategies of what Pamela Robertson has defined as feminist camp (1996). Her use of camp is knowingly produced, particularly in relation to her use of excess (clothes, bodily gestures and the emotion and power of her vocals), and her awareness of (and her onstage warmth towards) her huge gay male following (indeed the editing choices made by the television production team during the broadcast concentrated almost exclusively on shot/reverse shot alignments between Bassey her gay audience). The commonsense alliances utilized in dominant discourse to fix relations of gender, age and sexuality begin to unravel as her camp performance strategies ‘queer’ the space of the venue (Robertson, 1996; Doty, 2008). The anthemic ‘I am what I am’ (here a glorious, musical theatre style rendition) becomes not just a nod to her loyal gay fans (O’Connell and Gibson, 2003; Gill Valentine, 1995) but a statement that she is a fabulous older woman and that in her radiance the audience is (if only for the period of the concert) fabulous too!

During ‘What now my Love’ the layers of camp excess are pushed sublimely far when a troop from the regimental band of the Welsh Guards join her on stage to provide the rhythmic military style drum beat that suffuses the song. Not only does this symbolically reinforce her queenly diva status relation to nation (they are purposely Welsh yet their red tunics and black bearskins externally also signal less specifically England and the British Monarchy) but also expresses the power of her camp excess (a 72 year old woman has the command of a group of burly men in uniform).

When she first steps on to the stage she is wearing a sparkling shoulderless silver gown that is split to the thigh. Later in the show she accessorizes it with a long and luxuriant feather boa (even blowing a stray feather to a delighted audience member). This is not commonly accepted as age-appropriate wear for the postmenopausal woman but it is *de rigueur* for her

diva persona. She is not the sylph-like figure of her early career but she has the realistic figure of a woman who works hard to stay fit and is happy of what she has achieved. Hers is a well-managed body but not one (so frequently circulated in the western media) of unrealistic perfection. The inevitable 'bingo wings' (which are the natural concomitant of age for the average older women) are not disguised or covered and as she first walks on stage she extends her arms out wide to receive her audience's adoration. The diva has arrived and the audience must show their adulation and they do so for a period that seems to last and last and last. This is not the 'gesture at once queenly and sacrificial' (2008) that Melissa Bradshaw alludes to in her analysis of Bette Midler's portrayal of the Rose (in Rydell's 1979 film of the same name) but a regal act of both blessing (hers of the audience) and of tribute (from her loyal subjects/fans to her). After 50 years in show business Bassey is not yet entering the final and tragic stage of decline through ageing (Bradshaw, 2008: 71). As befits a much loved monarch after such a long reign, she is imperious (at a certain point she responds to someone in the audience calling her Shirl and says 'not Shirl – Shirley or Dame Shirley' (how different from Petula Clark who became affectionately known as Pet [with all its connotations] to her fans and to the public at large). As full-on diva there are no diminutives for Bassey but her respect for, and appreciation of, her audience is signaled as fully to them (she throws them roses) as theirs to her. Bassey's is not a masquerade of youthful femininity. She does not deny her age but refers to it through both the *mise-en-scène* (she has a montage of images of herself when younger displayed on two screens at both sides of the stage for the majority of the concert) and her choice of music (the hits plus the newer more autobiographical material). As words in the song, 'The Girl from Tiger Bay', express: 'there's no denting who I am...' and there is also no attempt to deny what she is now in relation to what she once was. Age is not a spectre that haunts her set

but a fact of life that she conjures up, explores and then parries; casting it away with her regal command. It is not her now rounder, more curvaceous bodily shape that makes her still sexy at 72 (although it is certainly one that many people will appreciate) but rather her power as queenly diva. This constructs the sexiness as both simultaneously real and ironic. Bassey's intervention as a sexy older woman does not therefore 're-boot the older woman into pre-menopausal systems of value' (1999: 254) in the same way as Davis Basting fears might be the case for many of the other well-maintained older women that are currently established as 'sexy' in Western media discourses.

Her outward confidence (for that is all we can read in these circumstances) in her powerful femininity seems undiminished with age. The audience is asked to compare her current and previous body and her current and previous music and she is blatantly unapologetic about both/ all these factors. It is no accident that the set list is topped and tailed with her trademark Bond/John Barry themes ('Diamonds are Forever' and 'Goldfinger') as these are vehicles for her signature powerful vocals. Hitting the mark with the first song revs up the audiences' (live and broadcast) expectations and the latter (which her careful planning of her set list manages her voice towards) brings the spectacle of powerful musical camp performance to a crescendo. At its end the queenly diva again extends her arms once more to receive the audiences' adoration and as a shower of golden confetti falls from above her (on to the stage and on to the audience) they are screaming for more as she gracefully withdraws. At this moment I realise that my face is still set in the smile that began with the first note that she sang some hour earlier.

**Child star to ageing star: re-framing Petula Clark's star persona**

Clark's provenance as an international star is impressive. Petula Sally Olwen Clark was born in Ewell Surrey in 1932. Like Bassey she also has Welsh lineage (though this is not key to her public profile) and like Bassey she has come to signify a complex national identity. This simultaneously comprises of quintessential Englishness (conveyed particularly in her perfect diction when speaking and singing song lyrics) and francophone credentials (through marriage to a French man and a string of hits recorded in French). In addition to a fantastically successful pop music career that took off in the UK and internationally in the 1960s (in 1964 she became the first British female artist to receive a Grammy for her international chart-topping hit, 'Downtown'), her pedigree is that of all-round entertainer, with dancing, acting and musical theatre all strings to her bow

Despite her success as an actress in films (*Finian's Rainbow* [Coppola, 1968]; *I know where I'm going* [Powell and Pressburger, 1945) and in stage musicals on Broadway in London's West End, most famously *The Sound of Music* (1981), *Sunset Boulevard* (1995-2000) and *Blood Brothers* (1993), Clark is no diva. Her talents have brought her all the trappings of show business success (homes in Switzerland, the USA and England) but she still cultivates a sense of ordinariness about herself. She may have a Rolls Royce in Switzerland but she is also happy (and talked about this at length in the Cheltenham Town Hall concert that is under scrutiny here) to travel between England and continental Europe by public transport (she recounted her use of the Eurostar train service). This articulation of ordinariness and a tendency to divulge a sense of her authentic self both undermines and works against pretensions of divahood. It may be that there is an element of Lisa Henderson's (2008) notion of the 'undivahesque diva' here and of course, as Doty concedes, there are: 'many ways to go about being a diva – and many ways to understand divadom' (2008: 3), but



Clark does not substantially meet diva criteria. Some of her fans may in fact cast the mantle of diva upon her but the following entry from a fan blog which was posted a few days after her 2008 Cheltenham concert is telling:

Great Pics from everyone...she sure looks very good except the last Pic [...]Petula doesnt do feathers!!! Leave the feathers to Bassey and the late Dorothy Squires.  
Look forward to comments on the new songs.

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Kind Regards .....? (posted June 16, 2008 at 6:43 pm on:  
<http://petulaclark.wordpress.com/2008/06/15/petula-in-cheltenham-june-11th-2008/>)

For this fan, Clark draped with a feather boa (so different to Bassey at the Electric Prom) did not fit with his perception of her star image. Truth be told there were several signs of dissonance within her star persona that night and it is the tension between previous star image and current performance practices that the following analysis will extend; especially as this is where a sense of trouble in her strategies of performance and ageing start to surface. This trouble, as I will argue later, is not all encompassing but it marks out some significant differences in the attitude to ageing and performance from the one I have highlighted for Bassey. As an ageing performer, Clark's live performance displays many of the more usual signs that associate the experience and process of ageing femininity with trauma.

Because of the 'naturalness' that Clark has previously honed as a career image, the cloak of diva artifice is not credible as a strategy against the problematic of post-menopausal female

performance identity. Clark's career and persona trajectory bears little of the outward signs of trademark diva struggles (e.g. she did not pull herself up from a childhood of abject poverty and she has also maintained a long career and a family life). Even more significant however is that fact that (certainly in her identity as a popular music artist) she incorporates elements of her authentic self in her star persona rather than playing with or alluding to them in camp reference. Her stage addresses to the audience are not the ironic quips made in the same playful way that Bassey's are but are frequently achingly honest articulations of her feelings and experience.

After more than 60 years in the public spotlight, it is her diversity as a performer rather than her complexity that has supported the longevity of her career. Her career has for the most part been marked by stages (though singing, recording and concerts have always continued alongside her radio, film, television and musical theatre career). Unlike Bassey, however, her status as a popular music star (certainly in the UK) stalled at the end of the 1960s when her rich vein of pop hits composed by Tony Hatch came to an end. Her pop success emerged in the context of and in relation to the historical confluence of the swinging sixties, the advent of a set of influential British female pop singers such as Dusty Springfield, Cilla Black, Sandie Shaw and Lulu (Whiteley, 2000: 19) and the catchy timeliness of Hatch's music. Unlike Bassey who has continued to perform new pop work, Clark's hits remain trapped in associations with the past (though still regularly played on radio in the UK) and Clark herself has been largely absent from media circulation (certainly in the UK) since her musical theatre triumphs of the 1980s and 1990s.

The naturalness/wholesomeness associated Clark's star persona stems in part from her transition from child star (radio, forces entertainment during World War II) to the

adolescent girl next door of British film comedies (such as *Here Come the Huggets* [Annakin, 1948] and *The Gay Dog* [Elvey, 1954] to that unusual being in the 1960s, a female pop star with a family life. This cultivation of naturalness as integral to her star person produces some specific difficulties for Clark in relation to ageing and performance if as Basting Davis suggests the mark of age removes ‘the possibility of naturalism in performance’ (1999: 258).

### **‘Colour my world’: an ethnographic encounter with ageing and live performance**

There are some similarities in the analysis that follows to Basting Davis’ (1999) audience participant analysis of Carol Channing’s performance (aged 74) as Dolly in the stage musical *Hello Dolly*, in that it shares the aim of exploring not just the dynamics of live performance for the ageing female star but also the possibilities of empowerment for artist and audience in this experience. Basting Davis, however, approached the task as a researcher from the start (with little personal connection to Channing’s star persona) and I did not. My research approach needs to acknowledge several levels of mediation in terms of analysis.

When I bought the tickets for Clark’s concert, they were for a friend’s 40th birthday. He has a particular affection for 1960s pop music and I knew he still played Clark’s music. Like me, he is also half French and therefore also had a wider awareness of her profile and her repertoire. It seemed like a fitting treat and all was set for two queer couples to head off for an enjoyable evening out. At this point in time I was leading an Arts and Humanities Research Council networking project on women, ageing and media so I should have been more prepared to see the Clark concert as a research opportunity. My contribution to that

project was however related to television research. I initially approached the concert as someone who had liked Clark when a child (I certainly had owned 'Downtown' and 'Don't Sleep in the Subway') but had no idea what she would offer now. The concert series was called 'All the Hits & More' so I suspected a feast of 60's music was in store and had no idea what the 'more' could be. I was aware that my own fondness for Petula Clark and her music was frozen in the past and if I had not wanted to buy tickets as a present I would not have attended the event. Hearing her songs on the radio or television (or at my friend's; whose birthday precipitated the occasion of going to see her) formed an emotional bridge to a nostalgic mode of being, allowing access to memories and feelings connected with the past and more particularly my childhood. I had no sense of her contemporary image, voice or music.

As I have indicated, my childhood brought me two Petula Clarks: the one I knew through watching the television, reading magazines and listening to the radio in the UK and the one I encountered when I was with my French family in France (where Clark was a huge star and embraced enthusiastically by the French public -partly because she married a Frenchman and partly because her English accented French was thought to be charming). In France she was associated with their new breed of female pop singers along with for example Françoise Hardy and Sylvie Vartan. In both locations she was undisputedly a star but one without any air of affectation. The iconic image that had stayed with me was of beautifully styled short hair, 60's clothes, and a rather fascinating and attractive mole on her chin.

On the evening of the concert in 2008, I'd walked in to town from work and was waiting for my partner and friends outside Cheltenham Town Hall. As I stood quietly there on my

own, my brain began to buzz as the possible richness of the event as a research opportunity struck me. At the time of the concert, I was in my late 40s (our group of four was aged between 40 and 58) but the majority of the audience making their way into the hall were in their mid-60s and there were many there that I would judge to be in their 70s and 80s. Nearly everyone was dressed up for a night out and I was aware that I was going to be a part of not just the intergenerational audience I had imagined but where the colour of this world that Clark would look down on from stage was an incredibly homogenous one of white/grey (as a sea of grey and white hair passed by me). The majority of the audience comprised of heterosexual couples but there were also visibly groups of gay men there (which should not have surprised me really - I was going with two myself).

What immediately became clear to me was the strong investment that many audience members had in the event and that they had maintained their connection to Clark as fans throughout the years (some, for instance, took photos of themselves in front of the poster of Clark's tour dates). For many, the Petula Clark who would walk out on stage that night would be one of continuous presence (they had aged along with her) and to them she was not necessarily 'stuck playing a symbol of the past' (Basting Davis, 1999:250). For me, in contrast, a discontinuity of presence brought complex factors of ageing into immediate view and play.

#### Let's hear it for the 60s! Ageing and Clark's troublesome performance

I'm glad I did not read Dave Simpsons' review of Clark's 2007 concert in a half-full

Newcastle City Hall

(<http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2007/apr/21/popandrock?INTCMP=SRCH>). until

over a year after I had seen Clark at Cheltenham, as it allowed me to both approach the Cheltenham concert with no prior knowledge of her current performance strategies and, post event, to reflect on what I had encountered in the same way. The format and the content of the two concerts (14 months apart) were almost identical and the review confirmed many of my own original impressions. Aged 76 when I saw her, Clark demonstrated her professionalism through a well-managed voice (paced in a similar way to Bassey to allow her to deliver power where the audience would expect it in her songs). Singing live, she had the best microphone technique I have ever seen and used pre-recorded layers of her own voice throughout the concert to fill-in for the backing singers required for refrains in key songs. She also cleverly used these layers to support her main vocal in the songs she used to 'rest' her voice. The 2008 UK tour (as with the one in 2007) was of provincial small to medium sized venues (Cheltenham like Newcastle was not sold out but certainly more than half-full). This was no command performance circulated on a multi-broadcast platform but a punishing tour for a working musician who operated on small profit margins (small touring band and no backing singers). The notion of the 'trouper' comes fully into play here (also noted in Simpson's review) and Clark's stamina and commitment are impressive at any age. Unlike Sullivan's triumphant review of Bassey's Electric Prom, Simpson's review of Clark's concert reveals that he is perplexed by what he sees and hears and I have to concur that this was also my experience.

In contrast to Bassey's performance, the narrative of age and decline was not expelled by Clark (and why should it be?) but wove its way through the performance. The overall musical performance was painstakingly prepared befitting a singer of her calibre but it was the non-musical aspects of the performance that were troubling (for both me and Simpson)

as they projected a sense that Clark's herself was working through a set of internal conflicts with regard to ageing, performance and her star persona. Having developed a star persona based on talent and naturalness, her performative strategies are not subject to the divisions between private and public or offstage and onstage in the same way as Bassey. Also, if as I have already indicated, naturalism in performance becomes less possible/acceptable with age, it not unexpected that tension in her star persona might be a consequence.

An interview with Clark for the 'What I see in the mirror' feature of *The Guardian* newspaper, printed only a few days after the Cheltenham concert, suggests a reasonably confident approach to the ageing process. As she says: 'Time marches on and I'm never going to look like an eighteen year old again' and 'I've had three children so I have put on weight here and there. But being a little overweight doesn't bother me' (*The Guardian*, 14/6/2008). On stage, however, the confidence in her aged appearance is lacking. In reality, she is in very good shape indeed for her age. As she acknowledges, she carries a little more weight than 40 years ago but, like Bassey, would be an inspiring physical presence of ageing if she would permit herself to be so. Simpson's review describes her as: 'Still glamorous, despite an array of curious, sack-like outfits' (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2007/apr/21/popandrock?INTCMP=SRCH>), and in Cheltenham her first outfit was made up of a series of layers consisting of a black dress (backless) with a black robe of chiffon tied at the neck. Throughout the set that I saw, all her clothes were long (to the floor) and her upper arms remained covered. More alarming than the clothes themselves (far removed from the simple elegance of style that I associated her with in my memory) which displayed anxiety about femininity and ageing (confused juxtapositions of little bows and shapeless design) was her mode of address

(including physical gestures) that formed the basis of her non-musical performative style. She walked on to the stage (in the midst of a song that she had already started backstage), she acknowledged the audience's applause and the buzz that went round the hall but she did not manipulate the moment as a grand entrance. To my surprise, what came immediately into play was the eccentric adoption of sexualised camp. Its unique form was a conflation of the burlesque influences of Mae West (Robertson, 1996) and the British music hall style working class humour of Hilda Baker (while she was singing, Clark sashayed (as Simpson also noted) across the stage adjusting her bosoms and winking at the audience in a suggestive manner). Clark (unlike Bassey) had never been known for being sexy and her previous ordinary/girl-next-door image was at odds with what she was now portraying. Clark's pre-menopausal star persona had been associated with a wholesome heterosexual attractiveness that was essential for all female pop stars who found their fame in the 1960s (Whitely, 2000) and the transition from this to a postmenopausal star persona was not culminating in a display of womanly confidence in her older sexual and gendered stage persona.

Considering Clark's francophone pedigree, her lack of confidence in her stage presence as an ageing woman was all the more surprising, for as Sheila Whiteley indicates: 'While the French have long accepted the older woman as both *sympathique* and sensuous, the English and Americans have been slow to accept that age does not necessarily mean social redundancy' (2000: 19). This was, however, a British context and the pop back catalogue that she was expected to perform (the 'hits' part of the concert's title) is intimately linked to a period of Britishness associated with idealized youth (youth movements, youthful energy). In addition, the very fabric of the music (her hits composed by Hatch more



specifically) signify the 1960s in its sound and construction (the instrumentation, rhythms, arrangements and lyrics). As Simpson explains: ‘Don’t Sleep in the Subway is as quintessentially 1960s as Christine Keeler. ‘A Sign of the Times’ mentions Twiggy, the Rolling Stones and even ‘grass’”

(<http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2007/apr/21/popandrock?INTCMP=SRCH>). It would seem therefore that in addition to the social and historical aspects that make ageing and heterosexual femininity so fraught with difficulty in Western cultures (Woodward, 1999; Kaplan, 1999), issues of musical genre and history act to compound such problems.

Clark’s rather idiosyncratic utilisation of comic parody is at first unsettling. Simpson’s review relates her concert performance to her long running role as Norma Desmond in the stage musical, *Sunset Boulevard*, suggesting that Clark’s concert performance conveys a similarly deluded decline as Desmond’s. He worries that it is an unfortunate case of ‘life imitating art’

(<http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2007/apr/21/popandrock?INTCMP=SRCH>) and in the concert hall on the night I initially thought the same. As well as having to deal with the tensions manifest in performing youthful pop hits at an advanced age, Clark herself constantly harked back to past times in her addresses to the audience in a way that indicated loss and longing. Between songs she reminds her provincial British audience of how brightly her stardom once shone. She talks of dancing with Fred Astaire and of her friend Charlie Chaplin dancing around the room while she played the piano for him. For a performer who has kept neither her pop repertoire nor her public presence current, the notion of the ‘stickiness of history’ (Basting Davis, 1999: 251) is all too prevalent. In

Clark's performance, nostalgia is not just the 'emotional bridge' that I alluded to earlier but a heavy weight.

She performed her 1960s hits well, apart from a rendition of 'Downtown' which was similarly 'lacklustre' to the one described by Simpson in her 2007 Newcastle concert', (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2007/apr/21/popandrock?INTCMP=SRCH>). Exactly the same as in the concert reviewed by Simpson, she also shouted 'Let's hear it for the 60s' acknowledging this era (particularly the mid to late 60s) as the most important period of star and audience's shared past. It was interesting that she did not want to go back further in her back catalogue. An attempt to sing (or rather not to sing) her 1961 hit, 'Sailor', was staged as a comic routine of pre-arranged interruptions so that only a few bars were rendered (even though the audience had already started to sing along). For a concert called 'All the Hits & More', it seems that the 1960s hits were problematic and the 'More' much less so.

### **Here is my song: music, authenticity and performance**

From my own perspective, the only 1960s hit performed in the first half of the set which really worked was Chaplin's (1966), 'This is my song' which she sang with an emotional power and intensity absent from the other hits dominated by a '60s sound'. From its first few bars Clark's powerful rendition melted any researcher/participant division that I still had as the pleasure in the music placed me squarely as an active part of an audience.

After the interval break she began to introduce her own songs into the mix; songs whose lyrics even spoke of ageing and contentment. As one of the popular 'girl singers' of the 1960s there would have been very little opportunity for her to release her own music. This

would not have fitted either with the marketable image for women performers at that time or the genres they were associated with. I certainly had no idea that she composed songs and was an accomplished pianist.

As the second half of the concert continued, she moved between her own songs and 'set pieces' from her more recent (last 20 years) musical theatre performances. When performing songs from *Sunset Boulevard* and *Blood Brothers* she performed her narrative characters (Desmond and Mrs Johnstone) as powerfully and convincingly as the songs themselves ('Tell me it's not true, was unbelievably moving).

As she sang her own songs, she was moved to dance (rather well for a two hour show and an obviously dodgy hip) and, although sometimes the dancing reminded you of your aunt at a wedding, there were moments when she was lost in the music, dancing and singing powerfully. These were moments of unmediated authenticity where she entered another performative mode/space; one that did not directly address the audience. She was lost in the music, obviously doing something she loved and feeling (and also conveying) the emotion of it. It was during the music that she loved and the music she wrote that she was magical and compelling. Contrary to established notions of performance, naturalness and ageing, it was in the rediscovery of her authenticity in performance that generated both renewal and a simultaneous disavowal (and honest acceptance) of the chronology of ageing. In this act she became inspiring and indeed in the obvious *jouissance* of her authentic performance – she was sexy rather than just generating a defensive parody of sexiness in old age.

In her assured concluding half to the programme, she paced the tempo of her emotional performance carefully so that we (the audience) were reeled in and let go on several occasions before we paid her tribute with our heartfelt applause. The standing ovations came (rather slowly as people struggled in and out of their seats) but this was not just playing our part in audience ritual but was authentic appreciation. For the audience there was nostalgia (tinged with the sadness for times past that nostalgia always brings) but there was also an energising affect of living in the moment of Clark's eventually assured performance

### **Conclusions**

In relation to both performances under scrutiny here, it would seem that, in many ways, as Bassey's (1997) hit with the Propellerheads suggests: 'It's all just a little bit of history repeating'. It is obviously also much more than that as the two distinctive performance experiences that took place illustrate. Bassey and Clark's differing performative strategies of renegotiated repetition generated different types of renewal both for themselves and their audiences

To keep performing, Bassey has worked hard to update her musical repertoire but has needed to do very little to her onstage diva image except intensify its camp excess. To remain fabulous, she just has to hike up the level at which she projects it. For Bassey, the past and the present provide a creative continuum for continued performance and this is communicated through to (and absorbed by) her audiences as a kind of assured radiance.

Clark's process, however, is almost the opposite, in that her new music (particularly her own music) has not had wider public acknowledgement and her expected performance

repertoire remains lodged in the past. The weight of the past casts a heavy shadow over the whole of Clark's practices as an older performer. As a star, famed for her naturalness, her onstage persona is sent into turmoil as she struggles with the concept that ageing and naturalness are unfortunately still thought incompatible in dominant notions of heterosexual femininity and dominant notions of heterosexual femininity and performance. As a result, Clark's performance is both fractured and is, at times, troubling to watch. This is mostly because of her choice to use feminist camp (so successful for Bassey) to make gestures of defiance against dominant discourses of age, gender, sexuality and performance. These practices are confusing because they are out of alignment with her star persona. It is not until she is able to free herself from the 'youthfulness' of her 1960s hits, that elements of her authentic self are able to surface and she is able to produce wonderful, powerful and inspiring performative moments.

It is clear that both these older performers still have things to say and more performances to give. Engaging with such consummate older performers has an inspirational and energizing effect for audiences of all ages and I'm sure that while they can physically and vocally perform to such an accomplished standard (Bassey and Clark's respect for their audiences and their professionalism will make them their own hardest critics in this respect), we can look forward to further important interventions from them.

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