

# “Something About the Way You Look Tonight”

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*Popular Music Festivals as Rites of Passage  
in the Contemporary United States*

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## Introduction

The phrase “music festival” brings to mind a variety of images. Maybe you hear a thumping beat, equal parts electric bass and hundreds of rumbling, excited voices. Or envision sun-tanned teens with dirt on their feet and bandanas around their heads dancing along to an insistent kick drum. See swells of people, some in concert t-shirts, or bright cotton tanks, or shirtless, some standing on tip-toe to see the stage, others laying in the grass to see the sky, but all sporting sunglasses and a drink in hand, nodding their heads to the rhythmic guitar. Or an endless sea of tents, mingled muted greens and blues and greys with vibrant tapestries of every color of the rainbow, dotted with lawn chairs and pop-up pavilions. Some territory marked by huge flags bearing Grateful Dead inspired tie-dye or a college mascot or a mysterious acronym. A game of beanbag toss, neighborly small talk, and the crackling of a boombox radio, anachronistic in the Apple Era. Sweaty groups of young men throwing beach balls, or bottles of water, or each other into the crowd, reckless and physical in reaction to summer sun and their favorite song. Pairs of girls weaving closer to the music, their hands firmly clasped, grounded in each other, as they get lost in the throng.

On the other hand you could feel the sticky skin of a day in the sun. Or think of the port-o-potty’s pungent scent, cleaned twice a day but somehow still not frequently enough to keep up with 70,000 bodies. Maybe you see the too-bright lights flashing and twirling from the stage, in peoples’ glow toys, and on the carnival-style rides. Or the music which never stops, from mediocre bands starting the early afternoon sets, to the highly anticipated headliners, some of whom can’t help but disappoint, to the amateur musicians playing in the campgrounds well into the early hours. Or the pushing, drunken crowds, or the inevitable rain and subsequent mud, or your tired, aching feet. Freezing nights and the

sounds of people vomiting or yelling or both, and the scent of unwashed bodies. Of the exhaustion or the itchy grass or the upset stomach of too much overpriced fried food.

Or maybe you picture late at night, when everything goes dark but the brilliantly lit artists and raised cellphone screens recording the moment before it passes. Musicians talking of the beautiful crowd as glow sticks rain from the sky and they dance and sing harder than before. Or hear the too-loud voices scream-singing as they stumble back to the campsite at one, two, three, four AM, and counting, drunk on the atmosphere or the beer or both, but you can never be sure of which. Or you sense the laughter and the sharp slap of yet another high-five. Hear the chants of nonsense phrases started by rowdy friends. Or the creeping, refreshing chill the humid day made seem impossible, and the hushed loudness of an open field with thousands of slumbering bodies. Or you feel that ephemeral moment when the audience sings louder than the singer, and the artist stops in apparent awe, watching the masses swaying together in a familiar chorus.

All of the above reflections convey the content and the atmosphere of a dominant cultural event loosely and conversationally called a *festival*. Colloquial descriptions, however, fail to capture the important roles such events take, both in the lives of the participants and in the larger contemporary American culture. Music festivals comprise a wide but specific set of experiences, the good lumped with the bad, and the insignificant mingling with the impactful. The people who attend them come from diverse backgrounds, locations, and age groups. Nevertheless, music festivals have grown to be a widespread cultural phenomenon in the United States. In recent years the festival industry has experienced a boom in popularity, with events of all sizes cropping up across the country.<sup>1</sup> Viewed as a microcosm, an examination of the temporary world of a festival gives insight

into larger cultural trends and values. The following thesis seeks to unpack the music festival as an experience in an effort to determine significant elements and to analyze better the important role these festivals play in modern American culture.

### **Setting Out**

I attended my first concert when I was 14 years old. It was Vans Warped Tour on its stop in Burgettstown, Pennsylvania. The venue was large and concrete, and very, very different from the lush outdoor stages the term “festival” often inspires. But with a long list of my favorite bands, all of the pop punk genre, Warped Tour’s length and variety of attractions became my first festival-type experience. Though I’d never know it on that day, as the hit attraction of the Trojan condom tent shocked and embarrassed me, my best friend crowd-surfed away into the crowd, and I tasted Monster Energy Drink for the first (and last) time, I became enamored with the power of live music, particularly in a marathon setting. The visceral immersion in a space filled with noise, music, people, and motion would eventually provoke my analytic interest in festival-style events.

At first, a typical teenager, I left the details of the festival day as “fun” when pressed by my mother, but from that concert forward music gained influence in my life. Since then my taste in genre has broadened as I began to listen to music that was not introduced to me by my angst-ridden older brother, and the concerts I attended varied. While still enjoyable, I found stand-alone concerts lacking some vital component that had made Warped Tour more exciting. I had inadvertently retired from the festival life until 2014, when I attended Bonnaroo Music and Arts Festival in Manchester, Tennessee. Now aged 20, I was not struck by any shocking events, but rather by a deep sense of comfort though I was far from home.

My Bonnaroo started with a 22 cross-country hour bus-ride, three tightly packed suitcases, and a festival partner who split the last leg of the ride between car-sickness and sleeping. We arrived, understandably worse for the wear, and our trip had really only just begun. Because we were volunteering at the festival (to earn a ticket for free), we had to find a way to get from the bus stop to the check in point, and then from the check in point to the festival. After paying a pricy taxi-bus-by-day-party-limo-by-night to go between the Greyhound station and the check in point, some kind souls let us join them on the short ride to the festival site because they were staying in our camp. This would be my first experience with the sort of sharing and lending perpetuated within festival culture.

The eight of us were stationed in Pod 10 as information desk workers; given a bagful of maps, a walkie-talkie, and a power outlet to take on the masses of patrons. We were lucky to have shifts that only went over night or early in the morning so that neither of us missed any acts we wanted to see, but sacrificed sleep and bus travel resulted in one relentlessly runny nose apiece. Our campsite was about a twenty-minute walk from the main entrance to the concert grounds, demarcated by a huge, sequined, green arch reading BONNAROO. The grounds area would fill up with patrons starting the next morning, Thursday, but for the time being we were alone.

After setting up tents and going through a few introductions, the eight of us decided to explore the grounds, though in retrospect, I think we had been explicitly told not to wander away. We walked down passed huge empty fields, all waiting for the 80-odd thousands to arrive in just hours. Golf carts and forklifts drove by us on the narrow paths, each carrying people whose incessant walkie-talkie communication, and no-nonsense demeanor indicated clear destinations and a tight deadline. We meandered, learning our

way to the volunteer camping, where the other types of helpers stayed, to the back entrances, to other campgrounds. Also learning a bit about each other, and our hopes for the festival, and the acts we were most excited to see. After that first night the eight of us didn't get to do much together, each enjoying our festival with the people with whom we came, but the shared evening stood testament to the ability of new surroundings to form quick and profound connections.

### **Being There**

The next three days passed in a blur of little sleep, a lot of standing, and slew of new experiences. From the first day glued together, to quickly developing confidence in navigating the grounds alone, my festival story rapidly diverged from that of my partner's. We got a handful of pictures together, but somehow they seemed less important than catching a bit of another set or grabbing a seat while there was a still moment and unoccupied space. We laughed about the posters and t-shirts emblazoned with bold satire and dirty jokes, and counted the older couples and children, adding diversity to a very youthful crowd. At night we marveled at the exhausting, wild, and ridiculous world we found ourselves in, from the bizarre outfits, to the odd phrases, to the endless high-fives and celebratory chanting.

We differed on the best way to watch a show, with my friend pushing to the front, while I stayed in the middle of a crowd. She chose to sleep where I chose to watch Lionel Richie, calling my brother and parents to let them know that the old family favorite was wonderful live. We shared some of the same schedule, many a meal of almonds and granola bars, and unfortunately the "festival cold" which kept us stealing new rolls of toilet paper from nearby port-a-potties for our running noses. We also shared stories, of the people



we'd met while resting in the grass, or the crazy questions we'd been asked while working our shifts. From the strange girl offering me vodka at 11 am, while she told me about her brother's fiancée and proclaimed our eternal friendship, to that first glimpse of the silent disco, a dance center where people wear headphones, immersed in a thumping beat only they can hear, we experienced endless new phenomena. There was so much to see, and everything overlapped, with popular artist pitted against popular artist, and hunger and exhaustion claiming their stake as well in every hour of the day. Here it became clear that this experience was for the participant, each choice affecting the people you'd meet and the shows you'd catch, and when you would finally get to sleep.

It was over in a moment, Elton John as the closing headliner. Floating lanterns emerged from the crowd as he sang "Rocket Man," and my eyes welled up at my personal favorite "Your Song." He sparkled, as always, and a short set of fireworks marked the end, as bright and fleeting as the festival itself. On impulse I bought a patterned green tapestry to remember the moment.<sup>2</sup> As I left the grounds that night some brave, reckless people climbed up along the entrance, pulling down the huge green sequins piece by piece to hand out to the thick streams of people exiting below them. Everyone wanted to take a piece of this singular experience home with them.

### **Returning Home**

When I got back home I found it difficult to explain to people what I had experienced. The question "How was Bonnaroo?" only garnered the response "really fun" or "great" or "exhausting." I couldn't elaborate because none of the other words seemed to fit without crossing the boundary into cliché. It wasn't magical, but it was amazing, it wasn't perfect, but somehow the bad didn't matter so much. It was not until months later that it dawned

on me that Bonnaroo marked a profound shift in my understanding of myself. As an experience, the trip had changed me, though the ways in which it did so were impossible to pinpoint. The series of concerts and bright lights suddenly seemed very important, though what they signified escaped me. I had grown up, being really and truly on my own for the first time in my life, four states away from home. I hadn't found a new religion, or a new passion, or my home, but the experience had stirred within me a sense of comfort and knowledge that was not there beforehand.

### **Organization of the thesis**

My inquiry into the meaning and the impact of music festivals revealed five major themes. Those themes form the chapters that follow. Chapter One, "Methodology and Theoretical Framework" outlines the process through which I gathered data, as well as introduces key literature useful in understanding rites of passage. The second chapter, "Music Festivals as Rites of Passage," analyzes the elements of festivals that cause them to function as sites of transformation. In Chapter Three, "Participation," I discuss the individuals involved in the completion of festivals, primarily those making up the audience, but also festival workers who fall at the fringe of the rite. The fourth chapter, "Festival Imagery," evaluates the marketing strategies employed by festival coordinators to sell the experience, as well as their role in perpetuating the significant elements of festivals. In Chapter Five, the penultimate chapter entitled "Music," I seek to examine the element most central to the rite. I look at the capabilities of music for enhancing the effectiveness of a rite, as well as the roles it occupies in a festival setting. Finally, Chapter Six, "Conclusion," points to further significance of music festivals in 21<sup>st</sup> century American society.

## Chapter 1: Methodology and Theoretical Framework

### Methodology

In January of 2015, months after the experience, I lay in my bed at home wondering if anyone had researched contemporary music festivals in an academic setting. I was fascinated by the background work an event of this size required, which I had caught a glimpse of as a volunteer, and preparation by the artists, some of whom toured only with festival appearances, and the patrons, whose backgrounds varied so dramatically. I wondered if anyone had thought about why so many people went to festivals, some travelling for days or across oceans, to sleep in tents and to stand in tightly packed crowds for hours of loud music and hot sun. Objectively, the negative aspects of festivals are about even with the positive, and plenty of people have horror stories of shows gone wrong, myself included. After talking to other people who had attended festivals, though, fond memories dominated their recollections. They laughed at memories of terrible sunburns or vomiting in the grass, but dwelled on their favorite set and the charged atmosphere. On a survey I compiled to get some opinions on festival experiences, a respondent wrote that she “basically starved because [she] couldn’t afford any of the available food or drink, but at least that meant [she] didn’t have to use the terrifying port-a-pottys[sic].” Even here, when describing the greatest negative to her experience, a participant found a silver lining. Other responses detailed the inadequate, “horrible”, toilets, lack of reasonably-priced water, and endlessly long lines for food.

Why, then, do people remember festivals with distinct nostalgia, associating the events with freedom or happiness or youthfulness, and not with sweat and rain and crowds? Looking back, remembering the best parts of a time gone by, establishes nostalgia

that lingers after the festival experience is over. Something about festivals represents an interpretation of the “good” in American society; festivals seemed to those who attend to highlight important values, beliefs, and forms of identity.

While festivals have received attention in popular magazines and films, the topic bears more scholarly inquiry. As a research topic, the music festival raises numerous issues that are directly relevant to contemporary North American society—and to the cultural values sustained and subverted in such lavish productions. I decided to pursue the topic, and find an answer to my own questions, by combining a search of historical documents with an approach taken from cultural anthropology, ethnographic fieldwork. I embarked upon the project by establishing an informal but practical definition of a festival: a series of concerts in the same location. That definition allowed me to search the Internet for relevant material. Even with a parsimonious definition, however, I discovered that the term “festival” encompasses a multitude of events, and that I would have to restrict the term even more strictly. As I sought to interpret festivals as a significant indicator of cultural values, I devised a working list of criteria that would demarcate the particular type of festival that would test my hypothesis about the personal and social significance of these events.

The first and most important criterion is that the focus of the event is popular music. This eliminates a host of other festivals, like cultural festivals, classical music festivals, and art festivals, in which music is present, but does not serve as the motivating factor for participation. In my field experiences I began to keep detailed notes, many of which initially focused on the campground space. Since most popular festivals offer nearby grounds for the attendees to camp, the festival environment extends beyond the venue itself, and the

grounds become vital to an attendee's experience, marking them as a second criterion. Finally I decided to look at events that spanned several days, rather than one. Single-day festivals, like Warped Tour, lack the intensity of experience crucial to the impact of a prolonged festival. Indeed the very difficulties, hardships, and pain a three or four day festival involves contribute to the influence the event has on participants. Only in prolonged festivals can the audience achieve the substantial collective experience that defines music festivals and gives them a significant bearing. With this in mind, I moved to create a plan to analyze the ways diffuse elements of a festival contribute to the significance of the event and to the lasting impression a festival experience leaves on a participant.

Looking for a place to start, I originally anticipated I would examine festivals in a comparative light, using primarily secondary sources. Quickly, however, I realized that in order to fully understand the impact of a music festival, I had to take advantage of my own participation in such events. Consequently I decided to tackle the experiential dimension first, and to do so I attended three festivals in the summer of 2015. I collected field notes from diverse events in real time to eliminate the fuzzy, nostalgic lens inspired by Bonnaroo.<sup>3</sup> With a good old-fashioned composition book and many differently colored pens, I sat behind the crowd on hills taking notes on anything I noticed about the festival and its attendees, from clothing choices, to snippets of conversation, to demographic trends. In this, I followed the well-known Malinowskian dictum of "casting a wide net" and acknowledging that "nothing is trivial."<sup>4</sup> At the same time, using a mobile phone from time to time limited me to taking notes on elements that seemed to be outstanding, repeated, and essential to all three festivals. This follows what can be labeled "traditional empiricism," or taking note

of objectively collected data, such as interviews (which I completed via an internet form), collection of statistical information, or emotionless accounts of particular sights.<sup>5</sup>

Afterwards, at night and in the downtime when the bright morning sun made sleeping impossible but the shows hadn't started yet, I wrote personal reactions to performances and conversations, making note of the way I felt interacting with the festival as a participant. Here I employed "radical empiricism," as expounded upon by several contemporary anthropologists.<sup>6</sup> This tactic examines the subjective methods through which a person gains knowledge and outlook as part of the fieldwork experience, gained by living the experience physically and emotionally. Along with interpreting objective data, I reflected on my own reactions to the event in order to draw deeper conclusions regarding the significance of elements of the festival.

The phrase "anthropological fieldwork" evokes an image of a khaki-clad researcher traveling to a remote land to study a group of people with whom he has minimal prior experience and often does not even share language. As a member of the young, adventurous group at the heart of festival culture, my field experience looks very little like that image. The content is neither remote nor removed from my own ideas about North American values. In line with recent anthropological work I used my experiences to refine and to interpret the data I gathered.<sup>7</sup> My status as both participant and observer in the study of festivals has a few distinct advantages. First, had I failed ever to attend a festival, I may not have considered them an influential event in a young person's life, and therefore never embarked on this line of research. Additionally, I have the ability to engage with the responses engendered by a festival, and that provides me with insight into the behaviors and the understandings of participants in a festival inasmuch as these are less cognitive

than emotional. Finally to interpret the symbolic elements of a show, a frame of reference regarding the current issues important to young people and their meaning-making structures plays a vital role. To complete a rigorous anthropological study, the importance of background research and understanding of the cultural systems in play cannot be overstated, and examining festivals as both a participant and an observer ensured that I built this foundation.

When I wasn't on site I researched festivals, reading about some of the most famous music festivals in recent U.S. history, like Woodstock in Bethel, New York, and the Monterey Pop Festival, in Monterey, California. In addition, I watched a variety of documentaries and examined festival websites to attune myself to the representations and values that festival marketing strategies projected. I also sent out a survey to friends and friends of friends asking simple questions about their own festival experiences. These narrative and historical accounts convinced me that festivals constituted a rite of passage for attendees. A festival experience, with all of its components and varied executions, separated a population into people who had gone and people who hadn't. Participation in a festival gives a person new metrics with which to examine dominant cultural values, and a new perspective regarding her role in society.

Given the rise in the popularity of music festival industry throughout the 2000s, this particular rite of passage appeals to many young people; evidently, music festivals accomplish goals that have yet to be fully analyzed.<sup>8</sup> While festivalgoer versus non-festivalgoer creates a division that many people would not think applies to themselves, popular culture, like that present within a music festival, plays a large role in the creation of cultural values and social categories. Popular culture, meaning the music, media, and

fashion trends that characterize a particular generation, also plays a key role in establishing and reiterating structural social elements. Working through entertainment and trending interests, a group pushes and redefines boundaries from the personal level outwards. Popular culture functions on two levels: first in creating categories of cultural criticism and second in providing a route of escape.

In the contemporary internet-driven culture where consumers are inundated with myriad messages presented through television, film, video games, and music, the role of popular culture continues to expand. In his book *Everything Bad is Good for You*, media theorist Steven Johnson makes an important distinction regarding the analysis of popular media. Rather than searching cultural events and programs for deep moral lessons, Johnson encourages readers to view pop culture as “a kind of cognitive workout.”<sup>9</sup> That is to say, by challenging what young Americans see in our day-to-day lives exposure to popular culture broadens our ability to critically engage with our culture. In festivals, youth participate in alternative circumstances that subvert or modify the values embedded in United States culture; through the familiar lens of popular culture, participants gain a frame of reference within which to examine their lives.

Another important role of popular culture within society is to act as a means of escape. Historian Peter Stearns’ book *American Cool* examines at length the phenomenon of repressed emotional expression in the United States. With the emotive climate in the country being de-intensified across the board, popular culture that allows catharsis gained popularity, serving as an outlet. As Stearns put it, media, like popular music, that “could overwhelm, that were exciting but did not require elaborate emotional expression” allowed consumers a mode through which to release sentiments that did not alter the reality of



their daily lives.<sup>10</sup> Music festivals fulfill both functions of popular culture; they are at once part of current popular culture, given their prevalence, and also a showcase of it, through ways attendees use them.

With many field notes, experiences as participant and observer, and ideas about popular culture's role in societal growth, I focused my research solely on contemporary music festivals. Hoping to identify some meaning-making structures implicit in my life and the lives of my peers, it seemed clear that festivals functioned beyond the realm of entertainment in their execution. Their resonance stems from many sources (music, collectivity, atmosphere among other elements) but the significance lies with the experience as a whole. It was this realization, that the persuasive elements of festivals served to elevate the *experience* itself, which led me to the framework provided by classic studies of rituals and rites of passage.

### **Rites of Passage**

In traditional anthropology the study of rites and rituals is long and varied. Rites, particularly rites of passage, which are central to this paper, take many different forms based on a society's needs and structure. While the two words, rite and ritual, are synonymous in colloquial usage, in cultural anthropology their differences are theoretically significant. A ritual is "a behavior that is formal, stylized, repetitive, and stereotyped, performed earnestly as a social act; rituals are held at set times and places and have liturgical orders."<sup>11</sup> Rites, in their most basic definition, manifest as a ceremony or event to distinguish the passage of a person from one stage of life into another. While rituals can be, and often are, present in the completion of a rite, the ritual itself does not achieve the transcendence necessary to give import to a rite. For the sake of clarity, all uses of the word

ritual in this paper refer only to elements of a rite—that is to say, the repeated or stylized parts of the rite that contribute to its significance, rather than to the event as a whole.

Rites rely upon symbolic elements that create the possibility of transformation, and can signify changes such as those of status, location, or age. Examples of well-known rites of passage include Bar and Bat Mitzvahs in Judaism, First Communion in Catholicism, a Quinceañera in some Latin American cultures, or even events like receiving a driver's license, Bachelor parties, or graduation ceremonies. While dramatically different in execution, each of these rites retains some key elements. The elements give weight to what would, without them, be considered only a formality, or an empty event. An examination of these weighty elements illuminates the functions rites fulfill in a society and indicate their value.

In his seminal book on rites of passage, *Les Rites de Passage*, French-Dutch ethnographer Arnold van Gennep examines rites that move an individual from one life-stage (or “crisis”) to another. He argues that all such rites contain three phases: separation, transition, and incorporation.<sup>12</sup> These phases may not be developed to the same degree in every set of ceremonies, but all will be present; depending on the purpose of the ceremony, one phase may be given more attention than another. So for example, celebration of the 18th birthday in the US serves to move an individual from childhood into adulthood, and the phase of incorporation may be emphasized. A ceremony recognizing the passage into a military from a civilian state may emphasize the phase of separation, as the individual leaves her/his former status behind. Still other ceremonies, like those marking entry into a fraternity or sorority may well emphasize the phase of transition, creating a context in which the identity of the person is transformed through symbolic gestures, clothing,

sounds, actions, and other sensory elements. This last type of ceremony suggests the ways in which a contemporary music festival becomes a rite of passage in the US.

This thesis examines rites of transition, more commonly referred to as rites of passage. While van Gennep defines rites as containing three major phases, he also asserts that each type of rite contains elements (often ritualistic ones) that serve the functions of the remaining two types. So, a rite of passage includes rituals that signify both separation and incorporation. But, as its ultimate purpose is to mark a transition, the elements that pertain to transformation feature more prominently throughout the rite. Rites of passage can mark a change in status, life-course stage, or identity.

Despite the bulk of the experience within a rite of passage reflecting the transitional period, the departure from the previous state and inclusion in the incorporation state nonetheless play a vital role in creating a profound impact on the participant. The stronger the sense of separation from the prior group and incorporation into the new group, the stronger significance the event holds as a milestone. For example, the sentiments I, as a high school student, experienced on the last day of school each year failed to feel as important as the last day of school preceding my graduation. Because the transition from 8<sup>th</sup> grade to 9<sup>th</sup> grade is not as culturally valued as that between senior and graduate, there are no ceremonies that mark the former change. The ritualistic elements of graduation, on the other hand, dramatize and elevate the experience to a more complete and significant rite of separation.

Accepting this as a useful method of evaluating rites and classifying the elements within them, it is also helpful to examine what sensations are created within rites. British cultural anthropologist Victor Turner established the concepts of *liminality* and

*communitas* in his book, *The Ritual Process*. While interconnected, the two concepts illuminate the reasons that rites appear so universally across varied societies and cultures. In rites of passage, the qualities of liminality and *communitas* aid in creating the atmosphere within the transitional space through which participants are transformed. Turner notes the importance of certain attributes of liminality and *communitas*, among them anonymity, absence of property, equality, lack of gendered differences, unselfishness, and humility, all of which function to remove societal boundaries determined by the external culture which exist between participants.<sup>13</sup> The methods through which these elements are created vary, but for a rite to transcend ceremony, the presence of such attributes is vital.

The first condition necessary for creating an atmosphere conducive to a rite of passage is liminality. A liminal period, from the Latin *limen*, meaning threshold, describes a state in which a person has separated from a previous status but is not yet incorporated into the new one.<sup>14</sup> In short, the liminal period is the transition, the “passage” part of a rite of passage. Liminality, then, is the condition of being “betwixt and between.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, it is the extent to which participants exist in a changing, nebulous, difficult to define state throughout a rite. Turner attributes the power of the liminal state to the stripping away of expectations and obligations of both the pre-liminal (life before) and post-liminal (life after) states. The induced liberation lends the experience distinctiveness, recaptured in memories that have the quality of nostalgia, and actions toward an idealized state.

Nostalgia functions upon reincorporation into the dominant society, as a means to reconnect with the emotions evoked within the rite. Fond recollections of the time spent in the liminal space cement the symbolic meaning of a rite and create a connection to that self

within the post-liminal state. Liminality serves a number of useful functions within a ritual, for example the creation of anonymity and acting as a strong equalizer. The second of these functions is critical to the influence a rite of passage holds over a participant; within the ritual space, those going through the process undergo a unique and individual experience that is at the same time intensely shared, increasing the importance of peer to peer relationships within the group.

Liminality underlies the creation of *communitas*, the second of Turner's most useful concepts. Again from the Latin, *communitas* describes a relationship between people that is akin to community. Much like community, *communitas* forms in a group of people with a shared location, experience, and goals. It differs, however, because community implies structure and deliberation. *Communitas* does not form when sought, but rather implies a level of spontaneity; people relate to those around them because of the intensity of contact and communication. The sense of camaraderie is not built upon shared values or mutually beneficial relationships; it rather stems solely from the condition of sharing the same space-outside-the-ordinary. In a rite, this extends the feeling of magic or importance of the event itself to those with whom the rite is shared. The other participants take on the distinctive, sentimentalized quality which memories of the festival invoke. Because *communitas* relies on spontaneity, it occurs only, or at least most enduringly, within a liminal space.

In this way liminality and *communitas* complement van Gennep's classification of rites and ritualistic elements by revealing the key emotions that make rites vital to successful societies. When fully achieved, the state of *communitas* increases the significance of a rite of passage. However, there is a complication stemming from the

nebulous nature of *communitas*. Rites of passage often depend on the establishment of spaces that foster *communitas*, but by definition, planning contradicts the spontaneity necessary to do so. Nevertheless, the sum of liminal elements and rituals enacted within a festival help to foster the freedom and exhilaration necessary for moments to fall into *communitas*. Turner writes that liminality, which exists in total separation from the surrounding society in which the rite is taking place, exposes by contrast the values of the society as a whole. It does so by removing many of the normative values upheld by law. In doing this the participants naturally create a brief “ideal” society through self-imposed boundaries that reflect their shared desires.<sup>16</sup> As this function is vital to a cultural understanding of society, van Gennep asserts that rites of passage in all cultures help to delineate stages of life within a populace. These transformations become integral to the vitality of a society as they demarcate various stages of maturation.

## **Chapter 2: Music Festivals as Rites of Passage**

In the United States, nation-wide rites of passage are hard to identify and notably lacking. Some legal restrictions, like driver’s licensing laws, liquor laws, or military draft laws exist to denote passages in age, but the 16<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup>, and 18<sup>th</sup> birthdays seem arbitrary as markers of burgeoning adulthood. In a globalized society in which ritual studies professor Ronald L. Grimes notes, youth increasingly look to peers for affirmation and inspiration, formal legal or parentally determined markers of maturation lack weight.<sup>17</sup> Other passages, like the high school prom or graduation, rely on purely ceremonial aspects, failing to include the depth of symbolic meaning created within a more encompassing rite of passage (Grimes 2000). Religious rites, while generally more impactful, are far from universal, and

remain inaccessible even for some who wish to participate, and are an enforced rather than elective process for others (Luhmann 2012). For these reasons, other occasions rise to aid in identity formation and meaning making. One such occasion, and the one at the heart of my research, is the North American popular music festival. On the surface one would anticipate that a rite of passage would not be the best way to describe a prolonged concert. However, when broken down, the elements of music festivals mirror those present in other rites. In van Gennep's words, phases of separation, transition, and incorporation all take place within a festival, causing the event to impact the participant beyond the superficial experience of being there.

### **Elements of Separation**

Rites of separation mark the removal of a person from a status or identity. For example, funeral rites acknowledge the separation of a deceased person from the living. While less final, elements of separation are central to the immersive festival experience. One element of separation from the American mainstream society comes in the form of anonymity. At a festival status symbols such as job attire, house size, or neighborhood disappear. Expensive clothing and fancy watches, as well as advanced technology and other luxuries, remain at home rather than risking their destruction at the festival. This possibility of damage acts as a very real motivator to leave important objects at home. I have yet to experience a festival and return with all of my possessions in tact; among these casualties are one family beach towel, a pair of sneakers, one air mattress, my cellphone (temporarily), and backpack. Additionally, neighborly bonds are formed, not within communities of similar house size and price, but by randomly assigned parking and tent spaces. It is not uncommon to see cars pull out of a line, trying to find a car with which they

travelled in the hope of securing adjacent campsites. As festivals serve for many as vacation, talk of the type of work one does outside does not lead a conversation. Despite speaking at length with a number of people, the only two careers I recall someone mentioning were a new enlistee in the military who confessed his nerves regarding deployment, and two men in mechanical engineering graduate school who gave me a 3D-printed keychain reading “Bonnaroo” to commemorate the event. In this way attendees disconnect from their outer identities by shedding material markers of their status.

Physical barriers to the space also create literal separation from the outside world. Festivals occur generally in fields or farms with a lot of flat land and few surrounding buildings, so as not to create traffic stops, pollution, or noise disturbances for the general public. Even festivals located in cities, of which I have only attended a small local festival, Flood City in Johnstown, PA, generate seclusion by taking over the local businesses, hotels, and restaurants with festival attendees. Areas of the surrounding cities become temporarily part of the festival, as I learned upon stopping at a local Waffle House on my way to Bonnaroo and on the way out of All Good, and being surrounded by people wearing festivals bracelets, and faces of visible anticipation, and sunscreen (the former trip) or exhaustion and dirt (the latter). Festival grounds, then, are at once physically remote from the mainstream society, and culturally remote from societal norms. This leaves behind some expectations of behavior; eating practices, traffic laws, and public spaces are given new definition to fit the alternative settings, separating time in the festival from time outside of the event. To mirror this, many popular festivals even give their festival grounds a name (I first encountered “the Farm” at Bonnaroo, and later “the Woodlands” for Firefly),



creating a vocabulary to identify the spaces in a more familiar manner, and a vocabulary that is restricted to that specific festival space.

Granting a name also creates a symbolic scheme unique to the event, emphasizing its separation from the norm. Some festivals go so far as to create a name for their participants, as an example, TomorrowWorld (part of a global festival franchise beginning with TomorrowLand in Belgium) refers to their participants as People of Tomorrow, underscoring the idea of participants as separate from people outside of the event.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, to enforce boundaries around the music venue itself, each festival erects gates, through which only people with the festival wristbands (and accompanying microchip to get past the sensors) can enter. Reminiscent of lines for an amusement park, I felt a palpable sense of anticipation each time I waited to enter a festival; here the crowd's rowdiness struck me as keyed up in a way it wasn't in the campgrounds. From the exchange of high fives with strangers, to a last minute chug of a beer can that wouldn't make it past the guards, to the odd walk-run through the empty sections of the stanchions, people appeared anxious to get through at all points of the day, as though they would miss something if they didn't move fast enough.

Perhaps the most dramatic element of separation within a contemporary festival comes from the suspension of technology. While festivals continue to include charging stations for the all-important cellphone, Wi-Fi is lacking, data service can be spotty, and the noise and activity of the event is frankly not conducive to productivity in the form of a quick email or text. Other forms of technology, like tablets and laptops, are not practical given the high potential for rain and the vulnerability of living in a tent. I've found, too, that with so much activity to watch happening just outside of my campsite, I could never

interest myself much with solitary tasks like texting or reading a book. Television, while present in the form of large screens on the big stages playing live video of the concert or festival-specific advertisements, excludes messages from the outside, underscoring the inner space as separate from the outer. At Bonnaroo this meant seeing the “Bonnarovian Code”<sup>19</sup> which outlines good festival behavior repeatedly, while at Firefly the screens hosted pictures posted by attendees on Instagram with the identifying hashtag “#firefly2015.”<sup>20</sup> Even technology like digital clocks are scarce, causing the audience to work on “festival time” and keep track via the artists playing rather than normalized behaviors associated with specific times. Because of this meal time for me essentially occurred whenever I realized I was hungry, or saw something I wanted to try, or when I had a brief break in artists that interested me.

Other elements of separation begin well before the start of the festival. For instance, the excitement created by announcement of the artist line-up, which creates the expectation that, this particular arrangement of musicians will produce an event that cannot be missed. Also in the separation phase falls preparation for the event; that is the acquiring of camping gear, appropriate clothing, food, camp toiletries and more. The process of selecting specific items with the festival in mind lend the event importance by generating conscious thought about preparedness and representation of self as well as anticipation of the routines you will fall into within the event. Separation is unmistakable, and vital to priming participants to shed their external identities within the liminal festival space.

## Elements of Transition

Other elements of festivals fulfill the phase of transition. In larger society an example of these types of rites could be pregnancy rituals like a baby shower or parenting classes; preparing for the change in status. For festivals, the phase of transition centers on experiencing the event. The transitional phase may begin with the various chants and inside jokes that absorb a participant. For example, at Bonnaroo every so often I heard a group of people yell out the festival name, dragging the final “o” as others joined them and cheered. During another festival I attended this summer, All Good, a set of performers on stilts would emerge and dancing through the crowd every afternoon at about four. Additionally, landmarks, like a large Buddha statue at All Good, or the Fountain (a mushroom spouting water) at Bonnaroo gain symbolic meaning only for those who experienced the festival. Atmospheric markers like these help to quickly normalize the events occurring within a festival by fostering attachment to the land itself. When these types of emblems are used in marketing or merchandise, they tie the event to objects with meaning only discernable by participants. Both of these things add to the nostalgic reminiscences resulting from other parts of the experience, especially the music, and extend into the incorporation phase.

Also creating a transitional element during the festival rite is the clothing. Certain items, like bandanas, fanny-packs, camelback backpacks, and various fad fashions denote “festival people.” Within the nonnormative space, daring fashion trends too off-putting for the outside world seem appropriate. Last summer this meant that everywhere I looked I could spot the silver and gold metallic temporary tattoos (called flash tattoos) on tanned (or burnt) skin. It also means more clashing patterns, the return of out-of style clothing

(like 90s-style bucket hats, socks with sandals, vibrant tie-dye, and more) that appear deliberately off-trend. This also manifests in a lack of clothing, on both men and women, who bare as much skin as possible to beat the heat and prevent abnormal tan lines. I personally took part in this by wearing my water shoes (which are more like crocs than the kind children wear at the water park) for all of Bonnaroo and most of Firefly rather than actual shoes. As clothing remains a means through which to present an identity, participants utilize a festival setting to experiment with their self-presentation in a low stakes setting.

As a central claim of this paper asserts, festivals themselves emphasize the transitional phase of rites of passage. That is not to mean that the whole event is spent preparing for incorporation into a new status or identity, but rather that within the festival a liminal (transformative and nebulous) space is created. Since the two statuses at hand are pre-festival identity and post-festival identity, the event itself acts as the transitional period between the two. To do this, the phase of separation removes the patron from their outer culture and society, at which point they enter the festival. Within the festival, signifiers of identity do not serve to replace those of the outer culture, but to act in a moment existing between the two, in a liminal space. Whereas in the dominant culture identities are represented by such characteristics as political views, economic status, or religious background, the self within festivals is presented as reflecting alignment with the festival itself.

For example, at All Good a cameraman chose to single out a person wearing a t-shirt which read "Eff Real Life", displaying the message on a large screen next to the performers to cheers from the crowd. At Bonnaroo a neighbor offered all of the volunteers I was with a

hit of marijuana within moments of meeting them, setting the tone of a relaxed relationship with substance laws. Similarly, more than one person in the crowds bumped into me and offered various drugs, alcohol, or hugs as apology, indicating a different system of exchange and in manners. A person's identity within a festival hinges on a visual projection of an engagement with the festival, creating a completely internal reference frame. That is, participation in the festival rite and its elements can only be achieved through internal engagement, not external observations. Thus the self expressed within a festival does not, and cannot, exist outside of the event. Festivals do not mean to create lasting connections; the grounds cease to exist physically, the strangers there may never interact again, and living in a tent only retains its novelty for so long. This ephemeral nature amplifies a sense of singularity attached to the experiences shared within the event.

Festivals feeling out-of-the ordinary also aids in their signification as a transitional space. An emphasis on the non-ordinary, when applied to festivals, results in a series of event specific norms that supersede laws. Because life within the festival is the exception, behaviors like public drunkenness, illicit drug use, and free sexuality enter as a valid choice. Other systems, like private property or commerce, get redefined as people within the festival see fit, giving way to *communitas*. As discussed earlier popular culture challenge societal norms through a medium, like music, that is familiar, giving those mediums influence. Within festivals calculated subversion, like the adoption of flashy or odd clothing, or acceptance of behavior usually frowned upon, are methods through which participants push against the status quo. Rejection of certain public laws underscores the temporary nature of the event, but it also lends festivals their importance on a larger scale. Because the event is temporary, patrons can assess and redefine ideals, values, and symbols of a

society; the breakdown of certain standards and the elevation of others create a space that challenges the larger culture in a way that does not jeopardize its successful functioning.

### **Elements of Incorporation**

Finally, incorporation completes the rite. While a wedding would signify incorporation into a group in the mainstream culture, rites of incorporation that a festival produces manifest themselves less definitively. Upon leaving the event, participants do not emerge as new people. No universally recognized badge, attire, or accolade indicates those who attended a festival. Despite this, living outside of societal expectations, as a participant does in entering the festival space, alters the ways in which a person interacts with the world.

Some examples of this are tangible. For example, the acceptance of the festival lexicon alters the inherent meanings of certain words when remembering them back at home. Many festivals give away material objects, such as cups, posters, or bracelets, which act as a token to identify a post-festival person. Beyond this many patrons create (or purchase) their own keepsakes. The wristbands, which permit entry to the grounds, for example, often remain uncut from wrists for months. My own are all taped to the wall in my bedroom, where they serve as a reminder of the experience. However they choose to hold onto the experience, attendees may maintain evidence to stir emotions and memories later in their lives. These are all symbolic representations of a new status, placing significance on the festival experience that extends beyond the event itself. Other examples are less tangible, though still significant. Back in the mainstream culture laws, class divisions, and styles of dress reassert outside identity. For many people, then, the physical representations of their time within a festival are no longer appropriate for their

surroundings, and thus dropped. Despite this, most festivals inculcate an attitude that does not end within a festival (Tengan 2008). Reminded of the power of community spaces, optimistic outlooks, and shared entertainment, all of which are central to the marketing rhetoric of festivals and integral to the ideas expressed within them, people leave festivals with an altered perspective.

Though it is for the best that festivals end, the ephemeral experience seeming that much sweeter in hindsight, a manner in which festivals continue influencing participants comes in the form of CDs, streaming playlists, merchandise, and films. The first of these is intuitive: when released, a live recording of some set or other from a festival represents tangible proof that the concert was just as good as you remember. While generally not available at large festivals, headlining artists or many artists at smaller festivals release recordings of their sets labeled “live at Coachella” for example. Beyond acting as a memento for people who experienced the festival, these recordings can also be used to market the event to potential future customers, generating buzz about the quality of concerts they had missed out on.

As CDs become less common in the modern music industry, an interesting use of new media comes in the form of streaming playlists. Online music streaming services, like Spotify or Pandora Radio, make music available either for free (with commercials) or for a monthly fee on any device with an internet connection. Subscribers can create playlists of their favorite artists for themselves and others, and are given recommendations based on what they have listened to previously. On these platforms festival promoters and fans alike can curate playlists for festivals made up of songs released from artists on the lineup. This allows people who may not be familiar with many of the bands to learn about who might be

playing and begin to decide what shows to attend. At once playlists of this type serve to create excitement for festivals beforehand and become a record of the event afterwards. As long as the streaming services exist, a collection of the artists can exist. And marketers put all this technology to good use; without it, the festival might not be a commercial success.

Elements of separation, transition, and incorporation within music festivals classify them as a rite of passage. These aspects serve to give meaning to the physical space, the temporal elements of a particular event, and many of the material objects brought to and purchased during festivals. Accepting the structure of a rite of passage as a useful model to understand the phenomenon of music festivals in the United States, the following will draw out specific elements which contribute to the liminal space and *communitas* created within a festival experience. First of these elements is the people who make up the audience and festival staff; in other words, the participants.

### **Chapter 3: Participants**

In the United States, images of festivals conjure up young, reckless, contagious excitement. Partly because of popular music's importance to young people (who make up many of the artists as well as the most voracious consumers), festival attendees appear overwhelmingly youthful. In fact, in 2014 46% of all festival attendees were between the ages of 18-34.<sup>21</sup> Assuming another fairly significant portion of attendance comes from participants under this age (as many children, even some infants in my experience, attend with parents and older teenagers attend in larger groups), that means that a notable sector of the people at festivals is indeed youthful. But beyond the reality of a young crowd,



rhetoric of boisterousness with a young face is perpetuated through the marketing and historiography of a festival.

### **Audience**

To begin with, teens and young adults are largely viewed as consumers in the pop culture realm; with regards to music specifically, millennial aged Americans (~18-34 years) listen to the radio at rates of about 90%.<sup>22</sup> Young people also increasingly identify with people their age, both as equals and as inspirational figures. Whereas some societies place great emphasis on the role of parents in teaching children the general “ways of the world” some of that education has become integrated into peer relationships. This may be the result of polarization between the ages, as the period of teenager creates a group with diminished responsibilities that some argue weakens the role of parents in the lives of American youth.<sup>23</sup> Along with increased identification with peers, this generational gap gives power to commercial marketing to influence young people. Young adults also tend to buy into brands endorsed by musical artists who are popular and successful.<sup>24</sup> Since festivals, despite their myriad other benefits, are also a business venture, playing to commercial musical interests of teens and young adults increases draw to the event. Purely from a moneymaking standpoint, festivals need to cater to youth to successfully operate.

Additionally, historically speaking festivals among college age participants gained popularity in the 1960s in the United States, as use of college grounds and auditoriums to serve as a venue helped to ensure a crowd.<sup>25</sup> Folk music featured at these festivals became attached to social protest and change, and in doing so festivals gained importance as a cultural event. Festivals became a part of the hippie cultural revolution, firmly planting popular music as a “young people thing,” so to speak, an idea that persists today. Another

reason young people make-up the core visible demographic of attendees is simply the difficulty of festival life. It's no secret that young people generally fare better sleeping on hard surfaces, standing for long periods of time, and withstanding loud, chaotic stimuli to the senses. In addition to being physically taxing for older participants, the loudness and rowdiness inherent in huge crowds of young people may discourage them from wishing to participate. The music, though varied, trends on the side of more modern styles and younger artists, meaning that the pull of familiar names may not be as great for older participants. In this way, the festival as a rite attracts those people in need of the transition it can provide. The impetus for people to attend festivals, the bands with youthful core demographics, as well as external perception of the event as catering to young people, suggest that a self-selected a group of people is most likely to attend.

Beyond the practical concerns, however, some of the ideological discourses surrounding youthfulness also make youth the natural target for festival marketing. Because young people are consumers are assumed to have limited responsibility, ideas about recklessness and excess often get associated with the group. Additionally, youthful vibrancy underscores ideas people in the United States like to conflate with America, such as virility, good-natured boisterousness, and hopeful self-confidence.<sup>26</sup> We are repeatedly given passes for irresponsibility and frivolity, which are a major part of the atmosphere being emphasized by festivals. At a festival, participants get swept up in the atmosphere within the event. For me, though distinct moments imprint themselves in memory, each festival takes on a general air of carelessness, excitement, almost surrealism that marks it as distinct from daily life. Youth is hugely romanticized; people think they loved more deeply, believed more fully, and enjoyed life more openly when young, according to

messages in modern music, television, novels, and social media. With a rhetoric of festivals centering on the successful return to the “good things” in life, teen audiences become symbolic of these values and expectations.

Furthermore, teens by definition live in a liminal space. Not quite adults, yet beyond childhood, young adult identity is temporary. Despite relying largely on stereotypes that may not reflect our actual identities, youth remains associated with certain transitional elements. Our interests (often viewed as phases) are subject to change, our activities (often largely focused on school and social interaction) will shift, and our priorities (often deemed irresponsible) are frequently rearranged. It is because of this that we, like festivals, become symbolic of a number of optimistic ideologies running throughout American society. The significance of young people at festivals underlines festivals’ importance as rites of transition into adulthood; these rites move individuals from a liminal status into a normative role. The nature of the rite is to erase signs of identity as a prelude to inscribing new signs of identity on the individual.<sup>27</sup> Since young adults are usually unmarried, living sometimes with their parents, but also sometimes with peers or on their own, the relationships playing a major role in their lives do not replicate the idealized American nuclear family. And so, practically, ideologically, and symbolically, teens and young adults become the target of festival rhetoric.

Despite this, as mentioned, many attendees fall outside of the group. This implies a few things. Firstly, that the benefits of rites of passage such as a festival are not limited by age and appeal to people in various stages of life. Secondly, that popular music attracts listeners beyond the narrow one-generation focus, marking it as more powerful than other niche genres. And thirdly, that as a society the United States values the ideas appear in a

festival beyond the extent to which these ideals manifest in widespread customs. A lowering of inhibitions, fostered by the noisy, dynamic atmosphere created within festivals appeals to Americans regardless of age. Remembering Stearns' commentary on a shift toward repressive emotional climate in the U.S., I believe that events like festivals have increased in importance across age boundaries. While they provide a needed site of transformation for younger participants, they also create an overwhelming ambiance of collective emotional climate (*communitas*, more specifically) providing a necessary release for participants of all ages.

### **Levels of Participation**

Given their production of *communitas*—or collective effervescence (Durkheim 1995)—through the use of music, images, and rhetoric, music festivals form an ideal location for a rite of passage. And while for many participants inklings of the larger significance and impact of the event are clear, purchasing a ticket to a music festival will not so easily change one's life. There is a not insignificant element of choice within this particular rite of passage that informs the extent to which a participant is influenced by the experience. Various factors can act as barriers to participation, elements of a person's expectations for the event may prevent their full immersion, or they may simply choose not to participate in meaningful ways. It is important to consider the ways in which participation in a music festival as a rite of passage is not mandatory or culturally contrived, but rather reflects a willingness on the part of the participant to embrace the event as a whole.

Obstacles to *communitas* include being part of an exclusive and cut-off audience section, travelling with a large group that does not engage with others, or working a job

while attending the festival. All three of these scenarios create barriers to the anonymity needed to enter a liminal space. For people in the exclusive areas, *communitas* is lost to the extent that they are barricaded away from the main activities. Being a VIP participant implies class in what is otherwise an economically egalitarian setting. Similarly, travelling with huge numbers of friends prevents some of the organic community formation that occurs within campsites and watching shows. It is useful, then, to think about participation in terms of levels of engagement. That is, when some participants of a festival do not engage to the point of conscious contribution to the festival, their presence is one step removed, or they remain on the fringes of engagement, they affect the festival as a whole.

One of the most prevalent examples of incomplete *communitas* comes from the status of worker within a festival. The majority of festivals staff security, guest services, and concessions jobs from outside groups. These groups come from various nearby cities specifically to help man the festival. Some, like those I met who worked in the accessibility areas of the Firefly festival, are able to watch the show from their vantage point. Many others, however, like volunteers manning water stations and information booths, or security guards facing the crowd rather than the artists to catch crowd-surfing audience members or calm down a pushing match, cannot see the acts. In the case of concessions workers, their location behind the booths, which are strategically placed out of the immediate areas surrounding stages so as to create logical queuing and eating areas, are also unable to participate in the audience of a band's set. While working, volunteers, paid workers, and security are not taking part in the festival as participants, but rather as part of the presence that dictates the tone of the space. They provide sustenance, refill water

bottles, settle crowd unrest, and help patrons who need it, taking care of the more practical concerns that keep the festival in order.

Though workers engage in the festival during their time off, the way in which they experience the festival is differentiated due to their relationship with the behind the scenes elements of its production. I have never worked for a festival in a paid capacity, but I have volunteered at two, Bonnaroo and Flood City. I've found in both cases that volunteering gave me a crash course in the lay of the land. It also allowed me to take agency of my experience; I felt more inclined to talk to people I didn't know, and to wander off to see elements of the festival I had heard other people mentioning. Strangely, I felt pride in the smooth operation of Bonnaroo, taking personal satisfaction from collective successes. I imagine the stake a worker feels in the event is elevated when they help in a more serious role. So, while participating in a festival on the engagement level of a worker precludes a person from certain aspects of the rite, their role in helping others to enact it still may instill significant memories and associations nonetheless.

A different level of engagement stems from the type of ticket a person purchases. While the majority of festival participants purchase general admission tickets, there are a number of other ways to enter a festival. One such way is as a patron with accessibility concerns. My father, who needed ADA accommodation for our trip to Firefly, received access to services such as golf-cart transportation, a fast line to enter the venue, and raised platforms with seating. Speaking with an industry professional, whose company provided accessibility staff for festivals of varying sizes all across the U.S., it became clear that the purpose of his staff was to ensure that patrons with accessibility concerns could engage as completely as possible with the festival, but still have access to additional amenities.

Another type of ticket gives people access to VIP sections. Here the removal of a layer of engagement results from their physical separation from the main audience. Roped off VIP areas place these participants in less crowded areas with generally more seating, occasionally also providing air-conditioned lounges. Being in such sections also frequently gives patrons access to separate bathrooms and showers, or free water bottles, and other such “luxuries” within a festival setting. In this manner elite patrons escape the more uncomfortable aspects of a festival, which underscore the experience as singular and outside of the dominant culture. In this way, some elements of the experience vary from participant to participant based on the type of ticket they hold. As I have never attended a festival with a VIP or an ADA pass personally, I cannot speak to the experience. Drawing from my father’s experience as well as a friend, who responded to a survey I presented asking about festival experiences with details of his VIP trip to Coachella, the main areas in which their response was different from others were on matters of comfort. They each still cited the music, atmosphere, and people participating with them as vital to a positive experience. In this manner, different types of passes, along with roles in putting on the festival, create differences in the level on which participants interact with the rite. The differences, however, do not invalidate the rite.

### **Choosing to Participate**

Additionally, some people’s experience may not extend to a rite of passage simply because their expectations for a festival do not allow it to. Whether stemming from a resistance to the campground space (like staying at a nearby hotel), or coming to see only one artist in particular, or a number of other reasons, some people’s experience with a festival may be truncated as they eliminate elements conducive to creating the liminal space.

For example, a couple I met at Firefly had only purchased tickets to see Paul McCartney; they said their festival tickets were cheaper than the stadium seats at a venue he would play later that month, and they felt they could catch a few other artists while at it.<sup>28</sup> Despite their interest in McCartney, they didn't feel the need to engage completely to experience the festival. They remarked that they had attended Firefly since its inception, but felt that the atmosphere was declining, and now they only came down to the grounds to view particular artists. While they would assert that their negative experience stemmed from the festival atmosphere, it appears to me that their failure to engage with elements of the festival, notably camping and the marathon element of seeing multiple shows, fundamentally changed the way in which they interacted with it.

Attending a music festival solely to see a few artists, or because one's friends want to, or any number of other reasons may prevent a person from joining into the rite because he or she does not necessarily receive the range of elements that create the state of being required. This doesn't bar such participants from benefitting from components of the festival-as-rite —the entertainment value, exciting artists, good memories with friends— but it may prevent the more profound impact festivals have the potential to have. While the need to elect to participate in the rite of passage presented by music festivals may lessen the number of people who experience it, choice also serves to deepen the impact of the festival. Where other rites of passage are culturally constructed, such as those handed down through religious practices (e.g. Communion) or law-based tradition (e.g. Marriage Licenses), an elective rite holds a few advantages. First choosing to participate ensures that those within the festival have a preliminary buy-in to its impact. Beyond that, festivals continue to grow and become more prevalent in the United States indicating that this type



of rite appeals to younger generations, where others may not (Putnam 2000). Choice is significant because in a culture where rites of passage are arbitrary and peer-driven, the choice to demarcate significant growth on one's own among peers rather than elders, denotes a shift in societal understanding of how Americans pass from one status in life to another.

## **Chapter 4: Festival Imagery**

Despite creating a space well suited to liminal experiences, music festivals do not inherently function as a rite of passage. A large portion of their import comes from the marketing utilized to sell the event and the imagery used within the event to create meaning. In terms of symbolism, ideology, and cultural references, festivals are a mixed bag, borrowing from distinct cultural groups, religions, and folklore, but attention to the representations created by festival promoters illuminates some of the ways in which the events perpetuate their own significance.<sup>29</sup> Analysis of various festival websites, documentaries about festivals, and marketing emails received from those I have attended, revealed the use of the following strategies in selling—literally and figuratively—the festival experience: inclusion, exclusivity, vivacity, transformation, and fear of missing out (colloquially, FOMO).

Though appearing contradictory upon first look, inclusion and exclusivity actually work very well together in marketing a festival. As discussed, teens, or people in a liminal phase, seek to define themselves in relationship to their peers. For this reason utilizing a rhetoric of inclusion becomes an obvious way to create a significant space. In Burning Man, a festival in the deserts of Nevada, this kind of unrestricted acceptance is represented by

one of their Ten Principles, “Radical Inclusion.”<sup>30</sup> In the Bonnaroo Code of Bonnaroo, this is stated as a desire to “play as a team.”<sup>31</sup> For other festivals lacking a written code or identified core principles, the rhetoric of involvement can be found in video footage of strangers high-fiving one another, or use of the words “oneness” and “community.” A participant in my survey wrote about his favorite part of the Creation Festival in Mount Union, Pennsylvania, saying he valued, “the sense of community there was whenever the music/artists were singing and everyone is jumping and singing along.” This boisterous *communitas*, as well as the enthusiasm with which my friend remembers it, underscores a need for connection being satisfied in the festival rite.

Additionally festivals place high importance on the concept of expressing oneself or “letting your freak flag fly.” By festival rules anything goes, as long as it doesn’t hurt others or ruin the “vibe,” in other words the positive atmosphere, by upsetting other participants. For example, a participant in my survey wrote the following: “my least favorite part of festivals is dealing with drunk a-holes who want to push their way to the front of the stage after you’ve been standing there for 5 hours in the hot sun,” demonstrating some vibe-ruining behavior. Within festivals, individuality is not only accepted, but celebrated and encouraged as long as it is non-conventional and non-normative: outlandish outfits, skills, or dancing garner largely positive attention. On the subject of acceptance, one respondent to my survey wrote that their favorite part of the Outsidelands festival in San Francisco, California was “making friends with strangers and the lack of judgment.” Another remarked on the friendly, open atmosphere of Bonnaroo by saying there were “so many friendly people who just wanted to dance and make friends.” A heightened level of freedom or self-

expression reflects the goals of the event, and so, with an “anything goes” attitude, the collective group appears to embrace difference.

On the other hand, a rhetoric of exclusivity also plays an influential role in the promotion of festivals. Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival in Indio, California underscores this tactic well. One of few festivals that can boast a long list of celebrity sightings, Coachella appeals to the “wannabe” tendencies many people share. Coachella creates a lot of publicity, with people who have attended as well as those who have not feeling a sense mysteriousness and novelty at its execution. Coachella has grown to a brand name, associated with clothing lines,<sup>32</sup> articles recounting stories about the artists, celebrity sightings,<sup>33</sup> strange outfit choices,<sup>34</sup> and quizzes ridiculing the breadth of unknown artists.<sup>35</sup> No matter the context, people talk about and keep tabs on Coachella all over the country. A similarly alluring aura surrounds festivals like Burning Man, known for its intensity and leave-no-trace approach to festival life,<sup>36</sup> Lollapalooza in Chicago, which can tout worldwide touring stops, or South by Southwest (stylized SXSW) in Austin, Texas for its expansive use of media and integration of various technical mediums.<sup>37</sup> An image of glamour and prestige makes some festivals *the* show to see—and to be seen attending. Attending a, for lack of a better term, ‘name brand’ festival creates an image tacked upon the millennial generation—someone on the cutting edge of cool in pop culture, capturing their experience live on social media, and sharing space with famous names.

For smaller festivals, the idea of exclusive takes a different form. Since many bands make a living off of touring festivals all summer, events can appear similar to one another even down to the performers. Without huge names to draw in crowds, exclusivity in smaller festivals requires presenting the event as singular. Pushing the jam-packed lineup,

history of innovation, unique food, spectacular art installations, or whatever exceptional item they can claim, festivals build upon the unique to stand out positively. From the celebrated “spicy pie” pizza at Bonnaroo, to the giant, illuminated laughing Buddha statue at All Good, certain elements of a festival space serve the purpose of distinguishing a festival from others. While the experience may be essentially the same at other festivals, certain elements will not be, forcing to the forefront endearing quirks that differentiate the event by creating an internal cultural landscape. Not only then, smaller festivals claim, will this festival be a place that truly accepts you into their renowned community as you are, but it will be the *only* place that does so.

Another tactic festival promoters employ to brand the festival experience centers on the concept of vivacity. In this usage, vivacity refers to evidence of a certain zest for life; the constant motion, unstoppable noise, and boundless energy espoused within a festival imbue the event with a tangible quality. I’ve found it is present in the unprompted cheers from small groups of friends, in the careless dancing barefoot in the grass, and in the running, skipping, jumping attendees resort to when trying to quickly get to a set they want to see. Vivacity is the condition of *feeling* alive, feeling as if in that moment I am truly living. As discussed, young people make up the main demographic for festivals. While attendees of all ages engage with the rite for similar reasons, linking the concept of festival to youthfulness gives advertising a few perks. Music is fun, summer is fun, friends and beer are fun, and camping is fun. With all of these components, promoters argue, festivals have to be super fun. Imagery of the sun shining down on tanned, smiling faces, bodies dancing on the dusty dirt, and jumping in the pulsing bright lights as one crowd all reiterate the

insistence on vitality. People like to be with the party, with the laughter, and festivals appear to be that place.

Though this marketing may be simple to execute, as participants tend to visibly enjoy festival and one can find an abundance of photos and film with smiling attendees, equating festivals with vivacity serves a few important purposes. By appealing to sensibilities about fun and joy, marketers can target people who feel those things are lacking in their every day lives. Festivals then, when undertaken as a vacation, or something to anticipate as being better than reality, evoke the post show nostalgia that makes them so effective. Another perk of associating festivals with boisterousness is that it heightens the experience; since an attendee is inundated with images of the loudness, the dancing, the intensity, they seek an experience to fulfill those images. In this manner the rite is enhanced as each participant finds ways to elevate the experience, elevating the experience of the collective group as well.

A fourth tactic utilized to isolate festivals from the “normal” is space. Different spaces underline the distinctive characters of different festivals. Places like Lucidity music festival in Santa Barbara, California are marketed as an “open-source” experience<sup>38</sup> whereas Lightning in a Bottle, in Bradley California, creates a special space by referring to the spiritual.<sup>39</sup> In both cases, their promotion teams assert, the focus on and elevation of the physical dimension of the collective experience allows the event to transcend an average concert and deeply affect the participant. As a participant quoted in “Under the Electric Sky,” a documentary about Electric Daisy Carnival says, “If you go back to the purpose of cathedrals and what people were going for, it was to feel small and spiritually

alive.”<sup>40</sup> Marketing a festival by implying there is something spiritual about it provides a unique validation.

The use of a ringing endorsement about the transformational power of an event greatly elevates its significance, even equating it to a religious experience. Being exposed to words like “life-changing” and “momentous,” festival attendees buy in to the concept that improvements in their lives or life philosophies can be traced back to festivals.<sup>41</sup> Though the phrase rite of passage is not so frequently used in regards to popular culture, festival marketing and participants alike subscribe to the idea that the event can have a larger impact than simply an enjoyable vacation with some good music. This larger impact, when posited as both a mission and an expectation within the festival, indicates that marketers and promoters are well aware of how to “sell” their product, the festival.

Finally, the most common method through which festivals create buzz and maintain patronage is to play to the fear most people have of missing out. The welcoming inclusivity, illustrious exclusivity, enticing vivacity, and significant transformation all work together to make festivals an important place to be. By catering to these ideas in one complex event, festivals turn even concert nonbelievers into participants. This, more than the other qualities, serves to bring participants back to the space again and again. Even though a person may have experienced a festival, when festival promoters set up another great lineup, or adding an extra stage, or day, or weekend, this causes a concern that the past festival was not the best one. Convinced that by returning or choosing a different festival they will heighten their experience even further, attendees choose to go through the whole experience again.

By representing a festival as a unique combination of the five enticing components, despite the plethora of other festivals, some festival marketing teams play upon the relationship between festival attendee and festival experience. To convince a patron that a particular festival is different from the others, festivals hold up ideas about community and philosophy, claiming an independent edge that the mainstream music scene allegedly doesn't have. It would seem that with each festival claiming essentially the same principles at the core, like free exchange of art and ideas, presence in the moment, and kindness, the market would become saturated with the events. While the number of festivals, or at least the number of people attending festivals, each summer in the United States continues to increase, it would appear that the draw of inclusion, exclusivity, vivacity, transformation, and fear of missing out are as enticing as ever. The desire for transformational, liminal, communitas-driven experiences remains potent. All of these ideas are more powerful because the articulation of them gives a vocabulary for participants to talk about something profound in a way that does not appear disingenuous.

## **Chapter 5: Music**

What separates popular music festivals from other rites of passage, and elevates them, stems from their central element: music. Music fulfills many different roles within any given event. Examining the incorporation of performers, the presence of amateur and radio music, and music's emotional qualities illuminates the meaning of music within a festival setting. Foremost in a successful festival is procurement of a lineup of artists which excites a festival's target audience to underscore the marketing of the festival. Some promoters focus on a genre of music, for example Electronic Dance Music (EDM) festivals,

which market revelatory, cathartic experiences to complement the selection of rhythmic, computerized music performances by DJs. For large-scale popular music festivals this means big, well-celebrated names, usually of varied genres and generational pull (like Elton John, Jack White, and Kanye West all in one place, who held the headline spots for the Bonnaroo I attended in 2014).<sup>42</sup> For smaller festivals this often means bands with a strong local following or hot new artists, and smaller genre spread like the All Good lineup in which I recognized only one band before attending.<sup>43</sup> Filling up lineups in all types of festivals are groups who make their money touring on festivals. That is, rather than booking stand-alone gigs, a large element of these bands' exposure comes from a summer's worth of festival appearances.

Much thought goes into the festival lineup; considerations such as the type of festival (country or electronic dance music? family-oriented or teen-centric? Located in an urban environment or near a beach or deep in the woods?), the success of the festival (how much of the budget can practically be spent on securing a given artist? How much will tickets to the festival reasonably sell for? About how many tickets will sell?), and the timing (what other festivals are occurring in the same month? The same week?) all play a role in the artists courted to perform. More important than practical considerations however, the role of the artist within a festival space is to act as a reflection of the space itself.

### **Artist Roles**

For some artists this is a matter of reflecting the population. Musicians of a similar age to the major demographics within a festival (mid teens to early twenties) give a sense of familiarity and camaraderie between the audience and the artist. For young artists festivals sometimes offer their first performance of this scope. Since the stages are all



outdoors, playing a festival gig automatically presents a larger show than some of the bands are accustomed to performing. At Firefly, one of my favorite artists, Andrew McMahon<sup>44</sup> remarked at the size of the crowd as his second set at a more intimate stage. He beamed as the absolutely packed (and sweaty, and over-heated) crowd sang along to the oldest of his songs, and he stayed for a few extra minutes to sing songs we wanted to hear. Even if the patrons are milling around in the back, waiting for another performance to start, the largeness of festival stages and consistency of movement elicit charged performances from the artists, who themselves seem to be able to feel the openness fostered by the liminality of the space.

For other artists, the role becomes a matter of expressing certain ideologies that align with those being exploited within a festival space. Though chatter with the audience between songs is commonplace in most concerts settings, I was struck by some of the messages being presented at festivals in particular. Rather than entertaining the audience with a brief anecdote about their time in the city or about the writing of a song, bands were more likely to comment upon the status of being at a festival. For example, shouting out simple advice which aligns with the aims of many festivals, such as “radiate that positivity to everyone around you,” heard to coupled with Bonnaroo’s “radiate positivity” purpose statement,<sup>45</sup> or “stay good” and “be kind” coincided with All Good’s brand. Some artists favor affirmations of weirdness and the classic crowd compliments like “you’re beautiful, keep dancing” –all of which positively reinforce the audience’s role in creating the liminal festival space. Artists also commiserate about the weather (“it’s sweaty and hot and muddy, just like a proper English festival. It’s brilliant!” Bastille remarked during their Firefly set), underscoring the sense of overcoming some unpleasantness for the sake of the experience.

Artists will also sometimes wax poetic about being together with this mix of people, like a group at All Good who remarked, “Something about playing out here under the sun makes me feel one hundred times better. And to be playing for a crowd that doesn’t give a f\*\*\* about what anyone else thinks, well that’s a beautiful thing.” All of this reinforcement legitimates positive feelings of *communitas* and effervescence being experienced by the participants.

Many older favorites underscore the important element of nostalgia within a festival space. Nostalgia plays two key roles within a festival rite. On the one hand, its function in creating the past-as-good helps to continue to integrate the transformation undergone at the festival into the post-event status. I found myself seeking certain playlists, or holding on to miscellaneous keepsakes, hoping to conjure fond memories of my festival trips. Additionally, in many forms of vacation people often look for the excuse to unplug, to return to a “simpler” lifestyle. Lacking solid buildings, reliable technology, and some basic amenities, festivals fit the bill of a step backward into a better time, a time looked upon through rose-tinted glasses. Tied up in the images of returning to an uncomplicated era throughout the event, older performers, who attendees have often grown up with their parents listening to, like Paul McCartney, Lionel Richie, and Robert Plant create a lot of interest, merging youth into an older generation.<sup>46</sup> That is part of the incorporation into a new status. The sets or older artists showcase songs to which a larger percentage of the crowd knows the words and draw more people for the novelty of seeing them perform, elevating the experience of *communitas* within the audience. Personal favorites do this well also, particularly bands that were popular during a person’s youth. In my experience many of the sets that I remember the most clearly were those performed by favorite bands I had

first heard of back in my Warped Tour days, and many of the people I've spoken to felt similarly. One respondent to my festival survey describes her favorite performers at Lollapalooza (a large festival in Chicago, with traveling auxiliary festivals) by writing that the crowd "was very fluid/moving. You could feel giant crowd [*sic*] pulsing." Whether they are huge headliners, or just an old favorite, songs that harken back to youthful memories imbue the event with positive associations.

### **Sources of Music**

Music is also heard at all hours of the day; from guitars and personal speakers in the campsite, to all of the day's festival lineup, to late night improvisational DJ sets lasting early into the morning. Somehow, in a space that is wide open the noise is cacophonous, and aids in the sense of constant movement within the festival atmosphere. Within a campground a person is not able to move far without hearing someone strum an acoustic guitar or tap along on a small drum. While skill level varies, many people kill time between sets or while cooking by singing old favorites or just getting a few people together and 'jamming'. The aim of this isn't to push one's music (though some musicians do have mixtapes they want to sell or distribute) but rather to connect with those around you. It's safe to bet that everyone at the festival is a music lover of some sort or other, so instruments make an easy conversation starter. Along with this, and more common, is the playing of radios or iPods within the campgrounds. The atmosphere in the early afternoon feels like a football tailgate; from the latent excitement building for the main event (the concerts), to barbeque style cooking, to the presence of time-killing games like beanbag tosses and Frisbee. Aiding in this, groups of participants play music at various points throughout the day. Hopefully one's neighbors stick to quiet acoustic in the morning, and turn off the dance music before

it gets too late at night, but if a group of people is in their campsite at any point it's likely there is music playing.

Another element of the soundscape within a festival is the barrage of noise. Made up of the boisterous chatter of thousands of people, the whistling wind and outdoor noises, and interspersed with snippets of music from those sources described above, the consistent background noise within a festival also serve an important function.

Overwhelmed senses are an experience that aids in creating the liminal and cathartic space. The sounds underscore the vitality of the event and emphasize the sheer numbers of people participating in the collective spirit. Between the amateur musicians and radio devices, incessant background noise, and, of course, the musicians at the heart of the event, festivals are almost never silent, but it would appear that patrons want noise, music, and motion.

This urge to add to the general barrage of noise is intriguing, because there is certainly no shortage of music when the festival itself schedules acts from about noon through one in the morning. But despite the almost constant wall of sound, the atmosphere feels most relaxed with a soundtrack, which serves many functions. In addition to being an easy conversation starter, some patrons play music of artists they hope to see later to build excitement. Also the type of music could imply some markers about a person's interests. In this way, though the liminal space has dissolved material markers of their outside identities, individuals can seek out others similar to them via music tastes. Other participants put on music to imply a sense of welcoming; a group that's sitting around with a couple of beers and music blasting seems much more friendly and open to visitors than a group talking quietly. It's also a strategy for creating a bit of privacy. In an open

campground, conversations carry pretty easily. While it's no guarantee that your neighbors won't listen in, a bit of music can help to make a conversation feel more private, or prevent you from feeling like you are eavesdropping. I know personally I listened to music at night through my headphones to help drown out the sounds of people still up and about. Festival websites advise use of earplugs for this purpose, as drunk people have little concept of reasonable night-time volume, and everyone's idea of "bedtime" varies drastically.

### **Music's Properties**

Most importantly, music within a festival space is vital simply because of some of the properties inherent to music as an art form. Festivals function as rites foremost because they create a liminal space and build *communitas*. Music aids in doing this in a handful of ways. First music is emotionally driven. Textures within the sounds chosen sound naturally happy or sad to us, based on the keys selected. Lyrically, musicians write about universal emotions, like love, grief, anticipation, happiness, and other familiar sensations. Because of these things, people are attracted to music because of how it makes them feel. Thinking back to Stearns' comments on an emotionally repressed society in the United States, external expression of emotion provides an outlet that is otherwise condemned.

Some of my earliest memories include songs: nursery rhymes, camp songs, my parents old CDs, the lyrics or tunes of which remain imprinted in my head today despite no conscious decision to remember them. That power, to evoke memories and emotions, remains unique to music as an art form, making it hugely impactful when used in a rite. Art is created to be experienced and listening to music engages a person on more levels than most art forms, which also helps to create transformative spaces. Where theater or fine art

causes observers to watch and listen, music has the added dimension of movement and reaction. It is appropriate to cheer when listening to a concert, it is appropriate to sing along at the choruses of a loud song, it is appropriate to dance. None of those reactions are out of the ordinary, and they cause people to react to music externally where most art forms only allows for internal reaction. Reacting next to others creates a natural dialogue, which can be voiced or simply physical, that connects participants to one another. Less mentally driven evaluation is necessary to experience music in a concert setting, which allows it to transcend critique and be felt more viscerally.

Additionally, music genres become associated with certain imagery. For this reason, country or folk based acts seem to make sense playing an afternoon show under the sun, acoustic guitar pairing nicely with a cool beer and a seat in the grass, while DJs only take up late night slots with their extensive light shows and pulsating beats perfect for vigorous dancing. A lot of this imagery of a great concert experience is tied up in large, engaged, tightly packed crowds, which festival style set-ups induce. In festivals I've found idle naps in the grass, sporadic dancing with arms out-stretched to the sky, endless photographs filled with smiling faces and sparkling eyes. I've made fast friends in line for a food truck and shared high-fives with a stranger who liked my hair. I've talked philosophy and destiny as the sun rose with people whose names I'd just learned, the hours passing unnoticed. Without the music festival, and ideas tied up in what that meant, none of those experiences would have occurred. Music connects people in a manner that other art forms do not. Concerts lower inhibitions of attendees, as evidences by the dancing, closeness, and singing they evoke. When listening to music recreationally, one is not thinking or analyzing; he is instead listening, responding to visceral emotions, watching the performers, the crowd, and

the lights, and kinesthetically connecting to the music all at once. A participant engaged in this manner, engaged in the idyllic images of a “good” concert, aids in the sensation that a festival is special. And, indeed, as music so deeply affects its listeners, festivalgoers do experience a uniquely moving, liberating experience.

Music also helps to detach a participant from her or his role as an individual, helping to foster liminality. Once within a crowd, a person becomes a part of the collective, no longer interacting with an artist on a personal level as we might while listening to the group at home. Any “you’re beautiful”s thrown out by the artist, then, strengthen the latent camaraderie within an audience; you, yourself, are not visible to the artist, but you, with others, are, and together you are spectacular. The frame of self-reference or identity then shifts from oneself to peers, placing value on one’s presence with respect to others. The artist can see you, those around you can feel you, but you are not really you; that is, the individual with a specific identity is transformed into the individual as part of the whole.

Èmile Durkheim in his book, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, identifies the power of this phenomenon in the execution of various types of festivals. He writes, “In every case, [a festival’s] effect is to bring individuals together, to put the masses into motion, and thus induce a state of effervescence—sometimes even delirium—which is not without kinship to the religious state. Man is carried outside of himself, pulled away from his ordinary occupations and preoccupations.”<sup>47</sup> The state of collective effervescence is liberating. Connection with those around you here is purely *communitas*, it is spontaneous, anonymous, based on proximity. My festival experience features you, an unnamed person singing along next to me, just as surely as my presence affects your experience. In helping

to create a transformative space, an individual's role in the concert experience becomes a means to affect many others through reciprocal engagement.

Excitement, boisterousness, wistfulness, or resentment, all of which may be evoked by the language and musical choices of various songs are at once present in the individual and the audience collectively. Any crowd excitement reflects the emotions stirred within many people, not just one; so, for example, when a popular song plays, the energy within an audience is heightened. Choice of particular imagery from the light show behind a band, the way in which members move about the stage, or alterations they make to the lyrics all help to dictate the emotions a crowd should be feeling. Even a song that a particular person may not know is made more enjoyable by the energy given off from the people who know the music and the lyrics.

For me this happened in seeing a group called The Killers, who performed the closing headline set at Firefly in 2015, play their most popular song "Mr. Brightside." Along with the pulsating, insistent beat I can't help but dance to, the crowd made that performance unforgettable. From the beginning of the first chorus the entire crowd, which felt expansive, endless, shouted along the words as if our lives depended on it. Thousands of illuminated glow sticks rained down up me, handfuls thrown into the air from feet behind, and then throw again feet in front, as people scrambled to pick them up and pass them along. The slippery mud from the stormy weekend caught in my shoes and splattered up my legs as everyone jumped, together. The image, burned so clearly into my mind, felt for a minute as if everyone in the world was there with me, belting out the lyrics I had known since my Warped Tour days, feeling connected and young and entranced. It is for this reason that the quintessential image of masses of people with lighters in the air



swaying in a dark arena concert venue evokes a deep sense of emotion, even without the context of a song or band. Music in a crowd is heightened in a way that can only be experienced; the palpable connection to everyone around remains without parallel in any other experience I have had.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

In my study of festivals I began with an experience. Singular in its significance to me, my trip to Bonnaroo marked a profound shift in my relationship to the world. As I have written, spurred on by a fascination with the power of a seemingly ordinary event, I undertook an ethnographic study of festivals as a phenomenon. Coming to the literature surrounding rites of passage, it became clear that festivals fulfilled the requirements, and thus function as a rite of passage in the contemporary United States. Through collection of traditional data, like a survey and objective observation of clothing, conversation, location, and more, paired with subjectively collected data, like accounts of my own responses to festival life, and the images presented by festivals themselves through marketing material, I sought to examine the functions of popular music festivals through an analytic lens. Festivals constitute a liminal space, complete with requisite elements of separation, transition, and incorporation required to fully immerse a participant.

Elements of separation include physical boundaries to festival entry and subversion of class-based living structures. Transition, the experience central to a rite of passage, is created through creation of internal landmarks, symbols, and lexicons that create liminality within the space, and an emphasis on the singularity of the event. Finally incorporation back into the dominant culture occurs upon leaving the festival, but one does not exit

without connection to the experience. In this way elements of incorporation include nostalgic memory of the event and collection of physical mementos by which to remember the experience.

Also important in signifying festivals as a rite of passage is the participation within a festival. The audience, made up largely of young adults who are chosen as the marketing target based on dominant cultural narratives of vitality and youthfulness, play an integral role in the experience of the collective group. Some people within a festival space, such as workers, patrons requiring accessibility assistance, and VIP ticketholders engage in the festival on a different level from those experiencing general admission, but their place in the event cannot be dismissed. Though they may not be as fully immersed in the symbolism and meanings of the festival rite, they are vital to enacting it; their presences contributes to the collective group, influencing the rite as it is lived by others. No matter the level with which a patron engages with all aspects of a festival, the most significant element of participation stems from their choice to engage. While a festival will remain enjoyable for attendees who only stay for part of the event, or sleep in a hotel, for example, the power to transform and profoundly influence lies in full submersion into the separate world of festival life.

Creating the liminal space of a festival comes from participants within the space, but is also largely impacted by expectations for the space as dictated through marketing. Festival promotion agencies utilize a number of tactics and mediums to allure potential attendees, but a few major components of festival marketing arise. First, through welcoming rhetoric, laid-back expectations of behavior, and acceptance of clothing, which would appear odd outside of the festival, events market inclusivity. By presenting a unique

feature or star-studded line-up, festivals also utilize exclusivity as a means to attract patronage. Thirdly, through emphasis on the fundamentally vigorous and lively spirit of live music events, marketers present a vitality that entices participants. Another rhetoric evoked to create excitement for a festival is language of transformation. With some patrons comparing the event to religion, as well as spiritual language in posters, films, and mission statements, some festivals draw upon a desire for change in self to attract attendees. Finally, festivals employ a fear of missing out, brought up through expansion, new features, and improved line-ups from year to year in order to create a repeat market in which participants return to engage again and again.

Like returning home from a boat ride to lay awake feeling phantom waves rocking you to sleep, music festivals linger. They linger in the immediate ringing in your ears brought on by sudden silence. They linger in the disposal of mud-ruined clothing and a much needed shower upon returning home. They linger in inescapable recollections of a performance when a familiar voice plays over the radio. This resonance, the ability to pop up to influence an audience member long after she has left, marks festivals as a significant experience. Because of this, profound engagement with the elements of a music festival constitutes a rite of passage in American culture.

Made up of elements which underscore two central requirements for rites of passage, liminality and *communitas*, festivals comprise a communal, nebulous space in which participants can release emotions, express alternate versions of themselves, and experience life outside of conventional American culture. Opportunities to do this are few, though they do exist. Churches, for example, offer belonging into a community and spiritual connection, but lack the ability to provide anonymity or subvert cultural norms. Sporting

events, while great for collective out-pouring of emotions, fail to create a narrative to which participants can attach themselves. Camping offers opportunities to meet new people and disconnect from technology, but does not provide entertainment over which to connect with others that empowers festivals to be influential. Music festivals, however, feature elements of the above activities, with the added central component, music, causing them to function most completely as a rite of passage.

In a society lacking universal rites, like that of the United States, people seek alternative means to mark the growth and transformation that occurs over time. Participation in a cultural phenomenon such as the music festival serves the purpose of celebrating transformation that religious, societal, and governmentally induced demarcations fail to. Festivals, so well suited to liminal statuses, foster the critical self-reflection and societal analysis crucial to a functional society.

And so, in their execution, festivals become so much more than an entertaining way to pass a weekend. In titling this paper I chose a song title from Elton John, the headliner at my first festival-as-rite experience, Bonnaroo 2014. Like John's wonderment at the object of his love, a festival experience motivates in participants a tangible, though hard to define, emotionally weighty manner. The whirlwind, encompassing trip into the liminal space, at once shared with thousands of other people and deeply individual, instills in the participant deep knowledge of a personal change. As Elton John sang "Your Song" during the encore of his Bonnaroo set, members of the audience set off floating lanterns. The image of those golden lights lifting into the air during one of my favorite songs imprinted itself in my memory. Something about the way they looked, or the way, so many memories later, glow sticks rained from the sky, or the crowd sang together for what felt like eternity,

created the ephemeral effervescence; the momentary, but profound connection of *communitas*. As the lyrics to the title track say, festivals stir something indescribable “deep inside” of participants, transforming their interaction with the society around them. And so, as cliché as it may be, as will any good passage, you may leave a festival, but it never leaves you.

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<sup>1</sup> Umbel, “6 Factors Driving the Massive Growth of Music Festivals”, <https://www.umbel.com/blog/entertainment/6-factors-driving-massive-growth-of-music-festivals/>.

<sup>2</sup> Tapestries are large, thinly woven pieces of cloth with elaborate patterns. Many of those being sold at festivals are mass-produced and used as blankets, to create shade in a campsite, and to sit on the ground, among other uses.

<sup>3</sup> Much of my data came from fieldwork in the form of extensive notes taken by me, a survey of acquaintances, and personal narrative accounts of my experience, making stories the following a vital source for examining the activities and the emotions occurring within festivals. Festivals examined included Bonnaroo (2014), Firefly (2015), All Good (2015), and Flood City Music Festival (2015).

<sup>4</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1922).

<sup>5</sup> James Davies, “Introduction”, *Emotions in the Field: The Psychology and Anthropology of Fieldwork Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), edited by James Davies and Dimitrina Spencer.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Recent work in cultural anthropology emphasizes the importance of the writer’s personal experiences; these experiences are a crucial element of the interpretive strategies used; see Garcia 2012; Luhrmann 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Steve Knopper, “Music Festivals Enjoy Record Expansion in 2012,” *Rolling Stone Magazine*, September 28, 2012, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/music-festivals-enjoy-record-expansion-in-2012-20120928>.

<sup>9</sup> Steven Johnson, *Everything Bad is Good for You* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005), 14.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Stearns, *American Cool* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 279-280.

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<sup>11</sup> Conrad Phillip Kottack, *Cultural Anthropology* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 661.

<sup>12</sup> Arnold van Gennep, *Rites de Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1960).

<sup>13</sup> Victor Turner, "Chapter 3: Liminality and Communitas", *The Ritual Process* (New York: Aldine Publishing Co., 1969).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Turner, "Chapter 4: *Communitas*: Model and Process"

<sup>17</sup> Ronald L. Grimes, *Reinventing Rites of Passage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 94.

<sup>18</sup> TommorowWorld website in their after movie, <http://www.tomorrowworld.com/>.

<sup>19</sup> Bonnaroo Code, <http://www.bonnaroo.com/festival-info#the-code>.

<sup>20</sup> Instagram is a popular photo sharing social media site. Users add a "hashtag" to their content using the "#" symbol in order to organize posts on the site into categories. By clicking on the tag any person can see all of the photos with the same hashtag.

<sup>21</sup> Nielsen's Audience Insight Reports on Music Festivals, <http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/news/2015/for-music-fans-the-summer-is-all-a-stage.html>, 2015.

<sup>22</sup> Nielsen's Total Audience Report, <http://www.nielsen.com/content/dam/corporate/us/en/reports-downloads/2016-reports/q4-2015-total-audience-report.pdf>, 2015.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Hine, *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager* (New York: Bard, 1999).

<sup>24</sup> Nielsen's Millennial Report, <http://www.nielsen.com/content/dam/corporate/us/en/reports-downloads/2014%20Reports/nielsen-millennial-report-feb-2014.pdf>, 2014.

<sup>25</sup> Ronald D. Cohen, *A History of Folk Music Festivals in the United States: Feasts of Musical Celebration* (Landham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 49-51.

<sup>26</sup> Hine, *The Rise and Fall*.

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<sup>27</sup> Turner, “Chapter 3: Liminality and Communitas.”

<sup>28</sup> Paul McCartney, one quarter of the Beatles, began performing rock’n’roll in mid 1960s. Given the prominence of the group, his presence at any festival draws a lot of buzz.

<sup>29</sup> It is worth noting that many festivals and attendees have drawn criticism for insensitivity and cultural appropriation. From fashion versions of Native American headdresses, to a large laughing Buddha statue, I’ve witnessed this manifest in a number of ill-advised gimmicks. It is my belief that these are the result of ignorance rather than malice, and that their presence speaks to a desire to add weight to the event through the adoption of spiritual symbolism. Nonetheless, I believe festivals transcend entertainment to become a rite of passage *in spite* of such appropriative actions, not because of them.

<sup>30</sup> Burning Man Website, Culture Section, <http://burningman.org/culture/>.

<sup>31</sup> Bonnaroo website, Bonnaroo Code section, <http://www.bonnaroo.com/festival-info#the-code>.

<sup>32</sup> H&M Loves Coachella Campaign, H&M Outfitters, <http://www.hm.com/us/hm-loves-coachella>.

<sup>33</sup> Gavin Edwards, Steve Appleford, Jeff Weiss, “40 Best Things We Saw at Coachella 2015”, *Rolling Stone Magazine*, April 13, 2015, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/coachella-2015-best-things-we-saw-20150413>.

<sup>34</sup> Amy Odell, “The 21 Worst Fashion Trends at Coachella”, BuzzFeed, April 15, 2013, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/amyodell/the-21-worst-fashion-trends-at-coachella#.lfAJdKakM>.

<sup>35</sup> Jenna Mullens, “Coachella Lineup Quiz: Is this a Real Band Name or Did We Make it Up?” *E News*, January 6, 2015, <http://www.eonline.com/news/611636/coachella-lineup-quiz-is-this-a-real-band-name-or-did-we-make-it-up>.

<sup>36</sup> Julia Allison, “Progeny of Burning Man: Burning Man Spawns New Age Festivals”, *New York Times*, September 24, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/25/fashion/Burning-Man-Creates-a-New-Breed-of-Festivals.html>.

<sup>37</sup> Farhad Manjoo, “At SXSW a Shift from Apps to a Tech Lifestyle”, *New York Times*, March 16, 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/17/technology/at-sxsw-a-shift-from-apps-to-innovation.html?rref=collection%2Fnewseventcollection%2Fsxsw-south-by-southwest&action=click&contentCollection=arts&region=stream&module=stream\\_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=10&pgtype=collection](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/17/technology/at-sxsw-a-shift-from-apps-to-innovation.html?rref=collection%2Fnewseventcollection%2Fsxsw-south-by-southwest&action=click&contentCollection=arts&region=stream&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=10&pgtype=collection).

<sup>38</sup> Lucidity Festival website, Who Are We? Section, <http://2016.lucidityfestival.com/about-us/>.

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<sup>39</sup> Lighting in a Bottle website, Experience section, <http://lightninginabottle.org/>.

<sup>40</sup> *EDC 2013: Under the Electric Sky*, documentary, directed by Dan Cutforth and Jane Lipsitz, (2014, Las Vegas: Haven Entertainment, Insomniac Events.), film.

<sup>41</sup> In fact, the surge to Evangelical Christianity in the United States followed from hippie spirituality movements in the late sixties. Much like festivals, Evangelicalism offered *communitas* and wonderment (Luhmann 2012).

<sup>42</sup> Elton John, from whose song the title of this paper is taken, has performed soft rock and glam rock since the early 1960s and is known for his piano ballads. Kanye West is a well-known rapper and hip-hop producer, who has made music from the late 1990s. Jack White, former frontman of the bands The White Stripes and The Raconteurs, is an alternative rocker from the late 1980s.

<sup>43</sup> The group, Greensky Bluegrass, had performed at Bonnaroo the year before, and I happened to catch part of their set while waiting in line for food. Their heavy acoustic guitar and banjo use, quintessential bluegrass, fit well in both settings.

<sup>44</sup> Andrew McMahon is an alternative rock singer-songwriter who also fronted indie rock band Jacks Mannequin and pop punk group Something Corporate, both of whom I loved during my Warped Tour days.

<sup>45</sup> Bonnaroo website.

<sup>46</sup> Lionel Richie, of soul and rhythm and blues acclaim, began his career in the late 60s. Robert Plant, known best as the lead singer in rock band Led Zeppelin began his career in the mid 1960s.

<sup>47</sup> Èmile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 387.



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