

Justin Bieber, YouTube, and New Media Celebrity: The Tween Prodigy at Home and Online

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the cultural values of childhood and commerce that inform tween popular music star Justin Bieber's portrayal as a musical prodigy, focusing on the 2011 concert film *Never Say Never*. While children's active participation in popular culture conflicts with social norms emphasizing children's place in the home, this chapter argues that forms of "new media"—especially home videos that both Bieber and his fans share on sites like YouTube—help to resolve those conflicts, by contextualizing popular music performance in the everyday spaces of childhood family life. The chapter explores themes of family and childhood domesticity, gender and the intersections between childhood and girlhood culture, disconnects between musical ability and commercial success, and the relationship between musical prodigies and child stars.

This chapter considers representations of pop star Justin Bieber as a child prodigy. Bieber was born in a small town outside Toronto. In 2007, when Bieber was 13 years old, he started posting home videos of himself singing and playing music to the video-sharing website YouTube.¹ The videos show him singing in the bathroom and playing guitar on his living room couch, as well as competing in a local talent show and busking on the steps in front of a local theater. These videos were very popular online and ultimately led to Bieber's discovery by a talent agent, following which at the age of 15 he moved to Atlanta, signed a record contract, and began working toward his breakout commercial success in 2009.

Throughout his career Bieber has frequently been described as a "prodigy" in the press (e.g. Vena 2010b; Widdicombe 2012; Rayner 2013). While Bieber was certainly a highly talented musician at an early age, his case is especially interesting for what it reveals about the role of

1. That original YouTube account, under the username "kidrauhl," remains active as Bieber's official YouTube site. Because YouTube lists videos chronologically, the earliest videos on the page are these home performances. They can still be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/user/kidrauhl/videos> (accessed October 15, 2013).

cultural narratives of child musical ability in a music industry in which children are an increasingly important audience segment. Therefore in this chapter I focus on a close reading of the 2011 concert film *Never Say Never*,² which depicts his summer 2010 tour and presents Bieber's commercial success as a story of prodigious talent. This film is a rich document that usefully connects several strands in Bieber's career: his family life, his status as a child, his early performance ability, his use of the internet, and his commercial success. The concept of child musical prodigy brings together and makes sense of relationships between childhood and extreme musical talent that we normally think of as incompatible. *Never Say Never* takes this mediating logic already embedded in child prodigy discourses, and applies it to another apparently incompatible relationship of pressing importance to Bieber's cultural and commercial standing: the tension between childhood embedded in family domesticity and the dramatic publicness required by commercial musical success. The film poses a novel resolution of these incompatible pairs by portraying the internet, and especially video-sharing tools such as YouTube, as an intimate medium that allows Bieber's public success to be presented as though it is embedded within comfortable family domesticity. The centrality of new media channels like YouTube to relatively new entertainment forms such as the spectacular popularity of "tween" music in the last decade suggests new or different possibilities for the meaning of child musical prodigy in the twenty-first century's changing musical and media environment.

Musical talent and social value

In this chapter, I take a cultural studies approach to the concept of child prodigy, to explore how it reflects and reproduces particular social values, while obscuring others. Social science

2. Paramount Pictures, directed by Jon M. Chu, 2011.

models like François Gagné's "Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent" (2009) endeavor to define and apply universally valid theories of prodigious talent. By contrast, in this chapter I do not attempt to evaluate whether or not Bieber fits a precise definition of child musical prodigy. Instead I consider the idea of "child musical prodigy" as itself a cultural discourse that is applied in various contexts and motivated by particular social, political, and commercial purposes.

Gagné's DMGT model distinguishes "gifts," or individuals' given natural capacities, from "talents," the cultural, social, and environmental situations that allow such capacities to be realized and made meaningful. Theorists in the humanities and social sciences have put forward important critiques of models like this that depend on strong distinctions between "nature" and "culture" (Ortner 1972; Butler 1990). Here I will focus on the implications of Gagné's quantitative definition of talent as a position in a normal (bell-curve) distribution, both because it neglects important musical values, and because it highlights themes of extreme differentiation within mass populations that resonate with the cultural logics of celebrity surrounding Bieber. The DMGT model defines "giftedness" and "talent" as "the top 10% of age peers" (2009:63), and makes even finer-grained distinctions of "exceptionally" (1:10,000) and "extremely" (1:100,000) gifted and talented individuals according to a similar logic of population ratios (2009:71).

Such a model can only account for precisely measurable abilities and requires a very large population. Especially from a cross-cultural perspective, applying such criteria to music is not always easy. For example, musically (and otherwise) egalitarian and small-scale societies like the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea described by Feld (1984) do not have large enough populations to support evaluations of "extreme talent," and despite moderate variation in musical interest

among individuals, they do not seem to exhibit the normal distributions of ability that Gagné's model assumes (with identifiable top and bottom deciles, etc.). With this definition of talent, such a model would imply that there are no “extremely”—or perhaps even “moderately” (top 1%)—talented Kaluli musicians. Following DMGT, we might even be forced to acknowledge that the Kaluli “talent development process” (Gagné 2009, p. 67) is *holding back* the musical development of its most musically gifted individuals. But for a community that appears to provide its members with a much more intensive and universal musical socialization than the educational systems of the large-scale capitalist societies, this would seem to be not the case.

This point is relevant not just to very small-scale societies or examples of significant ethnographic distance. Rather, it applies equally well to the musical communities of children on school playgrounds around the world. As Kathryn Marsh (2008) has documented, children display remarkable musical skills in their handclapping games and songs, which can stymie even musically trained adults. Like the Kaluli there may be children who show more interest or ability in musical games. But children's musical communities are small (despite their transnational reach they do not have transnational audiences or performance circuits). And their musical games are participatory, requiring not only relatively large groups but also often including children with wide ranges of ability. So there is no sense in which any one individual could be extremely talented. In fact the very definition of musical success in these games, in which a group must cooperate to produce a collective accomplishment, precludes individual talent. If talent is demonstrated mastery or achievement, in this case it is a trait of groups and not individuals. Therefore, even in highly stratified large-scale societies we can still find communities organized around skillful musical activity in such a way that do not sit easily within normal bell-curved descriptions of ability.

I welcome McPherson and Williamon's argument (in press) for looking beyond individual recreative forms of music performance to other forms of musical ability such as improvising and playing by ear. Such a proposal might make room for valuing the skills demonstrated in children's playground music. But I would be wary of incorporating these forms of musical ability within a regime of precisely ranked comparative measurements. As critical education scholars Hervé Varenne and Ray McDermott argue in a parallel field, quantitative measurements that define educational "success" through comparative rankings in effect *produce* the "failure" of unsuccessful schools or students (1998). In this way a descriptive model can easily become normative or prescriptive, such that the existence of failing or incompetent individuals is built into a definition of success that treats normal distributions as given, leaving no room to envision a world of shared competence and collective accomplishment.³

If what it means to be profoundly talented is to be more capable than 100,000 other people, then we are either left with an extremely narrow account of musical talent, or we have built social inequality and hierarchy into our aesthetic values and our research questions. But if we identify how social inequality and hierarchy are already built into concepts such as child musical prodigy, then we gain certain tools for seeing how such concepts can contribute actively to forms of popular cultural celebrity in large-scale capitalist societies like ours. My argument, then, is not to do away with concepts like talent or child musical prodigy, but to encounter them critically, identify their implications, and observe their effects. I hold the view, common in the growing field of childhood studies, that divisions between children and adults are culturally and socially contingent, and not fixed by biology or development (Prout and James 1997), so discourses about children, such as evaluations of children's musical abilities, play an important part in

3. Silverman and Miller (2009) put forward a convincing feminist critique of the standard emphasis in giftedness studies on measuring comparative achievement that parallels many of my objections here.

creating the social roles that children inhabit (Gubar 2013). This means that the concepts contained in “child musical prodigy” as they are applied to Justin Bieber are of central importance for understanding the cultural phenomenon of his dramatic commercial success, and for extracting useful lessons from it about the values and norms that structure children’s participation in public media.

Bieber is a highly visible child musician in a highly stratified capitalist society. Discourses around Bieber’s precocity are full of meaning about social relationships and social differences, not only about the legitimating relationship between individual talent and commercial success, but also about the changing role of children in public consumer culture. Unlike the Kaluli, who Feld describes as having “no investment in rationalizing differences in competence” (1984: 391), twenty-first century American society is deeply invested in rationalizing such differences (Varenne & McDermott 1998). To identify someone as a child musical prodigy—that such a category even exists for a community—is to express powerful ideas about the role and meaning of both music and childhood, and even more so about their relationship. As Jane O’Connor (2008) shows in detail, the practice of identifying and creating a spectacle of “exceptional” children reveals deep investments in historically and culturally specific views of childhood innocence and in social norms that police sexuality and family structures.

Child musical prodigies dramatically cross boundaries that we are accustomed to thinking of as fixed. The stakes of such boundary crossing are potentially very high: in modern liberal democracies, the distribution by age of privileges such as citizenship, employment, travel, privacy, property ownership, etc., is justified by linking age to competence and merit (Locke 1980 [1690], §58–60; Mill 1998 [1859], p. 14). Cases in which children’s competencies or abilities exceed expectations, then, have the potential to undermine a fundamental social division

between adults and children (Firestone 1970, pp. 72–104). Discourses about children are often deeply, if covertly, invested in preserving children’s subordinate social status (Jenkins 1998a), and it is a reasonable aim of cultural analysis to identify such investments. For example, we might look for the ways that social attention to child musical prodigies seeks to domesticate or contain the boundary-exceeding abilities of certain children: On the one hand, by identifying (or even defining) such individuals as extremely rare—even “mysterious” (Feldman & Morelock 2011, p. 215)—the idea of child musical prodigy may normalize and justify the inabilities (and by extension the social or political disabilities) of the vast majority of children. On the other hand, even for exceptional children themselves, the discourse of musical prodigy can circumscribe their excessive ability to a narrow realm of cultural practice that is seen as more expressive than instrumental, broadly unrelated to most forms of social power or authority and thus easily contained as superficial and non-threatening curiosity. While actual child musical prodigies may very well spend their lives outside of school or even serve as employers of professional staff and the primary income-earners for their families, the confinement of their activities to the cultural realm can have the effect of disguising these facts.

Thus the cultural values found in concepts like child musical prodigy that define and limit the appropriate relationships between children and performance are tremendously important for making sense of a changing media environment in which child performers are more and more prominent while child audiences are more and more influential. For Justin Bieber, such questions about children’s social roles are heightened, because he is a highly successful adolescent musician with a large audience of young people. Filling a venue like Madison Square Garden with young people coming to see another young performer begins to call into question some basic ideas about children’s role in public, in the economy, and in their families, and child

prodigy discourses can serve to domesticate or render intelligible these sorts of boundary crossings.

Age, identity, and tweens in popular music

Bieber's major success began at age 14, so he may not fit a standard definition of prodigy as "a child younger than 10 years of age who performs at an adult professional level in a highly demanding field" (Feldman & Morelock 2011, p. 212). In the home videos that originally attracted attention—some showing him as young as two years old—Bieber does demonstrate tremendous ability for his age in singing, playing guitar, and especially playing drums. Even so, in the context of popular music—the particular "highly demanding field" Bieber performs in—what it means to achieve an adult level of talent may not be straightforward, in part because Bieber's age is always foregrounded in his performances. In the home videos as well as his later recordings, Bieber's singing voice is identifiably that of a young boy. And many of the videos are set in spaces like Bieber's family living room, bathroom, and kitchen, which very clearly highlight his age. Where the settings may be age-neutral, the simple visual fact of Bieber's young body performing is not.

Even if we desired an evaluation of performance ability separated from markers of age or other identity, it might not be possible. In classical music it may be common to treat musical sound as separable from visual or embodied information, as in cultures of closed-eye listening or auditioning from behind a curtain, and part of what makes the idea of child prodigies thinkable may be that's field's expectation that music can or should transcend particular embodied experience (McClary 1991; McMullen 2006). But video and images of performers are central to popular music. This may be increasingly true, as the most common form of music listening for

young people is now the video-sharing website YouTube, in which music is usually only accessible along with video or other images (Nielsen Holdings N.V. 2012).⁴ Even outside of visual representations, Simon Frith argues persuasively that gesture and embodiment are central to popular musical performance (1998, pp. 191–98), so competent performances of popular genres almost require performers to musically signify embodiment, which is to say, to perform markers of sociocultural identity. But if performing one’s body, so to speak, is central to popular music competence, then we cannot assess a performer’s ability without reference to their particular forms of embodiment (even if those references are ironic, layered, or appropriative, as with racial passing or minstrelsy). Conventionally such embodiment highlights gender, race, and sexuality, but age has also been a key identity performed by popular musicians (Whiteley, 2005).

In genres that foreground performances of sociocultural identity in place of or in addition to technical musical skill, the question “does this child perform competently at an adult professional level?” may not be answerable. As audiences we cannot help but see a child performer as a child, so evaluations are always appended by “. . . for a child” and it is very difficult to fairly separate out our expectations about age. Certainly a major part of the appeal and interest that Bieber’s early videos garnered on YouTube was in recognizing the performer for the child that he was, while at the same time Bieber’s recordings were judged “too young” for airplay on top 40 radio (Stern, 2013). When standards of performance already include reference to embodied age identities, musical competence cannot be separated out from those sociocultural values. This means that there may be no simple definition of “performing at adult levels.” And while we might envision such embodied performance practices being incorporated into McPherson and

4. Headphone listening may be an exception in which contemporary listeners frequently use music to separate themselves from their visual environments (Bull, 2008). But even headphone listening can involve embedding music in visual and embodied contexts more often than we think (Bickford, 2014).

Williamon's (in press) expanded account of musical abilities, doing so for age would undermine definitions of prodigy that refer to age.

In fact, Bieber is a remarkably successful musician *because* of his performance of his “young voice”—something no adult-bodied person could do. Bieber emerged as a public figure during a moment when popular music for children was rapidly increasing (Bickford 2012). The Disney Corporation had begun to direct more resources into popular music products, with prominent success in 2006 and 2007 with the TV movie *High School Musical*, the musical sitcom *Hannah Montana*, and the rock band The Jonas Brothers. Meanwhile the demographic label “tween” had emerged to consolidate an awkward but profitable marketing category of pre-adolescent young people (especially girls) aging out of children's consumer products but not yet ready to be marketed to as teenagers (hence “*be-tween*”) (Cook & Kaiser 2004). So while his age may once have been a barrier to top 40 radio airplay, it quickly became an asset, as radio programmers saw Bieber and other young musicians as “stars of their generation” who “deliver audience” (Stern, 2013).

The discourse around tweens includes widespread attention to what marketers call “age compression,” commonly glossed as “kids getting older younger,” in which children are seen to participate increasingly in activities thought of as more mature than their chronological age (Brown & Washton 2003, p. 19; Montgomery 2007, pp. 20–21). Anxious versions of this discourse often emphasize a mismatch between mature content and children's developmental limitations (assumed to be fixed and given), but we might also see in age compression a discourse of precocity. That is, “getting older younger” quite clearly means achieving developmental milestones at ever earlier ages—not far from our definitions of prodigy.⁵ This particular discourse analytically separates precocity from talent—at least insofar as talent is

5. On terminological slippage between precocity and prodigy, see Feldman and Morelock (2011, p. 215).

defined in terms of individual exceptionalism—so the precocious unit is not an individual child, but rather children as a demographic group or sociocultural identity. That is, concepts of prodigy or precocity are built into the idea of children’s participation in activities they are conventionally understood to be unsuited to. But on the mass scale at which popular media takes place, those concepts attach to groups rather than individuals, and discourses of precocity might end up referring as much to the cultural blurring of boundaries between social categories like child and adult as to specific, measurable individual abilities.

So, as “tween” implies, what counts as childhood in consumer culture was somewhat in flux by 2010. Children’s media was never more prominent or visible to adults, and the increasing visibility of children’s participation in popular culture was already being articulated by marketers and cultural commentators as a phenomenon of widespread precocity. Therefore, Bieber entered a popular culture environment in which being a child was a clear source of value and interest: not only did his unusual talent draw attention from impressed observers, but he also entered the market at a moment when child audiences were increasingly articulated as an identity group, and were primed to seek out and recognize their own.

Never Say Never

Never Say Never is structured around two main narrative strands: First, it is a biopic about Justin Bieber’s rise to fame, and includes a large number of home videos, photographs, and interviews with family and friends. Second, it is a concert movie documenting his 2010 summer tour, focusing on the lead-up to his first concert at Madison Square Garden. The film consistently collapses these two strands onto one another, so that Bieber’s childhood and home life is continually invoked in representations of his celebrity performance, and representations of

YouTube are invoked to link the two separate strands. The juxtaposition of Bieber's professional success with his youthfulness and family life is not unique to *Never Say Never*. Among other examples, that pairing was the central focus of a major *New York Times* profile that is thematically very similar to the film (Hoffman, 2010). In focusing my interpretation on the single film, my goal is to explore in detail how these disparate and commonly remarked strands of Bieber's life and career are rhetorically linked and accounted for in his commercial portrayals, for which task the best tools are close reading and interpretation of a text where they appear together. My analysis here argues for the rhetorical importance of new media imagery in bridging Bieber's domestic and professional strands, which is much more prominent in *Never Say Never* than in the *New York Times* profile, precisely because the film is more concerned to resolve, rather than simply highlight, that tension. Therefore the film is interesting not so much as a historical document but as an ideological one, which deploys notions of child prodigy for its own commercial ends.

These themes are clearly established in the film's prologue, which opens on a computer screen and follows an internet user browsing viral videos of wedding disasters and cute animals. Finally an email message reading "No words. Just watch." leads to a YouTube page with a video of Bieber, sitting on a drab living-room couch with a Bart Simpson poster behind him, singing Chris Brown's "With You."⁶ The shot zooms in until the webpage disappears and the video takes up the whole frame, and then cuts abruptly to a slightly older Bieber in a white jacket and the shaggy haircut he became famous for, apparently backstage at a concert. Black intertitles cut in reading, "IN TEN DAYS / A KID FROM A SMALL TOWN IN CANADA / WILL PERFORM AT THE WORLD'S MOST FAMOUS ARENA / MADISON SQUARE GARDEN / THIS IS HIS STORY." The YouTube video is

6. The original video can be viewed on YouTube here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eQOFRZ1wNLw> (accessed October 18, 2013).

intercut with images of Bieber walking toward the stage, while the soundtrack cuts jarringly between “With You” and sounds of a screaming preshow audience, until both scenes finally fade together and then to white, and to the title sequence. This brief sequence, which returns at the film’s climax, encapsulates the overall story: the juxtaposition of Madison Square Garden and a home video of a child’s living room performance, of “a kid from a small town” and “the world’s most famous arena,” with YouTube positioned prominently between. From the beginning of the film, Bieber’s success is presented as prodigious (that is, as unexpected or in tension with his status as a child) through the constant pairing of images of domesticity with images of public performance, with YouTube as the medium that makes that exceptional or prodigious achievement possible and intelligible.

Family

Following the title sequence, a brief scene of interviews with fans outside concert venues concludes with one fan saying, “he was just like a regular kid who had a dream and it just like came true.” The film immediately cuts to a sequence of baby photos, home videos, shots of Bieber’s hometown Stratford, Ontario, and interviews with his mother, grandparents, coaches, and family friends, all of which emphasize the modesty of his upbringing, his strong bond with his grandparents, and his mother’s commitment to his well-being despite the challenges of being a single mother. The film transitions to home videos of Bieber playing drums and interviews with his mother’s musician friends. A neighbor describes his early interest:

Justin as a two-year old would wander up to the stairs right in front of the drum kit, and just stare at Dan, the drummer in the band at the time. He would just be mesmerized. And

he'd grab a pair of drumsticks and start hitting the stairs, and everybody noticed that his timing was amazing. Where does this talent come from?

McKay then describes Bieber at eight years old playing “jazz” at a church benefit, which was “quite difficult, but he was up for it.” Home videos of Bieber at nine or ten years old soloing on the drums cut seamlessly to a brief shot of him soloing onstage during the concert tour. Thus in the first few minutes of the film, Bieber’s talent is quickly identified as precocious and natural—a “gift” that he developed without lessons or many other resources—and it is situated in a domestic context, especially in strong familial relationships with his mother and grandparents.

Interestingly, Bieber’s actual family—his mother and grandparents—quickly recedes from the film’s focus. Instead the film introduces Bieber’s professional tour staff with both job titles and explicit kingship terms identifying their relationship to Bieber: Ryan Good is Road Manager/Stylist and “like the coolest older brother ever.” Carin Morris “works wardrobe with Ryan, and she’s just like Justin’s big sister.” Stage manager Scrappy says, “I kind of look at him like a little brother.” Kenny Hamilton is described as “technically Justin’s security guard, but Kenny is Justin’s everything . . . He lives on the bus with him.” Hamilton himself tells the camera, “it’s a uncle-nephew relationship. In my phone I have him programmed in as ‘nephew.’” Bieber’s manager Scooter Braun (who, along with R&B star Usher, played the key role in discovering Bieber) is described as “in the road family definitely dad.” He describes his job as largely parental: “ninety percent of my job is helping him become a good man. It’s a family. So we’re supporting each other, making sure the kid’s okay.” Finally voice coach Mama Jan (Smith) introduces herself: “I’m a 54-year-old childless woman, and they call me ‘Mama.’”⁷

While the tour staff are officially his employees, the film goes to great lengths to present them as caring authority figures, and to present him as very much a child. Throughout this

7. Jan Smith is only identified in the film as “Mama Jan.”

sequence Bieber is portrayed not only embedded in family relationships, but specifically as the child in a family, acting mischievously, joking, getting into trouble, and playfully wrestling with the “brother” and “uncle” figures, while the staff care for and discipline him. Even the one person not given an explicit kinship label, general manager Allison Kaye, is introduced as “the stern one” who intervenes when Bieber brandishes an electric clipper and jokingly threatens to shave his head, ordering him to “put that razor down right now!” Similarly Braun is introduced as “the dad” while Bieber is shown sitting in the cab of a running forklift, apparently about to drive it, for which Braun then sternly rebukes him.

This sequence concludes by returning briefly to Bieber’s own family and home life when the tour arrives in Canada, mixing and confusing his real and professional “families.” It shows Bieber’s father meeting his staff, a pre-show prayer that includes his mother and father but in which Mama Jan and other staff speak, and his father tearing up with pride during the performance. Mama Jan says in voiceover, “On the road with a group of people, it becomes a very functional dysfunctional family, all centered around one goal.”

Infantilization and paternalism

These representations of Bieber as a child in two families are part of a generally infantilizing portrayal. For example, after a concert, Bieber arrives at his grandparent’s house and goes to bed in his childhood bedroom. He is shown playing and roughhousing with his childhood friends. His grandmother tells him he can’t go out until he cleans his room, and he and his friends relate a story about breaking a taxidermy fox with hockey sticks. At other times he is shown brushing his teeth or doing homework at night on the tour bus, or being chided by a handler for eating

doughnuts out of the garbage. Bieber's child fans also participate in his infantilization. They describe him as "cute" and "adorable" in the same breath that they say they hope to marry him.

In fact, the plot of the film hinges on a moment in the lead-up to the concert at Madison Square Garden in which decisions about his own body and health are paternalistically made for him—over his protest—which the film presents as wholly salutary. When Mama Jan asks Bieber if he has been taking care of his voice, which is showing signs of wear during the long tour, he responds seriously that on his trip home he talked more than usual, but "I wasn't screaming." The film cuts to several shots of Bieber in fact screaming and yelling while playing with his friends—directly undercutting his claims and effectively calling him out for lying. This is surprising in a movie celebrating Bieber, but it fits the broader theme of infantilization. Not only is Bieber's boyish exuberance an appealing part of his image, his inability to responsibly care for his primary professional tool, even lying to avoid being caught, clearly positions him as a child, and childish.

The tension between Bieber's repeatedly specified age and "professionalism" emerges here as a central theme. Earlier in the film Mama Jan noted that "one of the hardest things . . . for a kid on the road to understand is that he's a working man." A doctor called in to examine him tells Braun and Mama Jan, away from Bieber, that, "We want him to be a healthy sixteen year old, but if he's taking on this career as a commitment it comes with obligations. There's a professionalism that comes along with it at any age where you have to make certain sacrifices, and that's why I think he has to cancel tomorrow's event." Another staff member is shown making a phone call to cancel the event. This decision to cancel a show is then presented to Bieber as *fait accompli*. He protests meekly, "there's gonna to be a lot of kids that are gonna be let down." Braun says, "if I asked you [whether to keep to the tour schedule] you'll say yes, but

then you'll destroy your vocal chords and we can't risk that." And Mama Jan says, "I can't let you do that." She then asks, "do you want to cancel seven shows, or move one now?" To which Bieber meekly consents to "move one." Mama Jan continues aggressively to lecture Bieber about making "smart decisions." (Moments later a grinning Bieber is shown begging Mama Jan to let him eat McDonald's chicken nuggets for dinner, despite the doctor's dietary prescriptions.)

Thus in the primary moment of narrative tension in the film, Bieber is shown not to know what his best interests are, and to be incapable of caring for his own voice. In fact it is presented as wholly positive that these adults in Bieber's life—his employees, in many cases—make decisions for him, without his input and preempting his objections. It is an odd portrayal for a celebratory concert film. We might expect such a film to present its star as down-to-earth, ordinary, and accessible. But *Never Say Never* does not simply show Bieber with charming foibles. It actively infantilizes him as not just fun-loving, playful, or innocent, but also irresponsible, a liar, and incapable of making good decisions. That these portrayals somehow do not reflect badly on Bieber is revealing. The value of being fully childish must outweigh any negative implications.

Commercial success as prodigious talent

Bieber's infantilization contributes to his portrayal as a prodigy by emphasizing the distance between his age identity and his accomplishments. His childish inability to care for his voice is the primary narrative mover as the plot leads up to his performance at Madison Square Garden, which serves as the triumphal climax to the film. Selling out MSG is presented as a measurable demonstration of Bieber's extreme talent, while Bieber's prodigy is presented now as a commercial, rather than strictly musical, accomplishment. The film turns to established music

industry executives who define selling out arenas as an extremely rare ability (in keeping with Gagné’s definition of talent), and emphasize the uniqueness of Bieber’s age. Tour promoter Randy Philips says:

What happened with Justin Bieber has never happened before. Truly a phenomenon. Even groups like ’N Sync and the Backstreet Boys took years. Justin is now in that rarified atmosphere: all these giant artists who sell out arenas every two or three years when they go on tour. Well Justin is one of them now. He’s become a member of that club. On his first record. In his first year and a half. I don’t believe that’s ever happened before. . . . The ultimate in our business is becoming an arena headliner: being able to sell out Madison Square Garden.

Producer and record executive LA Reid (who earlier in the film called Bieber “the Macaulay Culkin of music,” referring to another male child star): “Madison Square Garden represents the pinnacle of success for an artist. The Rolling Stones. U2. Michael Jackson. This is the big time. And for this *kid* to play Madison Square Garden, and he’s the headliner? Give me a break, come on. This just doesn’t happen.”

Braun and Bieber then combine to narrate this particular accomplishment—selling out MSG—as wholly the product of Bieber’s independent willpower and ability. Braun tells the camera, “a year and three days ago . . . we got invited to meet Taylor Swift at her sold out show—first time she’d ever sold out the garden . . . Justin looked at me and said ‘I can do this.’ And I said, ‘yeah I believe you can do it.’ And he says, ‘No I can do it in a year.’”

Bieber continues, “He kind of believed it but at the same time it was like . . . MSG is really hard to sell out. It’s a really iconic venue.”

Braun says, “He looked at me and he was like I can do this I don’t care how hard I gotta work . . . We wanted that Garden. . . . So we went on sale, and they called me and they’re like, ‘we’re going to sell out this entire tour in two days.’ I said ‘what about the Garden?’ They said, ‘the Garden? That sold out an hour ago.’ And I said, ‘what?’ They said, ‘oh yeah, we sold that out in twenty-two minutes.”

To headline arenas—especially MSG—is portrayed as the highest measure of accomplishment in popular music. Philips and Reid both emphasize the extreme rarity even of adults who succeed at this, and they highlight Bieber’s age and the speed of his accomplishment. And while interspersed comments from Bieber help establish the context, ultimately the climactic accomplishment is narrated by Braun—the adult—whose look of disbelief when he relates the “twenty-two minute” figure can express the sense of wonder that adults apply to child prodigies. The film pauses after the number, “twenty-two minutes,” to let the enormity of Bieber’s accomplishment sink in. Bieber himself is only allowed to ingenuously relate his guileless faith in his own abilities.

This is very clearly a prodigy discourse. It treats talent as measurable (through ticket sales), and defines categories of extreme talent in terms of statistical rarity. It also treats age as a normative precondition for ability, so the precocious achievement of extreme talent marks a child prodigy as the object of adult interest and even wonder. But at the same time, Bieber’s *musical* abilities—established early in the film through home videos and testimonials—are no longer commented upon. Instead it is his commercial achievement which is so explicitly framed in terms of prodigy, even playing on a distinction between gifts and talents: On the one hand Bieber highlights something like Gagné’s “talent development” when he says he doesn’t care how hard he will have to work. But ultimately the payoff is more than anyone thought to hope: not just

selling out MSG but selling it out in twenty-two minutes. Bieber's excess of gifts overflows any articulable goals of his "talent development" process. Thus right before its climactic moment, the film provides a rubric for evaluating extreme talent (selling out MSG) and then a precise measurement that locates Bieber within that rubric not just as a member of an elite group of performers, but, it is implied, remarkable even within that group.

The next minutes build to Bieber's entrance on stage at MSG: backstage shots of celebrities; shots of crying fans; shots of the various "family members" backstage; candid shots of Mama Jan giving advice. Then a pause, and a greenroom with Bieber, Usher, and Braun. Bieber holds his nose and drinks Usher's recommended pre-show energy drink, and calls it "dinosaur pee." He interrupts Usher's attempt at advice, reminding him (and us), "I'm sixteen, I always have energy." This moment of boyish play transitions to a sentimental pre-show hug, in which Braun tells Bieber he's proud of him, "the little man in all of our lives."

And then the film returns to the prologue. As Bieber dresses into the white jacket he was wearing eighty minutes earlier in the film, he says in voiceover: "I was once chilling in my room watching TV, just in a regular place. And now I'm in this big world living my dream, and you know doing what I love. And it's just crazy how it all came around." Off camera fans begin to scream and chant his name. The film cuts quickly between tracking shots of Bieber walking toward the stage entrance, shots of the packed auditorium and the spectacle of lasers and smoke happening simultaneously onstage, and rapid-fire sequences of family photographs and stills from home videos. The film lingers on the wide-eyed faces of children in the audience and then pauses dramatically at the moment right before Bieber starts singing to linger on a few more of those photographs and home video stills. And then finally it releases into the performance at MSG.

YouTube

There is a missing link here. The film's climactic scene returns to the opening: backstage at MSG, the sound of fans cheering heard over a montage of family photos. In the prologue, the juxtaposition of Madison Square Garden with childhood domesticity was presented as a problem: "A KID FROM A SMALL TOWN IN CANADA / WILL PERFORM AT THE WORLD'S MOST FAMOUS ARENA." But how do you get from former to the latter? If anything, simply cutting back and forth between home and auditorium only highlights the contrast between the two spaces. But by the time the film finally returns to this scene, that tension seems to have been resolved. The key to that resolution, and the figure in the movie that ultimately mediates between public and private, family and commerce, childhood and celebrity, is the video-sharing website YouTube, and social media and the internet more generally.

Director Jon Chu has said the film is structured according to the internet logic of the "hyperlink" (Vena 2010c). The direct connections the film is continually making between the disparate contexts of Bieber's public and private life are modeled on the internet, in particular "links" among websites that connect bodies of information and spaces for participation. But not just a background metaphor, the internet plays a key role onscreen as well, in the film's visual style and its narrative. Besides titles identifying dates or individuals, the film only uses graphics and animation in reference to the internet: certain shots include the YouTube logo and playback controls on the bottom, as though seen through a web browser, and Bieber's posts to Twitter pop up occasionally.

Before it gets to the MSG concert, the film relates Bieber's discovery by Braun, who explains how he stumbled across the online videos by accident and then convinced Bieber and

his family to sign with him and move to Atlanta. Cut among another home video of Bieber drumming on his guitar—with the YouTube logo and playback controls included at the bottom—Braun describes how he struggled to get Bieber a hearing from major labels. He presents YouTube as an explicit alternative to the child entertainment “machine” of Disney and Nickelodeon, specifically because young audiences are turning to the internet as a replacement for television: “Every label said ‘there’s no platform for him. You need Nickelodeon or Disney, you need the machine. Did you guys read the stats that kids are spending more time on the internet than they are watching TV? And the place where they’re watching most of their videos is YouTube?’”

A relatively short segment built around the song “One Time” relates Bieber’s rise to fame. Scooter explains that radio stations refused to play his music because, “we don’t play a young kid. Fifteen years old, he’s got a young voice, that’s not our thing. They didn’t understand it.” Instead they toured constantly, and Bieber used the social media site Twitter to get his existing fans to show up for performances; archival footage shows huge crowds filling malls and radio station parking lots. Hamilton says, “at that point, no one really realized how powerful social networking was, or is.” From images of malls and parking lots, the film moves to an establishing shot of an amphitheater packed full of thousands of screaming fans, while general manager Kaye argues that Bieber’s fans feel a special ownership of him precisely because social media let them bypass the normal mediations of the culture industries and consume his performance directly: “Justin’s fans are the most loyal group of girls on the planet. They all feel a certain ownership of him, because they feel like they found him before Scooter found him, before the record labels found him. He belongs to *them*.”

This is the key ideological moment in the film. While the prologue and climax juxtapose Bieber's home and professional life, this segment narrates a step-wise progression from his childhood living room to the in-person connections Bieber made with his fans at small regional shows to his mediated personal connections with fans through social media. And then, in an extraordinary and unique visual moment in the film, LA Reid says, "I've never seen fans like this," and the image swings away to reveal a CGI mosaic of hundreds of YouTube videos of fans singing along with "One Time" in their own homes and backyards (figure 1). The images move and proliferate in a fantastic three-dimensional black space out of which a few stage lights shine in the distant background. As more and more videos fill the screen individual frames grow smaller and smaller until they become a mass that resolves into the individual pixels of a wide camera shot of Bieber's live performance of "One Time" on stage. The fan videos now appear floating in space above the live performance, singing *to* Bieber as Bieber sings *to* them. The individual frames of fans' home videos move around each other like photographs hanging from a mobile, as though they share a real volume of space—a space that lays over the actual space of a large auditorium, whose stage lights intrude into the digital mosaic just as the home video tiles float over the audience in the live performance.⁸

8. There was apparently a contest encouraging fans to submit videos of themselves singing along to a different song, "That Should Be Me" (Warner 2010). That is a later recording that would not allow this connection to be made between Bieber's very early performances and his contemporary success. I have not found reports explaining how the filmmakers collected the videos that actually do appear in the film.



Figure 1: Still from *Never Say Never* (Paramount Pictures, 2011, dir. Jon Chu)

The song “One Time,” begun in this segment with Bieber’s acoustic performances at radio stations, is first joined in by a few fans singing along at regional performances who become thousands of fans singing along in their homes and in the massive tour venues. During this segment—at the same time that the soundtrack is imperceptibly shifting from small local performances of this song to big public ones—graphics begin to pop up on screen, portraying YouTube controls as though we are viewing a video in a web browser, and showing Bieber’s Twitter conversations with fans non-diegetically with the filmed footage. This graphic language points away from the documentary realism of the rest of the film while building toward the fantasy space of the home video mosaic.

The home videos of fans singing along with Bieber clearly recall the home videos of Bieber himself singing along to other celebrities’ songs. The mass audience is conceived as a collection of individuals, using digital animation techniques that allow the filmmakers to trace identifiable individuals as they join larger and larger groups. The mass audience in the auditorium is paired with the mass audience at home and online. Just as home videos trail Bieber’s every footstep as he moves toward the public performance space, they follow the audience to that space as well. In this narration of Bieber’s rise to fame, what makes his success possible is the steady

agglomeration of intimate one-to-one relationships between performer and audience, all of whom are metaphorically located safely in their own family homes. Bieber sings from his childhood couch to fans who sing back to him from their own living rooms and backyards.

This digital mosaic scene puts forward a spatial metaphor of internet media and the relationship between performers and audiences. These online performances are presented as taking place in a three-dimensional, social, and participatory space, but one that is always linked to and enclosed in domestic safety. In the literal space of the auditorium child audiences and a child performer gather outside their homes to participate in an activity that is, the film seems to want to say, effectively the same as that online space, which is itself comfortably embedded in individual family homes. Director Jon Chu described his interest in portraying a “digital lifestyle” (Vena 2010a). But of course there is nothing particularly “digital” about live concerts. Instead, this concert film proposes to narrate a “new” form of mass mediated relationality, with Bieber and his fans positioned at the forefront, in which the live concert is not conceived as the primary site of public performance and audition, the home is.

Public and private in children’s new media

In *Never Say Never*, YouTube intervenes as a proposed resolution to some fundamental questions in the children’s music industry. A child onstage at Madison Square Garden presents a powerful conceptual problem for our ideas about childhood, and public performance. Over the last 150 years, childhood has been constructed as innocent and vulnerable, and therefore as sheltered, private, and domestic (Zelizer, 1985), while consumerism, marketing, and entertainment have been identified as threats to the sheltered innocence of childhood domesticity

(Postman 1982; Spiegel 1993; Schor, 2004).⁹ Notably, two focal points of moral panic about threats to childhood domesticity and family authority are popular music (McCormick, 1993; Wright 2000) and online media (boyd and Marwick 2009; Palfrey et al. 2008; Montgomery 2007, pp. 35–66). But, ironically, for the same reasons that they are available to moral panic, popular music and online media’s specific potential for blurring the boundaries between public and private may provide powerful conceptual resources for legitimating children’s active involvement in media and consumer culture, and for quieting moral panic.

Popular music consumption often takes place comfortably within family homes and so may not immediately activate adult concerns. The tradition of “bedroom culture” has been identified as a historically important part especially of the social and cultural lives of girls, who are doubly subject to the surveillance and control entailed by ideologies of innocence and vulnerability (McRobbie & Garber, 1976; Baker, 2004). Especially in its association with femininity and domesticity, such bedroom culture points to forms of public media consumption and participation that are already coded as potentially complementary to values of family and childhood. The portrayal of private bedroom performances fantastically overflowing into real public performances may now be a conventional, even genre-defining visual-rhetorical trope of tween media: an almost identical move structures Kidz Bop’s first major music video (Bickford, 2012, p. 421), and it closely parallels core themes of the Disney Channel’s *Hannah Montana* (Blue, 2013).

Like bedroom music listening, online media is also conceptually primed to do this work. Accounts of YouTube in particular emphasize its blurring of traditional boundaries: between public and private (Lange, 2007), amateur and professional (Salvato, 2009), “ordinary” and

9. This is an impossible situation for actual children, as children’s investment in consumer culture can be seen as the direct outcome of their ideological association with privacy and domesticity (Pugh, 2009).

“extraordinary” (Strangelove, 2011)—the latter two pairs in particular resonate with questions of prodigy. And scholars such as Henry Jenkins (1998b) and danah boyd (2008) have argued that young people’s enthusiasm for digital and online media in part responds to the closing off of public spaces like street corners and shopping malls to children’s independent social activity and freedom of movement, and to increasing adult surveillance and control over children’s activities. Young people’s participation in the “networked publics” (Ito 2008) of social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter may accommodate the freedom of movement and independence of social activity that have been foreclosed elsewhere. In fact, Mary Celeste Kearney points to the complementarity between bedroom culture and new media technologies to argue that girls “are problematizing the conventional construction of the bedroom as private by using this space as not only a production studio, but also a distribution center” (2007, p. 137). The “One Time” montage of fans’ YouTube videos plays on the conceptual bridge that domestic consumption and online media already provide to domesticate the public performance space of Madison Square Garden. The spatial metaphor of the montage, in which online videos interact in a three-dimensional social space, might be seen as an attempt to depict visually Kearney’s argument that, “contemporary female youth are not retreating to private spaces; they are reconfiguring such sites to create new publics that can better serve their needs, interests, and goals” (2007, p. 138).

Furthermore, the clear parallel between home videos of Bieber and those of his fans links to a set of YouTube practices that emphasize “affinity” within social groups (Lange, 2009; also Senft, 2008). Online images of family domesticity, as much as they mark children as dependent, immature, and without agency, also mark children *as children*—that is, an authentic position that makes collective identification possible. While they are occupying adult spaces, Bieber and his fans are not simply becoming adults or trying to pass as adults. If anything the film presents them

reveling in their childishness: not simply being absorbed into an existing adult public culture but building a particular form of publicity up around them, as children. The connections being made online are portrayed as entirely between children. Child audience performing and watching on YouTube from their homes can directly connect to Bieber as child himself performing and watching on YouTube from his home. YouTube literally mediates connections among children, but it also symbolically mediates the conceptual gulf between childhood and publicity by envisioning an intimate online public space grounded in domesticity.

Media constructions of affinity through portrayals of celebrity “ordinariness” are not new, especially in popular music. Dibben notes its importance in 1990s Spice Girls videos (1999), and Shank argues for its broad importance to contemporary pop (2009). As Shank points out, ordinariness is a key tool in the production of “intimate publics” built out of affective identification rather than politicized solidarity (Berlant, 2008). Like “teenybopper” in an earlier generation (Coates 2003), “tween” is a strongly gendered category (Cook & Kaiser, 2004) that responds to cultural anxieties about sexuality that apply with much more force to girls than boys. Indeed, Diane Pecknold (2011) has argued that, “because the tween market is so gendered, . . . the marginalization of children becomes a kind of metaphor for female marginalization.”

In fact, the collapse of personal and public that so characteristic of contemporary digital formations appears to be identical to the same collapse in contemporary “postfeminist” culture (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009), to the point that Banet-Weiser calls it “the labor of femininity” (2012, p. 51). Bieber is himself subject to critiques of his masculinity (Harvey et al., 2013), and videos of him singing along to popular R&B recordings in the mid-2000s are only partially resuscitated from critiques of effeminacy by their position in a heroic prodigy narrative. The film’s active infantilization of Bieber—showing him as not simply “ordinary” but deeply

flawed—may recall the trend in postfeminist media to highlight the flaws and insecurities of female protagonists like Ally McBeal and Bridget Jones (Genz, 2010). On the other hand, and Bieber may simply be performing a parallel archetype: the “man-child” (Thompson, 2012; Weigel & Ahern, 2013). The specific forms of his childishness are strongly coded as boyish: cheerful mischievousness, roughhousing, etc. And his fans are interviewed repeatedly proclaiming their romantic and sexual desire for him. Perhaps we see not so much intimate identification among children as McRobbie and Garber’s “adoring female[s] in awe of the male on a pedestal” (1976, p. 221). Gender-bending masculine performances in popular music have long histories and need not destabilize masculine privileges (Auslander, 2006; Burton, 2007; Whiteley, 1997). Nonetheless there is a direct and important parallel established between the fans’ videos and Bieber’s own that needs to be accounted for, and the particular emphasis on domesticity in both—not a characteristic trait of the “man-child”—provides a strong link between childhood and femininity. If anything traits shared by childhood and femininity may provide a resource for (partial) identification, rather than simply adoration, between boy stars and their mostly girl fans.

What does “prodigy” do for Bieber? Like YouTube, like bedroom culture, like postfeminism, it highlights blurred boundaries between child and adult, and between public and private. And it provides tools for making Bieber’s particular configuration of childhood celebrity legible. “Prodigy” provides a conceptual scaffold connecting conventionally adult forms of success with childhood embodiment. Bieber’s prodigy involves a complicated inversion of talent and childishness—or even talent *as* childishness. So rather than credentialing Bieber as fully adult, having surpassed certain developmental milestones and proven his exceptionality, here prodigy does the reverse. There is no aspiration to adulthood. Instead conventionally adult forms of

popular cultural success are domesticated, or even infantilized—treated not as the hard-won endpoint of a developmental ladder, but as straightforward and unproblematically childish. Rather than discourses of prodigy providing rhetorical support for separating Bieber out from among his “peers,” instead the very definition of his prodigy—headlining and selling out MSG—requires instead his intense identification with other children. To be a prodigy in the terms set by commercial popular music is to cultivate such intense identification with a class of fans that they expend time and energy turning up to one’s performances (expenditures that are even greater for children who do not have access to their own funds or transportation). That means that the rhetoric of prodigy that the film develops around Bieber hinges on an account of his audience, and YouTube is the rhetorical tool that makes sense of that account.

Of course, *Never Say Never* is a motivated commercial text, and not a sociological one. It provides extremely limited insight into the actual practices of Bieber’s young fans, but it is richly informative about how contemporary children’s media is invested in working through the problems and promises of childhood performance in changing times, marrying “old” concepts like child musical prodigy to “new” ones like tweens and online video sharing, actively seeking out space in cultural norms about childhood, family, and media to push forward their commercial vision of mass celebrity and popular stardom.

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