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December 2015

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MEDST330W

The Music Industry

Analysis of a Musical Subculture

‘This Is My Culture, Man, This Is My Home,’

The Many Ways Frank Turner Moves His Fans

Hi ho, hi ho, hi ho. We're heading out to the punk rock show. Colleagues and friends condescend with a smile, but this is my culture, man, this is my home! The dark, huddled masses gather at the gate, the doors are at seven, and the show starts at eight. A few precious hours in a space of our own, and when the band comes on the only thing I really know is I want to dance!

- ‘Four Simple Words’ by Frank Turner (2013)

Frank Turner sings about the love of live music and the community you can escape to in the fan-favorite ‘Four Simple Words.’ Although this song was a recent addition to his discography, only coming out on his 2013 release *Tape Deck Heart*, it feels like it could have always been around due to the themes the song touches upon, narrating the drive and ethos of his subculture. Turner has an immensely devoted fan base who will “drive a thousand miles”¹ to see a show of his in a venue far from their home, and still find themselves “hungry just to do it all again the next day.”²

If you ask them, fans would say they love Turner - they love his music, what he stands for, and the fandom that blossomed around him. Mark Duffett, a senior lecturer in Media and

Cultural Studies at the University of Chester, writes of fan love “the word encourages us to think about a *depth* of shared emotion: it means *intense* feeling, *deep* attachment, *great* interest. Its usage, therefore, facilitates the construction of a communal social body - the fan base - that conceptually unifies a diverse range of interests, attachments, and readings. Love becomes collectivized as a central element in the bonding of an imagined community,” (Duffett, 2014, 159).³

I hope to explore and understand Frank Turner’s fandom and how the love of one Englishman’s music can unite strangers around the globe to sing, drink, and dance together on a global scale. The study includes looking back at subcultures that came before his, fans’ social capital, and their rituals that drive the ever-growing culture. I’ll also deconstruct how a musician who wrote an atheists’ anthem can create a congregation of his own, similar to totemism, and how equality and accessibility inspire unrivaled passion, and wanderlust, in his fans’ lives.

A Subculture On The Road

Six years into his solo career, a group of fans created a Facebook group entitled ‘The Frank Turner Army.’ The group was meant to be a virtual meeting place for fans ahead of Turner’s largest headline show, at the time, at Wembley Arena. Fans could chat online and arrange meet-ups for the big day, so no one would have to queue or go into the show alone. When asked about his subculture, Turner cites that very show as the moment he realized he properly had his own. “I think that prior to that it felt like I was kind of an act with a reasonably passionate fan base. But I think that was the moment when the Frank Turner Army thing was born, and when a lot of people came from around the world. Maybe that’s the moment I noticed

it most, is a better way of putting it. The moment when it really felt like it was ‘a thing’,” (Turner, 2015).

The Wembley show was a special one-off event for Turner, and milestone in his career. Fans did not want to miss out on the occasion, and many planned to attend and fill the 12,000+ capacity venue. On April 13th, 2012, people of all ages, walks of life, and all corners of the world crashed upon the North London borough. The show had sold out, and an imagined global community that had been brewing in dark venues and on social media channels was now visible in the stage lights of Wembley Arena. At the end of the show, Turner gave a speech during his song ‘Photosynthesis,’ where he acknowledged that he would not be on that stage at that moment without his fans’ dedication:

“The reason I’m comfortable being on this stage today is because I reckon about 95% of the people in this crowd have seen me play a show where I was close enough to you that I could sweat on you. Where there was less than two hundred fucking people. And it’s not like Simon Cowell gave someone a fucking phone call. It’s like all of you came to every single little show from the beginning until now and you brought your friends, and you fucking paid attention, and you gave a shit. So think of it like this: I’m not the one headlining Wembley right now, we are all headlining Wembley right fucking now!”

(Nolan, 2012)

In the years following Wembley, fan willingness to travel has only grown, and the size of the venues and length of tours has increased for Turner to accommodate all the new people joining them. Turner’s fans are not the first group to travel for the love of a band, either. His

fanbase is frequently compared to that of The Grateful Dead's. The mixture of Turner's relentless tour schedule, his accessibility as an artist, and the community that he fosters pulls his fans along as he goes around the world. "Deadheads, as Grateful Dead fans are called, traveled from venue to venue to hear the band play, sometimes staying 'on tour' with them for extended periods of time. The roots of this migrating community are in the hippie culture that grew up in the Western United States during the 1960s" (Adams, 2014, 189). It is easy to see why an outsider would compare Turner's subculture to the Dead's.

Frank Turner fans traveled for his shows before Wembley, too, but that show was a major catalyst for more international travel for many of them. They would take days off from work or school to follow his tours, citing Frank's lyrical content as a contributing and "enabling" factor. Lawrence, a fan from the UK, said his music gives "the idea of getting out and doing stuff at every opportunity, having no regrets and enjoying every moment. His music essentially tells people to have adventures, and if one of his gigs is at the end of that then all the better! There is a community of people that live miles apart but travel for his gigs, so it's great making friends from all over the world and then meeting up at a mutual place of interest," (Smith, 2015). Sarah, another fan from the UK, agreed and added "You end up making friends around your country or the world... when a tour is announced, and you agree to go to all of your friend's local gigs, that's half the tour covered!" (Kenny, 2015).

Traveling this way means one accumulates many gig-related memories, so a common ritual is keeping track of the number of Frank Turner gigs you have been to. Doing so is also a form of capital, with the higher number of shows being seen as a bigger fan for an extended period of time. Some fans add shows onto their plans to hit a milestone, rounded out, gig counts.

How many Turner shows one attends is a popular topic of conversation on the queue or in the crowd, and while no one is audibly judged for having less, the judging does happen, of course. The other popular topic of queue conversations? Where everyone has traveled from to be at the show that night.

A Congregation for an Atheist

Turner's fans do not only travel for the music, or friends they have made online or in the crowd, though those are significant contributing factors. Many also include his gigs, and indeed following chunks of tours, as ways to escape regular life in favor of something more moving or a way to find oneself. Here, the comparisons to The Grateful Dead's fandom continue to grow:

“Deadheads did not attend shows merely for entertainment or to socialize with like-minded people. Many of them reported having spiritual experiences at shows, which provided them with an additional motivation to attend... ‘Getting it’ is an expression Deadheads use to describe the process of learning to perceive shows as spiritual experiences as inseparable from the music, the scene, and a cooperative mode of everyday existence. Thus by having spiritual experiences at many shows over a long period of time, Deadheads developed feelings of closeness, a high level of commitment to the band and a high level of identification with the community,”
(Adams, 2014, 190).

Similarly, we can compare Turner's fans to that of Bruce Springsteen's. Coincidentally, there is a large amount of overlap between these two fan bases. This stems from the fact some Springsteen fans consider Turner a younger, English version of The Boss, coupled with the fact

Turner is a fan of Springsteen and frequently will cover his songs. Daniel Cavicchi, the author of *Tramps Like Us: Music and Meaning Among Springsteen Fans*,⁴ wrote of the concert experience:

“For fans... a concert represents a powerful meeting of the various forces and people and ideas involved in their participation in musical life. The excitement of participation, the feeling of connection with Springsteen, the interaction of fans and other audience members, the rituals, the energy, the empowerment, the communal feeling, the evaluation and discussion: together they enact the meaning of fandom. They shape and anchor fans’ sense of who they are and where they belong,” (Cavicchi, 1998, 37).

The question “why do we travel for Frank Turner shows?” was tweeted out, and a huge influx of responses followed. One response, from Kelly, a fan from Canada, comes as a series of tweets telling a very open, honest, and public answer: “For me, it's the clarity. The only time I don't wish I was anywhere else is when I'm at a rock show, specifically Frank Turner's. Life makes sense when I'm there, and it doesn't when I'm not. And I don't think it's anything short of magic.” When followed up with the question of “what do we get at his shows that we don’t get elsewhere in life?”, Kelly wrote “I have thought about this extensively. And I don't like the answer... religion. These shows are pilgrimages of sorts. DON'T get me wrong, I'm not calling Frank Turner a cult leader, but you find comfort and faith in words, you sing them together, you rejoice and suffer with people who are like-minded... it's just that THIS ‘religion’ isn't forced, or demanding, or hateful. It's community and support without the bullshit. I grew up in a REALLY Christian town, and because I wasn't raised with religion, I always felt like I was missing a piece. I don't have that feeling anymore. And we aren't being brainwashed. I hate the word ‘religion’. But yeah. It's humanity. The things Frank sings about are REAL and RELEVANT. So it's like...

no afterlife, just living in the now. Being decent and stuff,” (Holman, 2015). Another fan from England replied to Kelly, writing “I don't have a faith but Frank Turner gigs are what I imagine church feels like to the devout,” (Leila, 2015).

Due to concerts being events of great importance because of the love of music, the love of community, and the love of the spiritual, life-affirming escape they offer, we can draw the comparison to totemism religion, as outlined by Emile Durkheim. In his book, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, “totems” are material objects or people that embody the essence of the sacred, with each totem holding the attention of a group and inspiring feelings in its’ members. In this example, Frank Turner himself is considered a totem. “The feelings provoked by his speech return to him inflated and amplified, reinforcing his own. The passionate energies he arouses echo back to him and increase his vitality. He is no longer a simple individual speaking, he is a group incarnate and personified,” (Durkheim, 1976, 158). This passage could easily be about a concert, with the crowd feeding off Turner, the totem, and Turner feeding off the crowd. There is a clear exchange of energies between the two, that each raise and push to greater heights for the duration of the concert. Mark Duffett argues that “the totem’s connection to the whole of the congregation can then be used as means of empowering ordinary individuals. In a key moment that Durkheim calls ‘effervescence’,⁵ each emotionally heightened crowd member is given attention by the totem and experiences a life-changing jolt of electricity as they subconsciously recognize a one-to-one connection with such a valued individual,” (Duffett, 2014, 152).

To say Turner empowers his fans would be an understatement. As an example, devoted fan Seth, of New Hampshire, USA, says going to see Frank on a cruise⁶ earlier this year has

“revitalized” him and his wife. “We're much happier, nicer people than we used to be. We were in pretty dark and stagnant places pre-cruise and had been for a long time. We were very unhappy human beings. Music was escapism, and we found a band we really liked. Then we went on a boat with said band, and our lives changed completely. We found the excitement we needed and started to get a positive self-image and outlook. We've been really deeply affected by the music scene... very literally life-changing. That's why we're such gung-ho supporters,” (Radner, 2015).

In his book *Understanding Fandom* Mark Duffett examines the use of religious language and metaphors in fandom, writing they “capture the emotional transcendence of fan experience. Fans often refer to a live rock show as a religious or spiritual experience. They report being filled with the spirit, or feeling a sense of closeness to their star,” (Duffett, 2013, 144). He also brings up “*communitas*,”⁷ which is the idea that “individuals at live mass public events can feel blissfully united and are thrilled to realize that they are one with the assembled community,” (144). The sensation of *communitas* is strong within Turner’s subculture, and it could be found by those who attended his Wembley Arena event in 2012.

It is also important to note that the comparison to religion begins and ends with the act of rituals, language used, and community. The majority of fans interviewed shied away from comparing their fandom to any sort of religion due to the fact they do not idolize Turner but conceded they saw how one could otherwise make that link. Indeed, many even confessed to using religious terminology when talking about certain aspects of their fandom; however, it is “no more than a convenience: a way to speak about experiences that are hard to directly express in words,” (Duffett, 2013, 145).

Turner himself is an open atheist, and makes his (lack of) religious views known in his 2013 song “Glory Hallelujah.” In it he sings: “If we accept that there's an end-game and we haven't got much time / Then in the here and now we can try and do things right / We'd be our own Salvation Army, and together we'd believe / In all the wondrous things that mere mortals can achieve.” Many fans have celebrated this joyous song that doesn't put organized religion down but rather holds up doing what is right and looking out for your fellow man for the sake of it. They take away from it that they are all equal, and have to make the most of their time on Earth. This train of thought extends into his live shows, where Turner will recite the only two rules for the evening: “One - Don't be a dick to everyone else. And two - if you know the words you have to sing along.”

Equality, Normalcy, and Accessibility

Ask most Frank Turner fans if they have had a personal encounter with the man himself, and they will tell you “yes.” These encounters range from spending a night drinking with him at the bar after a show, buying merchandise directly from him, when he performs fan's song requests or having him respond to an email. Turner makes an incredible amount of time for his fans, all in the name of normalcy and equality. For example, to this day, he has his personal email address listed publicly on his website, so anyone can get in touch with him at any time.

“My central kind of motivation is, almost like my guiding philosophical principle, has always been that I don't want to be abnormal because of what I do for a living. And so within that, in the early days it was just like ‘yeah I finished the show, I'll go have a drink at the bar and I'll chat to whoever and I don't want to be removed and inaccessible’. But

I feel like the inaccessibility part wasn't the guiding principle, it was the normality part of it... When I was a kid I emailed Henry Rollins and he emailed back, and I emailed Guy Picciotto from Fugazi and he emailed back, and I wrote to Chris from Propagandi and he wrote back. That was seventeen years ago now, if not more, and I'm still talking about it. And it was a punk rock moment in the sense it showed to me that the people that made music aren't some weird case of aliens that you don't have access to. And I'm still very wedded to the principle that music should be a community, it should be a conversation between equals. And if it's not, I'm not that interested in it. I'm not interested in delivering messages to people I look down on, that's bullshit. And if I run into anyone in the street I say hey and hang out and all the rest of it, I'm not gonna run away and hide from someone," (Turner, 2015).

What is normalcy for Turner is accessibility for his fans, and they have met it with open arms. Many even attributing his accessibility as a significant contributing factor to their passion, and why they are so eager to support him and travel. Katharina, a fan from Austria, felt this way, adding "traveling for a Frank gig is a bit like visiting a friend - at least it does sometimes feel like it, especially since he recognizes me in the crowd," (Fürnkranz, 2015). Turner also has a great memory of faces, and can usually pick out people he has met before, which is only amplified by fans traveling to multiple gigs along a tour.

The unfortunate flipside for Turner is that any amount of access leaves people wanting more. These encounters have become capital and even a form of status for fans. If Turner plays a request and gives them a shout out, they have that to reference for eternity in fandom discussions. Fans frequently exchange stories of hanging out with him at a bar or merch table or

will show off tattoos they've collected in his handwriting. Turner mentioned he has seen entitlement creeping in amongst some fans and a feeling that they are owed more from him. It can come in many forms, with fans expecting to meet him after a show automatically, or assuming that a few brief digital exchanges translate into a firm friendship.

“An example is I was in New York the other day, and it was (my best friend)’s birthday, and we finished the show, and I wanted to go hang out with (him). That’s what normal people do! And a lot of people kind of got fucked off with me outside the venue that I didn’t spend like two hours signing stuff, and it was just like... it’s only his birthday today. You know? And I’ve already just thrown my guts on the stage for two fucking hours with you!... There are times when I need to remind people that just because we exchanged one email, it doesn’t mean we’re best friends. People kind of want a piece of something they see on the TV or on the radio sometimes. But in a way that kind of attitude is the thing I’m trying, in the smallest possible way, do something about,”
(Turner 2015).

Yet for fans, these are just normal interactions with the musician they love. Gaining this up-close and semi-personal access is part of the appeal of going to numerous gigs. As Katharina said, it’s the same as traveling to see your friend, who happens to make music you love. Duffett argues that this sort of fan-love, the deep attachment, further enforces the idea and comparison to totemism. “Associated with the idea of love as a premise for community membership is the notion that love can be protective or redemptive, about caring, ownership, or possession. Here Elvis, Springsteen or Lady Gaga become ‘ours’ as fans confer a kind of ambassadorial or serving function upon them. We love *our* heroes. The word marks a depth of devotion that identifies the

boundary of passion through which fandom is recognized. Love is therefore a boundary word. It defines the edge of the knowing field⁸ through which fans self-identify: *if you quite like a recording artist then you are not a fan, but if you love them you are one,*” (Duffett, 2014, 159).

Here, Turner would disagree with Duffett, that one does not need “love” to be a fan, due to his view of fandom equality. “I’m not all that keen on the hierarchy that has definitely - I’ve seen bits of it developing. I think the idea that somebody, for whatever reason, their story in life is taken to the point where they only heard of somebody on the radio last week and just bought a record - that person is *not* worth less than somebody who’s been listening since 2006, they just aren’t. And if you’re trying to kind of be better than other people, I’m an egalitarian at heart and... I love the idea of someone coming down to a show, making new friends, and all the rest of it... I just want it to be inclusive, you know? Everything I do, everyone’s welcome all the time. From everywhere. And if it’s ever not inclusive then I’m not interested,” (Turner, 2015).

This desire for inclusiveness and equality goes back to Turner’s second rule for his gigs - that everyone has to sing along if they know the words. He feels very strongly about this, and talks about it frequently on stage. One night at New York’s Bowery Ballroom he said: “If you all sing along together then what we’re doing here tonight ceases to be about a group of guys with snazzy white shirts, a raised piece of flooring, backstage passes and a fucking ego problem shouting at you for an hour and a half. And instead becomes about a group of people in a room who are equals with each other who are making a sound together. We’re doing something communal, something interesting, something transcendent that takes us out of the mundane bullshit we all put up with all day, every fucking day for the rest of our lives and *that’s* what music is all a-fucking-bout. Are you with me!?” (Berman, 2011).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown how the right concert can actualize an imagined community, and kickstart a culture's love affair with travel. I have also demonstrated how *communitas* feeds into the intense love Frank Turner's fans have for him, his music, and their fellow fans. The bliss and unity they feel, the effervescence they experience from shows, or the access Turner grants them, has quite literally changed the lives of many of his fans for the better. Turner inspires his subculture to join together as often as possible, and with his touring habits clocking him in at 1800+ shows over the past ten years, the meetings happen frequently. Turner asks his fans "Are you with me!?" and the answer is a resounding, deafening yes. They will follow him wherever he goes.

End Notes

1, 2 - Lyrics from Turner's "Four Simple Words," from his album *Tape Deck Heart*.

3 - An "imagined community" is a community that is not, and cannot be, based on face to face interaction of its' members. The concept comes from political scientist Benedict Anderson.

4 - For further discussion relating a fandom to, and referencing, Daniel Cavicchi and Emile Durkheim see Löbert 2012.

5 - Effervescence - "Emile Durkheim's term for the intense emotional response that followers have when their heroes offer them attention," (Duffett, 2013, 292).

6 - In 2015, Flogging Molly - a band that has toured numerous times with Turner in the past - had their own vacation cruise for their fans. Turner was one of the artists invited to perform during the weekend at sea.

7 - "Communitas" was originally coined by anthropologist Victor Turner.

8 - Mark Duffett defines a 'knowing field' as "an inner space of intense emotional conviction that fans collectively enter into when they notice engrossing aspects of a performance or persuasive elements in its context," (Duffett, 2014, 153).

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Frank Turner, his tour manager, Tre Stead, and his record label, Xtra Mile Recordings, for allowing me access and time with Turner for this assignment. Thanks also goes to members of the fan groups The Frank Turner Army and The Xtra Mile Recordings' Street Team, for taking the time to reflect on and inspect their fandom with me.

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