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## **Just what is it that makes today's music festivals so appealing?**

By Pauwke Berkers and Janna Michael

A music festival is an inevitable combination of heavy rain and a used-to-be-grassy terrain; severe fatigue due to an unhealthy cocktail of cheap beer and little sleep; and unsuccessfully manoeuvring yourself through an impenetrable mob to see who's playing at a distant stage.

Yet, as a society we (apparently) love music festivals! Not only do they attract a mass audience; they often sell out within seconds of the tickets going on sale, notwithstanding a potentially mediocre line-up. This raises the question: just what is it that makes today's music festivals so appealing, despite being dirty, exhausting and crowded? The answer is quite simple: collective effervescence.

### **Interaction Rituals**

Back in 1915, sociologist Emile Durkheim argued in his book *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* that religion is essentially a unified system of beliefs and practices in relation to sacred things. Rituals are crucial to all religions. As Durkheim states:

"There can be no society which does not feel the need of upholding and reaffirming at regular intervals the collective sentiments and the collective ideas which make [up] its unity and its personality. Now this moral remaking cannot be achieved except by the means of reunions, assemblies and meetings where the individuals, being closely united to one another, reaffirm in common their common sentiments; hence come ceremonies which do not differ from regular religious ceremonies, either in their object, the results which they produce, or the processes employed to attain these results," (Durkheim, 1915).

Like religious ceremonies, music festivals foster collective sentiments; integrating attendees into a 'festival tribe'. Successful festivals link the aesthetic; the quality of music, with the social; the crowd you're a part of (Fabiani, 2005). In other words, successful music festivals are strong rituals with high levels of collective effervescence; the perceived energy resulting from the gathering of a large group. According to Collins, who formalised Durkheim's ritual theory in his 2004 piece *Interaction Ritual Chains*, we need several ingredients to make a ritual or festival successful.

### **Key Ingredients**

"Two or more people are physically assembled in the same place, so that they affect each other by their bodily presence, whether it is in the foreground of their conscious attention or not," (Collins, 2004:48)

For an interaction ritual to be successful, bodily co-presence is a necessity, even – or possibly, particularly – in contemporary mediatised society. Imagine watching a music festival online and claiming to have attended it, without experiencing the actual dirt, exhaustion and presence of other people. It would make for a rather weak interaction ritual, precisely because much of our micro-coordination happens bodily:

“In the quick interplay of voice rhythms and tones, emotional expressions, gestures and touch,” (Collins, 2011).

We constantly, often unconsciously, monitor each other’s behaviour. As excitement builds up, crowds almost literally become electrified. All of a sudden you’ll find yourself dancing and cheering for an act you may not even like, but you find yourself ‘infected’ by the dancing bodies around you.

“There are boundaries to outsiders so that participants have a sense who is taking part and who is excluded,” (Collins, 2004:48).

The second element of a successful ritual is the barrier to outsiders, as this stimulates a group-feeling. It makes it possible to distinguish the in-group from the out-group, physically as well as symbolically. Such boundary work starts long before the festival actually takes place. Choosing to visit a certain festival, and not one of the many alternatives, tells us something about the kind of person you are. People who appreciate dance music will end up at an entirely different festival from people who love reggae music. This fosters a togetherness and group mentality. Getting your hands on those hard-to-nab festival tickets – where others have failed – will also create a certain buzz before the festival has even begun. You’ll post pictures of your ticket on Facebook and check to see who else is planning to attend, while leaving comments on new band announcements. You’ll also start to plan the festival visit with your friends, setting the groundwork for the group sensation. When you attend the music festival, the barrier to outsiders becomes physically visible. You can easily spot fellow attendees miles away from the festival terrain; recognising them by their clothing style, which tends to match the music they’re about to listen to, alongside huge backpacks, crates of beer, and the smiles upon people’s faces. Having set up your tent and entered the festival terrain, you’ll become aware of who’s attending the festival and who’s not, because of all of the factors listed above.

“People focus their attention upon a common object or activity, and by communicating this focus to each other become mutually aware of each other’s focus,” (Collins, 2004:48).

Another key ingredient is the mutual focus of attention; a collection of individuals have to feel as though they’re part of a group. The artists on various stages fulfil this role by drawing the attention of the crowd, and thereby unifying the audience in a shared activity. This focus of attention is necessary for all members of the group to feel they’re acting as a group. It can work in a positive way; you collectively love the performance of your (at least in this right moment) favourite DJ; or even the opposite - the crowd shares their anger about this drugged up, hardly capable of holding his own guitar artist who decides that he doesn’t feel like performing. You start discussing the matter with your neighbours, collectively hate this jerk and consider what you have in your bag that would be suitable to

throw at the stage. . As such, complaining to fellow attendees and booing and throwing things towards the stage can also create strong interaction rituals.

“They share a common mood or emotional experience,” (Collins, 2004:48).

For a successful ritual, a shared mood is the last central ingredient. There’s no great party without a shared mood. Even horrible weather can make for bonding; running from the rain and helping each other to find a dry spot, while watching the last survivalists plough their way through the mud. Circumstances like this can result in exciting stories to tell when you get home: recanting how you had to save your belongings from a flooded tent, danced with plastic-bags around your shoes and helped others pull their car out of the mud all offer bonding and well remembered experiences. A festival crowd can therefore turn into a tribe, turning strangers into friends; at least as long as the festival lasts.

### **Outcomes of a Successful Interaction Ritual**

So how do we know whether a festival was a successful or failed ritual? Collins distinguishes between four ritual outcomes in his work *Interaction Ritual Chains*:

First, when the abovementioned criteria are met, participants feel as though they’re part of something larger than themselves. Being immersed in a larger collective creates a sense of solidarity.

Second, individual members who participate in strong rituals feel confident, elated and enthusiastic, on top of achieving a sense of “emotional energy”. Third, whereas the ritual begins the moment you buy your ticket and plan the trip with your friends, it doesn’t end with the event. Successful rituals produce symbols of social relationships (sacred objects).The most important sacred object of any music festival is the wristband, which provides entry to the festival terrain. You might keep a wristband around your arm when the festival has ended, treating it as a sacred object. The wristband functions as an emblem of group membership, prolonging the feeling of being part of the greater whole. If you’re recognised for wearing a particular wristband, chances are you’ll receive a friendly smile from fellow attendees. Wristbands also act as batteries during everyday life. If you’re feeling bored or annoyed by school or work, festival bracelets can provide memories of a great and almost sacred experience. Fourth, for this reason, you may become angry when someone mocks you for wearing a dirty piece of cloth around your arm. How can someone treat this sacred object with such disrespect, and not understand its underlying meaning? Violating a sacred object, a symbol of the group, means a violation of the standards of morality of the group. Not surprisingly, festival visitors might react strongly to negative comments by outsiders, since these might only take a look at the music line up, but miss the social aspect of the festival: collective effervescence.

### **To Conclude**

While music is a central element of any music festival as an interaction ritual, the performing artists themselves are somewhat interchangeable, and hardly impact on the success of the festival – for most visitors at least. However as Durkheim notes:

"[People cannot celebrate ceremonies for which they see no reason, nor can they accept a faith which they in no way understand. To spread itself or merely to maintain itself, it must be justified, that is to say, a theory must be made of it," (Durkheim, 1915:430).

As with many religions, what people truly worship at successful rituals isn't so much a god or their favourite piece of music. On the contrary, what's celebrated is the collective effervescence, the energy of being together and feeling collective sentiments. The music festival is a contemporary religious gathering where a sense of togetherness – instead of individualistic experience – is celebrated!

### **Biography**

Pauwke Berkers was born in 1977, the year that punk exploded. He is Assistant Professor of Sociology of Art and Culture at the Department of Arts and Culture Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands. He has published widely on issues of ethno-racial and gender inequality in arts and culture in – amongst others – *Poetics, Cultural Sociology, Journal of Gender Studies*. Currently, he supervises the NWO project "Elvis has finally left the building? Boundary work, whiteness and the reception of rock music in comparative perspective."

Janna Michael is a PhD candidate and lecturer at the Department of Arts and Culture Studies at the Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands. In her PhD-project she investigates how different status groups draw symbolic boundaries and negotiate identity which has led her to explore hipster-scenes and young managers. On the side, as a visitor, bartender and stage-manager of many festival seasons, she saw plenty of attendees marching in and tuning out.