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Musicking, Discourse, and Identity in Participatory Media Fandom

Aya Esther Hayashi

The Graduate Center, City University of New York

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MUSICKING, DISCOURSE, AND IDENTITY
IN PARTICIPATORY MEDIA FANDOM

by

AYA ESTHER HAYASHI

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate faculty in Music in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, the City University of New York

2018
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Aya Esther Hayashi

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Music in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
ABSTRACT

Musicking, Discourse, and Identity in Participatory Media Fandom

by

Aya Esther Hayashi

Advisor: Emily Wilbourne

In this dissertation, I study three forms of music-making within media fandom and their respective communities: filk, roughly, the folk music of the science fiction and fantasy fandom; wizard rock, a punk/DIY movement inspired by J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* novels; and the YouTube musicals of Team StarKid and AVbyte. I consider their individual histories and the popular music movements and genres that influenced their respective developments. Even though the practices of these three communities are very different, their participants use similar, if identical, discourses when discussing what they do and why they do it, including but not limited to: openness, acceptance, the equality of all participants (and by extension, the lack of hierarchy), and the celebration of amateurism. The rhetoric itself is found throughout media fandom, in creative and non-creative sectors. However, unlike other creative communities in fandom that, today, exist primarily online, the rhetoric in these musical communities is attached to performance and social practices, as well as in-person and online interactions. In addition to providing the first academic histories for these communities, I analyze the ways in which participants’ behaviors align with and contradict the rhetoric. This demonstrates that the rhetoric’s purpose is not merely descriptive, but more often, imaginative and teleological.
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INTRODUCTION

We just really love music at LeakyCon. It’s definitely been important to us to have a lot of good music. Music is part of every culture... I mean, I’m not an anthropologist, so maybe I shouldn’t make broad, sweeping statements, but it’s my belief that most, if not all, successful cultures have music in them because it’s a way of storytelling, it’s a way to express emotions, it’s a way of connecting people. We’ve seen it help people. We’ve seen it make people feel accepted. It’s a big part of what we do. It’s fun! It’s silly and fun and what we should be doing.

~ Melissa Anelli, Executive Director, Mischief Management

Music performance has arguably been one of the most consistent features of fan gatherings since fan culture began in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century. It was present in British music halls as early as the 1890s when performers entertained audiences with songs about Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s famous detective Sherlock Holmes. Once science fiction fan conventions started in the late 1930s, some attendees parodied popular songs, replacing the original lyrics with silly or science fiction-themed ones, to entertain each other and foster camaraderie. Presently, there are several geek or nerd-rock bands on Internet platforms like iTunes, Bandcamp, and YouTube, and one can find these musicians touring small venues and playing at large and small fan conventions. Even mainstream entertainers like Jimmy Fallon and the Roots put together a cappella arrangements of John Williams’ themes from Star Wars to commemorate recent installments of the film franchise. The amount of musical activity in fandom, from the center to the periphery, niche to mainstream, is astounding. Yet, when looking at the academic studies and popular literature written about fan music-making, one receives the opposite impression. In the academic sphere, there have only been two master’s theses and a

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1 Melissa Anelli, personal interview, August 13, 2014.
smattering of articles and book chapters written on the topic, and they are mainly descriptive rather than analytical. In popular press interest pieces, fan music-making is incorrectly labeled “filk,” which, as I will discuss, is not a genre but a specific community of practice within the science fiction and fantasy fandom.

In this dissertation I study three forms of music-making within media fandom and their respective communities: filk, roughly, the folk music of the science fiction and fantasy fandom; wizard rock, a punk/DIY movement inspired by J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* novels; and the YouTube musicals of Team StarKid and AVbyte. I consider their individual histories and the popular music movements and genres that influenced their respective developments. Even though the practices of these three communities are very different, their participants use similar, if not identical, discourses when discussing what they do and why they do it. Many of these are exemplified in Anelli’s statement above: openness, acceptance, the equality of all participants (and by extension, the lack of hierarchy), and the celebration of amateurism. The rhetoric itself is nothing new and is found throughout media fandom, in creative and non-creative sectors. However, unlike the communities surrounding fan fiction and fan video that, today, exist primarily online, the rhetoric in these musical communities is attached to performance and social practices, as well as in-person and online interactions. In addition to providing the first academic histories for these communities, I analyze the ways in which participants’ behaviors align with and contradict the rhetoric. This is to demonstrate that the rhetoric’s purpose is not merely descriptive, but more often, imaginative and teleological.

**State of Research**

This dissertation seeks to bring the disciplines of fan studies and musicology together. A relatively young field, fan studies came into its own in the late 1980s and early 1990s, primarily
through the essay collection edited by Lisa A. Lewis called *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media* (1992). Lewis and her authors endeavored to depathologize fans, their readings, and their cultural activity. This collection included notable essays by media studies scholars John Fiske and Henry Jenkins, whose writings framed fan activity as resistant and subcultural and set the tenor of fan studies for the next decade.

Also in 1992, Jenkins published his pivotal monograph, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*, in which he sought to redeem television fans from the negative stereotypes that abounded in popular media, including William Shatner’s 1986 skit on *Saturday Night Live* where he pleads with *Star Trek* fans to “get a life.”\(^4\) Drawing on the work of Michel De Certeau and on his own fieldwork, Jenkins argued that fans are not pathetic, lonely consumers; rather, they exist in vibrant, creative communities, “poach” from mainstream media, and produce resistant readings of the texts that they follow. Notably, the final chapter of *Textual Poachers* focused on filk, which Jenkins broadly defined as “fan music-making.”\(^5\) Other works published shortly after *Textual Poachers* used ethnographic methods; authors interviewed participants and observed fan activity at conventions. Important contributions include Camille Bacon-Smith’s *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth* (1992), C. Lee Harrington and Denise D. Bielby’s *Soap Fans: Pursuing Pleasure and Making Meaning in Everyday Life* (1995), and John Tulloch and Henry Jenkins’s *Science Fiction Audiences: Watching Doctor Who and Star Trek* (1995). These works pitted fans against media producers in a power struggle over consumption and textual interpretation. Arguably a necessary

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task at that moment, this first wave of fan studies “left media and cultural studies with considerable baggage.”

Since then, the discipline has gone through two more theoretical waves: initially, scholars sought to move away from framing fandom as resistant, interpretive communities and situate fan activity as a specialized form of consumption within the spectrum of audiences. Scholars like Matt Hills and Cornel Sandvoss moved away from studying communities, and drew on psychoanalytic frameworks to investigate the motivations of individual fans. Since the turn of the 21st century, media producers have increasingly looked to cultivate fan engagement. The widespread adoption of the Internet and social media platforms have also contributed to the mainstreaming of fannish practices. In this third wave of fan studies, scholars turned from ethnography to investigating hierarchies within fandom and the effects of technology on how fans behave individually and communally. With this turn, however, scholarly interest in fan musical activity tapered off.

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Furthermore, few authors who have written about fan musical activity attempted to move beyond the first-wave approach. As Jessica Getman and I wrote, “They tend, perhaps by necessity of belonging to an under-represented subfield, to focus on defining and historicizing their respective genres, using filk as a baseline fan practice against which to develop an understanding of their topic…. [Filk] remains the ever-present lodestone at the centre of the smattering of existing research into the uses of music by fans. Many scholars, fans, journalists, and fandom outsiders [assume], after reading Jenkins’ *Textual Poachers*, that the term ‘filk’ applies to fannish music writ large.”\(^{12}\) While various scholars have challenged aspects of *Textual Poachers*, no one has challenged his presentation of fan musical practices.\(^ {13}\) Part of my project in focusing on three distinct communities within media fandom, including the filk community, is to remove “fan music-making” from its exclusive relationship to filk and widen its field of inquiry.

On the whole, little has been written about the production of music among fans in comparison with other areas of fan cultural production. In their introduction to *The Fan Studies Reader*, Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse provide hints as to why. They first distinguish between affirmative fans who “tend to collect, view, and play, to discuss, analyze, and critique” and transformative fans who “take a creative step to make the worlds and characters their own, be it by telling stories, cosplaying the characters, creating artworks, or engaging in any of the many forms active fan participation can take. Part of the academic interest in transformative fans


is that there exist actual artifacts that can be studied and analyzed.”14 Though this distinction in fan behavior is useful, Busse and Hellekson make two erroneous assumptions. One, they imply that all participants in creative fan communities are transformative fans. Two, they suggest that transformative fans produce objects. Neither of these assumptions apply well to fan music.15

First, does their presentation of transformative fan culture include the readers, listeners, and viewers? Second, where is the artifact in fan musical performance? Is it the lyrics, the recording, or the performance itself? Jenkins combined lyrical analysis with ethnographic accounts of the performances. Later scholars who took up the study of wizard rock have focused solely on lyrical content.16 In my own experiences and those of others quoted in this dissertation, recordings, both studio and live, fail to fully capture the experience of a performance. Musical scores do not exist, and chord and tab sheets are like sketches at best.

The study of popular and amateur musics requires a conceptual shift in how one views “music,” both the word itself and what it means. As a discipline rooted in nineteenth-century Europe and its philosophies of art, musicology has traditionally treated music like an object, a thing that can be studied. Though a performance of a piece of music is ephemeral, the musical work exists as a score through which the composer communicates his intentions. Lydia Goehr, in her book The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works (1992), notably challenged this view by historicizing the “work-concept” and showing how it came to dominate music-philosophical

15 Like in their introduction to Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet, music is notably absent from their list of transformative fan activities. See Ibid., 2.
thought in the late eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{17} The dethroning of the work-concept aided the study of popular music.\textsuperscript{18} Popular music has often been looked down upon or dismissed for its ephemerality, a perceived lack of gravitas and complexity, and its commercialism. In response, popular music scholars have turned their focus from how music is made to how it is used and interpreted.\textsuperscript{19}

This shift, however, continues to treat music as an object, as a sort of tool. Grammatically, music is still a noun. In his book, Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening (1998), cultural musicologist Christopher Small calls this assumption into question.

“Music is not a thing at all, but an activity, something that people do. The apparent thing ‘music’ is a figment, an abstraction of the action, whose reality vanishes as soon as we examine it all closely.”\textsuperscript{20} He posits that the word “music” should be conceptualized as a verb rather than a noun. He writes, “To music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing.”\textsuperscript{21}

The verb “to music” and its attendant gerund “musicking” resonate strongly with fan activities, pun intended. Small continues, “The act of musicking establishes in the place where it is happening a set of relationships, and it is in those relationships that the meaning of the act lies. They are to be found not only between those organized sounds which are conventionally thought

\textsuperscript{18} Michael Talbot, ed., The Musical Work: Reality or Invention (Liverpool: University of Liverpool, 2000).
\textsuperscript{20} Christopher Small, Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 2.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 9.
of as being the stuff of musical meaning but also between the people who are taking part, in whatever capacity, in the performance . . .” These relationships—between the performer(s) and the audience, between audience members, and between the group and the society at large—are experienced quintessentially in performance.

This explains both the way in which Jenkins and others have addressed fan musicking in the academic literature and the way that fan musicians describe their performance and social practices and derive meaning from them. However, just because fans describe their subjective experiences as idyllic does not mean that the communities in which they take part are always like that. More often than not, they are far from perfect. The commonly used discourses of a community are often in direct tension with its practices, and the tension between the ideal and the real is only ameliorated through musical performance. By pressing into these conflicts and tensions, I aim to demystify musical acts in fan studies and provide a fuller, more nuanced account of the three musicking communities.

My work directly responds to two recent calls in fan studies. First, Francesca Coppa writes, in her essay “A Brief History of Media Fandom,” that “not only has a comprehensive history of media fandom not been written, but there also have been very few histories of individual fandoms and the works of art they produced.” The few histories that have been written are by fans for other fans. Coppa considers her essay a first step in creating space for histories in fan studies, a genre that is “badly need[ed].” Second, Paul Booth encourages the

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22 Ibid., 13.
24 Ibid., 42.
start of a fourth wave of fan studies in which scholars return to “the fans themselves.”²⁵ He writes, “. . . there is still an enormous off-line component of fandom that should also be described and theorized if fan researchers are to understand fully twenty-first-century fandom. Fans do use the Internet to meet up, form communities and create original texts, but they also meet in real life to discuss, cosplay, game and engage in group viewings, among other activities. . . . The best way to do this, as first wave fan studies would indicate, is through ethnographic methodologies that emphasize the fan’s voice as well as the researcher’s.”²⁶

In this dissertation, I provide the first academic histories of the filk, wizard rock, and YouTube musical communities, fusing them with ethnographic observations and critical analysis. Fan musicking communities provide a rich site in which to think about several intersecting continuums that govern fandom participation today:

- Aesthetics and traditions: What moments in American culture influence the tastes of community members?
- Relationship to the Internet: Was the community formed before, during, or after the widespread adoption of the Internet and social media platforms?

²⁶ Ibid.
• Community interaction: Do interactions between members of the community take place face-to-face or online? Are interactions primarily one form or the other or a blend of the two?

• Participation: Do members participate primarily through group or communal performance, solo or band performance, or listening?

• Professionalism: How polished are the performances and recordings?

• Commercialism: How likely is a member of the community going to seek commercial profit from their music?

In addition to providing the histories of these communities, I locate them along these axes and analyze how they articulate their identities because of, or even despite, their locations.

Approach

I have identified as a media fan longer than I have as a scholar. Through my adolescence, I ardently followed the *Star Wars* franchise. I sketched my favorite characters (though not well), read the Extended Universe novels and online fan fiction, and kept track of new developments on several websites as the prequel films were being released. When new films opened in theatres, I attended midnight showings in a hastily-scrounged-together costume with a toy lightsaber attached to my belt. In high school and college, I became a devoted fan of Joss Whedon’s works and tracked his new projects. There were several other texts that I followed over the years. In the realm of fans and fan activity, however, I was a “lurker:” I would read fan fiction, blog posts, and news about the texts that I liked, but I never contributed comments. I did not attend any conventions because I did not have the funds, and I knew my parents would disapprove. Because of these factors, I did not enter the physical spaces of fan activity or actively engage other fans, on or off the Internet, until I decided to research this topic.
Fan studies scholars have spilled much ink over the distinctions between fan and scholarly activities. Early theorists like Joli Jenson, contesting the perception of the fan as a pathological being, suggested that the way in which fans and scholars read texts is not all that different. Henry Jenkins and Will Brooker openly identified as fans in their works, and by doing so, sought to establish a hybrid identity as both scholar and fan, with neither identity taking precedence. In his book *Fan Cultures* (2002), Matt Hills distinguishes between the scholar-fan (more commonly referred to today as “academic-fan,” or for short, “aca-fan”) and the fan-scholar. Both are hybrid identities. However, the aca-fan’s identity as a scholar is of primary importance, while the fan-scholar identifies first as a fan.

I’m not convinced that scholars who study fandom while also identifying as fans require a label. After a while, it devolves into hairsplitting. I was first a media fan. I became a scholar to which this dissertation attests. Both are part of my identity; the part that takes precedence depends on my environment. As my interest in fan music developed into a viable research topic and I began to present papers in academic settings, I often had to downplay my fan identity and learn to perform critical distance. When I began fieldwork at conventions, I often had to prove my fan identity to those with whom I spoke. However, neither part was fully absent when the other took precedence.

Over the course of my research, I struggled with my position as both an insider and outsider of the communities I was studying. I became more of a *Harry Potter* fan because of my work in the wizard rock community. Despite my own fan allegiances, I cognitively knew that the

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people to whom I was speaking were actively presenting the best narratives about their communities. In trying to respect them, my early attempts at writing were often criticized for sounding too “insider.” Writing this dissertation was an active exercise in not repeating these narratives wholesale, looking for the gaps in the discourses and narratives, and learning how to question them. I wrestled with the fear of insulting my informants. It took an advisor saying, “Be freely critical,” to give me the necessary freedom to restructure and complete the chapter at hand. Still, as I write this introduction, I fear how this dissertation might be received by the people I critique.

Deborah Wong, in her essay “Moving: From Performance to Performative Ethnography and Back Again,” plainly states, “The ethnographer is always an outsider.” There were many moments in my research that I acutely felt my outsider-ness. However, there were also many moments where I felt my insider-ness. Both positions fueled this dissertation. In their introduction to *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet* (2006), Busse and Hellekson write,

. . . the act of performing fandom parallels the act of performing academia. Both rely on dialogue, community, and intertextuality. . . . We’ll continue to exist on the intersection of the two, trying not to aca-colonize fandom or lose our academic allegiance through our fannish one. But we also want to profit from this intersection and to use our academic and fannish tools and insights to give a more complex and multifaceted image of fandom and its communities. In fact, we contend that our self-definition as participants and observers does not hinder us from seeing but rather helps us to see a more comprehensive picture of fandom.

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Throughout this dissertation, I use personal pronouns (I, me, my) to articulate my critiques and analyses, as well as, when applicable, my subjective experiences in the filk, wizard rock, and Team StarKid and AVbyte communities.

This dissertation is based primarily on information gathered through fieldwork and semi-structured interviews. From June 2011 to January 2015, I attended four filk conventions (Contata 2011 in Parsippany, New Jersey; Consonance 2012 in Boxborough, Massachusetts; the Ohio Valley Filk Fest 2013 in Worthington, Ohio; and Conflikt 2015 in Seattle, Washington), three multifandom conventions (LeakyCon 2014 in Orlando, Florida; DragonCon 2014 in Atlanta, Georgia; and New York Comic Con 2014 in New York, New York), and three Yule Ball concerts in Brooklyn, New York (2014–2016). While at the conventions, I attended multiple concerts and audio and video recorded events for personal reference. I attempted to gather data on fans’ musical tastes while at LeakyCon by passing out a link to a survey on Google Forms; though several people expressed interest in participating, very few followed through, and the results were negligible.

In addition to attending musical performances and events at these conventions, I conducted fifteen interviews with twenty-three informants. Eleven interviews were conducted at LeakyCon 2014, DragonCon 2014, and Conflikt 2015; most were arranged via email in the days leading up to the conventions, though a few were scheduled on site. Eight interviews were one-on-one conversations; the remaining seven were done in small groups of two or three. Several interviews took place outside of the conventions. Two interviews were conducted over Google Video; two were conducted in New York City; one was conducted in London, England; and one was conducted over email. All in-person and Google Video interviews were recorded with the signed consent of the interviewees. I informed all of them that I was only using the interviews for
my own research and writing. I later transcribed the interviews, and the interviewees had the opportunity to review them.

The interviews started with me briefing the interviewee(s) on the scope of my research and why I was interested in speaking with them. This led into the same basic questions: what is your musical background and how did you become involved in your community? From there, I allowed the conversation to flow according to the interviewee’s responses and responsiveness. I prepared additional questions for each person or group of people in the event that the conversation flagged. These included questions about their awareness of other forms of fan-produced music, the events in which they participated, the importance of the Internet and social media in their community, and what songs or pieces they felt best represented their work as performing artists. The one exception to this format was my interview with Melissa Anelli, to whom I spoke because of her role as the chief executive officer of LeakyCon. Almost inevitably, the interviews ventured into what fandom and music meant to them and what they hoped to encourage or accomplish in their chosen community. Depending on the interviewee’s availability, these interviews lasted anywhere from thirty-five to eighty minutes.

In addition to fieldwork and interviews, I conducted a significant amount of research online. I set up a LiveJournal profile, which allowed me to interact with many members of the filk community. I also set up a Tumblr profile; I did not use it as much as I anticipated because I could view most Tumblr posts without needing a personal login for the platform. I also used several publicly available blogs and the comments posted under relevant entries. In order to construct the histories of these communities, I combined the information gathered from my interviews, online research, books and documentaries produced by fans for their respective communities, and general interest pieces published on news and entertainment websites.
Definitions

Several terms pertaining to fans and fan studies appear throughout this dissertation and need to be defined. These terms are slippery concepts, and they carry different connotations depending on who is using them and their relationship or depth of involvement with other fans or fan communities. I will define terms that are specific to the three musicking communities in their respective chapters.

First, what constitutes a fan? Many scholars have attempted to define what makes a fan different from the typical consumer. Commonly acknowledged to be a derivation and reduction of the word “fanatic,” the term “fan” typically indicates a person who is an enthusiastic, emotionally and commercially invested follower of a sport, hobby, celebrity, media text, or other popular culture item. Yet, the term has also accrued pejorative connotations because of its etymology and associations with uncompromising religious zeal and mental instability. Additionally, it has primarily been associated with people with middle-to-low brow tastes in entertainment in contrast with those who are interested in “high art.”

Throughout the twentieth century, fans were often portrayed as immature, socially inept, and detached from the real world, while being overly invested in fictional worlds. As discussed earlier, Jenkins and other first-wave researchers sought to redeem media fans from these negative stereotypes. Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst attempted to subdivide levels of consumer engagement further, arguing that other terms like “cultist” and “enthusiast” ought to be used in addition to “fan” depending on the object of affection, use of media, and organizational coherence.32 These distinctions did not gain traction in either academic or journalistic circles. For the purposes of this dissertation, I draw on the work of Cornel Sandvoss and define a fan as

32 Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst, Audiences, 121–58.
someone who is a “regular, emotionally involved [consumer] of a given popular narrative or text in the form of books, television shows, films, or music, as well as popular texts in a broader sense such as sports teams and popular icons and stars ranging from athletes to musicians to actors.”

Participants in fan communities often use the term **fandom** when discussing their community or the spaces, on and off the Internet, in which they interact. The term is laced with uncertainty because it is a combination of the term “fan,” itself a loaded term, and the suffix “-dom.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes that “-dom” is “an abstract suffix of state,” and is currently a “living suffix, freely employed to [indicate] . . . the sense of ‘condition, state, dignity’ . . . [or] that of ‘domain, realm.’”

In the fields of audience and fan studies, John Fiske was one of the first scholars to ascribe a subcultural quality to the term:

Fandom . . . selects from the repertoire of mass-produced and mass-distributed entertainment . . . [and] takes them into the culture of self-selected fraction of the people. They are then reworked into an intensely pleasurable, intensely signifying popular culture that is both similar to, yet significantly different from, the culture of more “normal” popular audiences. Fandom is typically associated with cultural forms that the dominant value system denigrates . . . . It is thus associated with the cultural tastes of subordinated formations of the people, particularly with those disempowered by any combination of gender, age, class and race.

For Fiske, fandom is the alternate, subcultural space for people who are not part of the dominant system, who are looked down upon for their intense love of popular texts. It is positioned as a site that is inherently resistant. The influence of Fiske’s formulation of fandom can be seen in Jenkins’ *Textual Poachers*. For Sandvoss, this definition is value-laden, “[blurring] the

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boundaries between the description and the interpretation of fan practices.”\textsuperscript{36} It excludes those who participate in “regular, emotionally involved consumption,” yet do not have the desire or means to gather in the sites determined by fans whose participation matches Fiske’s definition.\textsuperscript{37} Like Sandvoss, I argue that fandom should include all people who identify as fans, regardless of their depth of involvement.

For the purposes of this dissertation, I prefer the definition given by Lara Rutherford-Morrison on the entertainment site \textit{Bustle}. Drawing on the twin implications of the suffix “-dom,” she writes that fandom

\begin{quote}

literally refer[s] to a region controlled by fans . . . . It is a group dedicated to showing devotion to some object (a show, a comic, a sports team, what-have-you), but it is also a site of production generated and controlled by fans—a space where fans create their own language and communities, and where they reimagine characters and worlds into something that is uniquely theirs . . . . “[F]andom,” too, is a state of being, a condition that fans have. That definition—the idea that fandom isn’t simply an external community, but also a mode of being—will ring true to anyone who’s ever been deeply enmeshed in a fandom.\textsuperscript{38}
\end{quote}

Rutherford-Morrison’s definition touches on a core idea of this dissertation: the cultural production aspect of fandom is a lived reality and an imagined one, a communal identity and a personal one. There is often dissonance between these concepts, facets of which will be explored in the following chapters.

Rutherford-Morrison also uses the term in its broadest sense. The flexibility of the term is great when writing about subjective experiences; it is less so when employing it in academic writing. As Busse and Hellekson write, “[Fandom] is itself not cohesive. It is impossible, perhaps

\textsuperscript{36} Sandvoss, 7.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 7–9.
even dangerous, to speak of a single fandom . . .”39 because different fandoms occupy different spaces and have different practices. In this dissertation, I specify the scope of the term by appending a descriptor before it (e.g., media fandom, the *Harry Potter* fandom, etc.).

The largest collective of fans that I invoke is **media fandom**. Coppa limits her definition of media fandom to fans and fan activity surrounding films and television shows.40 This was to distinguish the group about which she was writing from the science fiction/fantasy fandom, among others, which developed around literature in the early twentieth century. In this contemporary age of adaptation and transmedia, where, for example, Sherlock Holmes is simultaneously a character in a late-nineteenth-century serial narrative, and in numerous films, television shows, and web serials, that limited definition no longer suffices. I expand the definition of media fandom to include the fans and fan spaces that have developed around print media, television shows, films, and online video. I will not refer to the communities that I study as music fandoms because I do not want to conflate them with popular music fandoms that focus on specific genres of music or musicians. The musicking communities studied in this dissertation have developed within the context of media fandom.

When considering media fandom as a “realm” or “domain,” it follows that there are different spaces (metaphorical and physical) within it for those who are lightly involved and those who are deeply involved. Because this dissertation focuses on musical activity, it favors those who are more deeply involved, and who channel that devotion into creative pursuits.

Jenkins labels the art, fiction, and music produced by fans as **participatory fan culture**. He uses the adjective “participatory” to distinguish creatively-inclined fans from more casual viewers and readers of popular texts. Like Fiske’s interpretive definition of fandom, however, “participatory

40 Francis Coppa, “A Brief History of Media Fandom,” 42.
“fan culture” has become a value-laden concept associated with his formulation of fans as nomadic readers. Open participation is also a core value of fandom. Even though I use the term to limit the scope of my study (i.e. participatory media fandom), I also interrogate the adjective by considering who gets to participate in each of these communities, who controls the participation of others, and what practices encourage or discourage widespread participation.

Throughout this dissertation, I (or the sources I quote) make passing references to three other major forms of participatory fan culture: fan fiction, fan vids, and cosplay. Each form has its own communities, practices, rules, roles, and genres. The following is meant to be a basic primer rather than comprehensive set of definitions. **Fan fiction** refers to stories—short, novel-length, and serial—by those who self-identify as fans of a text, be it a real-life band/musician, book, film, television show, or web serial.\(^{41}\) Readers will note that I use the two-word form in my own prose. However, fans often conflate the term into one word: fanfiction (abbrev. “fanfic”). Some are adamantly opposed to the use of the two-word form.\(^{42}\) If the one word version is in a quote, I do not change it out of respect for the source. Most fan studies scholars use the two-word version, hence my choice to use it as well.


\[^{42}\] For example, see Gavia Baker-Whitelaw and Aja Romano, “A guide to fanfiction for people who can’t stop getting it wrong,” *The Daily Dot*, June 17, 2014, last modified March 8, 2017, accessed July 13, 2017, https://www.dailydot.com/parsec/complete-guide-to-fanfiction/. They write, “No, it’s not [written as fan fiction]. The word is ‘fanfiction.’ It’s not Fan Fiction or FanFiction or fanfictions or fan-fiction . . .Get it right . . . . When you write fanfic as ‘fan fiction’ you’re implying that a) you’re not one of us, because if you were, you’d call fic like normal people, and b) you’re thinking that ‘fan’ is an adjective that somehow separates our fiction from normal-people fiction. Fanfiction is a literary format with its own subgenres. You wouldn’t call a play ‘stage fiction’ or a movie ‘film fiction.’ They’re things. Fanfiction is a thing.”
Fan vids (short for “fan videos”) are videos that splice together clips from films or television shows in order to tell a story or highlight relationships between characters. These stories can be canonic or non-canonic. Many superimpose music over the edits. As with fan fiction and fan music, the quality varies from editor to editor. Some fans also favor the one-word conflation of the term: fanvids. I consider fan vids a distinct community of practice, separate from the communities studied here. I do not consider “official” music videos created by these musicians or the YouTube musicals discussed in Chapter Three to be fan vids.

Lastly, cosplay describes the practice of fans dressing up as fictional characters. Game designer Takahashi Nobuyuki first coined the term kosupure, a portmanteau of the Japanese words for “costume” and “play,” in the 1980s. The history of the practice is intricately tied to convention culture, and it is typically at these gatherings that cosplayers display their work. These costumes run the gamut in terms of complexity. As arguably the most publicly visual form of fan culture, cosplayers are usually open to strangers taking pictures with them at these events (Figure i).

Cosplay is a significant part of the wizard rock community. The YouTube musicals that I discuss also include acknowledgements to the practice.

Chapter Outline

The first three chapters of this dissertation focus on the individual histories of each community in chronological order of their development, their contemporary discourses and practices, and their locations along the previously introduced continuums. The fourth and final chapter is a case study that brings into sharper focus the ideas raised in the first three chapters.

In Chapter 1, I discuss the history, discourses, and practices of the filk community, and I interrogate its central practice: the filk circle. Specifically, I look at how scholars who have written about filk have contributed to its positioning as an ideal form of fan creativity and how their writings have informed the filk community’s reflections about itself. I challenge the scholarly writings about filk, as well as filkers’ writings about themselves, which accent the
community’s non-hierarchal nature and values of community, inclusivity, amateurism, and open participation, and downplay the manifestations of inequality and exclusion that are equally present.

Chapter 2 examines the history and development of the wizard rock community. Members of the community articulate values like those found in the filk community and media fandom at large, yet for them, these values are tied explicitly to J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series. The academic literature on wizard rock tends to focus on its moral and ethical dimensions rather than exploring the tensions between the community’s practices and rhetoric. This chapter explores these tensions and how recent events internal and external to the community have caused a shift in the purpose of the community’s rhetoric.

In Chapter 3, I address one of the more recent developments in fan musicking: stage and short-film musicals made by professionally-trained fans that are distributed through YouTube. I focus on YouTube channels Team StarKid and AVbyte who, at the time of my fieldwork, were immensely popular among younger media fans. This chapter analyzes how YouTube content producers support the rhetoric of media fandom as an open participatory space, yet delimit participation by their fans in the creative process. Instead of fostering a democratic creative space, their practices stratify the fandoms in which these producers participate. This has led to a rise in micro-celebrity in media fandom and the development of a pseudo-professional artisan class.

Lastly, Chapter Four uses the 2014 sexual manipulation and abuse allegations brought against prominent wizard rockers Alex Carpenter (a.k.a., the Remus Lupins) and the Ministry of Magic’s Luke Conard as a case study. In particular, I investigate the discourses of “fandom as home,” and its intersection with issues of power, micro-celebrity, and sexism. At the height of
the scene, this discourse and interrelated ideas were often used to minimize or silence claims that sexism existed in the wizard rock community. After the 2014 revelations, wizard rockers employed the same discourse as they responded and sought reform in the community in the wake of the events.

Through this dissertation, I contest the idealized representations of musical activity found in media fandom and the scholarship about it. In doing so, I hope to encourage fan studies scholars to press into conflicts in fan interactions and to pursue more critical ethnographic research, especially with regards to participatory fan culture. I also hope to provide a resource for fans, so they can enter their communities of choice with open eyes, recognizing that fandom is a simultaneously beautiful and messy place.
In her recently published article on the filk community, Sally Childs-Helton ends with an anecdote relayed to her about a professional folk musician who visited a filk circle for the first time in 2001. Afterwards, the professional musician remarked, “You’re sitting around, swapping songs, and everyone gets a chance to play. I’ve been going to folk music conventions for years, but you people are actually *doing* folk music.”¹ She sums up her thoughts, writing, “The folkloric concepts of communal creation and re-creation (as well as *recreation*) are embodied in the participative values of the filk room, where each person ideally helps to create a satisfying group experience. The boundaries between audience and performer are fluid, and the all-inclusive power of the circle is invoked to create a transformational nexus in space and time.”² Speaking as an ethnomusicologist, archivist, and active filker, Childs-Helton beautifully expresses what the filk circle means to her and others in the community. Her articulation of the filk community values resonate with anyone who belongs or longs to belong to an active musical community.

I first encountered filk during my senior year of college. One day, as I was perusing *Whedonesque*, a fan-curated blog devoted to Joss Whedon’s works, I clicked on a post that featured a song inspired by his short-lived science fiction show *Firefly* (2002). Though I hadn’t watched *Firefly* until two years after it had been cancelled, it was among my favorites of Whedon’s oeuvre, largely because of its folk and bluegrass-influenced score. I clicked through the post and listened to “Mal’s Song” by a duo called Vixy and Tony. It immediately captured my attention because it used the twanging guitar, the swirling fiddles, and found percussion.

² Ibid.
typical of bluegrass, incorporated the unique vernacular of the show into the lyrics, and, to my
great surprise, appropriated Firefly’s theme song as its chorus. Though I had long been aware of
fan art and an avid reader of online fan fiction, this was the first time that I had heard fan-created
music, and I wanted to know more. During my first two years of graduate school, I researched
and wrote about fan-created music whenever I could. I discovered that Vixy and Tony called
“Mal’s Song” and other songs that they wrote “filk,” music that was roughly defined as the folk
music of the science fiction and fantasy fandom. I read Henry Jenkins’s Textual Poachers for the
first time, and it introduced me to the discipline of fan studies. Jenkins’s final chapter on filk,
plus other posts that described the community in lovely, utopic ways, made me long to
experience this music firsthand.

In the summer of 2011, I arranged to attend my first filk convention. I notified the
convention committee that I was conducting pilot research on filk. The committee chair warmly
invited me to a housefilk, a local gathering in Queens, and put me in contact with other attendees
so I could carpool with them to the convention space in New Jersey. I enjoyed the housefilk, and
everyone with whom I spoke at the convention was kind. They responded well to my questions
and offered suggestions. They impressed me with their openness and welcomed me into the
circles and events I attended.

Yet, at the end of the weekend, I couldn’t shake the feeling that I, much to my dismay,
had not “found my people,” a sentiment that is frequently deployed in fan writings when
someone finds a fandom with whom they emotionally connect. Perhaps, this was because I
entered the space as a researcher, and that fact was always in the back of the minds of the filkers
I met. Nobody did or said anything to me to make me feel like an outsider. However, there were
other brief moments at the convention when I would get lost in the exchange of puns in the circle
or when someone made a reference or a filk in-joke that I did not understand. Several filkers were happy to explain anything I missed, but even when filled in on the joke, I felt out of place. Some of the verbal parleys I missed because I was too young to understand the text that was being referenced. Then twenty-four, I was one of the youngest people in attendance; most of the filkers present were at least a full generation older than me. I felt a distinct tension between what I had read about filk and my own experiences at the convention.

Since then, I have attended several other filk events and conventions. I have made several friends within the filk community and continue to keep them informed about the progress of my research. Still, I have never been able to shake myself fully from that feeling of not belonging in the filk community.

In this chapter, I explore the history of the filk community and interrogate the central practice of the filk circle. The filk community developed side by side with the science fiction and fantasy fandom, early media fandoms, and mid-twentieth-century American folk revival. This last movement provided aesthetic inspiration, and the community adopted several practices and discourses from it into their own. Filkers thus identify strongly with the concept of “the folk,” making it the root of their claims to authenticity and legitimacy. For participants, the song circle, or “filk circle,” is the embodiment of fandom’s ideals: its inclusivity, a lack of hierarchy, an embrace of amateurism, and open participation. The few scholars who have written about filk have only reinforced this view, being deeply involved in the community themselves. In contrast with the existing scholarship, I examine how exclusivity manifests in the circle, and the ways that such exclusivity inadvertently reinforces hierarchies and highlights the contradictions in the community. Through this work, I challenge the position of filk as the ideal expression of
community in fandom and fan creativity in order to demonstrate media fandom’s always and already present inclination to stratify.

A History of Filk

Filk, as a distinct practice, began in the late 1940s. Organized fandom in the early twentieth century largely focused on science fiction and fantasy (SFF) literature. Fan publications (known as “fanzines,” or for short, “zines”) distributed professional and amateur writing as well as art, and allowed for written correspondence between authors, editors, and fans. Francesca Coppa notes that zines generated a large amount of correspondence, and subsequently, amateur press associations (known as APAs) were formed to mitigate the flow of missives. Participants would send in materials to an editor, who would collate, copy, and redistribute submissions to subscribers. Small official fan gatherings, or conventions, began in 1936 and 1937 in the United States and Britain, and the summer of 1939 saw the inaugural World Science Fiction Convention, known more commonly today as WorldCon.³

Group singing among science fiction fans has in some form been part of convention culture since the beginning. Convention attendees at a 1936 gathering in Philadelphia supposedly sang science fiction-themed songs as they traveled to the train station.⁴ At the second WorldCon held in Chicago in 1940, John A. Bristol published a “Science-Fiction Song Sheet,”⁵ which had the lyrics to the songs “Convention of 2140,” “Marching Song of Foo Foo,” “Ode to Omniscience,” “Pink and Purple Rocket,” “The Road Song of the Transport Cadets,” and

⁵ The original title includes the hyphen in “Science-Fiction,” and I kept it in order to respect the source material. When referring to the genre in my own writing, though, I will use the two-word version, “science fiction.”
“Twilight Prelude.” All songs were musical parodies. The sheet included annotations under the title of each song about the melodies to which these lyrics should be sung. The bottom right corner also included a note about how another fan, Milt Rothman, wanted to write an original song but was not satisfied with the proposed melodies.  

When SFF fans gathered at these early conventions, music-making was an easy way to establish camaraderie and community among them. Original songs among these musicking science fiction fans were rare, parodies more common. Few people could read musical notation required to learn an original song, and reproducing songs in score form would have been costly. Writing parodies of popular songs maximized group participation and saved money. 

The nascent filk community borrowed freely from the popular culture of the 1940s, both in terms of subject material and sound. Recording artists like the Almanac Singers, Leadbelly, and Aunt Molly Jackson popularized rural American songs, making “folk music” a thriving commercial music genre. The song forms, instruments, and performance practices (call-and-response, song circles, hootenannies) used by these musicians became coded as “authentic.” 

Sociologist William G. Roy argues, “[Folk]’ music is typically the appropriation of one group, usually a dominant group, of someone else’s music . . . . No one calls themselves ‘the folk.’ ‘The folk’ are always some ‘other.’” He traces the history of the collection of folk music from the first generation of folklorists to the New Left’s adoption of it in the 1960s, concluding, “As the music of ‘the other,’ folk music appeals primarily to people who embrace marginalization. Indeed, it was folk music’s ‘authenticity’ as a marginal genre that appealed to

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9 Ibid., 462.
white middle-class youth seeking a relatively safe way to distance themselves from the mainstream. The aesthetic identity of folk music as ‘other’ meant that folk music became ‘their’ music because it helped them imagine themselves as someone other than what they feared they were: middle-class consumers.” Folk music’s “anti-commercial simplicity, its musical purity, and its evocation of a dissolving past” gave them the means to step outside of the mainstream. The same could be said of science fiction fans, a primarily white, middle-class group. Historically, they have been positioned by the mainstream media as outsiders, yet they have also embraced it. Folk music practices lent an air of gravitas and authenticity to musically-inclined SFF fans and allowed them to imagine themselves as “others,” to form their own community of outsiders.

Through the 1950s, SFF fans were also not an isolated community. Participants moved fluidly between historic music and dance groups, Renaissance festivals and SFF conventions, and the musical practices from these different spaces moved with them. Folk song forms, like drinking songs and murder ballads, were highly entertaining when given parodic lyrics. Additionally, chords were simple enough to learn if one played guitar or another accompanying instrument; singing a cappella was equally enjoyable. Musical gatherings were largely informal or took place after a convention’s daytime programs ended.

Sometime during this decade, the term “filk” was coined. Most agree that it began as a typographical error: the author meant to write “folk,” but typed “filk” instead. Some argue that the error appeared in a convention booklet, but in a community known for holding on to convention memorabilia, no one knows which booklet it first appeared in nor can anyone produce a copy. The most widely accepted origin story was written by Lee Gold and published

10 Ibid., 466–67.
for the first time in 1997 as part of the convention packet for the twelfth Southern California filk convention ConChord.\footnote{McGath, \textit{Tomorrow’s Songs Today}, 21.}

In her essay, “An Egocentric and Convoluted History of Early ‘Filk’ and Filking,” Gold noted that “filk” was already in parlance among science fiction fans by the 1960s. Determined to locate the exact origins of the term, she spoke with older fans, finally tracing the typo to a Los Angeles-based fan named Lee Jacobs. In the early 1950s, he submitted an essay to the Spectator Amateur Press Society called “The Influence of Science Fiction on Modern American Filk Music.” The editor rejected the essay because the songs discussed by the author had vulgar lyrics; the duplication and distribution of these lyrics could breach the US Post Office’s laws on mailing pornography. But the title’s typographical error so amused the editor that he began to tell his friends within the science fiction fan community.\footnote{Ibid., 21–22.}

Filker Gary McGath attributes the widespread adoption of the term “filk” to science fiction author Poul Anderson and his wife Karen, who were both highly involved in fandom during this time. Karen Anderson mentions in her essay, “An Introduction to Filk Singing” (privately published 1965, reprinted 2002) that they did not want to let the term “filk” go to waste after they first encountered the error. The first intentional use of the term appears in Karen Anderson’s zine \textit{Die Zeitschrift für Vollständigen Unsinn}, better known “The Zed.” In 1953, she published her husband’s poem “Barbarous Allen: A Filk Song,” whose poetic rhythm matches the traditional Scottish ballad “Barbara Allen.” It was also through \textit{The Zed} that filk was initially defined as folk song parody practice.\footnote{Ibid., 22.}

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\item \footnote{Ibid., 21–22.}
\item \footnote{Ibid., 22.}
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The 1960s were formative years for the filk community and other separate, but overlapping, fan communities. Folk music’s continued popularity on the commercial music scene, as well as the popularity of comedic novelty songs from artists like Tom Lehrer and Flanders and Swann, solidified the burgeoning community’s propensity for folk song parodies and nerdy, bawdy songs. Mad magazine printed song parodies in their issues, and most notably, defended their publication successfully in the 1964 court case Irving Berlin et al. v. E. C. Publications Inc. This paved the way for filkers to legally publish parody lyrics. The first filk songbooks, including the 1960 WorldCon’s STF and FSY Songbook and the first volume of the Filksong Manual, were published.¹⁴

Filk gatherings at this time were informal and erratic. Groups, sometimes as small as three or four participants, would sing through their limited repertoire a few times and then branch into the novelty songs that they knew.¹⁵ Filk, however, was a practice that existed more in print than it did in official gatherings or filksings and was considered one of many possible fan activities, or “fanac.” The world of science fiction fantasy fandom and media fandom was small. Early filkers like Karen Anderson and Juanita Colson were deeply involved in other aspects of organized fandom. Both women were married to noted authors, Poul Anderson and Buck Coulson, respectively, and the couples played major roles in shaping the growing filk community and other related groups. Poul Anderson went on to help found the Society for Creative Anachronism in 1966. Juanita Coulson became a contributor to the first Star Trek zine,

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¹⁴ Ibid., 23.
Spockanalia (1967), editor of the second zine ST-Phile (1968), and is one of the foremost oral historians of the filk community.\textsuperscript{16}

The premier and three-year run of Star Trek (1966–69) marked the birth of media fandom as a related but separate entity from the science fiction fandom. Showrunner Gene Roddenberry created a relational, futuristic, hopeful show that marked a distinct political shift in the genre of science fiction, one that embraced diversity instead of fearing it. Women flooded into the science fiction fandom, and fan art and fan fiction immediately became part of the culture surrounding the show.\textsuperscript{17} In its wake, some longer standing members of the science fiction fandom sought to delegitimize people who were only fans of Star Trek, especially when they started to win the major awards of the community. Gender played a significant role in this divisiveness. Older fans looking down on the Star Trek fans were largely men who wanted the fandom to stay focused on professional science fiction magazines. The large numbers of women who became involved in science fiction fandom because of Star Trek threatened their hegemony, and as a result, the women’s fiction and art was consistently derided.\textsuperscript{18} Because of this hostility, Star Trek fans were the first to organize their own conventions apart from multi-text gatherings like WorldCon. Their first was held in New York in 1972.

The Star Trek fandom’s move to make the science fiction fandom more pluralistic in the early 1970s laid the groundwork for the filk community to set its own communal and aesthetic boundaries. Filk became not just one of several forms of “fanac” but a distinct community of practice. Through the 1970s, filk slowly increased its presence at conventions: first in the Midwest, then on the East Coast, and then the West Coast. Conventions published and sold

\textsuperscript{16} Francesca Coppa, “A Brief History of Media Fandom,” 44.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 43–46.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 45–46.
(inexpensive) songbooks and filk “hymnals.” One of the filk’s most beloved musicians, Leslie Fish, joined the community after she and her band, the DeHorn Crew, recorded an LP entitled *Folk Songs for Folk Who Ain’t Even Been Yet* (1976). The songs were mostly inspired by and indirectly alluded to *Star Trek*; these included the infamous “Banned from Argo,” an infectious song that regales the scandalous vacation exploits of the USS Enterprise’s crew. Two of the songs, “Hope Eyrie” and “A Toast for Unknown Heroes,” were more sober homages to NASA. The former demonstrated that filk could be more than silly parodies and could include original, heartfelt songs.

Many of the values that continue to define the filk community were established during this time. The community prided itself on the roughly equal number of male and female participants compared with other areas of the science fiction and burgeoning media fandoms. Professional musicians like Leslie Fish played alongside amateur and new musicians. Songs could be bawdy or sincere, originals or parodies. Members of convention circles continuously grafted in new people, sometimes pulling them directly from the hallways into filk rooms.

The first filk-specific convention, *FilkCon*, was organized in Chicago in the summer of 1979. By this time, members of the community viewed what they did specifically as a form of folklore, not just a fun after-hours event. The convention’s organizers also established the Filk...
Foundation whose purpose was “the furtherance, encouragement, and preservation of filksinging as an art form and a form of oral history peculiar to the science fiction field.” A marked self-awareness started to characterize the community at this time.

Like the hostility that engendered the Star Trek fandom’s split from the rest of science fiction fandom, filkers were not always viewed favorably by non-filkers. Some found weak singing to be a turnoff. Others viewed the after-hours singing as disruptive; when filkers were not allocated space to meet, they would often gather in stairwells, hallways, lobbies, and other odd spaces like freight elevators, causing non-filking convention attendees and other hotel guests to complain about the noise. Filkers have also historically welcomed people who are not neurotypical. All these factors have contributed to the ostracism felt by filkers from other science fiction or media fans, which, I would argue, further fueled them to embrace the folk musical aesthetic and its perceived qualities as a music of “the other.”

While filk-specific conventions continued to multiply, filkers also actively fought for their place at other larger fan conventions. The most notable of these battles was waged at the 1991 WorldCon in Chicago, known within the filk community as “The Dandelion Conspiracy.” Inspired by the nonviolent “flower power” demonstrations protesting the Vietnam War, filker

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23 Ibid., 36.
24 Henry Jenkins’s chapter on filk includes a personal anecdote that Leslie Fish shared with him in which a small group of filkers gathered in a freight elevator after hours at a convention with no filk events scheduled. They rode the elevator up and down, singing all the while. The hotel management kept getting complaints about the singing but was unable to locate them because the freight elevator had moved on from the point of complaint by the time staff arrived. Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 274.
26 There exists still a stigma against filkers that I have occasionally encountered in the process of researching the community. I remember a member of my graduate school cohort, who is involved in fandom but not a filker, scoffing in reaction when I mentioned that my research interest was filk. She said, “That’s the room [at conventions] where all the people smell.”
Kathy Mar, with the assistance of Lindy Sears, penned a short essay, introducing a new way of bringing awareness to the filkers present at general conventions. She wrote:

There seems to be little understanding in fandom at large of the changes that have occurred in filk music since its inception so many years ago. This is not helped by the way most filkers react when we interact with other fans. We are very intense, we tend to be blind to or enamored of those aspects that non-filkers find most annoying, and we are inclined to be very vocal (no pun intended) and obnoxious in our protests when we feel we are being mistreated.

In an attempt to find a way to communicate our views to others more effectively, I have decided to form what I call the Dandelion Conspiracy. This is meant to serve many goals at once. In taking the dandelion as the filker’s symbol, I hope to convey, as gently as the flower-power movement did, that filk is almost impossible to root out. If disturbed, it tends to proliferate. It can be beneficial at times, and it can even be beautiful in spite of its weedy reputation.

At that WorldCon, Mar and Sears distributed pictures of a dandelion, and encouraged others to make buttons out of the image and wear them around the convention. By all accounts, it was a moderately successful, if quiet, campaign. The dandelion was widely embraced as the symbol of the community: songs were written about the conspiracy and others adopted the symbol for newsletters and other intracommunity publications. Convention committees were adequately convinced to give filkers the after-hours space that they requested, and filk has retained a steady presence at many general conventions to this day. WorldCon has a dedicated music track, which is frequently run by a filker. Similarly, the large Atlanta-based convention DragonCon also hosts events for filkers, holding introductory concerts and panels for those who have never heard of filk. The dandelion is a frequent sight at these and filk-specific conventions.

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29 The term “track” is used to describe a series of events at a convention organized around a common theme or fandom. They are usually organized by a person or team of people. Convention attendees have the choice to attend all the events of a track or sample from a variety of tracks.
Through the 1980s and 1990s, the filk community grew into its modern incarnation. Because of the WorldCons held in Europe, filk took root in the United Kingdom in the 1980s and in Germany following reunification in 1990. Americans initially introduced the musical practice to Europeans, but European filkers soon developed their own traditions and conventions. Some performers added older traditional European elements to the American folk sound of filk. German and British filkers, for example, are well known for their participatory choral singing.\textsuperscript{30}

With filkers gathering and practicing across the US, Canada, the UK, and Europe, the community can be described as a translocal scene, which Richard A. Peterson and Andy Bennet describe as “widely scattered local scenes drawn into regular communication around a distinctive form of music and lifestyle . . . . They interact with each other through the exchange of recordings, bands, fans, and fanzines.”\textsuperscript{31} Interfilk, a non-profit organization founded in 1991, primarily functions to facilitate the travels of performers to conventions that are not within their region. Conventions typically host an Interfilk guest and hold an auction. The sales from the auction provide the financial pool, which covers the travel expenses of other Interfilk guests.\textsuperscript{32} Online social networks like LiveJournal, or more recently Facebook, have also facilitated translocal connections. The annual Ohio Valley Filk Fest (OVFF) operates unofficially as the national filk convention, if one could be said to exist. The Pegasus Awards, the community’s version of the Grammy Awards, are held every year there and, with around four hundred to five hundred people attending, one sees a fair sampling of people from the major filk regions.\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{32} Davidoff, “‘Filk’,” 31; McGath, \textit{Tomorrow’s Songs Today}, 57–58.
\textsuperscript{33} McGath, \textit{Tomorrow’s Songs Today}, 41–42.
Filkers Today

Filkers are predominantly upper middle-class, highly educated, and white. Most hold steady jobs: many work as lawyers, scholars, and computer scientists. Their jobs provide the expendable income necessary to travel around to conventions and other gatherings. Several are active academics, three of whom—Solomon Davidoff, Melissa L. Tatum, and Sally Childs-Helton—have written theses or articles on filk. Filkers are generally early adopters of new technology. Most aspire to be or are competent amateur musicians; a few pursue it professionally or semi-professionally. They are an introspective group, generally willing to talk reflexively about filk, their experiences in the community, and what it means to them.

As of the writing of this chapter, filkers tend to be in their forties or older. Per the ranges defined by the Pew Research Center, they belong primarily to the Baby Boomer (born 1946–1964) and early Gen-X (born 1965–1980) generations. A small portion of the community belong to the Silent Generation (born 1928–1945). As such, filkers were adults before the Internet was widely available and likely participated in organized fandom before it moved online. Younger participants, Millennials (born after 1980) like myself, represent a much smaller portion of the community and often participate because of their parents’ involvement.

As a technologically savvy group, filkers were among the first to start using the Internet and embracing the changes it wrought. They used the early platforms like UseNet, email, and message boards. Despite this, Internet technology has not drastically changed how filkers interact. They predominantly use Facebook, connecting through several moderated Facebook groups, and LiveJournal, the social networking and blogging platform first created in 1999. Online activities, whether notifying participants of rediscovered recordings, publishing a new set

34 Childs-Helton, “Folk Music in a Digital Age,” 167–68.
of parody lyrics, or posting a recap of a convention, are secondary to face-to-face interactions. Conventions and filk circles are still the prime means for bringing people into the community and reinforcing established relationships.

The Filk Circle

By far, the most important social and performance practice in the filk community is the filk circle.35 A prime example of Christopher Small’s argument that musical performance is simultaneously an experiential and imagined reality, the circle reflects the values of the community and presents them at their ideal. It “model[s], or stand[s] as metaphor for, ideal . . . relationships between person and person, between individual and society . . . .”36 It is democratic and inclusive. All participants are on the same physical level and switch between the roles of audience member and performer; professional, semi-professional, and amateur musicians perform and listen side by side. The lack of spatial hierarchy represents the value that no one member is viewed as superior to another member based on musicianship or chosen level of participation. Unlike the fan fiction and fan vidding communities that are largely populated by women, filk circles roughly have an equal number of male and female participants. Many members are non-gender conforming or identify as LGBTQ+. Over the last two decades, the community has had members transition with regards to their gender presentation and has embraced them before, during, and after transitioning. The circle represents the community’s acceptance of participants, regardless of external identity markers. It is always open to those who may not feel accepted in other areas of fandom because of their nonnormative behaviors.

35 There are many practices in the filk community apart from the circle. My purpose in this chapter is not to address all of them. For detailed descriptions of filk practices, see Solomon H. Davidoff, “‘Filk’”; and Gary McGath, Tomorrow’s Songs Today.
For many filkers with whom I spoke, their first experience in a filk circle transformed them, and they used language to describe something akin to religious conversion. This is not to say that participation in the filk community (or the larger realm of media fandom) is religion or religious. But as religious studies scholar Sean McCloud suggests, fans employ religious language because they are trying to articulate what they do in the most serious manner possible.\textsuperscript{37}

For example, Michelle Dockrey (known as Vixy in the filk community) recounted her first circle to me, “It was . . . the first time that I’d heard people who had written songs about the media they liked, you know, movies and books. And suddenly, it was like it unlocked something in my brain.”\textsuperscript{38} A Toronto-based blogger named Manda wrote about her first circle at Filk Ontario in 2013,

That inclusiveness is the main reason I have grown to love Filk. It’s not as much about producing professional sounding music than it is about simply getting together to celebrate the joy of singing and playing. Those who would normally be too shy or afraid to speak openly about their passions have a safe space in these circles. Someone will start to sing, others will join in, whether to harmonize or to play an instrument to accompany, and soon something happens. Whether you are performing or listening, you suddenly become part of that song. And you feel, whether you mean to or no, like you belong.\textsuperscript{39}

This moment of belonging motivates many first-time filkers to stay. Others express the sentiment that they feel like they have “found their people” in the filk community. Many, even after many years of participation, can still name the person who introduced them to filk. The circle is that “transformational nexus of space and time” that Childs-Helton describes, a discreet bounded area

\textsuperscript{37} Sean McCloud, “Popular Culture Fandoms, the Boundaries of Religious Studies, and the Project of the Self,” \textit{Culture and Religion} 4.2 (2003), 203.
\textsuperscript{38} Michelle Dockrey, personal interview, January 31, 2015.
that demarcates a physical and temporal space exclusively for them, while keeping out the “mundane” world.  

Henry Jenkins concludes *Textual Poachers* with a chapter devoted to filk. As the culminating content chapter, the redemptive project of the book drives him to present filk as an ideal community within SFF and media fandom. He writes, “If fan writing and fan videomaking can still be understood primarily in terms of textual interpretation and appropriation, filking more often speaks directly about fandom as a distinctive social community” through “its role as a cultural expression of the ideals, beliefs, and activities of fandom, as a means of articulating an alternative social identity, and as a resource for integrating the community’s diverse interests.”  

Using the filk community and its ties to American folk culture as a case study, he argues, “Fan culture, like traditional folk culture, is transmitted informally and does not define a sharp boundary between artists and audiences. Fan culture, like folk culture, exists independently of formal social, cultural, and political institutions; its own institutions are extralegal and informal with participation voluntary and spontaneous. Fan texts, like many folk texts, often do not achieve a standard version but exist only in process, always open to revision and appropriation; filk songs are constantly being rewritten, parodied, and amended in order to better facilitate the cultural interests of the fan community.”  

Jenkins attributes a subcultural, resistant energy to filk, which he broadly defines as “fan music-making,” and set the tone with which fan studies scholars have addressed filk and, more broadly, musicking in media fandom altogether.

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40 Childs-Helton, “Folk Music in a Digital Age,” 173.
42 Ibid., 273.
43 Ibid., 252.
Rather than challenging Jenkins’s arguments, the few academic pieces written on filk since *Textual Poachers* have only reiterated it. Solomon Davidoff, in his Master’s thesis, positioned filk as a modern-day form of folk recreation and folklore. Other scholars stress how filk resists the social and cultural mainstream by emphasizing its community, inclusion, embrace of amateurism, and spirit of co-creation and play. Legal scholar Melissa L. Tatum made this argument while trying to address whether wizard rock does or does not count as filk. Sally Childs-Helton, in her 2003 induction speech for the Filk Hall of Fame, stated, “[J]ust be aware that we’re doing something . . . revolutionary . . . [W]e are taking back our right as human beings to make art. We have taken our right to be creative and to literally ‘play’ in the best sense of that word . . . . We do it with great joy, and we do it with great hearts. We do it with a lot of loving forgiveness for people who are still developing as musicians and may be a little painful at first to listen to. We see the growth, we see the value, we see the community . . . .” The same sentiments are expressed with more refinement in her article quoted at the top of this chapter.

Later scholars like Matt Hills, Cornel Sandvoss, and Jenkins himself have challenged the overall position that the latter took in *Textual Poachers*. Yet, no one has challenged Jenkins’s description of fan music, thus leaving his description of filk as “the baseline fan practice against which” other scholars, like Tatum, develop their understanding of different fan musical practices. Furthermore, Davidoff, Tatum, and Childs-Helton are all writing from their

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respective positions as academics and active filkers. As such, the filk circle, in particular, has become a consecrated practice within the academic literature, and one that needs to be challenged.

“Have We Filkers Become Too Closed of a Circle?”

Jenkins states in the conclusion of *Textual Poachers* that filk “capture[s] something essential about fandom [and] its status as a utopian community . . . .” It physically designates a space dubbed by some filkers as a “weekend-only world” that “allows [fans] to maintain [their] sanity in the face of the indignity and alienation of everyday life . . . .” But is filk’s “weekend-only” approach to fandom as utopic as Jenkins suggests? Perhaps not.

Ethnomusicologist Sarah Lash, in her dissertation on the Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA), quotes a critique of the bardic circle by Andrew Heinrich, known within that community as Baron Don Mateo Montero de Madrid. He states, “‘If everyone faces the middle and sings inwards, no one is singing outwards, and no one else is particularly moved to listen.’” The same could be said about the filk circle. For all filkers’ assertions about the openness and inclusivity of the filk circle, they seem to forget that a circle can also imply exclusion.

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50 The SCA’s bardic circle is very similar to the filk circle. Recall that one of the co-founders of the SCA, Poul Anderson, was also an active early filker in the 1960s.

51 Andrew Heinrich, quoted in Sarah Lash, “Singing the Dream: The Bardic Arts of the Society for Creative Anachronism (PhD diss, Indiana University, 2009), 206.
Exclusion can happen on several vectors, all of which intersect in the circle. As a relatively younger member of the circles I attended, I’ve felt excluded because I did not understand certain references and did not feel like I could keep up with the verbal parlay of other members. Other times, I did not understand that certain songs were in a long tradition of musical parodies. I did not know the parent song, and as a result, I did not understand the parody. Additionally, there were certain moments where I felt restless and even claustrophobic in these hotel convention spaces. Childs-Helton explores the generational aspect of the community, trying to understand why so few Millennials participate in filk. In corresponding with a few young filkers, as well as those whose parents are filkers, she concludes, “When [Millennials] recognize filk for what it is, they tend to either find the learning curve for understanding the music and culture too steep, or consider it passé and boring as something belonging to older generations . . . . This large body of arcane knowledge (which marks a folk group) separates insiders from outsiders, creating a barrier around the music and its community.”

Even those who identify with the filk community can feel excluded, particularly those who are considered by other participants to be “Big Name Filkers” or, for short, “BNFs.” “Big Name Filkers” tend to be more accomplished musicians. They record and sell albums within the community, and they are often guests of honor at conventions and headline concerts. I encountered the term almost immediately when I began my research in the community. I learned that Vixy and Tony were considered BNFs because their music, namely their Firefly-inspired “Mal’s Song,” caught the attention of the fans outside of the filk community. At my first convention, it was clear that the toastmaster and emcee of the event, Tom Smith, was an

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52 Childs-Helton, “Folk Music in a Digital Age,” 171.
53 It should be noted that “BNF” also stands for “Big Name Fan” in other fandoms. While I will use “Big Name Fan” in later chapter, in this chapter, “BNF” will only be used to indicate “Big Name Filker.”
accomplished and well-respected performer. Many people in the filk circles at that event asked that Smith play songs, instead of performing themselves. The flip side of being a BNF, though, is that if BNFs end up receiving too many requests, they unintentionally hog the circle. To avoid hogging, some then choose to sit out of future circles so they don’t interrupt the flow. Yet, when they do that, others perceive them as thinking that they’re “too good” for circles. Sometimes, others resent them for headlining too many conventions.

Strangely, though, the concept of the BNF is nowhere to be found in the literature on filk. Towards the end of his chapter, Jenkins expresses concern about outside, semi-professional recording companies entering the filk community with the intent to sign the more proficient musicians to their labels and market them to a larger audience. He comments, “The semi-professional producers and distributors are already having some impact on the nature of filk as a musical tradition. A star system has started to emerge as individual performers are drawn from the community and featured on their own tapes. A form of music founded on ideals of musical democracy, an acceptance of various competencies, has become more hierarchical due to the push toward professional standards of technical perfection.”

Jenkins argues that these companies are instigating the creation of a hierarchy within filk in direct contrast to the values on which the community was founded. His writing implies that “star performers” or hierarchies did not exist in filk before these companies tried to create them.

Solomon Davidoff’s Master’s thesis examines the filk community and its practices. He explains much of the common parlance and jargon in the community. Again, “Big Name Fan” is nowhere to be found. Melissa Tatum’s article pits what she perceives as a star system in wizard rock against the musical democracy of filk. She writes, “. . . Wizard rock is not filk because it

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54 Jenkins, Textual Poachers, 275.
promotes performance to a particular crowd rather than building a community of performers who perform for each other.” Filkers often bring up this issue when I ask their opinions about other forms of fan music, including wizard rock. They see the other musicians’ practice of performing on a stage, or at least physically distant from the audience, as a symbol of the status difference between performer and audience. The hallowed filk circle, in contrast, promotes the opposite.

The dominant view is that internal hierarchy is antithetical and foreign to the filk circle. In language similar to Henry Jenkins’s, Gary McGath writes, “The pull of mainstream music culture, with star performers and passive listeners, has sometimes affected filk. There have been periods when one person or group seemed to be a guest at every convention and dominate the Pegasus Awards, as well as getting requests every ten minutes in the filk circles. So far balance has always come back after a while. If filk ever becomes just another way to hear star performers, it will have died.” According to McGath, the very survival of filk depends on the community resisting the pull of mainstream culture by not allowing any one member to become too big.

However, this adamant stance ignores the complexity of the situation. Some of the most popular performers in the community have had to remove themselves from filk circles because they found themselves monopolizing performance time or distracting others with their presence. In our interview, Michelle Dockrey noted, “[Heather Alexander] had to stop coming to filk circles . . . because everybody would request [songs from her] . . . . She wasn’t trying [to put]

56 McGath, Tomorrow’s Songs Today, 101.
herself forward, but everybody wanted [to hear her] because everybody loved her! [When she did attend], it would feel disruptive, and people would blame her.”

Dockrey’s close friend and fellow filker Seanan McGuire also had to self-exclude. Even though she grew up and cultivated her musical skills in the context of the filk community, McGuire is often criticized for being a BNF, both for her skills as a musician and, more recently, a best-selling author within the larger SFF fandom. As an author, she travels to several general fan conventions, which leaves limited time and energy to attend filk-specific conventions. Because of this, critics have accused her of being “too good” for the filk community. When she attends filk conventions, she, like Alexander, finds herself inundated with requests in circles. When she chooses to sit towards the back of a performance space so that she doesn’t distract from a concert, others have flocked to talk to her, leading critics to proclaim that she is “being a diva . . . [and] holding court.” The irony of this critique is that Alexander and McGuire’s status directly result from the fandom in which they actively participate.

While I believe that Dockrey spoke hyperbolically when using the diva metaphor with regards to McGuire, one must also note the gendered nature of these critiques. Much like the sexism that the female Star Trek fans experienced when entering the SFF fandom in the 1960s, much of the BNF critiques in the filk community are aimed at women and mainly articulated online post-incident. In contrast, at the “Dead Dog Filk” (i.e., the final filk circle) of my first filk convention, many participants, myself included, requested songs from Tom Smith. Yet, it did not seem that people noted his ready acceptance of these requests as “filk hogging.” I wonder, too, whether Alexander James Adams (formerly, Heather Alexander) still self-excludes from the filk

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58 Ibid.
circles following his transition. I attended the 2014 Ohio Valley Filk Festival and the 2015 Conflikt where he was a guest of honor or a featured performer. However, I did not spend enough time in the late night filk circles to gain a sense of his participation in the circles.

For any active filkers who read this chapter, pressing into these issues of “Big Name Filkers,” “filk hogging,” and the gendered nature of internal conflict will likely upset them. This goes against the democratic, egalitarian values that the circle purportedly represents, that filkers strive to embody as a community, and that academics like Jenkins, Davidoff, Tatum, and Childs-Helton write about. Yet, as a predominantly Western phenomenon, fandom is prone to reproduce the power structures that are found outside of it. Because filkers believe so strongly in their identity as a folk and alternative social community, they are sometimes blind to how those structures manifest and quick to criticize any who appear to violate the community’s values, even when the subjects of that criticism are trying to uphold the same values.

The Utopic Impulse

In his examination of the mid-twentieth-century folk music revival, Max Peter Baumann identifies two related but competing impulses within the movement: the desire to escape into “the utopia of the past” and the desire to escape into “the utopia of the future.” Both are motivated by an “uprootedness in the present time and dissatisfaction with today’s world.”\textsuperscript{59} The same impulses also exist within the filk community.

As Henry Jenkins rightly notes, media fandom and its creative communities developed in a historical moment when negative stereotypes about fans abounded. As a community that grew in this moment, filkers seized upon the musical practices and vocabulary of the folk music

revival because it allowed them to claim a marginalized identity, setting them apart from mainstream culture while also coding them as authentic. The filk circle allowed them to revisit an idealized past. Today, it continues to do that, while also allowing them to imagine a utopic future.

But a metaphorical utopia and an actual utopia are distinct things. Sometimes filkers confuse the two, which leads them to dismiss or gloss over inequalities or exclusivity in their midst. I point these things out not to dismiss or undermine filkers’ positive experiences within their community, but to highlight the filk community’s construction of itself. Much like other sectors of media fandom, it is a just that, a construction—one that is tied to a specific historical moment and context. Inequalities and hierarchies are not brought in by outside forces; they are always and already present.

Michelle Dockrey aptly describes the conflict at the heart of it all: “We’re fannish people, and by nature, when we like something, we really, really like it. We celebrate it . . . . We all fangirl at our favorites a little bit, which creates a little bit of this artificial rock star thing. [That] causes some people to go, ‘Well, I hate that.’ But sometimes, it’s the same people doing both . . . . [E]ven as we say, ‘Nobody gets to be put on a pedestal,’ we’re fans. And we put the things we love on a pedestal.” Here, Dockrey notes that being a fan means intensely loving something. It means celebrating it, obsessed over it, and often, idolizing it. These impulses bring filkers together in community, but it would be ridiculous to think that they evaporate once the circle forms. Of course, filkers are also going to have those exact same impulses when they encounter a musician they like. To believe that filk is or to present it as non-hierarchal is, in some ways, to deny the impulses that bring filkers to the community in the first place.
The historical moment in which filk developed informed much of its character, idiosyncrasies, and contradictions. Born out of the American folk song revival, the filk community adopted the latter’s aesthetics, traditions, and notions of authenticity. The folk song revival was full of contradictions concerning musical codes of authenticity, insider and outsider status, class, and the purported lack of hierarchy between performers and audience members. These contradictions were woven into the legacy of the filk community.

Community members are generally older with most members identifying as Boomers or early Generation Xers. Because the filk community was well-established prior to the widespread adoption of the Internet and social media platforms, its practices and forms of interaction altered little when the technologies became more commonplace. Conventions and local circles still happened. Material culture like cassettes and convention programs remained important. If anything, technology simply allowed for faster and better communication in the moments between face-to-face interactions.

The most important form of interaction is the filk circle, where participants must be physically present. In this space, participants actively shift between performing (transformative activity) and listening (affirmative activity). Very rarely, if ever, are filkers musicking only as performers, and participants at any circle can choose to listen exclusively. Most who currently participate in the filk community are amateurs. The circle is the ultimate safe space to perform and the community actively provides alternate spaces to improve musicianship. The community houses a wide variety of skill sets. Those who are more experienced musicians who record and sell their music, but the fear of commercial invasion that Jenkins stated in *Textual Poachers* never came about.
The filk community’s continued attachment to the folk aesthetic and traditions, its relative independence from Internet technologies, and amateur-friendly environment has allowed it to last all these years. Out of all the communities studied in this dissertation, the filk community has stood the longest. However, there is also a fear that unless the community attracts younger members, it and its practices will die off as Millennials start to dominate media fandom and the next generation enters. The future of filk is uncertain because of the very things that make it so special to filkers.  

In the following chapter, I turn to wizard rock, the punk/DIY movement inspired by J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series. Though some filkers and fan studies scholars claim it as a variant of filk, I treat wizard rock as a distinct musical community within media fandom. I examine the Internet’s impact on media fandom and producers’ changing attitudes towards fandom that facilitated its rapid growth, separate from the filk community. Wizard rockers employ discourses that are near identical to those found in the filk community, but reflect them through different performance and social practices. I analyze the tensions between the wizard rock community’s rhetoric and its practices and how the relationship between the two has changed as activity in the scene has ebbed and flowed.

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60 Childs-Helton, “Folk Music in a Digital Age,” 170–73.
CHAPTER TWO: “SOMETHING MORE THAN ESCAPISM”
WIZARD ROCK, CONVERGENCE CULTURE, AND THE REINTERPRETATION OF FAN VALUES

It’s approaching midnight on the third night of the annual fan convention LeakyCon.\(^1\) An elevated stage dominates the far end of a cavernous hall within Orlando’s Orange County Convention Center. A crowd of about five hundred young men and women fill every free spot they can find, inching as close as they can to the stage. Unabashed grins abound as they cheer for the band. A young woman to my right turns her back to the stage to set up a selfie with the band in the background. She sticks out her tongue with a manic grin and, with her left hand, makes the rock salute. It takes her a few attempts to get the photo she desires.

On stage are three men dressed identically in white button-up shirts, jeans, and red-and-gold striped ties: the two men in front, one behind an electronic keyboard and the other playing electric guitar, are brothers. Both wear round, wireframe glasses and have purposefully unkempt, curly brown hair. As the guitarist adjusts his microphone, the keyboardist grabs his alto saxophone. The band’s third member, sitting behind the drum set, is sweating so much that he has already soaked his shirt; this is his second set. His shirt and tie, too, are unkempt but more because he had to throw the ensemble on during a hurried costume change. He sits with his drumsticks at the ready, anticipating the quick number that is next on the set list.

Paul DeGeorge, the guitarist, speaks into the microphone in a deliberately conversational tone about a recent adventure he, Harry Potter, had in the Forbidden Forest with his half-giant

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\(^1\) LeakyCon began in 2009 as a convention strictly dedicated to *Harry Potter*. From 2010–2014, the organizers of LeakyCon consolidated into an official events management company called Mischief Management and incorporated other fandoms into its programming. The following anecdote describes a concert I attended at LeakyCon 2014 which, at the time, was still a multi-fandom event. The following year, the event was rebranded as GeekyCon, and the name “LeakyCon” was reassigned to *Harry Potter*-only events. GeekyCon continued through 2016, but declining ticket sales have forced Mischief Management to put an indefinite hold on future iterations.
friend Hagrid. He tells his story in step-wise fashion, each moment becoming increasingly ridiculous, about different magical creatures approaching them for assistance and subsequently getting stored in Hagrid’s voluminous beard. He finally arrives at the point of the story, launching into the song with a single guitar strum:

\begin{verbatim}
Hagrid is fun to hug,
Hagrid is full of love.
Just don’t get stuck
In Hagrid’s beard.
Ahhhhhh!
\end{verbatim}

Each line is punctuated with a chord, the pop-rock harmonic pattern predictable and pleasing. The audience recognizes the song right away and starts singing along. The final word of each line (hug, love, stuck, and beard) has a corresponding audience gesture. At the final scream, the drums kick in with a roll and settle into a fifties-style rockabilly swing beat. The one-stanza song repeats with the guitar’s strums matching the swing rhythm introduced by the drums. Paul’s brother Joe DeGeorge, now on saxophone, huffs out responses to each of the song’s lyrics while also highlighting the bass line. The audience bounces along while repeating the song’s choreography. Everyone, band and audience together, scream on the final line and end with a staccato “Hey!” The song has lasted all of thirty seconds, and the concert rolls on.²

This is a snapshot of a concert by Harry and the Potters, the founding wizard rock band. Unapologetically giddy, wizard rock arose in the early 2000s primarily in the United States as a branch of creative fan responses to *Harry Potter* (1997–2007), the bestselling novel series by British author J.K. Rowling. At wizard rock’s height in 2008–2009, over seven hundred bands claimed the banner of wizard rock, playing in a variety of popular music styles—from punk to

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² “Accio Hagrid” is a popular song by Harry and the Potters and is frequently part of their sets. For an example of a performance (sans Joe DeGeorge’s saxophone), see “Hagrid is fun to hug,” YouTube video, 0:48, posted by “Chief2642,” August 4, 2008, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T3tnB8inPi0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T3tnB8inPi0).
boy band pop to arena rock to singer-songwriter acoustic folk. Only a handful of those bands played live shows and toured; the majority operated online. With silly band names and even sillier lyrics, wizard rock thrived because it advocated an accessible Do-It-Yourself (DIY) aesthetic to young fans who were new to fandom but eager to create. It promoted an identity that validated individual creativity and encouraged community formation. Furthermore, inspired by the moral code followed by Rowling’s titular character and his friends, many bands connected their music to social justice causes, encouraging audiences to channel their love of *Harry Potter* into actively challenging social inequality and injustice.

The *Harry Potter* novels were released at a pivotal moment, when a generation of children—primarily those born in the mid to late-1980s—was growing up with increasingly easy access to a rapidly developing Internet. With organized fandom already migrating onto the Internet, *Harry Potter* readers became enthralled with Rowling’s magical world and connected online. It was the perfect recipe: a richly textured fantasy world, a young generation experiencing fandom for the first time, the rising importance of social media in fan activity, and a handful of leaders who established the fandom’s networks and charitable organizations. This confluence of text, technology, and entrepreneurially-minded people allowed wizard rock to grow from an odd, small collection of concept bands to a fully-fledged, translocal music scene with significant participation across the United States, all within the span of five years.

In this chapter, I contextualize wizard rock within the development of the *Harry Potter* franchise, its fan community, and convergence culture. I provide a history of wizard rock—the punk performers and practices that influenced the early musicians, the impact of MySpace on the consolidation of the scene, and the community’s involvement with social justice campaigns and grassroots political action.
Like other groups in fandom, wizard rockers present themselves in idealistic terms. They prize community, equality, amateurism, and broad participation. In addition to these values, they also encourage individuality from participants and believe strongly in self-determination. These are put forth in the documentaries and accounts written within the community, as well as pieces written about them in the popular press and most of the academic literature. However, wizard rock is not exempt from the ever-present tensions between fan discourse and fan practice.

While looking at the scene at its height from 2007–2011, I consider the tier system, the hierarchal classification of wizard rock bands first introduced into the academic literature by musicologist Kelli Rohlman. While Rohlman argues that the tier system is based solely on a given band’s popularity among fans, I elaborate on her model by examining how musical talent, experience with music production and marketing, and connections with influencers in the wizard rock and the larger Harry Potter fandom also impacted a band’s placement within the hierarchy. Community leaders often questioned the existence of the tier system and reinforced idealistic rhetoric, which only served to valorize the experiences of top-tier members and diminish those of members in the lower tiers. This fixation on wizard rock’s idealism, I argue, kept the community from establishing infrastructure to support the work of lesser known bands, and ultimately, factored greatly in the diminution of the scene from 2012 to 2014. Since 2015, there has been a notable resurgence of activity; currently active bands still perpetuate these discourses, suggesting that the purpose of the rhetoric has changed. Whereas leaders once claimed it to be descriptive of the community at large, they now recognize it as a goal for which they strive, however imperfectly. The rhetoric and music thus play a teleological role in the community today and are part of a larger project to reintegrate the Harry Potter fandom with progressive, grassroots
resistance—one that grew more urgent during Donald Trump’s presidential campaign and subsequent election.

**J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter series, Its Fandom, and the Rise of Convergence Culture***

The story of how J.K. Rowling first came up with the idea for the *Harry Potter* novels has achieved near mythic proportions. In 1990, Rowling was preparing to move from London to Manchester. On a delayed train ride back to London, the image of a scrawny, bespectacled, black-haired boy wizard popped into her head. Lacking anything with which to write, she continued to tease out details in her mind about this boy on the long ride back to the city. That night, she started writing. Over the next seven years, the manuscript that became *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* continued to grow (as did her plans for the other six novels). On its completion, she had difficulties finding an agent to represent her and a publisher willing to take a chance on children’s literature, a genre that, in the 1990s, was not viewed as particularly profitable.³ Eight publishers rejected the manuscript before Bloomsbury offered her a meager advance. Despite these initial setbacks, Rowling’s first novel was a commercial success and quickly made her a best-selling author in the United Kingdom. Scholastic then bought the rights to publish the novel in the United States. The anticipation for each subsequent novel only grew with every new release.⁴

The *Harry Potter* series reignited the market for children’s and Young Adult literature. In the last two decades, *Harry Potter* has grown into a multimedia franchise spanning seven novels, a diegetic folk-tale collection, an encyclopedia of magical creatures, nine films, an interactive news website, and two plays that are currently being produced in London’s West End and

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⁴ Ibid., 41–58.
Broadway in New York City. Its longevity and continued success can be attributed in part to its surprisingly passionate and networked fan base, and how well Rowling and her media partners have adapted to the rise of convergence culture.

In her book, *Harry, A History: The True Story of a Boy Wizard, His Fans, and Life Inside the Harry Potter Phenomenon* (2008), Melissa Anelli recounts how the Internet nurtured the fandom. Mosaic, released in 1993, was the first Internet web browser to gain widespread use. It and its later competitors allowed people to hop online in exponentially increasing numbers with each passing year. As Internet use spread rapidly across the globe, the first three *Harry Potter* novels saw a concurrent exponential rise in readership; book sales continued to multiply even in months when new installments were not released. The first fan websites appeared in 1997, and by 2000, dozens of others—including the popular MuggleNet.com and the Leaky Cauldron—emerged along with dedicated fan fiction sites. Notably, most of these were run by teenagers who simply wanted to fill their time with *Harry Potter*-related activities while they awaited the next book. 5

Fan websites allowed *Harry Potter* readers to “get their fix,” but they didn’t necessarily allow readers to connect with each other. Message boards and email lists provided spaces for dialogue and were used by the fandoms surrounding other entertainment properties like *The X-Files* (1993–2002) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003). 6 The first social network site to solidify and grow the *Harry Potter* fan community was LiveJournal.com (1999). Through its

5 Ibid., 87–90.
combination of blogging, private and group messages, and “friending” (i.e. connecting users to each other), LiveJournal provided a central location where fans could share their thoughts, their fiction and art, and stay updated about each other’s personal lives. With a significant portion of its users under the age of eighteen, LiveJournal was essential in the process of establishing the youthful heart of the *Harry Potter* fandom. Anelli argues that it not only fostered the digital network of the fandom, but served a pedagogical purpose as well:

> . . . nondigital fan cultures used to connect via magazines and newsletters mailed to their homes, and since it usually took an adult to seek out a fanzine, children were largely left out of the picture . . . . Now they weren’t only forming social connections but using Harry Potter to explore literary concepts by writing fanfiction. They were developing their artistic skills by drawing their favorite Harry Potter characters and scenes. Since socializing online had developed to the point where any piece of fanfiction or fan art was likely to receive responses and reviews, they were also becoming used to receiving and implementing constructive criticism.

Anelli attributes children and teens’ entrance into fandom to early social media platforms. Once online, the *Harry Potter* fandom, specifically, allowed these young fans to socialize, create, and learn outside of formal education settings. While providing a valuable account of the rise of the *Harry Potter* fandom and the historical moment in which it developed, Anelli is far from an unbiased narrator. Her book is primarily written for other fans, and thus presents all fan activities in the most favorable light possible. Like Henry Jenkins choosing to “[accent] the positive” in *Textual Poachers*, Anelli ultimately argues that involvement in the online *Harry Potter* fandom taught valuable lessons in writing, art, music, social justice, and entrepreneurship; as a *New York Times* bestseller, her book has contributed greatly to the idealistic portrayal of the *Harry Potter* fandom and the wizard rock scene.

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8 Ibid., 92.
In addition to its young fans, the *Harry Potter* series also owes much of its success to media convergence. Henry Jenkins defines convergence as “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want . . . .”

In sum, the *Harry Potter* stories were first communicated through print media. The stories accrued avid readers, who migrated between reading the print sources and playing on social media platforms through the creation and consumption of *Harry Potter*-inspired art, fiction, and music. The commercial success of the books and Rowling’s active fan base encouraged Warner Bros. to purchase the film rights in 2000, bringing the film industry into conversation with the publishing and social media industries. The films brought in new fans, who were subsequently inspired to explore the *Harry Potter* universe through the books, official and fan websites, and social media pages.

Of course, these combined processes of creation, communication, industry cooperation, and consumer migration that make up media convergence did not occur without friction. Jenkins continues,

> Convergence, as we can see, is both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process . . . . Media companies are learning how to accelerate the flow of media content across delivery channels to expand revenue opportunities, broaden markets, and reinforce viewer commitments. Consumers are learning how to use these different media technologies to bring the flow of media more fully under their control and to interact with other consumers . . . . Sometimes, corporate and grassroots convergence reinforce each other, creating closer, more rewarding relations between media producers and consumers. Sometimes, these two forces are at war . . .

In the early 1990s, writings about Internet or computer technologies (i.e. “new media”) prophesied that it would destroy and replace “old media,” namely broadcast and corporate

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11 Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 18.
media. Instead, new media grew alongside old media, and the two forms developed a relationship of contested coexistence, resulting in moments of synergy and conflict, consonance and dissonance.

When fan websites and online fan fiction archives started to reach a critical mass, J.K. Rowling and Warner Bros. initially took an overly forceful approach to clamp down on fan creativity, which they viewed as copyright infringement; this was at the same time that production for the first film commenced and the studio was building some of its earliest new media content in conjunction with the film’s release. Warner Bros. sent cease-and-desist letters to owners of many fan websites, claiming the sites were “likely to cause consumer confusion or dilution of intellectual property rights.” On behalf of their company and Rowling, they claimed the right to review the content of these websites, and ultimately permitted many of them to continue with the stipulation that they could be closed if content was posted that the studio deemed inappropriate.

Warner Bros. was not the first production company to claim copyright infringement over fan activity, but they underestimated the militant interconnectivity of the Harry Potter fandom. Heather Lawver, the American teen webmistress of the faux journalistic website The Daily Prophet, joined forces with British teen Claire Fields and others to combat the Warner Bros. cease-and-desist campaign. They obtained legal representation and made the conflict public through television appearances and other print media outlets. The negative press received during

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13 Jenkins, Convergence Culture, 6.
and after the so-called “PotterWar” caused Warner Bros. to be more cautious about asserting their intellectual property rights; they subsequently relaxed their policy towards fan creativity.\textsuperscript{15}

With regards to fan fiction, Rowling expressed conflicting feelings, saying, “It was largely kids writing for kids—initially. I felt that we needed to be hands off, accept it as flattering. I’ve never read any fanfiction online. I know about some of it. I just don’t want to go there . . . . It’s not a comfortable feeling to see a kind of cardboard version of that world erected and stuff moved around and the laws contravened. But if the Internet had been around in the time of Agatha Christie, this would have happened to Christie. Or Dickens!”\textsuperscript{16} In the wake of PotterWar, Rowling eventually gave her approval to fan fiction stories and websites with the “concerned” stipulations that no person or company commercially benefit from them\textsuperscript{17} and that they do not include sexually explicit content.\textsuperscript{18}

Apart from fan fiction, Rowling’s most infamous copyright claim was disputed in \textit{Warner Bros. v. RDR Books}. In 2007, RDR Books announced plans to publish a print version of the \textit{Harry Potter Lexicon}, an online encyclopedia created by Stephen Vander Ark. Vander Ark’s original encyclopedia served as an enormous resource for the \textit{Harry Potter} fandom: it included plot summaries and quotations, and was even an informal resource used by the films, the videogame, and Rowling herself. RDR Books argued that its publication fell under fair use, but a New York court determined that the work infringed on Rowling’s companion works, \textit{Quidditch Through the Ages} (2001) and \textit{Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them} (2001). The publication

\textsuperscript{15} For a detailed discussion of “PotterWar,” see Jenkins, \textit{Convergence Culture}, 185–91; and Anelli, 94–100.
\textsuperscript{16} J.K. Rowling, quoted in Anelli, 93–94.

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of the Lexicon was thus halted. RDR Books and Vander Ark later published an informally approved version that used fewer quotations and included more original material.¹⁹

The *Harry Potter* franchise is one of many multimedia texts to have a devoted participatory audience, yet none of the others has spawned a music movement of the same magnitude as wizard rock. This is not to say that other franchises haven’t prompted musicians to form concept bands. A handful of musicians have been inspired by other franchises like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1996–2003), *Doctor Who* (1963–1987, 1996, 2005–present), and *Game of Thrones* (novels: 1997–present; television series: 2011–present), to name a few, and frequently perform at large fan conventions like Comic Con. Wizard rock, however, is unique in its scope and message; its story is marked by the simultaneously synergistic and competing forces of top-down corporate control and grassroots, DIY participation.

**The History of Wizard Rock**

As Anelli notes, the narrative of wizard rock’s beginnings has accrued a legendary air, similar to Rowling’s train ride.²⁰ The stories share a theme of humble origins; their respective founders attest to never anticipating its growth or popularity. Paul and Joe DeGeorge, the brothers behind the formative wizard rock band Harry and the Potters, frequently claim that the band started as a joke.

The brothers hailed from a suburb on the outskirts of Boston, Massachusetts, and were close despite an eight-year age gap. Both played in local bands through their teens and Paul’s

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²⁰ Anelli, 104–5.
early college years. Paul focused on guitar, while Joe learned piano and saxophone. Their foray into wizard rock was inspired during a show put on by Joe’s high school band, Ed in the Refrigerators. There, Paul heard an audience member shout, “I love you, Harry Potter” to Joe—an apt description for both brothers with their curly brown hair and glasses. Paul had posed the idea of forming a *Harry Potter*-themed band with some of his college friends earlier in the year, but they dismissed it as too narrow a concept. At the backyard concert, he realized that this concept might finally allow him to form a band with his brother, an idea that they’d begun to share as Joe’s musicality developed.

Paul proposed the concept band to his brother after the show, which Joe immediately embraced. They excitedly determined the premise of the band: Paul would play Harry Potter in his seventh year who uses a Time Turner, a time-travelling device introduced by Rowling in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (1999), to form a band with his fourth-year self, Joe. They immediately wrote some songs at the kitchen table. A few weeks later, they played one show where they performed the songs and considered the band done.

In the summer of 2003, Rowling published the fifth novel, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. The brothers saw an opportunity to revive the band by playing at a few of the local publication release parties. The generally positive reception that they received at these shows convinced them that the band might have more of a life. They recorded and released their first album, set up a website and a MySpace Music page, played a few local shows and birthday parties, and connected with other bands in Boston’s independent music scene.

While the DeGeorges coined and attached “wizard rock” to their songs, theirs were not the first *Harry Potter*-themed songs to be written. Two years before, an all-female punk band called the Switchblade Kittens had released a song on the Internet called “Ode to Harry.” Sung
from the perspective of Ginny Weasley, the sister of Harry Potter’s best friend Ron and later Harry’s love interest, “Ode to Harry” vented Ginny’s perceived frustration over Harry’s refusal to see or acknowledge her.21 Prior to the song’s release, the Switchblade Kittens were dropped by their record label. The frustration that the band’s lead singer Drama felt over their poor experience with the music industry was channeled into “Ode to Harry,” both in Drama’s choice to write a song from the perspective of a minor character with whom she related, and the band’s choice to release the song for free on the Internet—things they could not do if attached to a record label.

Once the song made its way to the online network of the Harry Potter fandom, it was downloaded over three million times. The band went on to release a full wizard rock album in 2006 as the Weird Sisters, a popular wizard band that Rowling introduced in Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire (2000). After the one album, they stepped away from wizard rock to pursue other literature-themed concept album ideas.

The DeGeorges, on the other hand, were primarily influenced by American punk bands of the 1980s and 1990s. They began to pull aspects of punk ideology into their musical performances and the choices that they made regarding their public image. Anelli recounts an instance where a local bar contacted them about doing a publicity shoot that would associate Harry and the Potters with the stereotypical hypermasculinity of rock performers, while helping advertise the business. The DeGeorges immediately declined. Anelli writes,

Their strong adverse reaction was fueled by their identity with Harry Potter. Harry Potter would never pose with sexy girls for publicity. Harry Potter would never play a show that kids couldn’t get into, to help sell alcohol. Harry Potter would never sign with

LiveNation. Harry Potter would never milk their [sic] listeners and fans for overpriced merchandise or albums. Harry Potter would fight the dark forces of evil and the record industry establishment as if they were one. Harry Potter became an invisible partner to Harry and the Potters, whose moral choices would abet and guide their own as they tried to carve a niche just left of the music industry.

Anelli cites Weird Al Yankovic and They Might Be Giants as their key influences and argues that this ethical stance set them apart from other musicians. These choices, though, do not necessarily represent their difference but point to the musical, ethical, and political influence of Fugazi.

Wizard rock is best contextualized as an offshoot of the straight edge punk scene. Based in Washington, DC, from 1979 to 1985, the straight edge scene eschewed excessive drug and alcohol use and the explicit sexual references that had become attached to punk music in the 1970s. Because of these abstinences, violence at concerts and fights with police rarely happened, allowing the scene to situate itself as law-abiding one. This, in turn, allowed teenagers to legally enter and explore the punk identity.

The most important legacy of the DC scene was its expansion of DIY culture. As Stacy Thompson notes, punk vaguely held to a DIY approach from its start; it was the straight edge scene, however, that turned it into the primary form of business. The DIY approach is best exemplified by Dischord Records, which was founded in 1980 by Minor Threat’s Ian MacKaye and Jeff Nelson. They initially formed the label to distribute their music and the music of their

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22 LiveNation is a large American entertainment company formed in 2005 that signs artists and works to promote them. They also control the bookings of hundreds of performance venues—from arenas to clubs to festival sites to theatres.
23 Anelli, 116.
24 Depending on the source, the DeGeorges name several bands and musicians as their influences—from Weird Al Yankovic to Nirvana to Green Day. In my interview on July 31, 2014, with Joe DeGeorge, he emphasized Fugazi’s influence on Harry and the Potters.
26 Ibid., 47–8.
friends’ bands. The label avoided corporate investors and distributed records by selling directly to stores and consumers through mail order. Any profits made from releases cycled back into the company to produce the next band’s record. While this form of management required significant labor, it also gave Minor Threat and the label’s other bands autonomy over their music and distribution. In addition to its commitment to fairly represent and mentor other punk bands in the DC area, it was also committed to social justice issues and donated proceeds to local homeless organizations, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), and others. Dischord Records continued to thrive even as the DC scene faded, and for many, it continues to be epitome of the DIY business model.

After Minor Threat disbanded in 1983, MacKaye formed Fugazi in 1987 with Guy Picciotto, Joe Lally, and Brendan Canty. The band distributed through Dischord Records and expanded upon many of the practices first embraced by the straight edge scene. They continued to play “all ages” shows and kept admission prices low, never exceeding fifteen dollars per person. Fugazi and Dischord Records mutually rose in prominence on the national and international scene through the early 1990s while maintaining their financial independence from major record labels and corporate investors.

As Fugazi took and built on the social and economic precedents laid by the DC straight edge scene, so did the DeGeorges. Stylistically, they added the element of cosplay through their adoption of the Hogwarts school uniform. Most importantly, they attributed the straight edge ethical practices of avoiding drugs, alcohol, and explicit sexual references to their identification with a fictional character. It was the earliest hints of what would develop into the narrative

28 Thompson, Punk Productions, 43.
leadership model championed by the Harry Potter Alliance, a social justice organization that the DeGeorges would play a major part in developing and with which they continue to partner today.

Through 2003, Harry and the Potters were unknown to much of the Harry Potter fandom. They were occasionally covered in the press, both print and online, but for the most part, they remained a quirky local band that played at libraries. Their introduction to the online Potter fandom came through fan fiction author Cassandra Claire, who was known to a large, primarily teen audience for her Draco Malfoy stories. Her post about discovering Harry and the Potters exposed the band to her readers and many fan-community blogs. When visits to the band’s website skyrocketed and emails started flooding its inbox, the DeGeorges realized that they had a significant enough audience to record new music and embark on a tour, which they proceeded to do through 2004.

While their popularity grew among Harry Potter fans, the DeGeorges also made a name for themselves on the local independent band circuit. They caught the attention of Matt Maggiacomo, a singer-songwriter who fostered a network of independent bands in Rhode Island and its neighbor states and held regular house concerts. At the recommendation of a colleague, Maggiacomo invited the DeGeorges to play a house concert that he was hosting in November

29 Anelli, 119.
30 The relationship between Claire’s Draco Trilogy and her later published YA series The Mortal Instruments, under the slightly modified penname of Cassandra Clare, is much debated among Harry Potter fans. While Clare herself denies the connection, there are significant similarities between the two. See Cassandra Clare, “Hey Cassie! I know TMI was a Harry Potter fanfiction and i really want to know who the characters was in Harry Potter's world. Can you tell? You inspire me so much, i'm a brazilian ficwriter and is really awesome know that you started with fanfics. Thanks, love you,” Tumblr, 2015, accessed April 12, 2017, http://cassandraclare.tumblr.com/post/103773689029/hey-cassie-i-know-tmi-was-a-harry-potter; and City of Bones discussion, “Is it true that the Mortal Instruments started off as Harry Potter fanfiction?,” Goodreads, last updated December 5, 2016, accessed April 12, 2017, http://www.goodreads.com/topic/show/1437126-is-it-true-that-the-mortal-instruments-started-off-as-harry-potter-fanfi.
Maggiacomo did not expect much of Harry and the Potters, yet they impressed him with their set and humor. Compared to the other bands he regularly booked, the DeGeorges were not “sad boys with guitars,” a refreshing change. Half-brothers Brian Ross and Bradley Mehlenbacher were also at this concert and shared Maggiacomo’s enthusiasm for this concept genre that the DeGeorges were beginning to call “wizard rock.” Maggiacomo invited them back to play another concert the following April.31

Mutually inspired, Maggiacomo, Ross, and Mehlenbacher decided to parody Harry and the Potters at this second house concert. Ross and Mehlenbacher wrote a set’s worth of songs from the perspective of Harry Potter’s school nemesis Draco Malfoy. Both Ross and Mehlenbacher played guitar and sang, but they lacked a drummer. Mehlenbacher decided to use a digital audio track for percussion. The digital accompaniment, as well as the highly parodic nature of their lyrics, demonstrated the influence of the alternative rock band Ween.32 This lo-fi approach to performing (and later, recording) would introduce another DIY element to wizard rock. Maggiacomo, being more influenced by singer-songwriters like Simon and Garfunkel and Bob Dylan, decided to personify the ferocious guardian tree featured in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (1999) for his set; however, rather than composing a slate of new songs, he accompanied himself on acoustic guitar, swaying pensively and playing Kansas’s “Carry on Wayward Son.”33 Copying the trend for plural band names, he styled himself as the Whomping Willows. Like the DeGeorges’ first performance as Harry and the Potters, Ross, Mehlenbacher, and Maggiacomo intended the stint as Draco and the Malfoys and the Whomping Willows, respectively, to be a one-time performance.

31 Matt Maggiacomo, personal interview, August 1, 2014.
32 Bradley Mehlenbacher and Brian Ross, personal interview, August 3, 2014.
33 Anelli, 124.
In the summer of 2005, the DeGeorges invited Ross, Mehlenbacher, and Maggiacomo to revive their bands for the last concert of their second tour. The newer bands were received positively by Harry and the Potters’ audience, and the DeGeorges invited them again to collaborate on a Christmas compilation album and play the first Yule Ball, the latter of which developed into an annual pair of concerts held in Boston and New York City. The compilation album and the concert, as well as their positive reception, convinced Draco and the Malfoys and the Whomping Willows to officially join the burgeoning wizard rock scene.34

As the scene’s following increased with the establishment of these bands and the ubiquity of their Internet presence, Warner Bros. Studio became aware of their activities. In mid-2004 the DeGeorges received a letter from a studio representative that expressed polite concern about the legality of their band. This was a marked change from the cease-and-desist letter campaign that instigated PotterWar. Paul DeGeorge and a studio executive spoke over the phone and came to an agreement. The band would be permitted to sell their music online. Any merchandise—like T-shirts and paraphernalia—was seen as competing with Warner Bros., and could not be sold online, though it could be sold in person at concerts. If no corporate representative witnessed the band selling merchandise, the DeGeorges were free to continue.35

Warner Bros. effectively turned a blind eye to their activities, but it was in the band’s best interest to exercise caution and respect the agreed-upon boundaries. As Ross, Mehlenbacher, and Maggiacomo joined, it was important to the DeGeorges that Draco and the Malfoys and the Whomping Willows abide by the same code. While this code primarily concerned the selling of merchandise, the two new bands followed the DeGeorges’ lead, only playing shows with Harry and the Potters and releasing albums with their permission.

34 Maggiacomo, personal interview.
35 Anelli, 121–23.
This code proved unsustainable toward the end of 2005 when they learned of Alex Carpenter, a college-aged singer-songwriter in Southern California who was also writing, performing, and distributing music about the *Harry Potter* novels. Though he started writing songs to entertain his friends in early 2005, Carpenter realized the viability of having a *Harry Potter*-themed musical act almost immediately. Raised in Los Angeles with family in the entertainment industry, Carpenter released a full album within a few months and used MySpace to build an audience, with whom he regularly interacted. Like the DeGeorges (but unaware of them), he named his band in the plural, calling himself the Remus Lupins. Unlike the DeGeorges, he was willing to capitalize on his boy-band good looks.36

Email conversations between Carpenter and the Northeast trio were initially hostile; the latter was concerned that Carpenter’s self-promotional tactics would inadvertently ruin their tentative agreement with Warner Bros. At this point, they knew of only one other wizard rock band on the West Coast—the Parselmouths, a Seattle-based female duo who had expressly asked the DeGeorges for permission to form their band. Carpenter eventually convinced Maggiacomo, the email representative of the Northeast bands, that their rule about always sharing the stage with the DeGeorges was geographically unfeasible. Carpenter further argued that always deferring to the De Georges would only stall other fans’ creativity, should they also be inspired by Rowling’s novels to write music.

Notably, the DeGeorges, Ross, Mehlenbacher, and Maggiacomo initially perceived Carpenter as a threat. On one hand, this could be attributed to jealousy: they saw themselves as musical pioneers, and Carpenter proved that they were not alone. On the other hand, perhaps some of their reticence was justified considering Carpenter’s later abuses in the community.

36 Ibid., 128–29.
(addressed in Chapter Four). Carpenter introduced an “indie” commercialism that was more dependent on his image as a nerdy yet handsome singer-songwriter. He held contests for fans to meet him one-on-one and his online behavior encouraged the sense that he was accessible.\(^{37}\) This perceived accessibility became dangerous for the young women who started to follow him. While his method of building an audience was in line with the DIY-approach, it was more likely influenced by mainstream entertainment practices rather than the straight edge, punk practices that influenced the other bands. For good and for ill, the relaxing of the DeGeorges’ performance rules, apart from the merchandising requirement, laid the groundwork for the first major growth of the wizard rock scene.\(^{38}\)

**The Development of the Scene**

With the Remus Lupins and the Parselmouths on the West Coast and Harry and the Potters, Draco and the Malfoys, and the Whomping Willows on the East Coast, the pattern in the scene became apparent. The bands presented a unified image in their appropriation of *Harry Potter* elements, but each had their own musical style and songwriting technique. Collectively, however, they created the wizard rock band recipe: pick a character or object from the *Harry Potter* universe, make it plural, pick a musical style, write a song or two, and start a band. This was not unlike the famous idiom from an English punk fanzine published in the late 1970s, which stated “This is a chord, This is another, This is a third. NOW FORM A BAND.”\(^{39}\) All that


\(^{38}\) Ibid., 129–30.

this burgeoning DIY scene required was a networked platform to spread awareness and function as a low to no-cost distributor. MySpace Music fulfilled that need.

Founded in 2003, MySpace was a social networking site that quickly gained traction among teenagers and young adults. It was free to join and allowed members to create personal profiles, friend others who had similar interests, and share content. The platform adopted a “perpetual beta” mode in its first few years of operation, meaning that the site would phase functions in and out of the platform depending on how its members were using it. From the start, the site was beneficial for musicians, regardless of whether they functioned independently or had corporate representation. MySpace Music allowed them to post music files, reach and build audiences, and network with other musicians or bands.

The platform had several features that provided a solid infrastructure for the developing wizard rock community. The friend request function allowed the DeGeorges to establish a network of audience members across the country and gave them the confidence to launch several nationwide tours. The site’s geographically targeted messaging function let them finalize tour stops, arrange room and board, and alert people to their concerts happening within a discreet radius. Carpenter used messages to foster a sense of intimacy with his listeners, personally responding to all messages sent to him. In doing so, he built an audience that expressly came to see him perform because they felt like they “knew” him. By the time Draco and the Malfoys and the Whomping Willows formally started their bands and created MySpace profiles, they could tap into the vast network of fans that Harry and the Potters had already accrued through their

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MySpace page. Additionally, MySpace had a group function that connected musicians and bands with each other and individual users.

In late 2005, the parent bands formed the wizard rock MySpace group. This gave the community a centralized virtual space despite the geographical distance that separated them. Each member could create their own “Top Eight,” a list of eight bands to whom the user was listening, on their profile pages. The Top Eight lists were effective cross-promotional tools: if someone was discovering wizard rock for the first time, they could go to the profile page of a band they liked or a MySpace friend and find links to eight other bands. This function helped the more established bands maintain their brand and reach; in turn, they could also promote bands that were still trying to build an audience.

Depending on one’s perspective, MySpace can be viewed as a democratizing or stratifying force. It was integral to connecting the initial bands and made apparent wizard rock’s DIY formula. It gave other Harry Potter fans the confidence to write songs, play instruments, sing, and record music for the first time. Even if they never performed live, MySpace allowed these fans to form bands and connected them to a nationwide network of others doing the same thing. On the other hand, the same functions that grew the wizard rock scene also masked the stratification of it. The language of intimacy embedded in terms like “friends” bolstered the rhetoric of equality between musicians and fans, but in actuality, disguised the power dynamic between the two groups. After all, the more “friends” a musician had, the more widespread their music and image became, and the more popular they were. With regards to the Top Eight lists, the well-known bands may have leveraged their popularity to make people aware of emerging talent in the scene, but the lists of wizard rock fans were often dominated by the same popular bands.
The last element to shape the character of the wizard rock scene also emerged in late 2005. At a stop on their 2005 summer tour, Andrew Slack approached the DeGeorges following their set. He expressed his admiration for how Harry and the Potters had introduced a generation of teens to DIY musical culture. Like the DeGeorges, he related to the morality of the characters in Rowling’s novels and proposed that the same DIY practices encouraged in wizard rock could be directed toward social justice campaigns. This proposition immediately resonated with the brothers because of the bands, like Fugazi, that had influenced them. Slack and the DeGeorges produced a *Harry Potter*-themed entertainment night including comedy skits and wizard rock in November 2005, and the proceeds were donated to Amnesty International, one of Rowling’s favored charities. Over the next year, Slack solidified his ideas into a 501(c)3 nonprofit called The Harry Potter Alliance (HPA).\(^{42}\)

Since then, the wizard rock scene and the HPA have maintained a mutually beneficial relationship. Though they are separate entities, many wizard rock shows and recording campaigns have donated money to the HPA and their charity partners. Additionally, many wizard rock bands became associated with specific social justice issues. Carpenter made literacy a cornerstone of the Remus Lupins’ brand with his slogan “Fight Evil. Read Books!” Another band Catchlove used its increasing popularity on the scene to promote awareness of the genocide in Darfur. Lead singer Jace MacDonald often performed in a “Save Darfur” t-shirt and included references to the issue in the band’s merchandise.\(^{43}\) Maggiacomo summarized this element of social justice, saying, “There was this real sense that if you were in a wizard rock band, you could make money doing what you're doing, but there had to be some sort of charitable element

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\(^{42}\) Joe DeGeorge, personal interview, July 31, 2014.

\(^{43}\) Lauren Fairweather, personal interview, August 1, 2014.
somehow. If there’s a non-profit equivalent of a band, you had to be that . . . . You had a cause or you [made] contributions to charity . . .”

Through this claim, Maggiacomo uses the element of social justice to solidify wizard rock’s identity as an alternative, anti-commercial music scene. As Rebecca-Anne C. Do Rozario notes, “Wizard rock somewhat ironically promotes itself as not being about self-promotion by referring back to the original creative work of Rowling. In so doing, it in turn refers back not to a musical pedigree, but a literary one, thus rejecting the music industry by endorsing reading in its place and focusing on narrative. Furthermore, it endorses not the publishing industry, but education, positioning itself quite outside commercialism.”

Over the years, some bands who favored more commercialized modes of production chose not to identify with charities or specific campaigns; for the bands that presently exist, the social justice element remains an important part of their bands and the whole scene.

Scholars have used the wizard rock community and its frequent collaboration with the HPA and other charities as a prime example of how the Harry Potter series has instilled an ethical code in its readers. Karin E. Westman, in her article “The Weapon We Have is Love,” argues that the Harry Potter novels teach sympathetic love, which is more charitable and outward facing than the obsessive love usually associated with fans. For her, wizard rock and the HPA prove that Harry Potter fans take the sympathy encouraged in Rowling’s novels and use them as “a catalyst for moral action and social change.”

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44 Maggiacomo, personal interview.
Rob Yoho makes a similar argument in his chapter “Developing Community Through Wizard Rock: An Interview with Wizard Rocker Lena Gabrielle.” He applies Victor Turner’s theory on how rituals create *communitas*, a liminal state where social hierarchies are flattened among participants, to wizard rock performances. He writes, “... *communitas* occurs but in reverse: rather than the empowered experiencing what it is like to feel disempowered, the individuals experience empowerment in order not to feel disempowered. In the context of a wizard rock concert, the performers and audience shed their ‘Muggle’ identities and don the figurative (and for some participants, literal) robes of wizardry. While experiencing ... *communitas*, the wizard rockers redefine and reorganize themselves into socially conscious and active communities.”

Wizard rock’s social justice commitments are not limited to humanitarian and literacy campaigns. Catherine Hall, in her article, “Reading and [w]rocking: Morality and musical creativity in the *Harry Potter* fandom,” explicitly connects wizard rock with political resistance against “corrupt power and untrustworthy governmental entities.” Focusing specifically on the music and performance practices of Harry and the Potters, she places the DeGeorges into a longer history of “singer-heroes” and examines how they facilitate the translation of fictional heroism into real-world action for themselves and their fans. Hall analyzes their song “(not gonna put on) The Monkey Suit,” which was inspired by the standoff between Harry Potter and Minister of Magic Rufus Scrimgeour in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*. In the novel, Scrimgeour tries to convince Harry to publicly stand with the Ministry in order to raise the

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wizarding community’s morale, even though such actions go against Harry’s personal ethics. “(not gonna put on) The Monkey Suit” expands on Harry’s refusal to be, as he sees it, a puppet mascot of the Ministry. The song’s lyrics, fast tempo, distorted electric guitar accompaniment, and Joe DeGeorge’s vocals reference the title song from Green Day’s 2004 album *American Idiot*. In their interview with Hall, the DeGeorges argue that the rest of the early 2000s punk scene failed by not following in Green Day’s footsteps and challenging the Bush administration. “(not gonna put on) The Monkey Suit” was their way of contributing to Green Day’s work, and in their own fiction-inspired way, continuing punk’s commitment to voice political resistance.\(^{49}\)

This was not the only overtly political wizard rock song written and performed during the first wave of the wizard rock scene. Harry and the Potters frequently played “Cornelius Fudge is an Ass”—a not-so-veiled attack on inept government leaders (read: then President George W. Bush), biased media, and an apathetic public—and “Voldemort Can’t Stop the Rock,” a song that likened Voldemort to Tipper Gore and the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) and thus placed the DeGeorges in a lineage of musicians who have critiqued the PMRC’s censorship.\(^{50}\) Draco and the Malfoys wrote their parody of Nena’s “99 Luftballons” called “99 Death Eaters” in 2006. The nouns were changed to shift the context to the wizarding world, but the warning of the song remained the same. While the original song mused on the possibility of helium balloons sparking devastating international conflict in Cold War Berlin, “99 Death Eaters” considered how a loose chocolate frog might ignite a battle between the Ministry of Magic and the Death Eaters (Voldemort’s disciples) and result in a destroyed city without magic. The HPA also

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\(^{49}\) Hall is currently writing her dissertation on music, morality, and wizard rock. The extent to which Hall critiques the scene remains to be seen.

released a special wizard rock compilation called *Rocking Out Against Voldemedia* in 2007. Eleven bands contributed songs, and it began with a spoken introduction by HPA founder Andrew Slack, encouraging listeners to speak out against media consolidation and support the Media Ownership Act of 2007.

The DIY practices and ethics promoted by the parent bands, MySpace Music, and the social justice element proved a potent combination: nearly three hundred new bands formed in 2006 and 2007. The first peak of the wizard rock scene coincided with the height of the *Harry Potter* fandom. By 2007, wizard rock was no longer a small niche. MuggleNet and the Leaky Cauldron regularly featured wizard rock on their websites and podcasts, granting the scene greater publicity within the fandom and building its audience.

In the months leading to the release of the final novel, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007), the fandom received significant media attention. Mehlenbacher and Ross were interviewed by *TIME, Entertainment Weekly*, and *Much Music*.\(^51\) *Salon, MTV*, and *The Washington Post* also published features on wizard rock. Tinged with amused approbation, these articles mainly covered the parent bands—Harry and the Potters, Draco and the Malfoys, the Whomping Willows, and the Remus Lupins—or the Hungarian Horntails, a hardcore band fronted by eight-year-old Darius Wilkins.\(^52\)

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\(^51\) Mehlenbacher and Ross, personal interview.
The scene continued to grow between 2007 and 2011. By the release of the two-part film adaptation of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* in 2011, the online community encyclopedia *Wizrocklopedia* listed over 750 bands. During this period, musicians and fans adopted other roles within the community, organizing festivals like Wrockstock (2007–2013), conventions, and local concerts. Others added to the scene’s online presence through blogs, wikis, and Internet radio stations. The rhetoric of the community solidified through these events and Internet sources, as well as through print and film media produced by members of the community for a wider public. Melissa Anelli published *Harry, A History* in 2008, and it became a *New York Times* bestseller. Megan and Mallory Schuyler produced and directed *The Wizard Rockumentary: A Movie About Rocking and Rowling* in 2008. Josh Koury’s 2008 documentary *We Are Wizards* focused on the larger *Harry Potter* fandom, including wizard rock in its exploration of fan art.

As public awareness of wizard rock grew, wizard rock’s political edge waned. Barack Obama’s electoral victory in 2008 subtly changed the tenor of the wizard rock community and the HPA. With a president whose ideology and persistent optimism matched their own, the HPA’s campaigns focused on community outreach and humanitarian issues more than legislative ones; one of the few exceptions was when members volunteered at phone banks and went door to door to encourage Maine residents to vote against Proposition One, which would have repealed marriage equality. Wizard rockers continued to support the HPA and their campaign partners, but overtly political songs like “Cornelius Fudge is an Ass” disappeared from performance set-lists. Still, at its height, the wizard rock scene had all the markers of a virtual and translocal

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scene—hundreds of bands, a commercially active audience base, a central online group through MySpace, annual events, and active, scene-specific journalism.\textsuperscript{54}

**The Practices and Discourses of Wizard Rock**

Like the filk community and other creative groups in fandom, the wizard rock community prides itself on providing safe spaces where anyone can participate, community members—musicians and audience members alike—are equal, amateurism is welcomed, and musical skills are learned and cultivated.\textsuperscript{55} For outsiders to grasp these values, music journalist and self-proclaimed wizard punk activist Claudia Morales argues that wizard rock must be experienced live. She writes,

> To truly understand wizard rock’s magic, it’s best to seek out a wizard rock show—to journey into some club or conference hall or basement, or at least scour the live albums and shaky YouTube videos and see the bands take the stage, hear the audience singing along, understand that this is something more than escapism. Wizard rock takes one of the most culturally significant and morally formative stories of our time and makes it more real. Music—live music, especially—is participatory in a way that books and movies cannot be.\textsuperscript{56}

Morales stresses that something akin to magic happens at a show—not just in the music that the bands play or the way they play it, but in the interactions between performer and spectator, and between individual members of the audience. It is in the performance space that the heroism and friendships displayed in the *Harry Potter* stories are transformed from fiction to reality.

Before attending any concerts myself, I watched YouTube videos and listened to recordings of Harry and the Potters, Draco and the Malfoys, the Whomping Willows, and the


\textsuperscript{56} Morales, “Wizard Rock in the Age of Trump.”
Moaning Myrtles. I found the off-key singing and lo-fi recordings with their thin textures and the occasional digital percussion off-putting. It also had been emphasized to me multiple times by filkers that wizard rock’s concert setup was a key difference between the two communities: the stage implied a lack of equality between performer and audience. In many ways, I was primed to be biased against wizard rock. My opinion changed after attending my first live shows at LeakyCon in 2014.

To be sure, the elevation of the performers above the audience was a marked change from the filk circles I had attended, but the audience was far from passive. People danced or bounced to the music and loudly sang along with the songs they knew. Their energy did not diminish as the bands rotated; if anything, it increased with each act. During the first night of bands at LeakyCon, I noticed Paul and Joe DeGeorge wandering through the audience, participating actively with the crowd. When Joe passed me, he gave me a wide smile and a thumbs-up, as if to confirm that I was having a good time.

During the two nights of wizard rock concerts, the most intriguing moments to me were when the audience participated in the concert through choreography, sometimes at the urging of the musicians and sometimes independently. When Matt Maggiacomo played his song “On Behalf of Neville”—a short, two-stanza song about Harry’s friend Neville Longbottom—the audience had simple movements to go with each line of the song. Maggiacomo invited his wife and fellow wizard rocker Lauren Fairweather to join him on stage and lead the dance; he also encouraged the audience members in the front to turn around and teach the dance to those behind them. Learning the dance from those around me fostered a non-conversational bond that left

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57 The performance of “On Behalf of Neville” from the 2013 LeakyCon is available on YouTube. See “The Whomping Willows – On Behalf of Neville Longbottom (LeakyCon 2013),”
me smiling long after the song had ended. The following evening, Harry and the Potters’
performance of “Accio Hagrid,” with its fun lyrics and crowd choreography, reinforced the
connection I felt with the musicians, the music, and my fellow audience members.  

Of the participatory moments that I witnessed at LeakyCon, Harry and the Potters’
performance of “Dumbledore” was, by far, the most compelling. First recorded and released in
2006 on *Harry and the Potters and the Power of Love*, “Dumbledore” serves as the lament of the
Hogwarts’ student body in the wake of the headmaster’s death at the end of *Harry Potter and the
Half-Blood Prince*. The recorded version begins with a gentle three-chord progression played
on guitar and underlined by a lilting cello line. Paul DeGeorge is on lead vocals with Joe
providing the parenthetical echoes.

> You were the best we ever had
> You were the best we ever had (you were the best)
> I wish that we could go down to the Room of Requirement
> And we could go bowling just like you used to
> Back when Hogwarts Bowling Club was cool

> You were the best we ever had
> You were the best we ever had (you were the best)

**Chorus 1**  
**Dumbledore**

> We're here with you tonight
> We'll carry on the fight
> Everything will be alright
> And everyone is fine

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58 For the song and dance, see “Accio Hagrid (Harry and the Potters) – RIDE THE LIGHTNING
Tour, Mission Viejo, CA [HD],” YouTube video, 1:12, from a performance at the Mission Viejo
Public Library on June 15, 2011, posted by “chinareds54,” June 17, 2011,
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8AlmBnZFgp8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8AlmBnZFgp8).

59 The recording can be accessed on the DeGeorge’s Bandcamp page. “Harry and the Potters:
Dumbledore,” accessed May 12, 2017,
A brief interlude follows the first statement of the chorus, similar to the introduction but punctuated by a ringing xylophone. Paul sings an abbreviated second verse, but then, the song suddenly ramps up into an arena rock-like sound, with both brothers shout-singing the second chorus. Paul shifts the guitar into a more distorted timbre, and Joe joins with rolling arpeggios on his keyboard.

You were the best we ever had (you were the best)  
I wish we could have shared more together  
But now you're off on your next adventure

Chorus 2
Dumbledore  
We'll fight for you tonight  
Dumbledore  
We all fight for you tonight  
In our hearts we'll never let you die  
Your love is keeping us alive

You'll never be gone as long as we're here (x3)  
We'll carry on 'cause there's nothing to fear

Chorus 2
Oh oh oh oh oh oh oh oh oh oh (x2)

You'll never be gone as long as we're here (x3)  
We'll carry on 'cause there's nothing to fear

Chorus 2
Dumbledore  
We'll fight for you tonight

The song maintains its high energy until the final lyric. Paul releases the guitar accompaniment with a series of dissonant fretboard slides, and Joe is left playing the keyboard arpeggios until landing one last time on the song’s tonic chord. Apart from the guitar and keyboards played by
Paul and Joe, respectively, arrangements of the song vary from performance to performance depending on whether they have other musicians able to accompany them.60

I was filming on the outskirts of the LeakyCon audience when I heard “Dumbledore” for the first time. As the song began, I noticed people turning, wrapping their arms around each other’s shoulders, and backing up towards me. To my surprise, I saw the entire audience forming one giant circle in the convention hall space, swaying gently as the circle increased and people sang along. It was the first time in the evening that the audience members’ attention was not fixed on the band but on each other. The passionate Harry and the Potters fans who crowded the front of the stage now had their backs to the musicians. When the DeGeorges launched into the second chorus, the circle suddenly broke; participants charged into the open space and formed a mosh pit. They ecstatically joined the band as they sang, “Dumbledore, we’ll fight for you tonight! . . . Your love is keeping us alive!” Despite returning to the center, the audience members’ focus was still on each other as they sang, jumped, and danced.

I later learned that “The Circle of Awesome,” as it was called, developed independently of Harry and the Potters. Ross and Mehlenbacher were both playing backup for the DeGeorges when they witnessed it for the first time at a concert in Boston in 2009. From their perspective, all they could see was a giant hole opening in their audience; they thought people were leaving in the middle of the song.61 When that first circle broke into the ecstatic dancing crowd, they realized what had happened. Stephanie Anderson, lead singer of Tonks and the Aurors, commented, “If we had told them to do that, it would have been stupid. If [we’d] come in and

60 Front musicians from other bands frequently serve as backup musicians for each other at wizard rock concerts. For example, at LeakyCon 2014, Brian Ross of Draco and the Malfoys played bass for Tonks and the Aurors, while his brother Bradley Mehlenbacher played drums for Harry and the Potters.
61 Mehlenbacher and Ross, personal interview.
said, ‘We’re all going to make a circle, and then . . .’ half of them would have done it, half of them would have left.” Dumbledore,” while special in its expression of community solidarity, is not performed often because the DeGeorges find that playing it is emotionally rewarding but exhausting.

It is not the only wizard rock song to have developed an audience tradition. In 2010, Matt Maggiacomo released his album Wizard Party Forever, which closed with the track “When the Lights Go Out.” The chorus proclaims,

\[
\text{We’re wizards.} \\
\text{We’ll party forever.} \\
\text{This night will never end.}
\]

When he performed the song live at LeakyCon 2011, he placed it in the middle of his set since it was new. He was surprised, then, when he finished his set and was about to leave, to hear some members of the audience sing the chorus of “When the Lights Go Out.” It spread through the rest of the group until the entire hall was singing the chorus, over and over. Many lifted their hands (and wands) in the air; others formed heart shapes with their fingers. Since then, the LeakyCon crowd traditionally says farewell to Maggiacomo at the end of his sets with this chorus.63

Because these traditions developed organically and separately from the musicians, they reflect the idea that all wizard rockers—a term in the community that applies to musician and fan—are equal as fans of Harry Potter. Participating in the wizard rock scene is a means of interpolating the Harry Potter stories into one’s life. Morales continues in her article for MTV.com, “The songs we listen to become our soundtrack: We walk through the world with

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them, we make memories with them, and we become the protagonists of the stories they tell."64 Live concerts, with their humor and participatory moments, fuel this process.

Lauren Fairweather’s song “It’s Real for Us” hinges on this idea.65 This song comes from her 2011 concept album The Prince’s Tale, which takes its name from the thirty-third chapter of Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows. In this chapter Professor Severus Snape shares memories with Harry that reveal his friendship with Harry’s mother Lily and his unrequited love for her. “It’s Real for Us” is written from the perspective of Lily as a young girl just after she learns that she is a witch. Because she comes from a non-magical (a.k.a. “Muggle”) family, Lily expresses relief to her friend, a young Severus Snape, that magic and the wizarding world exist; where once she was treated as an outcast, even in her own family, she now has a place to belong.

Ever since I was a kid
Could’n’t explain the things I did
Thought it would make my family proud
Instead it kind of freaks them out

If there’s a place where I could go
To step outside the status quo
I’d tackle every lesson plan
If I could stop hiding who I am

Petunia told me you’re lying
She just won’t believe you
Says there is no Hogwarts
So Sev, is it really true?

Chorus
But it’s real for us
It’s real for us
Doesn’t matter what the muggles say
‘Cause it’s real for us

He says they’ve cast protective charms

64 Morales, “Wizard Rock in the Age of Trump.”
To keep the school away from harm
Hidden away from muggle eyes
They couldn’t find it if they tried

I just can’t wait to go and see
So many people just like me
‘Cause all I’ve wanted for so long
Is to find a place where I belong

It’ll come by owl
A letter just for me
Is this really happening?
‘Cause it feels just like a dream

Chorus

We can do magic
Can do magic (x2)
Can do magic
If we stand together
Stand together (x2)

This song offers insight into a canonic moment, much like some fan fiction stories. In her music video for the song, Fairweather could have cast a young girl and boy to play Lily and Severus and staged the song as an extension of the novel. Instead, she focuses the video on a young girl and two teens. The young girl has parents who are constantly fighting, and she finds solace from domestic strife in the Harry Potter novels. The teen boy and girl are ostracized and bullied at school, but find friendship with others who also love the books. The video takes the hook line of the song and makes it about the Harry Potter fans to whom the novels are no mere escapism but a means of finding community.66

Fairweather’s involvement in wizard rock jibes well with the community’s rhetoric. She grew up in a musical family, taking piano lessons and singing in school choirs. Music

66 “‘It's Real For Us’ Official Music Video | @laurenfairwx,” directed by Amorae Daylett, YouTube video, 3:28, posted by Lauren Fairweather, September 22, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-rSxKDxLjYQ.
performance was treated as an extracurricular activity but not a viable career option. An active online participant in the *Harry Potter* fandom through high school, she first discovered Harry and the Potters in 2004. She immediately wanted to start a wizard rock band, and though she began to write her own songs, did not feel like she had adequate skills to accompany herself. A year later, she brought her friend Nina Jankowicz, a skilled piano player, to a Harry and the Potters concert, hoping to convert her to wizard rock. Jankowicz agreed after the concert, and they officially started The Moaning Myrtles in 2006.

They wrote their first song, created a MySpace page, and posted it. They were one of a handful of bands that ignited the first wave of wizard rock bands beyond the Northeast trio, the Remus Lupins, and the Parselmouths. Soon, the friend requests and pleas for more songs inundated their page’s inbox. Once they posted more songs, the requests for them to play live shows came in. Transitioning to live shows connected them with other wizard rockers including the DeGeorges, Maggiacomo, Ross, Mehlenbacher, and Carpenter. After a few years, Jankowicz moved on from the band to work on her own projects, and during that transition, Fairweather taught herself acoustic guitar so she could play their material on her own and build up a solo repertoire. Currently, Fairweather plays wizard rock shows under her own name, maintains a music and crafts channel on YouTube, and has an active Etsy shop where she sells her crafts and other merchandise.

Fairweather’s journey in the *Harry Potter* fandom is one that testifies to all the positive aspects of wizard rock. Through wizard rock, she cultivated a hobby into a career. She learned the craft of songwriting, how to play guitar, how to record and distribute music, perform live, and tour. She started as an amateur and became a professional. The career trajectory impacted her personal life in profound ways, giving her the confidence to try new things and connect with
others in the fandom. It was also through wizard rock that she met Maggiacono: they dated for several years before marrying in 2011.

As seen in Fairweather’s history with wizard rock, what was most validating for many of the scene’s burgeoning musicians was how it gave them the chance to pursue something that was all their own. Going to live concerts was an important aspect of solidifying the community, but the online aspect of the movement was essential for many in fashioning their personal identities. In the Schuyler’s documentary, Grace Kendall noted that her parents and friends did not know about the music she had been writing and recording in her room for years. She said, “I [knew] people would make fun of it, so I kept quiet. But online, people have been great. But it amazes me . . . they’re singing this in the middle of some other state. Somebody’s singing something I wrote, and that’s an amazing feeling.”

The online wizard rock group fostered an environment where teenagers could craft an identity independent of many of the forces that controlled their “real” lives such as family, school, politics, and religion. It also allowed them to bring their own musical voices to the scene. Fairweather pointed out, “There were a lot of bands for a while who said, ‘Nobody else is doing this, so I’m going to try!’” She mentioned that she played recently with a band called the Penelope Clearwater Revival, which was formed by Iris Clawson-Davis to fill the country rock gap in the scene. “. . . It's a community where there are so many different genres within it that people feel encouraged to try and figure out where their little pocket is, where their little niche is, to try and take an old idea and put a spin on it. It's a challenge, for sure, to see what's missing. Where do you stand out? What are you known for in this community?” Whether it was a specific character’s perspective from which you wanted to write, a musical sound, a social justice

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68 Fairweather, personal interview.
cause for which you wanted to raise awareness, the desire to write songs or play an instrument, or an interest in finding others who share your love for *Harry Potter* and humorous music—wizard rock offered space to explore.

**Real vs. Ideal: Tensions in the Wizard Rock Community**

In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* (1998), Hogwarts headmaster Albus Dumbledore responds emotionally to a cacophonous, polyphonic rendition of the school’s anthem. “‘Ah, music,’ he said, wiping his eyes. ‘A magic beyond all we do here.’” Wizard rockers frequently invoke this quote because it hints at an important metaphoric transfer that happens in their community. Though fiction, the *Harry Potter* novels open a magical world for them to explore. Music is the gateway for them to experience that magic in their real lives.

Wizard rockers’ claims about their community, especially the importance of experiencing the music live, echo Christopher Small’s argument that musical performances are ritualized spaces: he defines the term “ritual,” not as “any action that been repeated so many times that it has lost any meaning it may once have possessed,” but as “patterns of gesture by means of which people articulate their concepts of how the relationships of their world are structured, and thus of how humans ought to relate to one another . . . . [R]ituals are used both as an act of affirmation of community (‘This is who we are’), as an act of exploration (to try on identities to see who we think we are), and as an act of celebration (to rejoice in the knowledge of an identity not only

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possessed but also shared with others).” Drawing on the work of Clifford Geertz, Small argues that “when we take part in a ritual act ‘the lived-in order merges with the dreamed-of order.'”

This fusion of the imagined order and the real order occurs on three horizons in wizard rock: the fiction of the novels meeting the reality of their lives, the solitary reading experience made communal, and the virtual online community made face-to-face. The celebration that Small notes is a vital part of wizard rock performances. Because of this, though, critiquing the books has never been an active part of wizard rock. While other *Harry Potter* fans have used fiction and poetry as forms of critique, wizard rockers generally have not. When making political or social commentary, wizard rockers have directed their energies outward rather than inward.

Wizard rock performance spaces, as fusions of the imagined (“the dreamed-of order”) and the real (“the lived-in order”), have remained sacred. The literature and documentaries produced by the community, the features written about it by the popular press, and much of the academic literature focuses on and marvels at the moments when the real and imagined align.

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72 See Catherine Tosenberger, “Homosexuality at the Online Hogwarts: Harry Potter Slash Fanfiction,” *Children’s Literature* 36 (2008), 185–207. Slash fan fiction has received significant attention within fan studies. For key pieces of literature, see Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, eds., *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader* (Iowa City; University of Iowa Press, 2014), 75–130.
74 If a song critiques the books, it is usually in a tongue-in-cheek manner. See Harry and the Potters, “The Economics of the Wizarding World Don’t Make Sense,” YouTube video, 2:04, posted by “chinareds54,” https://youtu.be/Vzl-cOj4sRk?t=7m41s.
Yet it is also worth exploring when these two orders do not align, inside and outside of performance spaces.

For example, when the DeGeorges and other notable musicians in the community wander through the audience when not performing, this is supposed to exemplify that they are equal with their fans, that they too are just fans of wizard rock and *Harry Potter*. Admittedly, I experienced a thrill when I ran into Joe DeGeorge in the LeakyCon audience and he gave me a smile and a thumbs-up. However, the embrace of this community ideal—that all wizard rockers are equal—is predicated on the DeGeorges’ status in the community. It is not that wizard rock audiences are raised to the level of the musicians; it is that the musicians descend, thus simultaneously contradicting and proving the existence of a hierarchy in the community.

The community leaders with whom I spoke—Joe DeGeorge, Matt Maggiacomo, Lauren Fairweather, Bradley Mehlenbacher, Brian Ross, and Stephanie Anderson—emphasized this discourse of equality. Notably, it was wizard rock fans who first articulated the tier system. In her Master’s thesis, “Identity, Rhetoric, and the Contradictory Communities of Wizard Rock,” musicologist Kelli Rohlman noted and adopted the language of the tier system in her work. She conducted fieldwork from 2009 to 2010 when the wizard rock scene was, unbeknownst to her and her subjects, at its height. Using an approach that was primarily phenomenological, Rohlman drew on her own experiences in the community and those of high profile bands, lower profile bands, and fellow fans. She analyzed the community along intersections where its behavior contradicted its rhetoric—the tier system being a prime example at the heart of the community.75

The tier system—a hierarchical categorization of wizard rock bands—developed among wizard rock fans and lesser known bands. Members of the community placed original bands like

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Harry and the Potters and the Remus Lupins in the top tier, along with more professional-sounding bands like Ministry of Magic, the Mudbloods, the Moaning Myrtles, and Tonks and the Aurors. Top-tier bands were marked by their number of MySpace friends and the frequency with which they were featured on tours, convention line-ups, and compilation albums. These bands did not struggle to draw an audience for their concerts and albums, and their fans took care of much of their marketing and publicity. By comparison, second-tier bands were featured less in the scene’s public events and album releases. They often had smaller audiences than the top-tier bands. They were not as popular because they did not have the means to tour and perform live. Less time in front of audiences impeded efforts to build their own base and participate in ritualized spaces as performers.

As the largest of the three categories and the entry point for new bands, the third tier included bands with a wide range of musical, performative, and marketing experience. These bands struggled for recognition and most existed only on MySpace. Many of the musicians involved with such bands were new to writing, recording, and performing music. Depending on their level of professionalism and polish in recording and performance, some bands could move up through the tier system, but this was a rare occurrence.\(^\text{76}\)

Rohlman wrote, “Criteria for which band lives on which tier is based almost entirely on their community fame, not musical skill, production quality, or intended effort.”\(^\text{77}\) While this claim was based on impression rather than concrete data, her own survey results supported it. Additionally, her experiences interacting with lower tier bands confirmed that the effort put into production, marketing, and performance rarely led to community fame. I argue, though, that

\(^{76}\) Ibid., 23–25
\(^{77}\) Ibid., 24.
Rohlman underestimated the role that prior musical training or skill, production and marketing experience, and networking played in launching bands into the top tier and keeping them there. All the original wizard rock bands had some musical training and played in bands prior to forming their wizard rock bands. Paul and Joe DeGeorge played in several of their own bands in high school and college before playing as Harry and the Potters. Maggiacomo played and toured with bands throughout college; plus, “wizard rock” as a collection of concept bands was borne of the independent band network he spearheaded in the greater Rhode Island area. Alex Carpenter was a Los Angeles-based musician with family in the entertainment industry. Unlike many second and third tier bands, wizard rock was not their first foray into music performance. These musicians may have started wizard rock jokingly, but as soon as they realized the concept had momentum, they put their prior training to use.

Closely linked with musical experience are the original bands’ experiences with production and marketing. The adoption of *Harry Potter*-inspired personae was not just a silly, fun thing to do, nor simply “cosplay,” but a means of branding. They also knew that making even a partial living through music required more than ticket and recording sales. It also required merchandise, such as T-shirts and accessories, to turn fans into brand emissaries.

Other top wizard rockers had experience in the commercial music industry before crossing over to wizard rock. Three members of Ministry of Magic—Mark Jennings, Jason Munday, and Aaron Nordyke—were formerly part of the Christian rock group 38th Parallel. As part of this band, they toured nationwide with other Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) groups, received extensive airplay on CCM stations, and were nominated for the Rock Album of the Year Dove Award, the CCM equivalent to the Grammy Award, in 2003. They disbanded in 2006. Two years later, Jennings, Munday, and Nordyke joined Jennings’ brother Jeremy, Ryan
Seiler, and Luke Conard to form Ministry of Magic. Their former experiences as a commercial group gave them an advantage in terms of music production and marketing in the wizard rock scene. The professional quality of their sound and videos, as well as their handsome looks, quickly gained them followers.

Lastly, networking within the wizard rock community played an important role in the formation of the tier system. Wizard rock’s early expansion owes much to the networking efforts of Matt Maggiacomo. Without his house concert series, wizard rock would not have branched out beyond Harry and the Potters. Once wizard rock started to gain online momentum, Maggiacomo often sought out new talent through MySpace, and his quiet patronage frequently moved these bands into the top tier. In my separate interviews with Stephanie Anderson and Adam Dubberly of the Mudbloods, both attributed to Maggiacomo that access to live concerts and connections with the wizard rock community.

If a new wizard rock musician already had musical training and a good sound, the next step was to connect in some capacity to one or more of the original bands: Harry and the Potters, Draco and the Malfoys, the Whomping Willows, and the Remus Lupins. They were the main faces and gatekeepers of the scene. I suspect that Lena Gabrielle of the Butterbeer Experience, whose interview with Rob Yoho cements his argument about *communitas* in wizard rock, owes much of her community success to these bands too. In the interview with Yoho, she mentions that her start in wizard rock came when she won a talent competition at a Toronto fan convention in 2007. Incidentally, all four of the original bands were present at that convention. It is likely that she made the necessary connections there, which allowed her to tour with the Moaning Myrtles and the Parselmouths in 2008.\(^{78}\)

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\(^{78}\) Yoho, 224.
It should be noted that the top tier was predominantly male. The Moaning Myrtles, the Parselmouths, Tonks and the Aurors, and the Butterbeer Experience were (and still are) notable exceptions, but men primarily served as the “Big Name Fans” and gatekeepers of the scene. Perhaps, this can be attributed to all the founding bands being male, or to the more commercial approach that they took towards branding, merchandise, and music distribution. This gendered dynamic, like the tier system with which it was interlaced, was often downplayed by male and female community leaders. However, in prioritizing the appearance of equality, it laid the groundwork for the abuses committed by Alex Carpenter, Luke Conard, and others against young female participants. I address wizard rock’s gender dynamic and these abuses of power with greater detail in Chapter Four.

The top tier’s network also extended beyond the music scene. The DeGeorges and Maggiacomo worked closely with Andrew Slack as the HPA grew, with Paul DeGeorge and Maggiacomo both serving on the board of directors and individual terms as Executive Director. Melissa Anelli was and continues to be an important, influential connection. By the time she and the DeGeorges met in 2006, Anelli was already a “Big Name Fan” in the Harry Potter fandom because of her work as the webmistress of the Leaky Cauldron. She later toured with Harry and the Potters in 2007 and live-recorded several episodes of the Leaky Cauldron’s podcast while traveling with the band, experiences she recounts in Harry, A History.

The Leaky Cauldron served as a firm connection between the wizard rock scene and the larger Harry Potter fandom. Anelli has since formed the event planning company Mischief Management with Stephanie Dornhelm; with a small staff based in Brooklyn, New York, they produce fan conventions: the Harry Potter-specific LeakyCon, the multifandom GeekyCon, the musical theatre-centric BroadwayCon, and the Game of Thrones-themed Con of Thrones.
Mischief Management serves as the link between wizard rock, the *Harry Potter* fan community, YouTube entrepreneurs Hank and John Green, and the Nerdfighter community (the Greens’ extensive, young fan base). Even as many wizard rock bands have fallen to the wayside, several of the top-tier bands continue to perform live at Mischief Management conventions and VidCon, the annual online video convention organized by the Green brothers.

At wizard rock’s height, the use of the tier system only increased among wizard rock fans, much to the dismay of the parent bands. Leaders adamantly insisted on public forums that a hierarchy did not exist, because all participants were just fans of *Harry Potter* at the end of day. This rhetoric frequently clinched arguments about inequality in the community. There was an element of truth to this claim. Neither wizard rock bands or fans would exist if it were not for the *Harry Potter* books, and discontents could hardly argue against it. In forums where they couldn’t control the flow of the conversation or stop others from referring to the tier system, members of the parent bands would mock and undermine it. In one such online parlay, Maggiacomo jokingly wrote, “Brian’s a tool!” to which Ross responded, “Get off my tier!”

The reinforcement of the equality rhetoric or the mockery of the tier system was never malevolently intended. After all, nothing in the bands’ own experiences affirmed the tier system, and they actively used their influence to bring attention to other lesser-known bands. Rohlman writes, “As originating, Top-Tier musicians, there should not be a reason why they would not be able to behave, at least publicly, according to the [community’s] rhetoric.”

Wizard rockers also emphasized community members’ individuality and self-determination. Gabrielle, in her interview with Yoho, and Dubberly, in his interview with me,

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both mentioned that they started writing songs about *Harry Potter* because they thought no one else was doing it. Alex Carpenter, too, started writing songs without knowing about the work of the DeGeorges, Maggiacomo, Ross, and Mehlenbacher. Even when other musicians formed new bands while fully aware of the scene, they cited wanting to write from the perspective of a character who did not have a band yet, or in a musical style that the community was lacking. If successful enough to make it into the top tier, they attributed it to wizard rock fans simply liking the character perspective or musical style that they chose. The unspoken idea lurking behind this discourse was that if a band remained in the second or third tier, it was because they weren’t working hard enough.

Whatever their intentions, the top bands’ refusal to acknowledge the tier system held enormous weight in the community because of their status, and ultimately worked to still or silence disagreement in the community. Furthermore, because of the way they talked about it, one would think the tier system was merely arbitrary or a popularity test, though it manifested in concrete ways in the community’s output. For example, *Wizrocklopedia* ran the Wizard Rock People’s Choice Awards from 2007 to 2010. Each year, the list of nominees was dominated by the same bands: Harry and the Potters, the Remus Lupins, Draco and the Malfoys, the Whomping Willows, the Moaning Myrtles, Ministry of Magic, Oliver Boyd and the Remembralls, the Mudbloods, the Hungarian Horntails, and the Parselmouths. Occasionally, other bands appeared in the Best New Artist or Best Band You’re Not Listening To categories or in genre-specific awards like Best Metal, Best Rap, or Best Instrumental.\textsuperscript{80} Frequent award winners were also guaranteed to appear on wizard rock compilation albums, tour, and on the

mainstage at *Harry Potter* fan conventions and festivals like WrockStock. Even though some top-tier musicians would use their MySpace Top Eight lists to give exposure to other bands, wizard rock fans, in contrast, used their lists to prove that they were “in the know” about the popular bands. The tier system was self-perpetuating, providing positive feedback for the top tier and negative feedback for the second and third tiers.

On the one hand, the tier system was vital to the sustenance of the scene. It allowed certain musicians to become influencers in the community and set up a microeconomy within the scene. It was through these influencers that wizard rock attracted attention from the larger entertainment industry in the late 2000s, and it was because of the initiative they took that wizard rock had a significant online presence, exclusive radio stations, blogs, conventions, and festivals. On the other hand, when combined with the highly idealistic discourses of the community, the tier system hindered the scene from developing a healthy space for criticism. If anyone dared to critique them, they would find themselves under attack, not only by the offended bands but their fans too.

This is perhaps best seen in the blog and personal experiences of the Wrock Snob.⁸¹ The Wrock Snob first discovered wizard rock in 2006 and became an avid fan of the Remus Lupins and Ministry of Magic. In 2008, they started their own band, Dawlish and the Archies. They also worked to network with talented lesser known bands and used their MySpace page to promote them along with the top-tier bands. It was in this work, however, that the inbuilt inequalities of the community started to frustrate the Wrock Snob.

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⁸¹ At their request, I am keeping the identity of the Wrock Snob anonymous as they do not identify fully with their given name. I use the neutral pronouns they/them/their. When they first got involved in wizard rock, the Wrock Snob identified as a straight cisgender male but currently identifies as gender fluid.
The top-tier bands on tour talked constantly about the family-like nature of the scene, yet countless small bands were overlooked, especially during awards seasons. Their dissatisfaction peaked in 2010 when Ministry of Magic released their third album, *Onward and Upward*, which, in the Wrock Snob’s opinion, was a much weaker album than their previous releases. Despite this, wizard rock fans raved about the album, and shortly after, Ministry of Magic and *Onward and Upward* swept several of the 2010 Wizard Rock People’s Choice Awards including Best Album and Band of the Year. The Wrock Snob was flummoxed. In response, they started a blog whose first post was a scathing, sarcasm-ridden review of *Onward and Upward*. They notified a few friends in the news scene through Twitter, thinking that it would help to air the opinion. To their surprise, the blog post went viral overnight; the negative critique of one the scene’s most popular bands was new and incendiary, and its repost on *Wizrocklopedia* became the most commented-on post the site had had to date. The Wrock Snob realized that the community was lacking a critical perspective and continued to write anonymous provocative reviews of releases by popular bands including the Remus Lupins. The reviews tended to have controversial titles but attempted to recognize the good and bad aspects of each album.

The Wrock Snob’s online notoriety continued to grow in the months leading up to Wrockstock 2010. They became embroiled in a few Twitter fights, and Alex Carpenter released a song and music video that was not-so-subtly about the Wrock Snob.⁸² For the Wrock Snob, WrockStock 2010 was a weekend of both positive and negative experiences. They played a small set as Dawlish and the Archies and won an award for Best Dancing. They also met Alex Carpenter and members of Ministry of Magic in person for the first time; upon learning the identity of the Wrock Snob, Carpenter and the other band berated and bullied them. Other people

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who witnessed the confrontations did not intervene. Despite these negative experiences, the
Wrock Snob continued to use their blog as a site for critical, frequently sarcastic commentary on
wizard rock. Leaders in the community participated in the comments spaces on the blog, which
became a contested space for the discourses of the community where differing opinions had
more space to be expressed. Unfortunately, the Wrock Snob’s blog was one of the only voices
offering written criticism of the scene apart from occasional debates held on Wizrocklopedia.

In recounting their experiences to me, the Wrock Snob did not indict all the top-tier
bands. The DeGeorges and Maggiacomo, for example, supported the Wrock Snob’s work and
welcomed much of the criticism offered; Joe DeGeorge, in our interview, mentioned them as one
of the historians of the community. The Wrock Snob was also friends with Rohlman and worked
with her as she conducted her master’s research. Then again, Wrock Snob and Rohlman were the
scene’s only participant critics. Absent criticism to balance out the idealism and motivate
changes, the scene’s infrastructure proved weak once the *Harry Potter* franchise’s moment
waned.

**The Decline of Wizard Rock**

The *Harry Potter* book and film franchise effectively ended with the film release of
*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part Two*, in the summer of 2011. Anticipation of book
and film releases fueled much of the fandom’s online activity, and the end of the film franchise
caused many fans to turn their attention to other emerging franchises like *The Hunger Games*
slowed significantly on the fandom’s general websites and wizard rock specific sites like
Wizrocklopedia. Many top-tier bands retired or stopped actively touring.
In early 2012, MySpace underwent significant rebranding, and over the course of the year, musician pages lost all their connections and the music they had posted. Though the platform encouraged artists to start fresh, even mainstream artists like Justin Timberlake and Britney Spears had trouble translating their former MySpace “friends” into “connections.” Wizard rockers found their profile pages emptied of content, and many second- and third-tier bands chose not to recreate their pages, especially as they began to migrate away from the *Harry Potter* fandom. Some top-tier musicians like Carpenter, Lauren Fairweather, and Ministry of Magic, shifted their online presence to YouTube and converted their MySpace friends into subscribers.

MySpace’s rebranding also dissolved wizard rock’s group page, which had served as the networking locus and music archive of the virtual community. Top-tier musicians who chose not to move to YouTube fell back on other platforms like Tumblr, Facebook, and Twitter, as well as email lists to maintain contact with their audiences. Without MySpace, though, wizard rock audiences were decentralized, with each form of communication requiring great effort and no guarantee that fans would be reached with the same efficacy that the old MySpace group had provided.

With the seeming end of the *Harry Potter* franchise and the dissolution of MySpace Music, activity within the scene slowed to a trickle between 2012 and 2014. Bands dissolved at a much higher rate than new ones formed. Many musicians chose to, in Adam Dubberly’s words,

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“grow up.” They finished college, married, had kids, and settled down. A handful of the top-tier bands continued to perform semi-regularly: Harry and the Potters reunited a few times a year to perform at VidCon, LeakyCon, and the Yule Balls. Draco and the Malfoys and the Whomping Willows each released new albums in 2014 and performed at conventions. Tonks and the Aurors toured over the summers. The sparsity of wizard rock events led many to declare the scene dead and write “in memoriam” blog posts.

That the wizard rock scene lulled is not unusual. Music scenes come and go. As a predominantly youth-led music movement, even the most active participants were bound to move on as they aged. With community leaders emphasizing wizard rock’s idealism and minimizing the less-than-ideal experiences of the lower-tier bands, the scene did not develop an internal support system independent of MySpace; when MySpace dissolved, the wizard rock scene swiftly followed.

The Purpose of the Rhetoric and Hints of a Second Wave

I conducted my research and interviews during the summer of 2014, when wizard rock was at perhaps its lowest point since it began. The musicians with whom I spoke acutely understood that the community, despite all its idealism, had failed many of its members, as evidenced by the ebb of scene activity and the abuse allegations against several prominent musicians in the spring of 2014. Yet, if anything, my interviewees doubled down on the utopian descriptions of the community. The question is, why?

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84 Adam Dubberly, personal interview, August 2, 2014.
From a phenomenological perspective, they spoke with conviction about their own experiences. Of all the participants in the wizard rock scene, members of the top tier experienced the best of the community—the friendship and collaboration of fellow musicians, the adoration of fans, and the commercial success that comes with cultivating a niche audience. The language they used was not empty rhetoric: it was their lived experience. Their experiences, however, were not the same as those lived by second- and third-tier bands, and so their words rang hollow when they claimed to speak for the community at large.

I find that the reinforcement and continuous statements of wizard rock’s idealism has gained a new purpose—a teleological one. The discourses, while still reflecting these top-tier bands’ past experiences, also serve to remind themselves and others about what inspired the music in the first place: the lessons of bravery, loyalty, friendship, and acceptance embedded in the *Harry Potter* stories. The bands that have continued to play, even as the scene has flagged, see themselves as keeping wizard rock alive until other bands choose to return. Stephanie Anderson stated, “I’m seeing people who, five years ago, were in this and then left, had kids, or they graduated from college, and now they’re coming back . . . . They’re bringing their kids, they’re settled down, and now they’re able to do stuff. It’s one of those things where, as people leave, there’s [also] going to be [many] people coming back once it fits into their lives again.”

Though Anderson’s statement seemed naively optimistic in 2014, there has, in fact, been a slight resurgence of wizard rock activity since 2016. Following Adam Dubberly’s return at LeakyCon 2014 and his archiving of the Mudbloods’ albums on Bandcamp, the full band reunited at LeakyCon 2016; the Parselmouths also reunited. Ashley Hamel, formerly of Bella and Le Strangers, performed at the 2015 and 2016 Yule Balls in Brooklyn. Most recently, Stacy

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86 Stephanie Anderson, personal interview, August 3, 2014.
and John Pisani have returned to performing live as Swish and Flick, as has Lena Gabrielle and
the Butterbeer Experience. Lauren Fairweather, Matt Maggiacomo, and Kristina Horner have
also formed a new band called Flying Colors.

Two factors have contributed to this resumption of wizard rock. For one, Rowling and
her collaborators have released several new works tied to the Harry Potter franchise. The two-
part dramatic sequel to the novels, Harry Potter and the Cursed Child, opened in London’s West
End in the summer of 2016. After much petitioning on the part of her readers, Rowling allowed
the plays’ scripts to be published. The plays are currently being cast in New York City and are
slated to open on Broadway in 2018. The film Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them, a
prequel to the novels rather than a strict adaptation of the companion encyclopedia, was released
in the fall of 2016. Its commercial success has guaranteed it four sequels. These new properties
have reignited a love of Harry Potter for Rowling’s original readers, many who are grown and
now have kids of their own to whom they are introducing the series.

The second, more important reason for the increase of wizard rock has been the
presidential campaign and subsequent election of Donald Trump. The populist conservatism
championed by Trump in his campaign was rife with anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, homophobic,
and anti-feminist rhetoric. Trump’s “America First” economic and foreign policies instantly
reminded many Harry Potter fans of Voldemort’s tactics when he conquered the wizarding
world in Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince. News sources made explicit parallels between
Trump and Voldemort during the campaign. In fact, the BBC published an article titled “Why
people are calling American businessman Donald Trump Voldemort;”

Rowling retweeted the BBC’s article link with the annotation, “How horrible. Voldemort was nowhere near as bad.”

The similarities between Donald Trump and Lord Voldemort have even been tested by a sociological study. Political scientist Diana C. Mutz hypothesized that people reading the *Harry Potter* novels or watching their film adaptations were more likely to disapprove of Trump and his policies. The first part of her research surveyed 1,142 individuals on how many *Harry Potter* novels or films they had consumed; participants varied in age, gender, and political affiliation. To test reactions to Trump’s then candidacy, she queried the same participants’ on their tolerance of outsider groups (most notably, Muslims and people who identify along the LGBTQ+ spectrum); their attitudes on torture, treatment of terrorists, and the death penalty; and, in the 2016 sampling, their general impressions of Trump. Two analyses of her data proved that *Harry Potter* readers (as opposed to the participants who had only watched the films) had higher opinions of outsider groups, were more likely to oppose harsh retributive policies, and had more negative feelings towards Trump and other authoritarian figures. Factoring in issues of self-selection, her study statistically proved that *Harry Potter* readers were more likely to oppose Trump than participants who had only seen the films.

Trump’s 2016 election reignited political grassroots activity in the *Harry Potter* fan community. The HPA—whose leaders still include Anelli, Maggiacomo, and Paul DeGeorge—started a campaign called #NevilleFightsBack, named after minor character Neville Longbottom.

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and the other members of Dumbledore’s Army who resisted Voldemort while Harry, Ron, and Hermione were on a separate mission in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. This campaign encouraged HPA members to call and write to their congressional representatives on issues concerning minority rights, gay and transgender rights, and healthcare. Given the significant leadership overlap between the HPA and the wizard rock scene, I argue that the swing towards a populist conservatism in America has refocused the work of the HPA, and consequently, the moral telos of the wizard rock scene.

Significantly, the political songs that were gradually phased out of wizard rock set lists after Barack Obama became president are now starting to return. Harry and the Potters brought “Cornelius Fudge is an Ass” out of retirement at a concert held days after Trump won the Republican Party nomination and at LeakyCon the following fall. The LeakyCon performance included an adjusted lyric. Where the original song said, “You can convince yourself that the Daily Prophet has a clue, but I think you’re a whole lot closer to Fox News,” the 2016 version replaced “Fox News” with “Breitbart.” Paul DeGeorge, speaking to Morales about how recent political events have changed the brothers’ approach to music, mused, “I think it’s time for our shows to be less goofy . . . and a lot more ‘it’s time to fight!’”

The DeGeorges are not alone in funneling their political frustration into reenergizing the resistant edge of wizard rock. In addition to the bands who have returned to performing live, existing bands are reconnecting and forming a new infrastructure for the community. In October 2016, Stephanie Anderson launched the #YesAllWitches microscholarship program to fund women and minorities in creating new wizard rock.³⁰ Brian Ross and the DeGeorges each led workshops for aspiring songwriters at Boston’s NerdFighteria 2017. Ross hosts quarterly house

shows in Rhode Island with a concentrated effort to focus on new bands. With regards to online activity, a new network—comprised of websites, Twitter and Tumblr feeds, and Facebook pages—is gradually forming. Wizrocklopedia, which stopped posting in December 2014, returned in September 2016 with a new domain and a project to host an archive. A relatively new blog called Your Wizard Rock Resource appeared towards the end of 2015 and has served as an invaluable resource for lyrics, albums, compilations, and links to sites where one can listen to and buy music. For all the political and cultural upheaval that 2016 presented, it has rekindled a scene whose practices and community structures are better reflecting its idealistic discourses.

It remains to be seen how much of a renaissance there will be in wizard rock. Even as this chapter is being written and edited, the scene is regaining momentum, though it is unlikely to achieve the same magnitude it had from 2007 to 2011, in part because of the decentralized nature of social media. Wizard rock musicians are starting to collaborate and perform more with YouTube musicians like the Gregory Brothers, Meghan Tonjes, and Jon Cozart, as well as other nerd rock bands like H2Awesome and Blue Milk Run.

Inspired by the straight edge punk bands and DIY culture of the 1980s and 1990s, wizard rock arose at an important historical moment, when Millennial readers claimed a cultural text of their own and became the first fans to actively use the Internet to connect. Early social media platforms like LiveJournal and MySpace Music allowed the first wizard rockers to find an audience and inspire a DIY music movement that was not constrained to any one geographic location. Community in the early days of social media became defined by both virtual and face-to-face interaction. Virtual interactions outweighed face-to-face interactions, but the latter, experienced at live performances, was more important in defining the community’s identity and spirit. Like the filk community, wizard rockers ranged from first-time musicians to more
professional-sounding bands. However, because of the ease of online distribution and branding, wizard rock was more commercial and more professional with regards to recordings and performances. The more commercial and professional wizard rockers, as well as more developed new media platforms, lay the groundwork for future musical activity in media fandom.

The following chapter explores YouTube as a site for participatory media fan musicking through an investigation of fan-created musicals. The video-sharing platform has allowed fan creators to reap significant profit from their viewers. Yet, the language that they use to describe their activity and interactions with their viewers is not all that different from the language used in the filk and wizard rock communities, thus highlighting different facets of the tensions between fan practice and discourse.
The lights dim in the theatre. The low strings in the pit orchestra bite out two sixteenth notes, followed by a fermata sustain on the same pitch. The piano responds in the minor with rolling arpeggios while the violin sings out a melody on top. Center stage in a tight spotlight, actress Meredith Stepien, dressed in vaguely Middle Eastern garb and a fez, sets the scene, weaving the story of a magic kingdom that, once prosperous, has fallen on dark times because of an evil and negligent sultan. At her line “The happiest place on Earth became the crappiest place on Earth,” the audience laughs loudly.

Stepien, as the yet-unnamed narrator, introduces the central character, a misunderstood royal vizier who dreams of restoring the kingdom and bringing about another golden age. At the narrator’s upstage gesture, Dylan Saunders, costumed as Jafar from Disney’s Aladdin (1992), lowers the book he is holding—Gregory Maguire’s novel Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West (2000)—and steps downstage with a smile on his face. Despite the decrepitude of the city around him, he sings optimistically that this day might be the day that he can make a difference. Spreading his arms wide and imagining the possibilities, he sings, “. . . and all the grateful citizens will say to me . . .” as the orchestra supports his line with a hopeful half cadence.

The stage lights up in a warm wash as the ensemble walks out from both wings. “Fuck you! Fuck you! Fuck you! Fuck you! Fuck you!” comes the barrage of responses in the exact rhythm of the villagers’ “Bonjour” in “Belle,” Alan Menken’s opening number for Disney’s Beauty and the Beast (1991). In the first two minutes of the musical, the prologue has set up the fact that this show is parodying several Disney animated film musicals, both in terms of music
and plot, and using *Wicked*’s inverted narrative structure that transforms the original story’s villain into a hero.

In describing these opening moments of Team StarKid’s *Twisted: The Untold Story of a Royal Vizier* (2013), I’m not writing from memory. I am watching (and rewatching) the production on YouTube in the comfort of my apartment building’s lounge. This musical was performed live in Chicago in July 2013. The company filmed several of the performances and edited them into a film that they uploaded to their YouTube channel in November 2013.

This was not the first fannish musical to cross my social media feeds. I had first heard about Team StarKid because of their full-length, comedy musical *A Very Potter Musical* (2009). In the last several months, I have also seen short film musicals by a YouTube channel called AVbyte popping up on my Facebook and Twitter feeds. The latter team’s “Sherlock – the Musical” was the first one I clicked through because I loved the BBC show. As I started to explore the work of these two teams, why they became popular was clear: the writing and performances were amusing and showed that the authors and performers were knowledgeable about the media texts they were parodying. The music was catchy and good; they featured actors of professional caliber. Most notably, I could easily access all their works on YouTube.

This chapter investigates the production teams of Team StarKid and AVbyte and their impact on participatory fan musicking. Combining the stage and film musical with parodic interpretations of popular media texts and using YouTube for distribution, these creative teams represent one of the latest developments in media fan musicking. I first present a brief history of online video, its relationship to participatory fan culture, and the development of the new media musical. I then turn to the individual histories of Team StarKid and AVbyte, with special foci on Team StarKid’s *Twisted* and AVbyte’s “Bronies – The Musical” (2014) and “Fandoms – The
Musical” (2014). Using interviews conducted with key members of Team StarKid and AVbyte, I argue that these musical content producers celebrate the participatory, democratic discourses found in media fandom in and outside of their works, yet their respective rises in popularity in fandom, their micro-celebrity status in the community, and the ways in which they delimit fan participation in the musical process actively contradict these same discourses. More so than in the other communities studied in this dissertation, the discourses mask the power relationships at work. Deeper investigation into the YouTube communities of these two channels reveals the increased levels of hierachization and stratification in participatory media fandom—something that is less apparent in other online, creative fan communities. The study of these online video producers and their works brings into sharp relief the tension between the rise of a pseudo-professional artisan class in fandom and fan communities’ persistent use of utopian, egalitarian discourses. Through this work, I aim to move beyond the idyllic assumptions still granted to musical communities in fandom and fan scholarship, and explore the complex and often contrarian relationship between fan discourse and fan practice.

**YouTube and Participatory (Fan) Culture**

At once a source of streaming video and music, a research and educational tool, a social media platform, a grassroots distributor, an advertiser of mainstream corporate products and events, and a favorite means to procrastinate, YouTube has become a ubiquitous part of people’s everyday lives. Created in 2005 by Chad Hurley, Steve Chen, and Jawed Karim, it immediately garnered the attention of influential tech bloggers as a “site to watch.” In 2006, Google purchased it for 1.65 billion dollars. YouTube took several years to test identities and brand itself. Its designers initially positioned it as an archive for personal video, subtitling it as “Your Digital Video Repository.” However, as online video developed its own set of genres beyond
home videos and amusing animal videos, it came into its own through the newer branding of “Broadcast Yourself.” Since then, the site has left an indelible mark on the media landscape. In lists compiled by web analytic companies, it ranks consistently among the top five most-visited websites in the world.¹

Unlike other, more traditional media companies, YouTube is not a content producer: it is a content aggregator.² It collects content, serves as a distribution platform, and splits the advertisement revenue with its content creators. Thus, it sits in a new middle zone between independent producers and established, traditional media companies, functioning as a tool for both camps without being claimed entirely by either. Jean Burgess and Joshua Green argue that YouTube is a site of participatory culture and co-creation, where users approach the site “with their own purposes and aims and collectively shape [it] as a dynamic cultural system.”³ Compared to normative entertainment culture, where people fall into the fixed categories of producer and consumer, “participatory culture” sounds idyllic and politically exciting. It speaks to the treasured Western ideals of individualism, democracy, and populism, while also implying an element of resistance against capitalistic structures.

Henry Jenkins bucolically defines participatory culture as a space where “fans and other consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content.”⁴ The hierarchy that exists between producer and consumer is eliminated as consumers enter production spaces formerly closed off to them. This definition, when extended to YouTube, positions it as a site where everyday consumers, through participation and co-creation, can

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¹ Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2008), 1–4
² Ibid., 4.
³ Ibid., vii.
socially, culturally, or politically resist the various corporations that try to control their lives. However, rather than solely being a place of folk-like resistance where consumers are empowered, Burgess and Green note that YouTube is rife with discomfort, “as disruptive and uncomfortable as [it] might be potentially liberating.” Corporations struggle with their positions as participants in this landscape and loss of distribution control (a figurative step down in the hierarchy), while independent creators treat corporate participation as intrusive and suspicious. YouTube is many things to its many users, and thus its various uses and its meanings frequently conflict.

It seems natural that participatory fan culture would eagerly adopt YouTube. Fans historically have been early adopters of technology. Additionally, the descriptors surrounding YouTube and other Web 2.0 technologies significantly overlap with those of fandom: phrases like “non-hierarchal,” “democratic,” “open participation,” “user-friendly,” and “community” appeal to fans and Web 2.0 advocates alike. Platforms like LiveJournal, MySpace, Tumblr, and YouTube have brought fan communities, as well as many other niche communities, into the public eye. As Jenkins writes in his appendicular essay to Burgess and Green’s study, “YouTube has become the home port for lip-syncers, karaoke singers, trainspotters, birdwatchers, skateboarders, hip hoppers, small time wrestling federations, educators, third wave feminists, churches, proud parents, poetry slammers, gamers, fans, Ron Paul supporters, human rights activists, collectors, [and] hobbyists . . . ,” leading many to claim that the video-sharing site and its Web 2.0 cousins have paved the way for the rise of participatory culture. Certainly, they have granted these groups far more mainstream exposure, but participatory cultures existed long before such technologies were available—something to which numerous subculture and fan

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5 Burgess and Green, 10.
studies scholars and participants can attest. As Jenkins argues, perhaps the inverse is more true: that DIY and participatory fan cultures, with their pre-established networks and creative communities, paved the way for the quick adoption of YouTube and the other social media platforms. Or maybe, the truth lies in the grey zone between the two poles.

With this “greyness” in mind, I turn to the genre of online video at the heart of this chapter: the new media musical. Drawing on the traditions of the twentieth-century stage and film musical, the new media musical frequently parodies music-theatrical conventions by merging them with other entertainment genres or subjects that are typically not sung (or danced) about. These include villains, superheroes, video games, comic books, fans of various pop cultural phenomena, and social media. Some of these musicals are performed live, but all are filmed and uploaded to the Internet (typically YouTube, but other video sharing platforms like Vimeo and Hulu have been used). Thanks to the relative ease of embedding online video into other platforms, these musicals spread through pre-existing social network channels, online and person-to-person, to reach a wide audience.

Team StarKid and AVbyte trace their appeal to the prototypical Internet musical: Joss Whedon’s Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog (2008). It, too, developed in this contentious grey zone—neither fully corporate nor fully DIY, but a bit of both. Prior to its release, Whedon already ranked among media fandom’s most beloved auteurs with his television shows Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1997–2003), Angel (2000–2005), and Firefly (2002), as well as his work for Marvel Comics (The Astonishing X-Men, Runaways) and Dark Horse Comics (Fray, Tales of the Slayer, Buffy the Vampire Slayer Season Eight and Season Nine). Motivated by the concerns of the 2007–08 Writers’ Strike, Whedon wrote and produced this short, three-act musical with his brothers Zack and Jed Whedon and his sister-in-law, actress Maurissa Tancharoen. His chief
desire was to create something of his own, something that was professional, small, and relatively inexpensive. Most importantly, no network would interfere with its production. The cast included musical theatre actor and former Doogie Howser, M.D. star Neil Patrick Harris, Firefly and Buffy alumnus Nathan Fillion, and the actress and producer Felicia Day. They, along with the crew, worked on the promise, but no guarantee, of future pay.7

Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog tells the story of the video-blogging wanna-be villain Billy (codename Dr. Horrible), played by Harris. His strange moral code blends typical villainous acts (i.e., stealing gold out of a bank vault) and small acts of heroism (i.e., refusing to have a face-off with an enemy in a local park because children are present). He commits his crimes in the hopes of joining the Evil League of Evil; however, his plans are constantly thwarted by the handsome, strong, profoundly dense Captain Hammer, played by Fillion. The plot is further complicated by Billy’s unrequited love for Penny (Felicia Day), who falls in love with Captain Hammer in the first act.

Musically, the Whedons and Tancharoen mix and match different music-theatrical and pop-rock genres, from a whimsical foxtrot to a he-says-she-says pop duet to an intense, Stephen Sondheim-like patter song. The characters are aware that they are singing, which leads to many musical gags throughout the piece. Like Whedon’s prior work in the musical episode of Buffy the Vampire Slayer (“Once More With Feeling,” 2002), Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog revels in inverting the narrative and musical expectations of the genre.8 Though musicals tend to resolve

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in a utopic, community-oriented fashion, Whedon’s musical asks, “What does a happy ending look like for a good man whose ultimate goal is to be evil?”

Fans of Whedon were well aware of the musical’s production, as well as the statement that he was trying to make through it. When the team released the three acts of the musical over the course of six days on the Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog website in July 2008, traffic was so high that the website crashed. The musical was eventually made available for streaming on Hulu and for purchase on iTunes. The soundtrack reached the no. 2 spot on the iTunes USA chart, and the DVD also sold well once it was released in November 2008.9 Profits allowed Whedon to recoup his $200,000 investment and fully compensate his actors and crew.10 Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog—with its mixture of self-awareness, inversion of expectations, and DIY production (albeit by an established television director)—set the aesthetic and genre standards for the new media musical.

The success of Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog inspired many media fans to try and produce their own Internet musicals. Over the course of research for this dissertation, I saw many fan-made musical productions appear and subsequently disappear. Works like Hunger Games the Musical and Still Not British: The Doctor Who Musical crossed my social media feeds. Some went so far as to set up their own YouTube channels. Their producers were young, some still in high school, and I believe their projects lapsed because they underestimated the amount of work required to produce a musical, let alone set it up for mass distribution on the Internet. Thus,

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9 Leonard, 275.
Team StarKid and AVbyte are the only music-theatrical teams to successfully produce and distribute their work and gain traction within media fandom.\(^{11}\) The discourses of fandom and Web 2.0 video claim that anybody can create if they have a good idea, a camera, and access to the Internet, yet clearly, not everybody “makes it.” This begs the question: what allowed Team StarKid and AVbyte to succeed, artistically and commercially, when others couldn’t?

**Team StarKid**

Team StarKid had its start on the campus of the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. In 2008, founding members (and brothers) Matt and Nick Lang were in the theatre department and part of a student-run theatre organization called Basement Arts. A twenty-four-hour script challenge introduced them to a sophomore musical theatre major named A.J. Holmes, who wanted to be the first person to write a musical for this challenge. Matt Lang and Holmes teamed up and wrote the first draft of the show that became StarKid’s second official production, *Me and My Dick*.

Shortly after the twenty-four-hour challenge, the Langs invited Holmes to contribute music for a parody musical based on *Harry Potter*. Holmes split songwriting duties with Darren Criss, later of *Glee* fame, and the two wrote the music and lyrics. The Lang brothers penned the musical’s book with Brian Holden. Originally titled *Harry Potter: The Musical*, the piece was submitted to Basement Arts to be considered for part of the organization’s 2008–09 season. The show was accepted and given a $100 production budget.

\(^{11}\) There are other YouTube content producers in media fandom whose videos have an element of theatricality and have also gone viral, for example, Jon Cozart’s works. However, I do not address him in this chapter because his videos fall more into the one-man a cappella genre. See, Paint, “Star Wars in 99 Seconds,” YouTube video, 1:55, December 14, 2015, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=22mdHYEzKCO](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=22mdHYEzKCO); Paint, “After Ever After – DISNEY Parody,” YouTube video, 4:18, March 12, 2013, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=diU70KshcjA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=diU70KshcjA).
*Harry Potter: The Musical* was a far-from-faithful adaptation of Rowling’s novels. Pulling narrative elements from the first, fourth, sixth, and seventh novels of the series, the show freely played with Rowling’s creation. All characters were parodic distillations of their novel counterparts. Non-canonic elements pulled from online fan fiction stories (for example, Draco’s attraction to Hermione) were interpolated and put alongside canonic romantic relationships like that of Harry Potter and Ginny Weasley. Other purposefully ridiculous elements, like Pigfarts (a wizarding school on Mars), were added and celebrities from the real world were freely referenced. Songs were, for the most part, inconsequential to the story. They were inserted when characters were instructed to serenade each other or to heighten emotional moments. The music had a broad comedic purpose rather than a narrative one. The script stood on its own without the songs. This non-integrated relationship between book and music characterized *Harry Potter: The Musical* as well as the next five StarKid productions.

The show ran at the University of Michigan from April 9–11, 2009. A few cameras were set up to record each performance so that the cast and creative team could share it with friends and family who could not make it to campus. Wizard rocker and Basement Arts member Stephanie Anderson was in the audience on opening night. Anderson had already started to make a name for herself in the wizard rock scene beginning in 2007 as one of the few female wizard rockers to play electric guitar. By 2008, she was networked into the top tier of wizard rock musicians, touring with the likes of the Whomping Willows and Draco and the Malfoys. This association also connected her with other important people in fandom like convention organizer Melissa Anelli. Upon seeing *Harry Potter: The Musical*, Anderson knew that the larger *Harry Potter* fandom would love and share the musical if they saw it. She pushed the Langs for DVD
copies of the show, and as soon as they were made available, she sent them to Anelli.12 The DVDs were passed from person to person. When the Langs uploaded a version of the show onto YouTube, the video immediately gained traction in the Harry Potter fan community, and was shared through numerous blogs, websites, and Twitter and Tumblr feeds.

The creative team realized that Harry Potter: The Musical had an audience beyond their friends and families, so they took it off YouTube, polished up its production, and re-uploaded it in June 2009, naming their channel Team StarKid.13 They also changed the title of the show to A Very Potter Musical to avoid any accusations of copyright infringement. The video quickly went viral again because of the international reach of the Harry Potter fandom. A Very Potter Musical’s Internet success allowed Team StarKid to catch the attention of the mainstream entertainment industry, and the musical made it onto EW.com’s list of best viral videos of 2009.14

Through the next year, the Langs and their University of Michigan colleagues continued to produce shows through Basement Arts. The following fall, they returned to their twenty-four-hour musical challenge, Me and My Dick. The Langs, along with Brian Holden and Eric Kahn Gale, fleshed out the book. Holmes worked on the music and lyrics with Carlos Valdes and Darren Criss. When they released the cast album, it charted at no. 11 on the Billboard Top Cast Albums chart, the first student-produced college musical to do so. Me and My Dick gained the

12 Stephanie Anderson, personal interview, August 3, 2014.
13 “StarKid” is pulled from a moment in the musical’s book, where Draco Malfoy mocks Harry Potter’s celebrity, saying, “Oh, moon shoes Potter! StarKid Potter! Traversing the galaxy for intergalactic travels to Pigfarts!”
attention of other national entertainment companies like MTV, as well as popular entertainment blogger Perez Hilton.

The third and last production at Basement Arts, *A Very Potter Sequel*, was produced in May 2010. Featuring a book by the Langs and Holden and music and lyrics by Criss, *A Very Potter Sequel* drew thousands of fans to Ann Arbor with four thousand ticket requests for four hundred seats. The production was uploaded to YouTube on July 22, 2010, and earned over 160,000 unique views, making it the most viewed video of the day. Most of Criss’s songs were included on their album *A Very StarKid Album*, which made it to the no. 14 spot on the iTunes pop chart.

Having all graduated from the University of Michigan by 2010, the Langs, Holden, and Criss decided to consolidate Team StarKid into an official theatre company based in Chicago. They found commercial representation with talent agent Pat Brady, a self-proclaimed *Harry Potter* fan who first encountered the troupe at a fan convention.¹⁵ They retained many of the actors from their Basement Arts productions who, by this time, also had significant fan followings of their own. These actors did not work for significant pay, though there was some; they were more interested in the social media payout and the building of their own professional brands.¹⁶ Their first musical produced in Chicago was *Starship* in February 2011. They later held sold-out screenings in Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York. The cast album and YouTube video dropped simultaneously on April 30, 2011; the cast album hit no. 1 on the Billboard Cast Album chart. That summer, the company took several of their fan-favorite actors on a cross-country tour. In 2012, they produced *Holy Musical B@man!* and performed a special staged reading of *A Very Potter Senior Year* at LeakyCon 2012 in Chicago. Through all of this, their

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¹⁵ Nick Lang, personal interview, August 2, 2014.
¹⁶ Ibid.
merchandise sales and advertisement revenue from YouTube continued to provide a steady, if not large, stream of income allowing them to set the bar higher for their next full production 
Twisted.

Twisted

As Team StarKid’s seventh full production, Twisted: The Untold Story of a Royal Vizier stands out among the company’s productions as its most ambitious and integrated project to date. Matt and Nick Lang conceived the story and wrote the book with Eric Kahn Gale. A.J. Holmes returned to write the music. The musical aimed to be to Disney’s Aladdin what Stephen Schwartz’s musical Wicked (2003) was to Frank L. Baum’s The Wonderful Wizard of Oz (1900) and its iconic 1939 film adaptation. Whereas Wicked’s creative team had freer rein with regards to the public domain properties, Twisted’s creative team had to exercise more caution. They were attempting to parody a beloved animated musical that was owned by a company infamous for enforcing its copyright claims.\(^{17}\) They carefully constructed the story and music, only naming characters who belonged in the public domain and lightly altering other character names without disguising their referent.

Twisted reframes the story of Aladdin by making Ja’far the hero of the story. He is a well-meaning city official who, despite his best efforts, is blamed for the failings of the kingdom’s government. Through flashback, we learn that he fell in love with and was married to Sherrezade, of One Thousand and One Nights fame. They are ripped apart, however, when the Sultan kidnaps her into his harem. Ja’far’s subsequent quest for the magical lamp is transformed from a political power grab into a romantic quest to save his wife. Aladdin, in contrast, is recast

as a spoiled, perverse, overgrown man-child who only works to seduce the kingdom’s princess. The Princess, styled after Jasmine, remains oblivious to the motivations of those around her and her own born privilege, but she proves ultimately to be good-hearted. *Twisted* does not alter any of the original plot, but it offers unseen moments before, during, and after the movie as well as different interpretations of overlapping events.

Unlike previous StarKid productions, *Twisted* was a multi-layered parody, referencing not only a Disney story but also the sound of Disney’s animated musicals from the late 1980s and early 1990s, specifically those by composer Alan Menken. In previous StarKid productions, the songs were often written by one or more different composers in the styles of contemporary musical theatre pieces. They were inserted into the show to highlight emotional moments but did not play an integral role in the telling of the story, much like early-twentieth-century musical comedies and revues. The scores required a rock ensemble of piano, bass, and drums. Specific musical arrangements were usually figured out by the band during the rehearsal process. This was the first show in which the music itself was part of the parody. Now on his fourth collaboration with Team StarKid, Holmes recognized that creating Menken’s sound required a larger, more orchestral ensemble. Additionally, the songs had to be rooted in the characters’ development, flow out of their emotional state, and progress the story. He realized that this was the opportunity to push the company to recognize the narrative need for song. In short, *Twisted* could be Team StarKid’s first fully-integrated musical.¹⁸

To make this happen, he brought on lyricist Kaley McMahon, a BMI-trained lyricist, and orchestrator Andrew Fox to create the Menken-esque sound. Writing began over the winter holiday season in 2012. The Langs and Gale provided a rough draft of the script to Holmes, and

¹⁸ A.J. Holmes, personal interview, August 16, 2014.
once McMahon signed onto the project, work on the music and lyrics began. Holmes and McMahon worked remotely on the project, since Holmes was performing in productions of *Next to Normal* and *The Last Five Years* in California and Pennsylvania, respectively. McMahon, based in New York City, drafted the lyrics in her spare time while working full time. Founding company member Brian Holden was tapped to direct his first StarKid production with the Langs assisting the rehearsals as needed.

As the script and the music started to solidify in February 2013, the ambition of the project revealed itself through production costs. The hiring of McMahon and Fox as lyricist and orchestrator added to the budget of the show. Holmes also encouraged the company to hire Justin Fischer as music director, so that he and McMahon could focus on finishing the score.\(^{19}\) Furthermore, the company needed to hire a choreographer, costumer, and set designer. As an independent theatre company, Team StarKid lacked a commercial producer who could finance these things. However, they realized their large fan base could function similarly and opened a Kickstarter campaign.

Kickstarter is an online crowdsourcing company that allows entrepreneurs, startup companies, and content producers to fund projects through a tiered system of donations and to spread awareness of their projects through social media pages like Facebook, Tumblr, and Twitter. Supporters can donate anywhere from ten dollars to thousands of dollars; for every donation tier, there is a reward. The more a supporter gives, the nicer the reward. Sometimes, additional rewards are granted if the supporter helps to make others aware of the campaign through their own social media pages. The campaign manager sets a fundraising goal and a date

\(^{19}\) Ibid.
by which to reach that goal, both of which the project must hit if it is to receive any of the donations.

Team StarKid opened their campaign on March 22, 2013, and set a goal to raise $35,000 in one month. The initial monetary goal was to cover the costs that the production had already accrued. Rewards included tickets to attend the show in Chicago and copies of the cast album. They achieved their goal by the end of the day, and within a week, they had to remove the ticket and album rewards because the logistics of providing those rewards would have exceeded the money raised for that reward level. The quick support of their fan base allowed the company to fund other aspects of the project like hiring a music director, stage manager, choreographer, fight choreographer, lighting designer, and adding actors to the cast and musicians to the orchestra. By campaign end, the project raised approximately $143,000. Additional funds allowed them to improve the set, lighting design, costumes, and offer better pay to the cast and crew.\(^\text{20}\)

*Twisted* ran for three weeks in July 2014, and it was met with much acclaim by their fans and local press. The cast album and the video were released the following November. Holmes, McMahon, Fox, and Fischer also released a small digital album that they titled *Twisted: Twisted*. Parodying the 1990s Disney tradition of playing a radio-ready pop cover of a key song over the end credits sequence, it featured an R&B cover of “A Thousand and One Nights,” as well as remixes of the songs “Everything and More,” “The Golden Rule,” and “Take Off Your Clothes,” performed by musical theatre actress Andrea Ross and StarKid alumni Britney Coleman and Carlos Valdes. To round out the album, they included Holmes’ demo tracks for four numbers. Fox and Fischer compiled a piano-vocal score that was made available for purchase, a

merchandise first for Team StarKid.\textsuperscript{21} In March 2014, the music team also produced an abridged concert version of \textit{Twisted} at Studio 54 in New York City, with the hopes of finding some commercial backing for an off-Broadway run. The concert sold out two performances, and though some producers expressed interest in backing the project, an official production never went forward.\textsuperscript{22}

\textit{Twisted} provides a nice touchpoint when looking at Team StarKid’s unintentional rise to fame within media fandom and their rapid development as an independent theatre and comedy troupe. A \textit{Very Potter Musical} quickly made them “Big Name Fans” in the \textit{Harry Potter} fandom, and their subsequent works demonstrated that they were also fans of other popular culture texts. They used social media, namely Twitter, to build a rapport with their audience, tweeting about the various things they are fans of, retweeting compliments by their fans, and responding to requests for birthday shout-outs and the like. With the Kickstarter campaign for \textit{Twisted}, they effectively turned their fan base into small-scale producers. By their donations, the fans determined the size of the cast and the orchestra, allowed additional hires for the creative team, and provided funds for better costumes and props. The musical’s credit sequence on the YouTube video consequently thanked their supporters and referred to them as StarKids. Much like the wizard rock community, this rhetorical move does significant work in appearing to eliminate the divide between creator and fan.\textsuperscript{23}

Despite the friendly rapport and rhetoric, the rise of Team StarKid hints at changes in how people engage in participatory fan culture. Widespread participation in music creation by

\textsuperscript{21} Fox, personal interview.  
\textsuperscript{22} Holmes, personal interview.  
\textsuperscript{23} For the example, see the acknowledgements at the end of \textit{Twisted}’s credit reel. Team StarKid, \textit{Twisted: The Untold Story of a Royal Vizier}, YouTube, 2:13:30, posted November 27, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-77cUxba-aA.
fans is reduced. Team StarKid allows their fans to contribute financially, but how that money is spent is not up to them. They can hope their donations will result in certain outcomes (the addition of an actor, better costumes, etc.) but they have no guarantee that it will. When their fans attend a live performance of the troupe, there are few participatory moments. Audience members can laugh and sing along, but that is the extent of it. In StarKid performances, the traditional Western models of cultural production, where there is a clear distinction between creator and fan, are reinstated and reified.

AVbyte

The other major music-theatrical YouTube channel to build up a significant fan following in recent years is AVbyte. Run by the brother team of Antonius and Vijay Nazareth, this channel is known for its mini-film musicals, each no longer than three minutes, which parody pop cultural texts and phenomena. Born in Verona, Italy, the Nazareth brothers grew up in a musical family. Their father, Daniel, was a symphony and opera conductor, and his work as well as their studies in piano and cello, respectively, caused them to travel all over continental Europe. As children, the brothers’ entertainment consisted of classic Hollywood musicals starring Gene Kelly, the film adaptations of musicals like My Fair Lady and The Sound of Music, and later, the 1990s Disney musicals. These films provided respite from the six to eight hours that they spent practicing their instruments daily.24

In 2009 the brothers moved to New York City—Antonius to study piano performance and Vijay to study filmmaking. During a semester at New York University, Antonius’s interests turned toward musical theatre composition. He realized that he was not well-suited for NYU’s program, so he withdrew with the intent of composing full-time. This fit perfectly with Vijay’s

desire to start making original films. Upon moving to New York, both brothers became fascinated with YouTube as a platform to create original content and gain an audience.

Simultaneously, musical theatre as a genre was experiencing a renaissance in the media industry with the popularity of the television show *Glee* and recent film adaptations of musicals like *Les Misérables*. There was a dearth, though, of original media musicals. They realized that they were in a unique position to produce small, original film musicals and distribute them on the video-sharing website. In October 2011, they registered their channel AVbyte with the intent to create a new mini-musical every week.²⁵ “AV” was both a play on their first initials and an older analog term “audio-video,” while “byte” was a newer digital term. The brothers saw themselves as fusing an older art form, musical theatre, with new media. They hoped to create parodic musicals about the things they loved—video games, social media, and television shows—and in doing so, covertly expose people who did not normally listen to symphonic music or watch Hollywood musicals to those traditions. They uploaded their first musical, “Murdering Musical Madness,” on January 3, 2012. Over the next few months, their channel of “Youtubesicals” gained nearly five thousand subscribers.²⁶

The general aesthetic and pattern of the channel developed over 2012. The brothers picked topics they liked, sometimes at the suggestion of viewers. Antonius drafted a few different versions of the current project with music and lyrics. They brought in actors that they

²⁵ I do not consider AVbyte’s mini-musicals to be music videos or fan vids. Music videos typically are promotional tools for a recorded song; though videos can add a narrative element to a song, they are not necessary for the enjoyment or consumption of the song. Fan vids, according to the conventions of the genre, take clips from existing media texts, edit them together, and superimpose a piece of music on the finished video. AVbyte’s mini-musicals, though they each contain one song, have dramatic trajectories and the singing and dancing are integral to the small stories they tell. Additionally, the musicals are meant to be watched on YouTube. The purchase or streaming of the music apart from the video is secondary.

²⁶ Ibid.
knew in New York City. On filming day, they would spend the morning teaching the song and would film in the later part of the day with a click track and recorded piano accompaniment. Costumes, when needed, were designed by one of their regular actresses, Elizabeth Oldak. In post-production over the next few days, Vijay would edit the best takes from the shoot and Antonius orchestrated the accompaniment. Actors were brought back to rerecord the vocal parts over the finished video and orchestration. New musicals were typically released at the start of each week, with a behind-the-scenes video coming two days later and a video responding to viewers’ comments and reactions two days after that.

The Nazareths’ break into media fandom happened in April 2012 when noted vlogger and YouTube content creator Hank Green found their “INSTAGRAM – The Musical.” Green quickly grew to appreciate their work and reached out to the Nazareths about collaborating on a musical about the social media platform Tumblr, a site popular among younger media fans. They collaborated on the lyrics, and Antonius Nazareth scored it. They filmed their portions separately and stitched the video together through shared cloud services and email consultation. “Tumblr: The Musical” was released in July 2012 on the vlogbrothers, the YouTube channel that Hank Green shared with his brother, New York Times-bestselling author John Green. In the video tag after the musical, Hank Green promoted the Nazareth’s channel. The Green brothers themselves already had a significant fan following. At the vlogbrothers’ suggestion, their fans flocked to AVbyte. The Nazareths’ subscription base quadrupled within a week.

By 2013, they solidified their creative process. The original goal of producing one musical per week proved too strenuous, so they slowed the production process to approximately

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27 Ibid.
one musical every two weeks. Several videos went viral thanks to platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr, as well as popular culture websites like BuzzFeed. The professional quality of their musicals allowed them to foster productive business relationships with established media companies like Disney and Nintendo.

While these companies may have taken a more litigious route in the past and claimed copyright infringement, they have since decided that videos like AVbyte’s only help to build and spread their brand. AVbyte frequently picks “tent pole” subjects. The term refers to highly anticipated dates like opening weekends for films, television show premieres, and video game releases. The days before and after these dates are the prime window for promotional materials, reviews, and social media conversations, where other industries (advertising, journalism, new media, etc.) can capitalize on the primary producer’s success. For example, the Nazareths created “Disney Princess Leia – Star Wars Disney Princesses,” which featured Star Wars’ Princess Leia being welcomed into the Disney family by the other princesses. This came out the week after Disney announced their acquisition of Lucasfilm. AVbyte’s most viewed video to date is “Frozen – A Musical feat. Disney Princesses.” Released at the peak of Frozen’s popularity, this musical had Elsa giving the other princesses a lesson on feminism and why they don’t need men.

As their channel grew, they developed a sustainable business model. Most of their income was generated by YouTube’s advertisement revenue, and an additional small income

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came from selling their music through the iTunes store. In 2014 when I met and interviewed them, this income was enough to support the brothers in New York City and maintain a steady production of new videos. It was not enough to pay their actors; however, like with Team StarKid, working for AVbyte helped the actors build their social media presence and brand, something that is becoming increasingly important to television and film casting directors.

The Nazareth brothers, now considered among the top new media content producers, are consummate YouTubers, thriving in the greyness that defines the new media landscape. As we’ll see in the two of their works, “Bronies – The Musical” and “Fandoms – The Musical,” and their respective behind-the-scenes and comments videos, the Nazareths frequently validate their fans through their interactions over social media and invite them into their creative process. At the same time, they foster relationships with several merchandise and entertainment companies while maintaining their DIY aesthetic and creative autonomy. By doing both things, they seemingly epitomize the “anybody can do it” narrative popular in Web 2.0 and participatory fan communities.

“Bronies – The Musical”

After their subscriber base grew in response to “Tumblr: The Musical,” the Nazareths noticed that their fans enjoyed many of the same media texts that they did. Recognizing a valuable topic resource, they started to turn to their viewers’ suggestions for source material. Through 2013, they kept receiving requests to do a musical about the Brony fandom—that is, the

32 Antonius and Vijay Nazareth, personal interview.
community comprised predominantly of straight, grown male fans of the television cartoon *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* (*MLP*).  

The Brony community sprang up in 2011 following the show’s premier. This unexpected adult audience admired the show’s sincerity and messages of caring and generosity. However, because of the gender and age gaps between *MLP*’s intended audience (i.e., children and preteen girls) and their community, Bronies are among the latest fan groups to be ridiculed by journalists and other cultural commentators. In the years since this fandom’s formation, members have constantly had to defend themselves against public shaming and accusations that their fandom is absurd. Insiders have employed defense tactics that attempt to normalize their fandom by pointing to other instances where intended consumers of a product do not match their actual consumers. They also affirm and perform the values of sincerity and friendship that the show, and by extension, their community, celebrates.

The Nazareths knew nothing of the Bronies, but they started to research the community with the intent to poke fun at them through a musical. After watching some episodes of the show and investigating its fandom, however, they were too impressed by its sincerity to mock it. As straight male fans of musical theatre, they related to how Bronies challenged gender expectations for media audiences. They also noticed how the Brony fandom fostered creativity and community among its members like the fandoms to which they ascribed and the fandom that was


building around their own channel. They chose to make a sincere musical tribute to Bronies, which was uploaded to their channel on March 4, 2014.36

Starring Michael Ruocco, Sergio Pasquariello, Travis Kent, Matt Stoke, and Sean Welsh Brown, “Bronies – the Musical” follows five young men who are existentially distressed over their love for MLP. They fear that this love isolates them and undermines their masculinity. Upon finding each other, they celebrate the friendship and community that is cultivated through Bronies’ online forums, artwork, and in-person gatherings. Ultimately, they relish the ways that the Brony fandom challenges normative gender roles and learn to take pride in this untraditional community.

Antonius Nazareth’s score actively highlights the emotional journey that the men take in the short musical. It begins with a cheerful galloping accompaniment. The opening vocal lines, the lyrics of which stress each man’s feelings of loneliness, stretch quarter-note triplets over this accompaniment. The first two four-bar phrases end on an upward leap of a minor seventh, which suggest the men’s emotional restlessness within the key. The next two phrases continue the triplet pattern but wiggle in a sequence of descending thirds towards the tonic of F-major. The vocal line finally arrives on the tonic with the lyric “a community full of friends.” The accompaniment then settles into a gentler pattern of eighths that outline the harmonies. Antonius Nazareth borrows the “I am a Brony . . .” motive directly from MLP’s opening theme song, tying the men’s newfound pride in their fandom to the music of the show itself.37 The melodic contour of the motive is slightly different, but the rhythm is the same, effectively making the theme song’s lyrics, “My little pony,” the heartbeat of this all-tenor musical fanfare.

Despite the occasional tongue-in-cheek lyric (e.g., “I like ponies and have a beard!”), the Nazareths take a sincere approach to the subject matter. With its emphasis on community and friendship, the musical is a celebration of all fandoms: it visually and lyrically recognizes fan activities like forum participation, merchandise collecting, and fan art. Lyrics like “We won’t let the established rules dictate what things we’re allowed to love!” are rooted in the Nazareths’ understanding of and own experiences within fandom. At the same time, five theatrical tenors singing in tight harmonies also highlights Bronies’, and by extension fandom’s, inherent queerness.

I use the term “queer” here, as other fan scholars have, in a more general sense to describe “an assemblage of nonnormative positions that challenge assumed hierarchies of gender and sexuality.”

Fandom is premised on the idea that a person can love something or someone intensely without judgement and find acceptance and community not despite that love but because of it. Consequently, fandom has long been considered a safe space for those who identify as LGBTQ+. With their musical and visual choices, the Nazareths make it possible for their musical to be read as queer in both the general and specific senses of the word.

“Bronies – The Musical” features five good-looking tenors: when put together in frame, they evoke comparisons to the popular boy bands of the late 1990s. In his analysis of the Backstreet Boys’ song “As Long As You Love Me,” Daryl Jamieson notes that the song is primarily meant to be understood as a heterosexual love ballad to an unnamed woman. He argues, though, that the song can also be read as a love duet between the two lead singers, Nick Carter and Brian Littrell. In the first verse Carter sings about his isolation and how he’s “risking it all” in expressing his feelings of desire, to which Littrell responds affirmatively in the second

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verse. Jamieson writes, “Loneliness, the condition of the protagonist before the song’s narrative begins, is itself, though far from exclusively, a very common feeling for gay youth.”

A similar theme is woven into the introduction of “Bronies – the Musical.” It opens with Ruocco singing forlornly about an unidentified secret. Before panning to Ruocco for his first solo, Vijay Nazareth starts with a shot of two men’s muscular forearms fervently manipulating video game controllers; their faces are not shown. The hyperactivity of their movements match the strong downbeats in the musical introduction. Ruocco presumably cannot share this secret with his video-game-playing (read: straight) friends. The next shot shows him singing about his feelings of isolation in the shower, a private place where fantasies can be entertained. It’s not clear that he is singing about MLP until Stoke’s first solo. Through Brown, Kent, and Pasquariello’s responsorial solos, the introduction homologizes queer desire and the Brony fandom.

The remainder of the musical continues to play with this idea, both musically and visually. It, like “As Long As You Love Me,” has “a very gay-positive message—one should accept love when you feel it, not try to hide it, and not care what anybody else thinks.” When Ruocco triumphantly states “I am a Brony” for the first time, Vijay Nazareth shoots him opening a closed door and emerging from a small bedroom. The subtext of this shot is clear: that finding pride in his fandom is like coming out of the closet. Kent encourages himself through a mirror, puts on a fluorescent pink hat inscribed with “Brony,” and then turns towards the camera, granting the viewer an intimate close-up of his face. His newfound confidence as a Brony

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40 Jamieson, 254.
41 It should be noted that Kent is a fan-favorite actor on AVbyte. He frequently portrays Benedict Cumberbatch’s version of Sherlock Holmes in other videos.
allows him to be fully open with himself and others. When the lyric “We won’t let the established rules dictate what things we’re allowed to love” first appears, Ruocco and Stoke sing in unison to each other. It’s not until the very last moment that they lift the tiny horse figurines into the frame. The “what things” in the lyric could easily be replaced with “who.” The actors’ gestures throughout the musical run the gamut of homosocial interactions. In the musical break between the second verse and the bridge, Kent falls backwards into the welcoming laps of the four other men sitting on the sofa. Ruocco then squeezes his bicep and says, “Somebody’s been lifting.” At other moments, they high-five each other, share food, and warmly embrace.

The conflation of queer identity and fandom comes to a head in the last forty-five seconds of the musical. For the first time, all five men sing at the same time, declaring that they stand proud and firm in their love for MLP while breaking into harmony. In a small nod to the fan practice of cosplay, they pull on tutus that correspond in color to five of the major pony characters: Fluttershy, Rainbow Dash, Rarity, Twilight Sparkle, and Pinky Pie. The three shots that follow feature the tutu-clad men walking towards or looking at the camera while doing stereotypically masculine gestures like giving thumbs up, doing the “What’s up?” nod, slapping each other’s shoulders, or aggressively pointing. Lyrically, the finale combines the portions of the first and second verses to highlight the themes of self-affirmation and celebration of community. Most of this is sung in unison, but when the men harmonize, their parts remain close and firmly diatonic with passing dissonances that quickly resolve. The musical ends with all five men in frame, their gazes skyward, and their arms raised triumphantly, singing the tonic chord (Kent jumps up to the high A midway through). Antonius Nazareth punctuates this in the accompaniment with syncopated brass sforzandi.
The Nazareths treat the queer elements of this musical with care in their behind-the-scenes video.\(^{42}\) When describing their decision to make this musical, Antonius stated, “It’s really fascinating how [the Brony fandom] legitimately bends gender norms and the way we think about what should be for girls and what should be for boys.” Vijay tagged onto that idea, saying, “It’s a theme we always think about and talk about. We make musicals, and musicals are ‘stereotypically’ for girls . . .” The video edit jumps forward, which suggests that there was more to that thought—more specifically, that Vijay had ended the phrase with “. . . and gay men” and they decided later to cut that out. When I interviewed them a few months later, they mentioned that the idea that musical theatre was for gay men was a foreign concept to them, growing up in Europe.\(^{43}\) It was only when they came to the United States that they became familiar with the association and made a conscious decision to play with the stereotype in their musicals. Even though the queer subtext is never mentioned outright in this musical, the Nazareths clearly put it there for those willing to look for it.

The rest of the behind-the-scenes video framed the musical as a paean to fandom and the positive experiences that it grants to participants. The Nazareths emphasized that the musical would not have happened had it not been for the frequent requests of their viewers. They also acknowledged the fans who wrote to them on social media during a period when they visited their hospitalized father in Europe. They apologized for not being able to meet up with their European fans, but they expressed gratitude for all the get-well messages they received and shared with their father.


\(^{43}\) Vijay opined that Gene Kelly was a paragon of masculinity because of his ability to sing and dance at the same time.
The comments video also works to acknowledge and actively interact with their audience. Here, the brothers speak directly to the camera as they answer pre-selected comments that were left by viewers on the video’s page and questions tagged on Twitter with their handle @AV_Byte and the hashtag #byteme. One comment notes the physical similarities between their actor Sean Welsh Brown, and the actor Matt Smith then playing the Doctor on Doctor Who. Since Travis Kent had already played Sherlock for them, Antonius hinted that a Sherlock-Doctor Who musical would be coming soon. “WHOLOCK – The Musical” did, four months later, further demonstrating that the brothers rely on their viewers for project ideas. The rest of the comments video features them talking casually about their favorite cartoons, and the movies and musicals that inspire their work. This video, along with the behind-the-scenes one, aims to foster intimacy with their fans, to encourage them to interact with the brothers via social media, and, by doing so, to feel like they are insiders participating in the creative process. The validation of their fans and the invitation to participate (in specific ways) are sentiments that are reiterated in “Fandoms – The Musical.”

“Fandoms – The Musical”

Released in December 2014, “Fandoms – The Musical” is the Nazareths’ second musical dedicated to fans and fan culture. The musical opens with Gandalf, Thorin, and Bilbo Baggins sitting at a derelict bar, bemoaning the conclusion of the Hobbit film trilogy. Katniss Everdeen of The Hunger Games joins their drunken musings, wondering whether anyone will care about

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45 “Wholock” is the portmanteau used by fans of Doctor Who and Sherlock to describe fan fiction, videos, or images that pair the main characters of the two shows together.
them when their film adaptations cease. Harry Potter, Princess Leia, Captain Jack Sparrow, the Eleventh Doctor, Maleficent, and Darth Vader interrupt their forlorn thoughts and encourage them to cheer up. These characters remind them that producers still see potential profit in them. Their fans, whose affection is worth “a lot of gold,” will allow them to live on beyond the screen.

This musical classifies as one of AVbyte’s “tent pole” works; its release was meant to coincide with the release of *The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies*, the final film in Peter Jackson’s adaptation of J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*. They knew that *The Hobbit* would be trending on several social media sites in the days around the film’s release. With hobbits on the brain, people would be more likely to share an AVbyte musical with characters from Tolkien’s universe. The Nazareths originally intended to feature only the characters from *The Hobbit* and film in the evergreen areas of upstate New York. This idea evolved as they realized that other film franchises like *The Hunger Games* were finishing soon. As fans themselves of franchises that had multiple waves of production like *Star Wars*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Doctor Who*, and *Harry Potter*, they decided to include cameo appearances of characters from these universes as well.

The scale of the production was significantly larger for this musical than previous ones because it was, in part, financed by Loot Crate, a monthly subscription service that specializes in fandom-related merchandise. This backing allowed AVbyte to partner with theatrical make-up designer Dalton Dale, hire a second camera person, and shoot on a set at the YouTube SpaceNY. In exchange, they cross-promoted Loot Crate and Dale’s work and upcoming projects in the behind-the-scenes and comments videos. The partnership with Loot Crate also

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allowed them to host a contest where viewers who shared the video on Facebook could win a Playstation 4.

Perhaps the most notable feature about this musical was the set on which YouTube permitted them to shoot. The neglected club in which the characters all meet was modeled on one of New York City’s most famous alternative music clubs, CBGB-OMFUG. When CBGB closed in 2007, YouTube acquired its stage and replicated the interior of the club around it.\textsuperscript{48} Through its set, “Fandoms – The Musical” is tied to a concrete piece of subcultural music history.

This musical brings to the foreground one of the key tensions found in fandom’s construction of itself. On the one hand, it styles itself as an alternative community, a niche culture that is proudly not part of the mainstream, one that embraces all people regardless of who or what they love and how they express that love. As Louisa Ellen Stein writes, “. . . fans envision fandom as an expansive community with subcultural energy that can transform the mainstream and that is already a growing part of popular culture.”\textsuperscript{49} The Doctor and Harry Potter’s lines (i.e., “Don’t you fret. Don’t you fear. I was gone for sixteen years. One day you will all regenerate. Trust in love. Trust your fans.”) acknowledge that the love of fans is what keeps them alive, even during long hiatuses. Staging the musical on the recreated CBGB set reinforces that identity and connects their channel (and, by extension, YouTube) to this subcultural legacy. On the other hand, other lyrics (e.g., Captain Jack’s “I can spy dollar signs. You’re worth a lot. Why let you rot?”) demonstrate that fans are also a targeted commercial audience. Producers can revive any number of franchises because they know that fans’ love

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kctk-6V5rCQ?t=3m9s for Vijay’s description of the set and stage.
\textsuperscript{49} Stein, Millennial Fandom, 176.
translates into profit. Toys, games, theme parks, and merchandise companies like Loot Crate exist because of fans’ emotional investment in these franchises. The Nazareths celebrate fandom differently in this musical than they did in “Bronies – The Musical.” Whereas the latter points to creative participation and community formation as fandom’s driving mechanisms, the former points to commercial investment. The characters in “Fandoms – The Musical” gratefully sing about their fans, but only for their loyal viewership and consumption.

**Breaking Down the Narrative**

Stein ends her recent study *Millennial Fandom: Television Audiences in the Transmedia Age* (2015) with music, describing the song performed at the opening ceremony of LeakyCon 2013. Written by YouTube star and musical theatre actress Tessa Netting, “To LeakyCon” officially opened the fourth iteration of the eclectic convention. The song parodied “La Vie Bohème” from Jonathan Larson’s *Rent* (1993) and featured references to over twenty fandoms and fan activities. Adding to the multifannish nature of the song, original *Rent* cast member Anthony Rapp (dressed as his character Mark Cohen) sang its opening invocation and was joined by the convention’s other special guests, all of whom cosplayed as characters from other fandoms. Stein writes, “. . . the very fact that Anthony Rapp plays his former character suggests how smooth the adaptation is from *Rent*’s depiction of a multifaceted, subcultural queer collective to LeakyCon’s depiction of a multifannish community connecting online and off, cosplayers and fan writers, and web series actors and creators . . . [T]he lyrics of the number are riddled with fannish codes, proclaiming LeakyCon a space for all fans to come together in person.

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to rejoice in their shared fannis\-\hness.\textsuperscript{51} The Frankenstein-like nature of millennial fandom is made coherent through musical performance. She reinforces this idea by explicitly connecting LeakyCon’s environment to Team StarKid. She argues,

[T]he StarKid musical theatre troupe and fandom—very much a core part of LeakyCon—have a particular energy that seems to me to embody where millennial fandom is headed. . . . StarKid culture is somewhat utopian in that it embraces the idea that anyone can be a star, but in a millennial culture of microcelebrity and self-authorship, acknowledging the dispersion and construction of the star is perhaps more realist than not. Actors and fans are all part of one welcoming community known as Team StarKid, which works to foster cultural support and media literacy through performance, satire, and song, spread in person and online.\textsuperscript{52}

Her language is oddly reminiscent of Jenkin’s use of filk in the final chapter of \textit{Textual Poachers}. Despite the twenty-three-year gap between the books’ respective publications, both authors essentially argue that musical performance best exemplifies the values of participatory fandom—its integration of multiple codes, its welcoming and open atmosphere, and its lack of creator/fan hierarchy.

I do not think it coincidence that Jenkins and Stein end their studies in this fashion. No matter the contradictions and tensions within fandom at the historical moments they are describing (and both authors address them), it is in musical performance that those things seemingly disappear. The ideals of fandom are what draw so many people to participate, and it is often through musical performance that these ideals are transformed into lived experience. Their descriptions serve as a final articulation of their arguments and mitigates the relationship between the critical work they do as scholars and their own positive experiences in fandom. Because of this stance, though, fan musicking is enshrined within the discipline of fan studies,

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 173.
\textsuperscript{52} Stein, \textit{Millennial Fandom}, 171–72.
mostly free of the critical inquiry applied to other creative fan communities. The literature ends up repeating the community’s rhetoric and narratives about itself instead of interrogating them.

Granted, it is tempting to romanticize the histories of Team StarKid and AVbyte and marvel at their seemingly accidental rise to Internet fame. Team StarKid’s humble roots on a Midwest college campus testifies to the “anyone can be a star” narrative. Their brilliant comedic musicals could have languished in obscurity were it not for a couple of cameras and YouTube. AVbyte’s tale is the story of two brothers coming to America to pursue college degrees in the arts and, by combining their strengths and passions, innovate a new subgenre of film musical. The creators of both channels appear self-made and self-determined. They seemingly embody the motto of the online video convention VidCon which proudly proclaims, “One year’s VidCon attendee is next year’s superstar.” But Team StarKid and AVbyte could not have happened to anyone, anywhere.

Team StarKid grew out of the highly competitive environment of the University of Michigan’s School of Music, Theatre & Dance. Though Basement Arts was an extracurricular student organization, all its members were training to become professionals in theater, film, and television. Students had specific concentrations at school, but many of them were proficient in more than one performance art.

Consider the composers and musicians in the band of A Very Potter Musical. Composer Darren Criss, already a singer, dancer, and musician at Michigan, went from Team StarKid to playing a major role on the hit television show Glee, putting out a solo album, and performing lead roles in the Broadway productions of How to Succeed in Business without Really Trying and Hedwig and the Angry Inch. Co-composer, music director, and pianist A.J. Holmes performed in

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several regional theatre productions before landing the role of Elder Cunningham in the Broadway, West End, national tour, and Melbourne productions of *The Book of Mormon*. Bass player Carlos Valdes—also an actor, singer, pianist, and composer—is a series regular on the CW’s hit television show *The Flash*. Their drummer Joe Carroll, who (in addition to being a singer and dancer) plays eleven different instruments, recently starred as the Prince in the Broadway production of *Cinderella*. Many other members of Team StarKid, regular and occasional, have phenomenal music and theatrical skills that remained untapped by the troupe.\(^{54}\)

Similarly, Antonius and Vijay Nazareth were raised as musicians in a family of them. When Antonius decided to drop out of New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts, it wasn’t because he wasn’t good enough: it was that he felt he knew more than what the undergraduate program could teach him.\(^{55}\) With both brothers living in New York, they made friends and colleagues who were all multi-talented actors and musicians. The supporting network of talent found specifically in New York City contributed greatly to their success.

Even though their works prove them to be fluent in the texts that fans love, the members of Team StarKid and AVbyte, notably, were not active members of fan communities before their channels became popular. They were brought into fandom when they happened to tap into the small but influential network of people who are shaping media fandom today. These influencers are part of numerous fandoms, companies, nonprofit organizations, and new media projects.

When tracing the connections between members of this network, many of the threads lead to Hank and John Green. In 2007, the brothers were pursuing separate career paths: Hank Green was an environmental science writer and editor of an environmental issues blog; John

\(^{54}\) Holmes, personal interview.

\(^{55}\) In our interview, Antonius recounted that his instigation for leaving NYU was when his freshman theory professor became ill and asked Antonius to teach the class in his place.
Green was an emerging young adult author whose debut novel *Looking for Alaska* (2005) earned multiple awards. Realizing that they hadn’t seen each other face to face in over a year, they started the vlogbrothers YouTube channel in 2007 with a project they termed “Brotherhood 2.0.” Every day for the rest of the year, they each uploaded a video letter addressed to the other, detailing their day or current project. The channel gathered a modest and loyal following until July 2007.

On July 18, 2007, three days before the scheduled release of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Hank Green performed a song he had written called “Accio Deathly Hallows” to express his excitement about the forthcoming novel to his brother. The online *Harry Potter* fandom found it, and the video went viral, landing on YouTube’s homepage. This forged a connection between the Green brothers and the *Harry Potter* fandom. In 2009, Hank Green started making appearances at *Harry Potter* conventions and touring with top-tier wizard rock bands. The Green brothers’ fan following, known in fan parlance as “Nerdfighters,” continued to grow.

Since 2008, the Greens’ entrepreneurial empire has spread significantly, largely because of the opportunities online video has afforded them. They produce numerous educational YouTube channels (*SciShow, Crash Course, How to Adult*), run a professional transmedia entertainment company (Pemberley Digital), are active in grassroots social justice organizations

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56 vlogbrothers, “Brotherhood 2.0: January 1st,” YouTube video, 2:02, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vtyXbTHKhlO.
(Project for Awesome, The Harry Potter Alliance), manage and participate in several annual fan conventions (LeakyCon, GeekyCon, and VidCon), and have their own indie music label (DFTBA Records). The vlogbrothers’ family tree, illustrated by The Daily Dot’s Aja Romano and Jason Reed, provides a nice overview of the Greens’ projects and the connections they have fostered (Figure 3.1).  

![Figure 3.1: The vlogbrothers Family Tree](image)

The viral response to “Accio Hallows” grafted the Harry Potter and wizard rock fandom into the Greens’ network in 2007 and 2008. The following year, Team StarKid produced A Very

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Potter Musical, which caught the eye of Stephanie Anderson, Melissa Anelli, and subsequently, the larger Harry Potter fandom. Anelli and Hank Green are good friends and colleagues, aiding each other in the organization of their respective conventions. Since the Nerdfighter community overlapped with multiple online fandoms, including the Harry Potter fandom, this guaranteed an online audience for Team StarKid. Anderson jokingly noted that Team StarKid’s rise was all her fault. She’s not wrong.

AVbyte’s rise was more straightforward since their early musicals caught the attention of Hank Green himself. Once they collaborated with him, the Nerdfighter community flocked to their channel, and they connected with other influential YouTube content creators and networked with other companies through VidCon. As much as fans like to claim that amateur creativity can thrive and succeed in fandom, Team StarKid and AVbyte demonstrate that success in contemporary fandom depends upon cultivated talent and knowing the right people.

It is this network that made Team StarKid and AVbyte into “Big Name Fans,” yet much of the work for these two channels is about proving that they are, first and foremost, fans themselves. Team StarKid does this primarily through their social media and choice of source material. AVbyte uses their social media and source material in a similar fashion, while also adding to their fannish image through their behind-the-scenes and comments videos. These things highlight that their work is coming from fandom and is not being made for fandom.

Team StarKid and AVbyte’s emphasis on their own fan identity, however, masks how they limit their fans’ participation in the creative process. StarKid and AVbyte fans, while they share a love for the same pop cultural texts with the members of these production teams, are ultimately fans-of-fans. These fans-of-fans participate in the creative process but only within prescribed boundaries. AVbyte fans participate primarily online by commenting on videos and
suggesting future musicals. Whether their comments and suggestions are addressed is completely at the discretion of the brothers. For a brief spell in 2012 and 2013, the Nazareths invited their viewers to submit videos of themselves singing along to the accompaniment tracks of three musicals. Vijay Nazareth then edited them together and published the sing along videos on the channel. Interestingly, though viewers continued to request the sing along videos (see, for example, “Comments – Bronies the Musical”), these required a significant amount of work without the usual viewer dividends. The last sing-along video was posted in January 2013. Their attempts to integrate audience participation decreased as they established the musical and visual aesthetic of their channel, started collaborating with other high profile YouTubers, and attracted the attention of major media companies. The Nazareths and their actors rarely perform AVbyte material live.

Here, we arrive at the crux of the issue: Team StarKid and AVbyte depend on their fans’ participation only to the extent that their fans view their content and are compelled to like the videos, subscribe to the channels, and share the content via their own social networks. While Burgess and Green are not wrong in considering YouTube a site for participatory culture and co-creation, this argument disguises the fact that content creators are primarily looking for viewers and subscribers. The more views a video has, the more advertising revenue it generates for its producers.

At a core economic level, YouTube monetizes viewers’ attention; it is part of what theorists like Michael H. Goldhaber have called the “attention economy.” As new media like social networks, blogs, podcasts, and online video have situated themselves beside “old media” like radio, film, and television, this process has created a surplus of information and content.

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What is in short supply, then, is people’s attention. Corporations pay YouTube to show their ads before videos on the assumption that a causal relationship exists between attention and consumption. The platform keeps track of the number of unique views, and advertisers pay a fixed rate per thousand unique viewers, known in online video parlance as “cost-per-thousands.” YouTube keeps 45% of the revenue with the other 55% going to the content creator.

Now, this is not to reduce the members of Team StarKid and AVbyte to their basest capitalistic impulses. In my interviews with several of them, I sensed that they genuinely enjoyed interacting with their fans and encouraging the building of a community around their respective works. What it highlights, however, is that broad participation in the creative process is not central to these forms of fan musicking. It is more of an added social bonus. When they do meet their fans in person at events and conventions, it is not in a “we are one of you” context; they attend as special guests and are minor celebrities in fandom.

Furthermore, there is an even greater gender disparity between these BNFs and their subscribers: except for Twisted’s lyricist Kaley McMahon, all the prominent creators covered in this chapter are men. These teams have prominent, popular female actors; however, they rarely include women in the creative process. This is not to imply that the YouTube musical communities are sexist; however, the power dynamic between men and women, where creators are predominantly men and actors and audiences are predominantly women and consumers, must be noted. With the wizard rockers and other YouTube celebrity musicians (though not those

61 Ibid.
64 Since October 2015, AVbyte’s cover photo on Facebook has been a piece of art given to them by one of their fans.
addressed in this chapter), the reluctance to recognize this gender disparity has resulted in sexist and abusive behavior, which I address in the following chapter.

This is in stark contrast to one of the most popular narratives about the Internet and fandom. It is widely believed that the Internet threw open the doors for participation in fandom, and this is true to a certain extent. Fan fiction, the closest creative corollary to fan music, saw an exponential growth in participants because online archives were easy to create and to join; additionally, the time to publication was greatly reduced. However, the democracy narrative is at odds too with the reality of interactions and relationships in fan fiction communities. Certain authors are more popular than others, and the fans-of-fans dynamic manifests there as well. The publication of E.L. James’s Fifty Shades of Grey (2011–2012), which was first written as AU ("alternate universe") Twilight fan fiction, and Cassandra Clare’s The Mortal Instruments (2007–2014), which shares significant similarities with her Draco Malfoy fan fiction trilogy, testifies to the power differential between popular fan fiction authors, less popular ones, and readers. More experienced authors exercise power over less-experienced authors, as do authors who have been in a particular fandom longer than others. Moderators also have power over their online


67 See Susan Ashley Wright, “The Discourse of Fan Fiction” (PhD Diss., University of Louisville, 2009).
archives, and this has led to conflicts between them and readers. Like the scholarship about fan musicking communities, little has been written about the relationships between fan fiction authors, archive moderators, beta readers, and readers.

The three musicking communities at the heart of this dissertation demonstrate the impact that the Internet, social media, and new media platforms have had on media fandom and fan creativity. With each community, we see a decreasing amount of amateur participation and a rise of more professional musicians and creators. These more professional fan artists control who participates and how they can. With more professional fan artists attracting their own avid fans, old media and new media companies look to benefit commercially from fan engagement. The producer-fan relationship is restored, albeit on a smaller scale. No matter how fervently fandom positions itself as a countercultural or subcultural community that is set apart from mainstream Western culture, these shifts in performance practices and social practices (online and off) prove that it is something that could only have developed within the context of Western culture; it inevitably falls back on its traditions of cultural production and the power structures that come with them.

This is not to say, however, that the Internet caused these changes. As anthropologist and social media scholar danah boyd writes,

[T]echnology . . . has a tendency to mirror and magnify the issues that affect everyday life. The good, bad, and ugly . . . . In the early days of social media, it was exhilarating watching people grasp that they were part of a large global network. Many of my utopian-minded friends started dreaming again of how this structure could be used to break down social and cultural barriers. Yet, as these tools became more popular and widespread, what

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unfolded was not a realization of the idyllic desires of many early developers, but a complexity of practices that resembled the mess of everyday life. As seen thus far in my dissertation, each community has in-built hierarchies and dissonances between their practices and community rhetoric. If the social and performance practices attempt to allay and smooth these tensions, participants’ use of Internet platforms and social media makes them manifest.

I conducted my interviews with Team StarKid and AVbyte in the summer and fall of 2014, when both channels were arguably at the height of their popularity. The writers and actors of Team StarKid and the Nazareths were among the most sought-after guests at LeakyCon. Team StarKid had a full summer season lined up in Chicago and a number of new pieces in the works. AVbyte had recently won a competition that granted the Nazareths a six-month development deal and $1 million marketing budget from Fox Sports; in the midst of this, they continued to produce new musicals every two weeks. Yet, over the next two years, activity on both channels slowed. Team StarKid produced their last full-length musical in August 2016. Since then, many of the troupe’s writers and actors, including co-founder Nick Lang, have moved on to other projects. After a long hiatus in 2016, AVbyte announced on their channel that they had been collaborating with the CW to produce the scripted musical series *How to Be a Vampire* for the television network’s new online video platform *CW Seed*. This drew the ire of some of their international fans because only residents of the United States could access *CW Seed*. Three

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71 AVbyte, “SUPER HUGE ANNOUNCEMENT (How to Be a Vampire),” YouTube video, December 2, 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xH7IHjd9PE8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xH7IHjd9PE8).

72 See the comments underneath the video.
months later, without releasing any new material to their channel in the interim, the Nazareths announced that they were taking an indefinite break from the channel because of the toll that it had taken on their relationship as brothers. They encouraged AVbyte’s subscribers to subscribe to their new, separate channels, but this has not proven all that successful. Whereas their original channel had over one million subscribers, their separate channels only have eighteen to nineteen thousand each.

Team StarKid and AVbyte deserve recognition for how they fused online video and fandom to innovate a new genre of musical theatre. Out of all the musicians studied in this dissertation, they were the most professional in terms of production quality and the most commercial. Their content and production values appealed to a technologically savvy audience, primarily younger Millennials (born 1990–2000). As a result, however, their works were the least participatory in that fans could only partake in the creative process in specific, peripheral ways. Once the flow of content diminished, “StarKids” and “AVbyters” migrated to other texts and fandoms, as they are wont to do in this age of convergence. This trend towards microcelebrity among fan musicians, I would argue, does not support the narrative of “anyone can be a star,” as Stein and others have written: it directly contradicts fandom’s identity as a nonhierarchal, openly participatory space.

In the following chapter, I examine a specific negative manifestation of the power dynamic between popular fan musicians and their fans. Using as a case study the sexual manipulation and abuse allegations against wizard rockers Alex Carpenter and Luke Conard in the spring and summer of 2014, I look at how the rhetoric of “fandom as home” was used to silence disagreement in the community with regards to sexism and gender inequality.

Participants’ staunch belief in the wizard rock’s moral and subcultural difference ultimately created a culture of silence around the scene’s most popular musicians, which allowed them to manipulate and abuse young women in the community for years. I analyze the role that musical practices and discourses played in the community’s attitudes towards gender inequality before 2014, and how the purpose of both have shifted as the community has responded to and recuperated from these events in the years since.
Chapter Four: “In Some Corridors of Our Home”
Sexism in the Wizard Rock Community

In the early hours of March 15, 2014, Rosianna Halse Rojas, John Green’s personal assistant, posted an indicting testimonial on her Tumblr about the sexual manipulation and abuse she experienced at the hands of founding wizard rocker Alex Carpenter. At the time of their 2006–2008 “relationship,” she was sixteen, and he was twenty-four. Another Tumblr user sarahsnitch seconded Rojas’s post later in the day with confirmation of Carpenter’s behavior towards Rojas and further personal testimony against him. sarahsnitch alleged that she and Carpenter had a relationship when she was sixteen and he was twenty-five. Over the next few days, seven other women came forward—six of whom were fans of Carpenter as teenagers and were manipulated by him into varying degrees of sexual and emotionally abusive relationships, often at the same time. These posts prompted Kristina Horner, founding member of the

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Parselmouths and later YouTube music act ALL CAPS, to reveal her own manipulative relationship with former Ministry of Magic member and ALL CAPS partner Luke Conard. The following day, Whitney Milsom, another member of the wizard rock and Nerdfighter communities, confirmed Conard’s behavior with her own detailed Tumblr post.

The YouTube music and Nerdfighter communities, of which many of these women were also a part, was already reeling because of similar allegations made against other musicians earlier that year. The accused musicians included three of the four members of the popular Doctor Who-themed rock band Chameleon Circuit—Ed Blann, Tom Milsom, and Alex Day. Allegations against Day and multiple denials on his part incited a social media maelstrom of “he said/she said.” The news of Carpenter and Conard’s misconduct only added to the chaos. In response to these disclosures, Hank Green publicly denounced the men, pulled their merchandise from DFTBA Records, and quietly revoked their invitations to the upcoming fan conventions VidCon and LeakyCon.

The accusations against Carpenter and Conard shocked the wizard rock community because their respective bands, The Remus Lupins and Ministry of Magic, were among the most popular at the scene’s height. Additionally, Carpenter actively and vocally supported the social justice arm of the community through his efforts to encourage children’s literacy. Thus, the abuse allegations created intense cognitive dissonance for many members of the community. How could a community with such a strong moral center have two of its most prominent members involved in abusive behavior? Why had they not been called out for it sooner? Many

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felt that their belief in the wizard rock community was shaken or destroyed, that their “home” in fandom was no longer a “safe space.”

On March 17, 2014, the Harry Potter Alliance posted the following statement on their Tumblr:

Like our namesake, the Harry Potter Alliance will always protect our friends and the places – like fandom – where we want to feel safe. The reports that have come to light recently about conduct in some corridors of our home have left us feeling angry, vulnerable, and raw . . . .

Sexual assault, sexual opportunism, and emotional manipulation are all unacceptable behaviors that should have no place in the Harry Potter fandom or anywhere else. The challenges we face on this front are systemic. They stem from deep-seated societal issues that are not unique to our community; they are part of our culture. But we have the opportunity to reject these aspects of culture. We can work to create solutions to these problems.5

The HPA’s post was notable because it was the first time that leaders in the Harry Potter and wizard rock communities recognized systemic gender inequality in their midst and that Carpenter and Conard’s behavior stemmed from it. While complaints about sexism in the community had circulated online in the past, leaders (and their ardent supporters) often dismissed the claims, arguing that though sexism was systemic in Western culture, it was not present in wizard rock because of members’ shared moral commitments and values.

At the height of the wizard rock scene, J.K. Rowling, Harry Potter fans, and wizard rockers frequently used the metaphor of “home” to describe the fandom. The abuse allegations called into question the belief that the Harry Potter fandom provided a safe place from the ugliness of the outside world. Yet, as seen in the HPA’s Tumblr post, wizard rockers invoked the concept of “fandom as home” or “fandom as family” all the more. In this chapter, I analyze this set of discourses and its intersection with microcelebrity in the wizard rock community. Through

an analysis of two prominent online debates in 2009 and 2010 about the presence of sexism in the community, I argue that ideas affiliated with the discourse of “home,” coupled with musical performance, were used by leaders to silence those who sought to address the gender inequalities within the scene. They also served, for many years, as protection for the offenders. However, the responses and subsequent actions of the community show that the discourses and music also provided the means for renewal and change. By studying this dark period in the wizard rock community, I demonstrate that fans can recognize the imaginative work done by musicking, and through this process, begin to craft their community into the safe space for which they long.

Fandom as Home

At the red-carpet premiere of the film *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part 2*, J.K. Rowling addressed her fans, saying, “The stories we love best do live in us forever, so whether you come back by page or by the big screen, Hogwarts will always be there to welcome you home.” Her statement resonated powerfully with the *Harry Potter* fandom; here, she recognized that the books she had written had opened a world of magic for her fans, and that she mourned with them at their ending. Rowling assured them that Hogwarts, Harry’s chosen home, would be wherever they were.

Inspired by these words, Lauren Fairweather wrote a song called “Home.” Described as a song for *Harry Potter* fans, “Home” uses the title metaphor to describe the feeling of belonging that fans have found in the books and with each other.

*Can’t believe they’re done*  
*And two thousand seven’s so far gone*

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Oh, but don’t be scared  
‘Cause the books aren’t going anywhere

J.K. Rowling once said  
That Hogwarts will always  
Be there to welcome you home  
Just like magic, it seems  
These books can make you  
Feel like you’re never alone

Chorus:
You’ve become a part of me  
And I take you wherever I go  
Harry, I’m coming home (x2)  
And time it passes by, but  
No matter how far I roam  
Harry, I’m coming home (x2)  
I’m coming home

Now my bags are packed  
Better watch out ‘cause I’m coming back  
To a place I know  
And there’s nowhere else I’d rather go

There are places out there  
Where people get you  
People will understand  
That it’s not just a book  
It’s your childhood  
And it’s music, so join the band

Chorus

It feels like home (x2)  
This feels like home

Fairweather filmed the video for “Home” while at LeakyCon 2011. It opens with her sitting on a sidewalk alone, playing her guitar for change from passersby. As she plays, someone drops Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone into her guitar case, which elicits a smile. She packs up the change, the book, and her guitar and begins walking as she sings the chorus for the first
time. The song segues into the second verse, and she walks into the Chicago Hilton where LeakyCon convened that year. There, she sets up her merchandise table, talks with other LeakyCon attendees, and takes photos with and signs autographs for her fans. For the final chorus and tag, the video includes her performance of “Home” at LeakyCon that night, on the stage with a large crowd dancing and singing along. Though the studio version of the song is used for the video, at the end, it cuts at the end to the applause from her concert performance. Many in the audience raise their hands in a heart shape, which Fairweather sends back to them as the video fades to black.⁷

Ostensibly, the video is meant to be an ode to the Harry Potter fans and the sense of belonging that Fairweather has found with them. At the same time, it can be read as her journey towards self-discovery, self-fulfillment, and microcelebrity status in the fandom. She starts alone, and over the course of the video, surrounds herself with more people until she is elevated on the stage in front of an indiscernible crowd. Fairweather’s home, it is implied, is on the stage of LeakyCon, playing music for other Harry Potter fans and being adored for it. While the video is meant to reflect Fairweather’s personal, positive experiences in the Harry Potter fandom, it also demonstrates a key tension: in this supposedly egalitarian, safe space, Fairweather has become a powerful voice and a star.

The concept of “fandom as home” includes several interrelated ideas. Philosopher Aviezer Tucker writes, “‘Home’ is marked by an emotional attachment . . . . Home is where we could or can be ourselves, feel at ease, secure, able to express ourselves freely and fully . . . Home is the environment that allows us to fulfill our unique selves through interaction with the

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⁷ Lauren Fairweather, “‘Home’ – A Song for Harry Potter Fans by Lauren Fairweather | @laurenfairwx,” YouTube video, 3:30, September 20, 2012, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gk3D1hCbDQg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gk3D1hCbDQg).
world.”⁸ This sense of ease and security marks “home” as a haven, which as sociologist Shelley Mallett writes, “is founded on . . . the distinction between public and private, and the inside and outside world. According to this dichotomy the inside or enclosed domain of the home represents a comfortable, secure and safe space.”⁹ She continues, “. . . the private realm of the home is typically understood as a space that offers freedom and control, security, and scope for creativity and regeneration. It is an intimate space that provides a context for close, caring relationships.”¹⁰

Considering the layers of meaning attached to “home,” it’s understandable why fans use the metaphor frequently. As a group, fans are marked by their emotional attachments. Where once the term “fan” had aberrant and pejorative connotations, fans in the twentieth and twenty-first century have reclaimed the term, becoming a desired type of consumer for some media producers. As touched on in Chapter Three, parallels can be drawn between fan and queer identification. As Foucault argues, in his iconic study *The History of Sexuality* (1978), doctors in the late nineteenth century made gay men into a species, a group of people defined not by their actions but by their affections.¹¹ This discourse, in turn, allowed gays and lesbians in the twentieth century to “speak on their own behalf, to demand that [their] legitimacy . . . be acknowledged.”¹² Several media fandoms, including the *Harry Potter* fandom, intersect readily with the LGBTQ+ community. Many have found that fandom provides the safety and means to “come out” as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, polyamorous, or queer. Fandom provides

¹⁰ Ibid.
¹² Ibid., 101.
freedom to be one’s unique self within “a context of close, caring relationships” along multiple vectors of identification.

When we consider the dimensions of “home” as a place for self-discovery, self-fulfillment, and safety, fandom is often presented as a point or place of arrival, the ending of a journey of self-discovery. Fairweather’s “Home” and its music video exemplify this. Mallett, paraphrasing Robert Ginsberg, writes, “. . . home is less about ‘where you are from’ and ‘more about where you are going.’”¹³ As destinations in the process of self-discovery, fans position fandom as something that is separate from everyday life and societal pressures. It is a place in which to find one’s self; it is also a place in which to escape.

This situating of fandom as an ideal destination, though, hides a dangerous assumption, that fandom is somehow exempt from the social inequalities that plague the real world. Issues of privilege—whether rooted in race, class, gender, or sexuality—are sometimes discussed at conventions or in online forums. However, as we will see in the wizard rock debates, fandom is frequently pitted as being better and safer than nonfandom spaces. Suggestions that inequalities exist and are perpetuated within fandom are often denied, and the people arguing for them are perceived as threatening that “safe space” of fandom, or undermining others’ personal experiences of freedom.

“The (Non?)Existence of Sexism in Wizard Rock”

The wizard rock community is a bit of an anomaly within the greater Harry Potter fandom. Though much of the larger Harry Potter fandom consists of women, men occupy the most prominent places in the wizard rock community. Apart from the Parselmouths and the

Switchblade Kittens, wizard rock’s pioneering bands consist entirely of men. Over the course of the movement, few female bands achieved success comparable to groups like Harry and the Potters, Draco and the Malfoys, the Whomping Willows, the Remus Lupins, Ministry of Magic, or the Mudbloods, to name a few. These all-male bands toured more and were featured more on MySpace Top Eight lists, EP releases, the Wizard Rock People’s Choice Awards, and important concerts. When compared with other contemporaneous fandoms that were also either female-dominated or equal in terms of the gender participation, wizard rock proved atypical.

Because of this gender disparity, several wizard rockers, primarily women in lesser-known bands, started to question whether wizard rock was inherently sexist. Their concerns were addressed in two online debates, posted in September 2009 on Wizrocklopedia and May 2010 on the Wrock Snob’s blog, respectively. The posts sparked fervent discussion in their comments sections among community leaders and members.

Wizrocklopedia, one of the central blog sites and archives for the wizard rock community, posted the transcript of a debate between Matt Maggiacomo of the Whomping Willows and Grace Kendall of the acoustic-folk band Snidget on September 2, 2009. This staged conversation served as part of the site’s Question Tuesday thread, where participants were invited to weigh in on a variety of topics, ranging from the trivial (“What type of merchandise would you like to see from your favorite musicians?”) to serious. Entitled “He Said/She Said: The (Non?)Existence of Sexism in Wizard Rock,” Maggiacomo and Kendall’s conversation classified as one of the latter.¹⁴

The *Wizrocklopedia* debate and its comments section shared remarkable similarities with the Wrock Snob’s later blog post titled, “Women in Wrock, Part 1 – In Defense of Men.”\(^\text{15}\) This was part of the site’s Extended Thoughts series, in which posts were more self-reflexive and introspective than the album reviews. As the title suggests, the post hoped to explain the gender disparity in the wizard rock community without seeming to “fall back” on sexism. It sparked significant discussion with ninety-five comments; original wizard rockers like Bradley Mehlenbacher, Brian Ross, Kristina Horner, and Matt Maggiacomo weighed in.

In both posts and their respective comments, Maggiacomo and several top-tier wizard rockers asserted that sexism was not “inherent in the structure of the wizard rock community” and was “never woven into the [its] fabric . . . , deliberately or otherwise.” A few participants, following Kendall’s lead, argued that sexism was present in the community, though “like many dangerous attitudes, it [was] a quiet and often unacknowledged presence.”\(^\text{16}\) She accepted Maggiacomo’s assertion that sexism was never intentionally brought into the community, but argued that this did not mean sexism was absent in the community. Both debates ended with most participants agreeing with Maggiacomo and the other top-tier musicians. Many ideas related to the concept of “fandom as home” undergirded their reasons.

The core of the defense rested on the assumption that the wizard rock community was a separate, secure, egalitarian space “in which any artist can thrive, regardless of gender.”\(^\text{17}\) As the representative for the defense in the *Wizrocklopedia* debate, Maggiacomo initially blamed the presence of sexism in the community on the actions of a few. He wrote, “If sexism exists, it’s


\(^{16}\) Grace Kendall, quoted in Freya, “He Said/She Said.”

\(^{17}\) Matt Maggiacomo, quoted in Freya, “He Said/She Said.”
perpetrated by specific individuals who do not represent the values of the larger community.”

In the comments, Lauren Fairweather went further, saying, “A lot of people who claim that there is sexism in wizard rock are females in smaller bands who feel like they don’t have the success they deserve. The worst (and only, really) case of blatant sexism I have encountered in this community was when a fellow female wizard rock band told me that I’m only successful because of my short skirts, [as] she was trying to prove to me that there is sexism in wizard rock.” Here, Maggiacomo and Fairweather claimed that women who were jealous over their lack of success in the community spoke sexism into existence.

Women wizard rockers were also blamed for casually perpetuating sexism. Stephanie Anderson commented, “I’ve had lots of people say things to me after a show such as ‘I didn’t like your music before I saw you play[,]’ or ‘I had no idea that you were so GOOD!’ . . . . Sure, some of [these comments] may have been because I’m a lady, but I’m choosing to think better of them. Oh, and did I mention that these comments are always from girls[?] Always. So, if there’s sexism in this community, it’s coming from our own team, ladies . . . and that is f*cked up.”

One reader, Julia, wrote, “Someone in this fandom once told me that she hates Wizard Rock, not because she can’t stand the music or the concept, but because it took Harry Potter fandom from being a female dominated creative fandom to being an outlet for the adoration of men. I was entirely too shocked to even argue back.” Maggiacomo responded, “. . . I kinda [sic] understand this. And that’s kinda what I was getting at when I said that females are as (if not more so) responsible for sexism in wizard rock as men. There are times when I’m just blown

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18 Ibid.
19 Lauren Myrtle, September 2, 2009 (8:07 PM), comment on Freya, “He Said/She Said.”
20 Steph, September 5, 2009 (1:19 AM), comment on Freya, “He Said/She Said.”
21 Julia, September 3, 2009 (12:46 AM), comment on Freya, “He Said/She Said.”
away by the creation and perpetuation of sex objects in this community – and lo and behold, most often the men are the objects and most of the creators are female.”

Maggiacomo, Fairweather, and Anderson’s responses demonstrate a misunderstanding of the nature of sexism or, more broadly, oppression. Political theorist Iris Marion Young writes, “Dominant political discourse may use the term *oppression* to describe societies other than our own, usually Communist or purportedly Communist societies . . . it is not legitimate to use the term *oppression* to describe our society, because oppression is the evil perpetrated by the Others.” In contrast, she argues that oppression is better understood as “the disadvantage and injustice some people suffer . . . because of the everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society. . . . Oppression in this sense is structural, rather than the result of a few people’s choices or policies.”

Because of their strong belief in the separateness and moral foundations of the wizard rock community, Maggiacomo, Fairweather, and Anderson see sexism as a power relationship that exists in the world outside of their community. They do not see that the community, too, is always and already sexist. Systemic inequalities like sexism are built into the very fabric of fan communities because they are embedded in Western culture.

The argument that sexism in the community was perpetrated by a select few, though, did not explain why all-male bands were disproportionately more visible in the community than all-female bands. Leaders had to find other means to explain this. The Wrock Snob’s blog post attempted to address the issue with mixed success. Bradley Mehlenbacher responded first to the post, “I don’t actually think there IS a [gender] disparity. See, we SEE a disparity, because the

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22 Whompy, September 3, 2009 (2:33 AM), comment on Freya, “He Said/She Said.”
24 Ibid.
most popular bands are mostly male, yes. But is there? No . . . The *HP* fandom is . . . probably 85% female. This [is] important, because, by and large, the fandom is WHERE the bands come from.”25 He argued that women comprise most of the hundreds of bands listed on *Wizrocklopedia*. Because “the limelight doesn’t circulate evenly,”26 men appeared to be more dominant. He did not attempt to explain why exposure in the community varied along gender lines.

Like Mehlenbacher, Maggiacomo posited in the *Wizrocklopedia* debate that “women have greater control of the community’s past, present, and future.”27 If women did not come to concerts and buy merchandise, he argued, the bands would not be successful. Maggiacomo further noted that women organized and ran all the major *Harry Potter* conventions and wizard rock events. From his perspective, women helmed the wizard rock community and made the subculture function.28

Maggiacomo’s two arguments, however, contradict each other. On the one hand, women are empowered by the community and exercise that power through their commercial choices. On the other hand, if sexism manifests in the community, it is their fault, since their commercial choices make male musicians more visible in the community than the women. Conveniently, both arguments absolve him and his male colleagues of any responsibility in the matter. Furthermore, he relegates women to the audience and the wings of convention spaces—places where faces are lost in the shadows and individuals meld into an indiscernible crowd. Women may make it all happen with their money and behind-the-scenes labor, but the uneven limelight that Mehlenbacher referenced rarely, if ever, shines on them.

25 Brad Ausrotas, May 19, 2010 (12:09 PM), comment on wrocksnob, “Extended Thoughts.”
26 Ibid.
27 Maggiacomo, quoted in Freya, “He Said/She Said.”
28 Ibid.
Maggiacomo and Mehlenbacher both formulate the wizard rock community as a largely female space, and they mean this in a progressive sense. However, their language concerning the visibility and relative power of women in the community oddly echoes nineteenth-century descriptions concerning the place of women in the private sphere of the home. Barbara Welter, in her essay, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860,” observes that women’s magazines and religious literature of the time theorized and encouraged a divide between the public and private spheres. “. . . [Men] were the movers, the doers, the actors,” while women, ideally, “work[ed] in silence, unseen.” Women were expected to embrace the “cult of domesticity” by working in the home and supporting their men, who traveled freely between the public and private spheres.

In her book investigating Victorian musicking and its discourses, musicologist Ruth A. Solie analyzes a comic allegory called “The Concert of Domestic Life” by the pseudonymous Teczoni. The text abounds in puns and jokes, but as Solie notes, “. . . its message is deadly serious: members of the family ensemble have specific and scripted roles to play . . .” In Teczoni’s fable, the mother or “woman of the house” is “Madame Violino primo.” Solie writes, “She is the centerpiece, the linchpin, of the ideology, as the first violin is of the ensemble. This does not mean, of course, that she is in control . . . within the domestic grouping her performance of her assigned role is the most conspicuous, the one to which, as the text tells us, ‘all other parts

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orient themselves.” Similarly, Maggiacomo and Mehlenbacher make women of prime importance to the wizard rock community yet confine them to less visible spaces.

As if he sensed the instability of the last argument, Maggiacomo addressed the visibility issue directly, writing, “Yes, males have been represented more frequently at major cons and on major compilations, but the ratios really aren’t that bad . . . . I think wizard rock represents a vast improvement over what you see in the mainstream music industry.” Indeed, in the context of the larger music industry, the disparity in the number of prominent all-male bands to all-female bands seems less problematic. Kendall responded to Maggiacomo’s point, saying, “On that note, I can agree with you completely. The wizard rock community is extremely accepting and fairly open-minded, and I definitely think the shared attitudes valued by the majority of the community are a major improvement over those of the mainstream music industry. There are plenty of wizard rockers, myself included, who would be doing very different things with their lives if it wasn’t for the kindness and support of this group.”

Other commenters connected this comparison to the music industry with the wizard rock community’s higher sense of morality. Georgia Riddle wrote, “Wizard rock is about the Harry Potter books. It’s so different from the Muggle music industry where all the female singers are expected to look like models, and people only listen to the male bands because they actually take them seriously. The same rules do not apply in wizard rock at all. We take every band seriously, and all it depends on is your music and how far you want to take it. Muggle music is where gender differences exist, but that is not the case in wizard rock.”

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33 Maggiacomo, quoted in Freya, “He Said/She Said.”
34 Kendall, quoted in Freya, “He Said/She Said.”
35 Georgia Riddle, September 4, 2009 (5:27 AM), comment on Freya, “He Said/She Said.”
In Georgia Riddle’s comment, the idea that the wizard rock community exists independently from the larger society resurfaces. The outside or “Muggle” world has sexist standards; the wizard rock community, in contrast, is more egalitarian and fair.\(^{36}\) Even though participants may not know the people, places, and processes that constitute the “mainstream music industry,” they have to believe that the wizard rock community is not only set apart from it, but that it has purposefully chosen to do so because of the values inspired by Harry Potter and his friends.

Because of the supposedly egalitarian nature of the community, many argued that the most popular bands’ success was dependent on their hard work and the quality of the music they produced, not their gender. They pointed to the fact that the most popular bands (i.e., Ministry of Magic, Oliver Boyd and the Remembralls, and Justin Flinch-Fletchley) were successful because of prior experience in the music industry, which gave those bands the tools to distribute their music broadly and tour extensively. Speaking on behalf of those who established themselves in true DIY-fashion, Maggiacomo foregrounded what they had to sacrifice in order to tour: he and Paul DeGeorge both left their day jobs, Joe DeGeorge gave up his high school and college summer vacations, Bradley Mehlenbacher sacrificed work and family time, Brian Ross turned his work into a job that he could take on the road with him, and Alex Carpenter put an acting career on hold.\(^{37}\)

Kristina Horner and Fairweather, as prominent female wizard rockers, seconded this argument with their own experiences. Horner credited the lesser success of the Parselmouths to the fact that she and Brittany Vahlerg were unable to tour because of school. She writes, “Had I the free time to tour back in 2006–2008, I never felt like being a female would have held me

\(^{36}\) “Muggle” refers to non-magical people and things in the \textit{Harry Potter} universe.
\(^{37}\) Maggiacomo, quoted in Freya, “He Said/She Said.”
back. The guys in the bands slightly more popular than mine were never anything but accepting, helping, and supportive of everything we were doing.”\(^{38}\) While she may be attesting to her age and relative place in life compared to the male wizard rockers, Horner’s comment speaks to the double standard between them: it was far more acceptable for the men put their career pursuits on hold while they pursued music careers than it was for the female musicians. Fairweather also attributed the lesser success of female wizard rock bands to the quality of the bands’ music.\(^{39}\) She experienced success without having to tour all that much, and so, in her experience, touring was helpful, but not vital, to the Moaning Myrtles’ success. If she wasn’t picked for a compilation or event, it signaled to her that she needed to work harder.

Though community leaders of both genders agree that this ought to be a nonissue, the heart of their argument relies on the meritocracy defense that is often used against women in the workplace.\(^{40}\) Men have advanced because of their past experiences in the “real” music industry, their self-sacrifice, and hard work. The unspoken part of that argument is that women, especially the ones who are complaining about the sexism in the first place, haven’t made it to the same level because they haven’t produced quality music or put in the necessary sacrifice and work. If these women want a stronger, more visible female presence in the wizard rock community, the onus is on them to make different choices, sacrifice more, work at self-promotion, tour more, and produce higher quality music.

These beliefs reflect the “freedom and control” that Mallett associates with the concept of “home as haven.” From the perspective of these top-tier musicians, female musicians’ choices determined their respective visibility. In a slight variant of this reasoning, female consumers

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38 Kristina, May 19, 2010 (5:14 PM), comment on wrocksnob, “Extended Thoughts.”
39 Lauren Myrtle, September 9, 2009 (8:07 PM), comment on Freya, “He Said/She Said.”
asserted their choices through the language of personal preference. One consumer wrote, “I, personally, prefer the male-fronted wrock bands just because I prefer male singers to female singers, I like male singing voices better than female singing voices. *shrugs*”41 An older participant who had two children echoed this sentiment on the Wrock Snob’s post, “Were I a more scientific sort, I’d offer the conjecture that as a largely female fanbase there’s something to the whole genetic imperative here (and in music in general), and offer support, but as it is I can only say that, as a general rule, I too prefer a male voice more often than not.”42 While this commenter entertains the notion that her tastes as a woman may be conditioned by something outside of herself, she ultimately resorts to the language of personal preference.

The Wizrocklopedia and Wrock Snob posts reflect many of the discourses circulating in the community at its height. Top-tier musicians dominated these conversations, reinforcing the belief that the wizard rock community served as a haven from the outside world and its systemic inequalities. In this space, musicians and consumers were free to make their own choices and articulate their preferences without fear of judgement. As was commonly argued, they were all fans of Harry Potter, and at the end of the day, that made them equal.

Power, Silence, and Micro-celebrity

In analyzing the Wizrocklopedia and Wrock Snob posts and their respective comments, I am not trying to ascribe malicious intent to any of these participants. The posts themselves were well-intentioned pieces of writing, and those who wrote them were participating in the spirit of promoting open dialogue in the community. Many of the top-tier musicians participated not because they wanted to exercise some dictatorial power but because they supported the blogs’

41 Joella, September 2, 2009 (8:20 PM), comment on Freya, “He Said/She Said.”
42 Court, May 20, 2010 (5:11 PM), comment on wrocksnob, “Extended Thoughts.”
values. Their personal experiences did not testify to the presence of sexism in the community (except, somehow, when introduced by young fan girls or jealous, less successful women). Despite their intent to participate in the conversations as equals, they did not realize the weight that their comments held in the community. They acted as community gatekeepers, discounting those who disagreed with them and encouraging those who did.43

With these “open discussions,” we must consider the flip side of this issue—the silences also represented by the debates. As much as discourses transmit, reproduce, and reinforce power, silence and secrecy shelter it.44 Few people agreed with Kendall in the Wizrocklopedia debate. The Wrock Snob, despite the controversial start to their blog earlier that year, started from a position of wanting to explain the gender disparity without resorting to gender inequality and gender relations. These discussions may have inadvertently fostered spaces where others were too timid to speak up. None of the women supposedly responsible for perpetrating sexism participated in the conversations. Furthermore, all the factors discussed in Chapter Two played a part in the popularity of the top-tier musicians, including Carpenter and Conard. The networks of power sheltered them.

It’s important to keep in mind that Carpenter and Conard were actively taking advantage of women when both these debates occurred. For all that Maggiacomo said on both blogs, the reservations that he and the other Northeast bands had about Carpenter when he first came to their attention are conspicuously absent. Melissa Anelli recounts that Carpenter, as part of his early online publicity, held contests on his MySpace page in which fans, mainly young women,

43 For example, Lauren Fairweather responded to Georgia Riddle’s remark about the differences between wizard rock and the “Muggle music industry” with “Georgia, you are beautiful. And I completely agree with you.” Lauren Myrtle, September 4, 2009 (10:20 AM), comment on Freya, “He Said/She Said.”
44 Foucault, History of Sexuality, Volume 1, 101.
could win opportunities to spend time with him.\textsuperscript{45} In our interview, Joe DeGeorge remembered that Carpenter advertised these contests as dates, which factored into the DeGeorges’ initial apprehension of him.\textsuperscript{46} It seems that Carpenter started targeting young women early in his career.

The Tumblr posts revealed that it was common for women to warn each other about Carpenter, Conard, and others, yet remain quiet in public fora. In her post, Jenn Hammond mourned

How it was commonplace when a fifteen-year old friend gets followed on Twitter by Jason Munday and you have to say, “Don’t get too friendly, you know how he is with young girls.”

How it was commonplace why, when people asked me why Ministry of Magic wasn’t playing at Wrockstock 2 and 3, I would shrug and say, “Well Jason and Luke got some underage girls drunk, and a lot of people were too sexual with each other.”

How it was commonplace to have a friend fall in love with Alex Carpenter and fly to LA to see him and have sex with him and hear how he says he loves them, only so he could dump them the next week for another girl. How it was commonplace for me to say, “Well, you know Alex, that’s just what he does. He’s slept with so many women, it’s no surprise.” How it was commonplace to see Alex drunk and making out with a different girl at each convention, usually on different nights of the same convention, and me wondering how many days it will take until he dumps them.\textsuperscript{47}

A culture of silence surrounded and protected the Remus Lupins and Ministry of Magic because they were so popular in the community. Summarizing these events, the Wrock Snob wrote to me, “[It] turned out that fostering a culture of unabashed adoration of young conventionally attractive white men among young high school girls was not actually a good idea. And a focus on a community of love and avoiding drama led to rampant abuse being silenced and swept under the carpet.”\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{45} Melissa Anelli, \textit{Harry, a History: The True Story of a Boy Wizard, His Fans, and Life Inside the Harry Potter Phenomenon} (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008), 129.
\textsuperscript{46} Joe DeGeorge, personal interview, July 31, 2014.
\textsuperscript{47} Hammond, “Since this is a thing that is going on.”
\textsuperscript{48} The Wrock Snob, email interview, August 19, 2016.
“The Weapon We Have is Love”

As these women came forward with abuse allegations, responses from leaders pointed back to the music and practices that differentiated the wizard rock community from others. In his Tumblr post Maggiacomo wrote about his struggles with the situation, having worked closely with Carpenter over the years. He urged wizard rockers to remember the important values of the community and signed his post with the phrase, “The Weapon We Have is Love,” the refrain from “The Weapon” by Harry and the Potters.49

Paul and Joe DeGeorge released “The Weapon” on their second album Voldemort Can’t Stop the Rock in 2005. The song is sung from Harry’s point of view, following the death of his godfather Sirius Black at the hands of the Death Eaters. It is perhaps the darkest moment in the series that its readers had experienced to date. Paul DeGeorge writes,

My brother and I have written a lot of songs about the Harry Potter book series. Some are romantic, some are trivial, and a few are just wholly sincere. “The Weapon” falls into this latter category. At its surface, the song is a self-assuring statement of purpose lending Harry comfort and encouragement in the developing war with Voldemort. But the song also broaches several of the major themes of the book series: selflessness, overcoming death, and the power of love as an enduring and potent weapon in the fight against evil. These themes resonate strongly with Harry Potter readers and our song has, I’ve been told, played a role in deepening that connection for some fans. The refrain of the song, ‘The weapon we have is love,’ became the de facto motto for the real-world Dumbledore’s Army, the Harry Potter Alliance . . . 50

“The Weapon” is a straightforward rock anthem. The original recording features Joe DeGeorge on keyboard, Paul DeGeorge on guitar, and their friend Ernie Kim on drums. The song alternates two verses with a chorus, all of which hint at the “one thing” that Harry and his friends have that their enemy doesn’t.

We may have lost Sirius Black
But we’re not turning back.
We will fight till we have won
And Voldemort is gone.

And I’m gonna do
Whatever it takes
I don’t care about whatever fate
That prophecy says
No, I’m not afraid. (x2)

Chorus
‘Cause there’s one thing that I’ve got
One thing that you’ve got inside you too
One thing that we’ve got
And the one thing we’ve got is enough
To save us all

Well we taught ourselves to fight
And we know that neither can live
While the other survives
And I know that that means me
But I’m glad we’ve got our army

And we’re gonna take down the Dark Lord’s crew
The Death Eaters will all be running from me and you
And you (x5)

Chorus
The weapon we have is love (x11)

The harmonies are built on progressions of I, V, vi, and IV, a familiar harmonic pattern found in many pop songs. The second chorus leads into a brief instrumental break, which itself crescendos into victorious and numerous repetitions of the refrain, “The weapon we have is love.”

Harmonically, the ending refrain is set over alternating I and V chords. Often, about midway through the refrain in live performances, the audience throws in an antiphonal response. This is a descending scalar line of eight statements of the word “love,” separated into two phrases with each starting on scale degree five. The first phrase ends on scale degree two to accommodate the
chord change to the dominant. The second phrase starts the same but cadences on the tonic. “The Weapon” is a simple song, but this simplicity allows it to be a heroic rock anthem and community-affirming ballad.

The 2011 recording of Harry and the Potters playing live at the New York Public Library demonstrates a more arena-rock rendition of the song. Joe DeGeorge typically begins “The Weapon” with a call-and-response with the audience, reminding and affirming them (with the occasional tongue-in-cheek digression) that they have the power to promote change in their world when they fuse love with rock-n-roll. It begins as a mid-tempo piece, gaining momentum through the verses and chorus. The audience sings along enthusiastically throughout the entire number. During the instrumental break, Joe encourages the audience to start jumping. This launches the band and the audience into the triumphant statements of the refrain. Like a charismatic religious service, the number allows the concert to end on a high note and sends out the audience out into the world following the rock version of a benediction.

“The Weapon” has also helped to ground and solidify the community during moments of duress. In 2010, the wizard rock community lost Esther Earl, an active member who died of lymphatic cancer at the age of sixteen. Throughout her illness, Earl remained active in the community by participating online, going to events like the earliest iterations of LeakyCon, and supporting the HPA’s social justice campaigns. When she died, the community keenly felt her loss. Many, including Harry and the Potters, knew that “The Weapon” was among her favorite wizard rock songs. Because of this, Harry and the Potters often perform the song at events connected with This Star Won’t Go Out, a non-profit organization started by Earl’s parents that

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provides financial support to families whose children are also suffering from life-threatening cancers.

YouTube user Lish Ventura posted a recording of what seems to be an impromptu performance of “The Weapon” by Harry and the Potters at the 2014 book release of This Star Won’t Go Out, the memoir composed of Esther’s letters and artwork as well as contributions from people who knew her. The video, probably from the user’s smartphone, is shot from under the lid of a baby grand piano. It focuses on Joe DeGeorge on the keyboard, and Paul is just off-camera to the left, though he does pop his head briefly into frame towards the end of the first chorus.\textsuperscript{52}

This performance demonstrates the versatility of the song. Its simple harmonic pattern allows the DeGeorges to perform it anywhere. The grand piano’s cleaner timbre allows Joe to add melodic flourishes to the accompaniment that aren’t as feasible on electronic keyboard. Though Joe leads a version of the song’s introductory shtick, it begins with a more solemn quality. Joe reminds everyone that they have gathered to honor Esther Earl because she believed in the power of love. Once the song’s lyrics start, the DeGeorges do little in terms of leading the song. The crowd around the piano knows it well, and they sing out fully. The refrain also plays out beautifully. With each statement of the lyrics, Joe encourages the crowd to wail the word “love” on the dominant scale degree, rather than allowing the melody to cadence on the tonic. Once he manages that, he throws in the contrapuntal line in the accompaniment, which several participants quickly latch onto. The song ends with half of the audience singing the refrain and the other half singing the contrapuntal descending line. Just as Harry “sings” this song after

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\textsuperscript{52} “Harry and the Potters-The Weapon (LIVE at This Star Won’t Go Out in Natick, MA),” YouTube video, 7:22, posted by “Lish Ventura,” February 2, 2014, 
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6cNeWhVmu4Y.
\end{flushleft}
losing his godfather, the Harry Potter fan community sings it after losing one of their own to cancer. In both cases, the loss may be discouraging, but it does not stop Harry and his friends, or by extension, the fan community, from moving on and continuing to fight evil in honor of those whom they have lost.

When I attended LeakyCon in the summer of 2014, Harry and the Potters chose to end their set with “The Weapon.” The song began in the usual manner, with a call-and-response led by Joe DeGeorge. The accompaniment, once the song began, was kept at a minimum. Paul DeGeorge kept the tempo at a moderately slow pace through his strumming, and Joe used an organ-like setting on his keyboard. Bradley Mehlenbacher from Draco and the Malfoys performed as their drummer that night, but he sat out of this song. At the end of the second verse where the song typically gains momentum, the DeGeorges lessened the accompaniment even more, only playing discreet chord changes and allowing the audience members to sing. Rather than ending with a triumphant mosh pit, the song took on a quieter, more sincere turn. Though participants might have anticipated the typical victorious mosh pit, they adjusted mid-song to the more contemplative mood and started to sway back and forth, with their hands lifted above their heads, forming hearts with their fingers.

At the time, I was unaware of what had transpired in the community with regards to Alex Carpenter and Luke Conard. Looking back now, I sense that the quieter version of “The Weapon” was purposeful. Harry Potter fans at LeakyCon needed to remind themselves and each other about the values that were important to them. The sexual abuse revelations were, at its heart, losses for the community, which not only lost a key member of the early movement, but

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had their moral standards put severely to the test. They needed to come together musically and communally to heal, which “The Weapon” helped them do. This performance could also be read as part of a concerted effort to help the community heal and renew its commitment to a higher moral standard.

**Positive Fandom**

In many ways, 2014 proved to be a crucible for the wizard rock community, and leaders used the moment to mobilize it into concrete action—to make the discourse of “safe space” and “home” into a reality for all its members. Stacy Pisani of Swish and Flick, wrote the following on her Tumblr,

CALLING ALL GIRLS, WOMEN, FEMINISTS (both female and male), MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS, SISTERS: TAKE BACK OUR FANDOM!

. . . It has already been said that this fact (lots of girl fans, lots of boy bands) was a contributing factor to creating the atmosphere in which abuse could take place. I don’t need to go into that any more than I just have.

But it was not THE reason it happened. The majority of the males in wizard rock did not manipulate girls and were just there to make music and perform it for their friends and for their extended wizard family. What drew me into the wrock community in the first place was the fact that there was no distinction between bands and fans. We were all fans of Harry Potter. There was no fourth wall; no barrier. What these douchebags did was take advantage of this lack of a barrier and the willingness of others to elevate their status to “famous”. Nobody is to blame but the douchebags themselves. I don’t blame the fans. I don’t blame the openness of the community . . .

In wizard rock, it is perfectly OK to interact with the bands because they are fans of Harry Potter just like you are. They are not above you. They can be your friend, and you can be their friend. It is extremely unfortunate (and pisses me the fuck off) that this openness is the main contributing factor that led to the manipulation of girls by male wrockers and YouTubers.

But this openness is also what will save us as a community in this time of adversity. We NEED to prevent this barrier between bands and fans from ever going up. There should not be separation of fans and bands. Bands should not be hoisted on the stage and elevated to the status of untouchable celebrity . . . . The lack of a barrier is what makes wizard rock special. It is what makes it accessible to all, as music enthusiasts and as
music writers. We are truly a family. I have always felt this way - the wrock family embraced my family and loved us as much as I loved everyone. I will not let a couple of self-important womanizing douchebags destroy my family.\textsuperscript{54}

Pisani invokes many of the same discourses used in the \textit{Wizrocklopedia} and WrockSnob posts, yet she also transforms the defenses into reasons to reform. Like these earlier posts, Pisani recognizes that the wizard rock and Harry Potter fandoms have more women than men. She calls to them, challenging them to step away from the sidelines. While recognizing that the gender disparity contributed to an environment in which Carpenter and others could take advantage of their female fans ("lots of girl fans, lots of boy bands"), she also absolves the community at large and places the blame squarely on the perpetrators. She passionately reminds them that wizard rock is different from the mainstream music industry, supporting the claim with her own experiences in both the nonfandom rock music scene and the wizard rock community. If anything, she argues that the community needs to lean into its values, to be even more open in a time of hardship. Pisani closes her post using the "fandom as family" metaphor and honoring the women who chose to speak out.

When I interviewed Melissa Anelli, she specifically mentioned wanting to impact fan culture by making it an “open and accepting place that values—above all—fairness, diversity, [and] feminism.” She continued, “We want to make geekdom a safe place and try to eradicate some of the baser things that have come along with it.”\textsuperscript{55} Recent events forced her and other leaders to recognize that fan spaces are not always the safe places that they are extolled to be. Rather than lamenting that fact, they moved to encourage reform within the community in online and offline spaces.

\textsuperscript{55} Melissa Anelli, personal interview, August 3, 2014.
Working together with the executive staff of LeakyCon and Fiction Alley, an online archive dedicated to *Harry Potter* fan fiction, the HPA launched a new campaign called “Positive Fandom” on July 14, 2014. Taking the form of a contract, “Positive Fandom” articulated many of the ideas and values that had always been important to the organization and the Harry Potter and wizard rock fan community; however, by plainly stating these values and asking their members to sign, leaders encouraged participants to reflect and renew their commitment to the values. In the opening statement the authors expressed their affection for fandom and explained the need for change in the community. The statement of purpose was followed by a list of ten points. The original version of the website had a form at the bottom, which community members could electronically sign; later, they removed the form, but the agreement remains online.\(^56\)

“Positive Fandom” is both comprehensive and specific in scope. For example, the fourth point states, “I will imagine people complexly” and the following text accompanies it:

I will remember that everyone I meet is a human being as susceptible to misunderstandings and errors as I am. I will remember that I do not always have the full story or know what a person is thinking and that others do not know the same about me. I will remember that this is true even for the most visible members of a community and that idolization and demonization are both forms of dehumanization. I will be conscious of my influence - whether it comes from age, experience, or following - and how it impacts my interactions with others. I will remember that groups are made up of unique individuals.\(^57\)

This point, without naming names or pointing specifically to any perpetrators, addresses the idolatrous practices that allowed Carpenter, Conard, and other musicians in the wizard rock and Nerdfighter communities to take advantage of their female fans. “Positive Fandom” asks that everyone who signs the agreement actively practice kindness, especially online. From there, the


\(^{57}\) Ibid.
other positive-fandom characteristics flow—hospitality, openness to teaching and learning, acceptance, the acknowledgement of diversity, generosity, and self-care. Though it was a top-down initiative, flowing from the fandom’s leadership, the formatting of it as a contract or formal document encouraged the fans to step up and officially own the discourses of the community—to turn the rhetoric into action.

The HPA also started the Granger Leadership Academy (GLA) in the fall of 2014. In contrast to the larger fan conventions like LeakyCon or GeekyCon, the GLA brings together fans for the express purpose of cultivating leaders and social justice activists. Based on the HPA’s narrative leadership model which “uses parallels from the fictional content world as an impetus for civic action,” the GLA draws inspiration from popular heroes both inside and outside of the Harry Potter universe.\(^\text{58}\) These include Katniss Everdeen from Suzanne Collins’ YA series The Hunger Games, Korra from the Nickolodean animated series The Legend of Korra, and Luke Skywalker from George Lucas’s Star Wars film trilogy. However, the fact that the campaign is named after Hermione Granger, the key strong female character in the Harry Potter series cannot be overlooked. Empowering the largely female Harry Potter fan community is at the heart of the GLA.

The first expressly feminist wizard rock anthem came out of the inaugural meeting of the GLA. Stephanie Anderson gave a speech called “#YesAllWitches: Identity, Fandom, and Finding Your Voice.” Even though feminism was one of the core causes of the HPA and the community is “dominated by female nerds,” Anderson felt that the organization had done little with it. She wanted to encourage the men and women present at the GLA and the HPA at large to

“get more vocal and involved with feminism.” Her speech focused on the impact that personal identity has on how one is perceived and how one perseveres and leads, even if those initial outside perceptions of oneself are presented as obstacles. Citing Oprah Winfrey, Margaret Thatcher, Steve Jobs, Walt Disney, and of course, J. K. Rowling as examples, she argued that these people had aspects of their identities—their race, gender, age, or passion projects—presented to them as reasons for why they would never succeed. Yet, despite such obstacles early in their careers, these people used those very aspects of their identities to achieve phenomenal success. Anderson also drew on her own experiences of starting a wizard rock band as a woman who plays electric guitar, though the scene was dominated by electric-guitar-playing men and acoustic-guitar-playing women.

Anderson based her speech and subsequent song on a transformation of the Twitter hashtag and social media campaign #YesAllWomen. As a woman in fandom who had experienced her fair share of discrimination, she wanted to write a song for women in fandom that wasn’t about a man or a potential romance—a wizard rock song (or perhaps more apropos, a “witch rock” song) of sorts that could pass the Bechdel test.

60 This hashtag surfaced in the wake of Isla Vista killings. On May 23, 2014, Elliot Rodger went on a shooting spree through the Southern California town. Prior to embarking on the rampage that killed six and injured fourteen people, he uploaded a YouTube video and emailed a statement called “My Twisted Life” to friends and family. The video and his email detailed his lifelong frustration with his inability to have a girlfriend, his hatred toward men who seemed to have a more enjoyable dating life, and his aversion to interracial couples. The media connected the mass shooting with Rodger’s misogyny and racism. In response, men started to defend themselves against what they perceived to be an attack on men using the Twitter hashtag #NotAllMen. “Not all men” were like Rodger, nor would they commit such a crime. This, in turn, spurned the creation of the hashtag #YesAllWomen by an anonymous woman. Millions of women and men latched onto this hashtag to recount, in 140 characters or less, the overt and subtle sexism that they had experienced or witnessed. See Sasha Weiss, “The Power of #YesAllWomen,” The New Yorker, May 26, 2014, http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-power-of-yesallwomen.
The song pivots on a chorus in which the audience chants “Yes! All! Witches!” four times. Once the audience learns the chant, Anderson launches into a simple I-IV-V progression. The verses are sandwiched between four iterations of the chorus.61

Chorus
Yes! ALL! Witches! (x4)

If the patriarchy is holding you down
Stand strong together with us
If you’re a wizard in the crowd
Questioning if you’re good enough
Let me hear you say

Chorus

Hundreds of years of systematic oppression
Is gonna bring around a little bit of aggression
So saddle up your thestrals,
Because we’ve seen things you can't believe!

Chorus

We’re not about world domination
Just equal representation
We are the voice of a generation
Let me hear you Hogwarts nation

If you wanna be a badass witch . . .
Become a feminist!

Chorus

The first two lines of each stanza focus on the systematic oppression that women have experienced in Western culture for centuries; they encourage solidarity while also recognizing that being discontent and expressing it is normal. The second half of each stanza has the “wizard or witch rock” twist. For the wizard rock community, identifying as a witch or wizard has always

been a metaphor for the aspects of identity that are non-normative. The community, referred to as “Hogwarts nation,” works to celebrate those differences and transform them into motivations for social change.

Like “The Weapon,” “Yes All Witches” best communicates its message through live performance. Anderson notes, “[It] wasn’t until I started playing it live that it really came into its own. Everywhere I play, whether it's a small library or a huge nerd con, I see women and men shouting back ‘YES ALL WITCHES’ and it makes me feel like a legitimate rock star.”62 Like Harry and the Potters are able to do in “Dumbledore” and “The Weapon,” Anderson leads a ritual in which the men and women of the community internalize the song’s message and perform it back to her; through that moment of musicking, the imagined ideals of the community become real. Unlike previous wizard rock songs, “Yes All Witches” recognizes that the community is not already ideal. To make their fandom and their larger society better, wizard rockers must work together. “Home” is not where they are; they must “saddle up their thestrals” to get there.63 These leadership initiatives, new programs, and songs have all contributed to the grassroots, progressive edge that the wizard rock community has adopted in the last three years, and they have breathed new life into the community. There is an increased awareness that fandom is not always what it claims to be, and that making it a home and safe space for its participants is an active work-in-progress.

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62 Anderson, email interview.
63 Thestrals are forest-dwelling winged horses that can only be seen if a witch or wizard has witnessed another person’s death. Thestrals become visible to Harry after he witnesses the death of Cedric Diggory in Book Four, The Goblet of Fire. In later novels, they become a convenient form of magical transportation.
CONCLUSION

It is December 16, 2017, and I am back at the Brooklyn Yule Ball. It’s my fourth consecutive Yule Ball since beginning the fieldwork for this dissertation. Unlike my first few wizard rock concerts where I dressed in “Muggle” clothes, I now sport black pants, a white button-up shirt, and a Hufflepuff (i.e., gold and black) belt and necktie. My hair is parted and styled into two buns so I look like my Hogwarts avatar that a website generated for me a few years ago. I say hello to Brian Ross, Lauren Fairweather, and the DeGeorges, though I’m not sure how well they remember me from our interviews three and a half years ago. This year’s Yule Ball features the reunion of Nina Jancowicz and Lauren Fairweather, also known as the Moaning Myrtles. All the favorite songs are played, but there is the sense that everyone has matured. There are references to marriages and kids, to perspectives that have changed with time. A group of Draco and the Malfoys fans requests a song that hasn’t been played since the first Christmas wizard rock compilation (“Voldemort is Coming to Town”), and Brian Ross wonders aloud whether he can remember the song. After the Moaning Myrtles’ set, the request for “one more song” leads Jancowicz to confess that they played all the songs they practiced; after Fairweather figures out a chord progression on her guitar, the encore happens with some bewildered and amused glances tossed between the two women as they recall the song on the spot. I leave happy, voice hoarse from singing along, and musing on my experiences as I have worked on this project.

In this dissertation I covered three fan musicking communities that, despite similar discourses, represent distinct moments in the development of media fandom. Inspired by the mid-twentieth-century American folk revival, the filk community appeals primarily to Baby Boomers and Generation Xers who remember what fandom was like before the Internet became
quotidian. Wizard rock, influenced by the punk scenes of the 1980s and -90s, appeals to older Millennials who, as teenagers, experienced the Internet and social media platforms in their beta stages and used them to connect and share their love of the *Harry Potter* novels. Team StarKid and AVbyte, which arose in the post-Internet world, appeals primarily to younger Millennials, who may vaguely remember what life before the Internet was like but for whom online interaction is more the norm than not.

Face-to-face and online interactions occur in all three communities, but the ratio between the two varies among the communities studied here. For filkers, face-to-face interaction, primarily through conventions and filk circles, is of utmost importance; interactions via social media tie the community together when members are not in the same geographic location. For wizard rockers, online interaction was vital to the development of the community and is still important in its ability to knit the community together; however, live performance, where wizard rock bands meet wizard rock fans face-to-face, is where the “magic” of the community happens. Community interactions in the StarKid and AVbyte communities happen almost entirely online; there are select opportunities, primarily at large conventions or meet-and-greets, where fans can meet the content creators, but these are few and far between.

A similar continuum exists between a community’s preference for participatory or performance-oriented activities. As epitomized by the filk circle, filkers place more emphasis on group participation. Community members move smoothly between the roles of performer and audience member. Occupying the mid-ground again, wizard rockers perform primarily on stage, which implies a stricter boundary between performer and audience member; however, they seek to minimize this divide with call-and-response, audience sing-alongs, and group choreography. Team StarKid and AVbyte fall on the opposite side of the continuum with their strict divide
between performers and audience members. In these online communities, audience participation is limited to supporting production efforts and sharing content.

The stronger the divide between performers and audience members is in the community, the more professional and commercial they are. Filk music, with the community’s emphasis on group participation, is overwhelmingly amateur and meant for small, more intimate spaces. The more professional filkers are also more prone to make their music commercially available.

Wizard rock has a larger number of musicians who perform on a semi-professional or professional level. They are more likely than filkers to use amplification technology in live performance settings and to record and sell their music. Lastly, Team StarKid, AVbyte, and other YouTube musicians are most likely to be professionally trained and to put their music or productions on YouTube where they can profit from ad revenue and production-affiliated merchandise.

When mapped along these continuums, fan musicking communities call into question Busse and Hellekson’s distinction between transformative and affirmative fans. These designations oversimplify the dynamics of the relationships between members of fan creative communities. Each of the communities studied here have transformative and affirmative fans, and I would argue that the same applies to fan fiction, fan vid, and cosplay communities as well.

Much of the literature on fan creative communities has focused on how participatory, egalitarian, and amateur-oriented they are. What I have attempted to show in this dissertation is that this literature, in doing so, has only reinforced these communities’ discourses about themselves and effectively left the study of them in the past. It is a skewed, falsely idyllic image. As fan studies scholars, we need to consider how our work interacts with fan rhetoric. Why have we hesitated to critique our fandoms of study? Why, even as the discipline has accrued a
required reading list, have we chosen, more often than not, to “accent the positive?” Is it to make our discipline more acceptable to wider academic audiences? Is it that we do not want to offend our sources so that we can reenter those spaces for further research or simply as fans ourselves? Why are our sources—and by extension, why are we—reluctant to discuss the less savory or hierarchical aspects of fandom? Fan studies scholars need to address power structures and the construction of “big name fan” identities, as well as how racial, gender, and class inequalities manifest within fandoms and fanships of all types.

In interrogating certain practices, highlighting contradictions between practice and rhetoric, and pressing into the trying moments in these communities, I wanted to challenge the representations of fan musicking communities found in both fan and scholarly discourses. Just because everyone involved is a fan doesn’t necessarily mean that the community will be egalitarian; in fact, it is more likely to hierarchize. When fans in these communities refuse to recognize this, that is when the welcoming spaces of fandom develop the potential to exclude or hurt participants. Musical performances model ideal relationships in a community, but this does not mean that the community consistently lives out those ideal relationships. There are always and already tensions in fan communities that they need to be interrogated more, not mitigated or avoided. These communities are not set apart from societies. They are firmly embedded within them, and thus reflect the good, the bad, and the ugly.
APPENDIX: INTERVIEW SUBJECTS

Stephanie Anderson
   Affiliation: Tonks and the Aurors, wizard rock
   Date: August 3, 2014 (in person); February 7, 2016 (email)

Melissa Anelli
   Affiliation: Mischief Management (Executive Director)
   Date: August 13, 2014

Joe DeGeorge
   Affiliation: Harry and the Potters, wizard rock
   Date: July 31, 2014

Michelle Dockrey and Tony Fabris
   Affiliation: Vixy & Tony, filk
   Date: January 31, 2015

Adam Dubberly
   Affiliation: The Mudbloods, wizard rock
   Date: August 2, 2014

Lauren Fairweather
   Affiliation: The Moaning Myrtles, wizard rock
   Date: August 1, 2014

Andrew Fox
   Affiliation: Team StarKid, orchestrator – *Twisted: The Untold Story of a Royal Vizier*
   Date: August 7, 2014

A.J. Holmes
   Affiliation: Team StarKid, composer – *Twisted: The Untold Story of a Royal Vizier*
   Date: August 16, 2014

Nick Lang
   Affiliation: Team StarKid (co-founder)
   Date: August 2, 2014

Matt Maggiacomo
   Affiliation: The Whomping Willows, wizard rock
   Date: August 1, 2014

Kaley McMahon
   Affiliation: Team StarKid, lyricist – *Twisted: The Untold Story of a Royal Vizier*
   Date: August 7, 2014

Bradley Mehlenbacher and Brian Ross
   Affiliation: Draco and the Malfoys, wizard rock
   Date: August 3, 2014

Joe Moses and Tessa Netting
   Affiliation: Team StarKid (formerly), YouTube personalities
   Date: August 2, 2014
Antonius and Vijay Nazareth
  Affiliation: AVbyte, composer and director, respectively
  Date: September 11, 2014
Scott and Kirsten Vaughan
  Affiliation: The Blibbering Humdingers, wizard rock
  Date: September 1, 2014
The Wrock Snob
  Affiliation: The Wrock Snob blog, wizard rock
  Date: April 13, 2016 (email); August 19, 2016 (email)
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