

**TESSA VANNIEUWENHUYZE**

*Ghent University, Belgium*

*Intermediality in Theatre and Performance WG*

**CONNAN MOCKASIN AS MR BOSTYN: THE POPULAR MUSIC ARTIST IN DISGUISE, THE PERFORMANCE PRACTITIONER AS POPULAR MUSIC ARTIST**

**ABSTRACT**

*The cross pollination between popular music and theatre/performance shows up most pertinently in what performance theorist Philip Auslander coined as the 'musical persona': a performed presence in between the 'actual' identity of the performer and a fictional character (2021; 2006). The online stages that social media propose have significantly intensified popular music artists' identity performances (Hansen 2019). In my research project *Staging the Musical Self(ie)*, I gauge how the marginalized identities that (online) music personas subvert, entangle with the cultural dominance of (social) media screens. At this stage of my research, I tap into indie musician Connan Mockasin, whose music persona hosts, among others, the particularly theatrical music teacher Mr Bostyn and his fictitious band Jassbusters. By discussing his multi-layered persona practice, that delivers an exceptional performance situation both on the concert stage and online, I aim to initiate a dialogue with another segment of my research that digs into performance-trained practitioners who deliberately play with an identity performance as music artist (e.g. Mathias Ringgenberg's PRICE, Ivo Dimchev).*

*This paper presentation in other words challenges centre and periphery through the lens of musical persona in the social media era. The co-figuration of artists' extravagant self-presentations alongside ordinary-looking (yet equally heavily curated) online personas makes apparent how the ever-present stage of social media has drawn the mainstream and the marginal closer together. By holding Mockasin's persona against increasingly entangled understandings of the notions performativity and theatricality, I ask: what is it exactly that the framework of theatre and performance renders intelligible in popular music artists' engagement with (extra)ordinary identity performances?*

**CV**

*Tessa Vannieuwenhuyze obtained a master's in Art History, Musicology and Theatre Studies at Ghent University (2017) and an advanced master's in Literary Studies at KULeuven (2018). Her research project *Staging the Musical Self(ie). An Interdisciplinary approach to the Subversive Potential of Musical Performance in Times of Social Media*, funded by FWO and supervised by Prof. dr. Christel Stalpaert (Ghent University) and co-supervised by Prof. dr. Abigail de Kosnik (UC Berkeley), concentrates on popular music artist's identity performances in the social media era. Tessa is also on shared dramaturgical duty for performance collective oester.*

## Connan Mockasin as Mr Bostyn: the popular music artist in disguise, the performance practitioner as popular music artist

This conference paper on the work of indie musician Connan Mockasin is situated within my research on the concept of musical persona performance between popular music scenes and the contemporary performing arts. Before turning to the work of Connan Mockasin, and the relation between the character of Mr. Bostyn and another album that he made together with his father, I would like to situate this paper within my broader research project called *Staging the Musical Self*(ie). Within this project, I concentrate on the musical persona, “a performed presence that is neither a fictional character nor equivalent to the performer’s real identity”, as coined by performance theorist Philip Auslander. First, I wrote about artists from a pre- and proto-social media era; artists who have I have closely followed as a fan myself and which I found to be related, in all their unlikeliness, within their approaches of presenting a persona. These cases are thus set within a representational media regime, which is a term that I borrow from the field of *Persona Studies*. This distinction between representational media and presentational media, is key to the argument I have been developing, which is that persona performance seems to have moved from the ‘creation’ of a persona (i.e., playing a ‘character’), to ‘curating’ a persona (highlighting, selecting and stylizing facets of one’s own identity as a music performer that are more in line with an aesthetics of everydayness, ordinariness).

This shift brings me to my overarching research question, which deals with the intensified interaction between contemporary theatre & performance and popular music, more specifically in the recurring phenomenon of performance and theatre practitioners who incorporate the shifted identity performance of the popular music artist into their staged presence. The two cases that I look into are Ivo Dimchev, a Bulgarian icon of radical performance, and PRICE, the name that the Swiss-Brazilian Mathias Ringgenberg adopts. While both are rooted in contemporary theatre and performance, they actually present us with material associated with popular music artists. Dimchev, for example, started calling himself a singer-songwriter some time ago already, after also participating in the British X-Factor contest, and now predominantly plays concerts in which he performs his self-released songs that are a massive success on YouTube and Spotify; Ringgenberg released his first album last year on an experimental music label, after previously having made several performance pieces that centred this persona-like PRICE figure.

When comparing Ivo Dimchev’s Instagram profile to that of indie musician and producer Yves Tumor, a music artist who has been known to take on a variety of cinematic roles in his music videos, it is curious to notice how Tumor has labelled their Instagram account as ‘theatrical play’, while Dimchev has tagged his page under the category ‘musician/band’. In order to further

dissect this crosspollination between performance practitioners adopting the identity performance of music artists, I depart indeed from the reverse side of the coin through the case of indie musician Connan Mockasin, an who both presents an everyday-looking social media era persona, and explicitly introduces a theatrical framework.

In 2018, Mockasin's third album *Jassbusters* introduced the fictional band of retiring music teachers of the same name. Even when the outsiderness that the musician cultivated over the course of his career never shied away from theatrical imagery, the Jassbusters concerts, of which I attended the Ghent Handelsbeurs show in October 2018, proposed an even more exceptional performance set-up. The evening opened with a screening of *Belly Bubble*, the first episode a “five-part melodrama” and a “television series” called *Bostyn 'n Dobsyn*, directed by and starring the musician himself. Besides an earlier music video that featured parts of this episode, this was the audience's first introduction to protagonists Mr. Bostyn - the role of the musician-turned-music teacher that Mockasin adopts -, and his pupil Dobsyn, whom Mr. Bostyn believes to be a girl named Josie and develops an infatuation with.

Fans are up until this day left in the dark about when and whether they will get to see the other 4 parts, but the first episode unfolds the flirtation between Mr. Bostyn and his object of affection Dobsyn, all set in a classroom environment made from silly-looking cardboard elements. The sequence of scenes is funny, but on the verge of uncanny, mostly because of the awkward conversations and interactions between this teacher asking his student to stay behind and trying to impress them by watching recordings of his former glory as a front man. The most disturbing moment is undeniably the moment when Bostyn drinks beer from Dobsyn's belly button – hence the title of this episode. The screening came to an end when both characters sit in front of a television, and the camera zooms in on the tiny television device that shows a *Jassbusters* concert – which is also the image used for the cover of the first album. After that, a dressed up Mockasin with his band would take the stage for a *Jassbusters* concert, after which they concluded the evening with a ‘normal’ Connan Mockasin set.

The fictional narrative of *Jassbusters* undeniably affects Mockasin's persona. Building onto Auslander's distinction between song character, performance persona and real person, the introduction of Mr. Bostyn points towards what philosopher Ley D. Cray identifies as an opaque persona, which is natural to assume when, with respect to personas and persons, we *cannot* see through one to the other. Although I do not entirely align with Cray and Auslander, in the sense that I approach this musical persona in itself as a totality, an entity that comprises various layers and elements, such as for example, fictional characters, I do believe that “informed judgments about the transparency or opacity of a persona” (Cray 2019, 189) are helpful to make sense of what popular music artists perform. The look of the tacky tour posters, as well as this text for the

*Jassbusters 2* album that reads as the opening scene of a TV series and even hints at the genre of fictional band film, suggest how Mockasin's portrayal of Mr. Bostyn is indeed close to the genuinely fictional character that an opaque persona borders.

Yet, there is also the nickname Conn Conn in one of the single's lyrics, which implies the presence of the Connan we know in the universe of Mr. Bostyn, and video material from a Q&A that preceded a Rough Trade live session out of which the mini-LP Connan Mockasin as Mr. Bostyn resulted. In the video, Mockasin and Blake Pryor, his former neighbour with whom he invented the series twenty years ago as a teenager, appear in Bostyn 'n Dobsyn attire, yet are likewise announced by the moderator of the event as 'Blake and Connan', the creators of Bostyn 'n Dobsyn, which is unlike 'normal' film actors at a PR-event. Within the tripartite division of the shows and the explicit cross-references between the world of Mr. Bostyn and Connan Mockasin, the transparent deliberately shimmers through the opaque, since Mockasin actively incorporates (into his persona) the parameters of the fictional space that functions as a vehicle for theatricality and therefore also urges viewers to perceive certain relations within that space. Because, even when *Jassbusters* plays with a certain era's aesthetic and musical legacy, the series revolves around this homoerotic tension between the teacher and a student, which is basically a power relation that passed unnoticed in an age and time where the #metoo was raging on in the broader performing arts sector. One could therefore wonder about the potential correlation between the tolerated transgressive nature of *Jassbusters'* content and the opaque persona's installation of a theatrical frame. Under the guise of absurdism, Mockasin's appearance as Mr. Bostyn oscillates between the actual world of Mockasin the music performer and the fictional universe of the *Jassbusters*, which causes a cleft in reality that very much functions as part and parcel of his persona, a performance in which the transparent hacks the opaque.

Mockasin's next artistic move during the summer of 2021 deliberately fostered that same friction. In between the *Jassbusters* albums, the artist deviated again from the relative opacity that Mr. Bostyn had installed with an album that he made together with his father Ade Hosford, *It's Just Wind*. The story behind this unlikely collaboration, as prominently present in the promotional discourse, involves a future teller urging Mockasin to no longer postpone a project with his father, who had suffered a cardiac arrest some time before. Not long after, Mockasin took his father and his band into a recording studio in Texas, where the majority of the album magically came together after a first jetlagged evening with a few margaritas. Cray understands an artist to have a transparent, or sincere persona, when they endorse the stances or artistic values that their public image suggests in their personal life. And what could be legitimizing one's sincerity as an artist more than collaborating with one's own father? The YouTube documentary that came with the album, with its subversive clickbait title and thumbnail signalled that there might be something more at stake though.

With its “combination of performance footage, interviews, and undirected material” (Barker 2014, 5) the video hints at several codes and conventions of the rockumentary. We get to see father and son in their home environment and a recording studio, while Ade, talking heads style, delivers his account of the album’s unique genesis. What makes the entire video so funny and ‘real’ at the same time, is the tension between father and son’s vernacular performance (such as for example the album’s title *It’s Just Wind* that is said to be a retort Ade’s father used whenever he broke wind), and the mythic dimensions of the ‘making-off’ format that it somehow replicates. The Ade documentary in other words plays with the highly scripted narration that characterizes the documentary ‘making-of’ format for albums that have become ‘classics’ over time (such as the British *Classic Albums* series) by holding it against the so-called unmediated gaze of the rockumentary. This causes an interaction between documentary display and the category of the performative that connects well with Cray’s distinction between a transparent persona as set apart from acting, yet still the result of a (performative) act.

Through reading Mr. Bostyn in tandem with this collaboration with his father, including the linkage with the format of fictional band film and rockumentary, I wanted to demonstrate how Mockasin’s multilayered persona profusely acts upon the performative nature of a music artist’s identity in general, both transparent and opaque. The way in which Mockasin indirectly shapes his identity through the Ade album is therefore not a literal reversal of the popular music artist ‘in disguise’, as my second subtitle might have misleadingly suggested. It rather touches upon the parallel between Mockasin’s subversion of music artists’ identity performance, by working from the overlapping margins of established identity scripts, and the work of performance practitioners who similarly shift center when they place their identification as a popular music artist at the core of their artistic practice, which similarly fuses the frameworks of the opaque acting out of fictional characters and the equally carefully curated act of the transparent persona.

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