

ByteNoise

Fanatics Versus the Laity

As with any other medium of entertainment, there are two broad groups of people who consume and listen to music. Yes, I'm oversimplifying yet again, but I think this distinction is useful for musicians to bear in mind for reasons I'll come to in a second.

On the one hand, there's the laity: people who don't like music that much, but occasionally buy something mainstream to listen to. They own up to about twenty pop albums, all of which employ the verse/chorus structure, prominently feature emotionally engaging vocals, and primarily use solid 4/4 rhythms which make you want to shake your hips to the groove (with the occasional 6/8 rhythm thrown in for good measure). These people are largely unaware of, or at least indifferent to, the wider world of diverse music out there, but it's by choice and that's just fine. If music isn't their thing, let them be.

The other broad group is the fanatics: people who listen to classical music, jazz, IDM or any other specific genre. They are more likely to have upwards of two *hundred* albums. They like music for its own sake, so they can enjoy instrumental music just fine. Most of them even like music with less popular time signatures. A lot of them probably make their own music, or at least play an instrument, and would agree that music is best enjoyed when it is created and played rather than merely passively consumed and heard.

Both of these broad groups of people are just fine. However, this latter group of fanatics has its own pitfalls, and less excuse of ignorance. It's too easy for music fanatics to fixate on one particular genre, just as the laity focus on mainstream pop music. They might even dismiss everything else as not counting as "real" music. It's also far too easy for these people to look down on pop music itself, largely missing its point.

The laity are the vast majority of people — enough of a majority to buy substantially more albums than the fanatics *overall*, despite buying only a fraction as many *each*. This large cross section of humanity has completely different requirements for the music they buy than those of fanatics. As musicians themselves are fanatics, they often overlook this difference. All too easily, they regard anyone who makes music fulfilling these requirements as "selling out," whereas making music for the laity is an interesting challenge in its own right. It just involves a different skillset to the one that fanatics intuitively understand.

For fanatics, music is all about the melodies, rhythms, harmonies and sounds, about the endless patterns within patterns. For the laity, music is about conveying universal emotions regarding love and lust, life and death. The singer discusses timeless concerns from money to madness, found love to lost love. These people buy music in order to find a singer who can articulate what they're feeling better than they themselves can. Fans would do well to respect the laity, because they are more numerous, often more well balanced, and more likely to pay their wages as musicians.

Musicians would do well to remember the differences in expectations between these two audiences, and to work out which one they want to write for. If you want your music to be popular, it should be emotionally engaging, prominently feature

vocals, and only rarely stray from familiar time signatures that you can dance to. Writing good music with interesting patterns is all well and good, but it has to be built upon a solid foundation that resonates with people.

Above all, you should respect people who have different requirements for music than your own, especially if they outnumber you.