



PREFACE

I've been involved in music all my adult life. I didn't plan it that way, and it wasn't even a serious ambition at first, but that's the way it turned out. A very happy accident, if you ask me. It's a little strange, though, to realize that a large part of my identity is tied to something that is completely ephemeral. You can't touch music—it exists only at the moment it is being apprehended—and yet it can profoundly alter how we view the world and our place in it. Music can get us through difficult patches in our lives by changing not only how we feel about ourselves, but also how we feel about everything outside ourselves. It's powerful stuff.

Early on, though, I realized that the same music placed in a different context can not only change the way a listener perceives that music, but it can also cause the music itself to take on an entirely new meaning. Depending on where you hear it—in a concert hall or on the street—or what the intention is, the same piece of music could either be an annoying intrusion, abrasive and assaulting, or you could find yourself dancing to it. How music works, or doesn't work, is determined not just by what it is in isolation (if such a condition can ever be said to exist) but in large part by what surrounds it, where you hear it and when you hear it. How it's performed, how it's sold and distributed, how it's recorded, who performs it, whom you hear it with, and, of course, finally, what it sounds like: these are the things that determine not only if a piece of music works—if it successfully achieves what it sets out to accomplish—but what it is.

Each chapter in this book focuses on a distinct aspect of music and its context. One asks how technology has affected the way music sounds and the way we think of it. Another considers the influence of the places in which we listen to it. The chapters are not chronological or sequential. You can read them in any order, though I do think the order my editors and I arrived at has a flow to it—it isn't entirely random.

This is not an autobiographical account of my life as a singer and musician, but much of my understanding of music has certainly been accrued over many



years of recording and performing. In this book I draw on that experience to illustrate changes in technology and in my own thinking about what music and performance are about. Many of my ideas about what it means to go on stage, for instance, have changed completely over the years, and my own history of performance is a way of telling the story of a still-evolving philosophy.

Others have written insightfully about music's physiological and neurological effects; scientists have begun to peek under the hood to examine the precise mechanisms by which music works on our emotions and perceptions. But that's not really my brief here; I have focused on how music might be molded *before* it gets to us, what determines if it gets to us at all, and what factors external to the music itself can make it resonate for us. Is there a bar near the stage? Can you put it in your pocket? Do girls like it? Is it affordable?

I have, for the most part, avoided the ideological aspects of music making and production. That music can be made to bolster nationalistic urges or written in the service of rebellion and overthrowing an established culture—whether the motive is political or generational—those are beyond the scope of this book. I'm not much interested in specific styles and genres either, as it seems to me that certain models and modes of behavior often recur across wildly different scenes. I hope that you will find something to enjoy here even if you have no interest in my own music. I'm also uninterested in the swollen egos that drive some artists, although the psychological make-up of musicians and composers shapes music at least as much as any of the phenomena I'm fascinated by. I have rather looked for patterns in how music is written, recorded, distributed, and received—and then asked myself if the forces that fashioned and shaped these patterns have guided my own work... and maybe the work of others as well. One hopes I'm not just talking about myself here! In most cases the answer is yes; I'm no different than anyone else.

Does asking oneself these questions in an attempt to see how the machine works spoil the enjoyment? It hasn't for me. Music isn't fragile. Knowing how the body works doesn't take away from the pleasure of living. Music has been around as long as people have formed communities. It's not going to go away, but its uses and meaning evolve. I am moved by more music now than I have ever been. Trying to see it from a wider and deeper perspective only makes it clear that the lake itself is wider and deeper than we thought.





CHAPTER ONE

Creation in Reverse

I had an extremely slow-dawning insight about creation. That insight is that context largely determines what is written, painted, sculpted, sung, or performed. That doesn't sound like much of an insight, but it's actually the opposite of conventional wisdom, which maintains that creation emerges out of some interior emotion, from an upwelling of passion or feeling, and that the creative urge will brook no accommodation, that it simply must find an outlet to be heard, read, or seen. The accepted narrative suggests that a classical composer gets a strange look in his or her eye and begins furiously scribbling a fully realized composition that couldn't exist in any other form. Or that the rock-and-roll singer is driven by desire and demons, and out bursts this amazing, perfectly shaped song that had to be three minutes and twelve seconds—nothing more, nothing less. This is the romantic notion of how creative work comes to be, but I think the path of creation is almost 180° from this model. I believe that we unconsciously and instinctively make work to fit preexisting formats.

Of course, passion can still be present. Just because the form that one's work will take is predetermined and opportunistic (meaning one makes something because the opportunity is there), it doesn't mean that creation must be cold, mechanical, and heartless. Dark and emotional materials usually find a way in, and the tailoring process—form being tailored to fit a given



context—is largely unconscious, instinctive. We usually don't even notice it. Opportunity and availability are often the mother of invention. The emotional story—“*something to get off my chest*”—still gets told, but its form is guided by prior contextual restrictions. I'm proposing that this is not entirely the bad thing one might expect it to be. Thank goodness, for example, that we don't have to reinvent the wheel every time we make something.

In a sense, we work backward, either consciously or unconsciously, creating work that fits the venue available to us. That holds true for the other arts as well: pictures are created that fit and look good on white walls in galleries just as music is written that sounds good either in a dance club or a symphony hall (but probably not in both). In a sense, the space, the platform, and the software “makes” the art, the music, or whatever. After something succeeds, more venues of a similar size and shape are built to accommodate more production of the same. After a while the form of the work that predominates in these spaces is taken for granted—*of course* we mainly hear symphonies in symphony halls.

In the photo below you can see the room at CBGB where some of the music I wrote was first heard.^A Try to ignore the lovely décor and think of the size and shape of the space. Next to that is a band performing.^B The sound in that club was remarkably good—the amount of crap scattered everywhere, the furniture, the bar, the crooked uneven walls and looming ceiling made for both great sound absorption and uneven acoustic reflections—qualities one might spend a fortune to recreate in a recording studio. Well, these qualities were great for this particular music. Because of the lack of reverberation, one could be fairly certain, for example, that details of one's music would





be heard—and given the size of the place, intimate gestures and expressions would be seen and appreciated as well, at least from the waist up. Whatever went on below the waist was generally invisible, obscured by the half-standing, half-sitting audience. Most of the audience would have had no idea that the guy in that photo was rolling around on the stage—he would have simply disappeared from view.

This New York club was initially meant to be a bluegrass and country venue—like Tootsie’s Orchid Lounge in Nashville. The singer George Jones knew the number of steps from the stage door of the Grand Ole Opry to the back door of Tootsie’s—thirty-seven. Charlie Pride gave Tootsie Bess a hatpin to use on rowdy customers.

Below is a photo of some performers at Tootsie’s.^C Physically, the two clubs are almost identical. The audience behavior was pretty much the same in both places, too.^D

The musical differences between the two venues are less significant than one might think—structurally, the music emanating from them was pretty much identical, even though once upon a time a country music audience at Tootsie’s would have hated punk rock, and vice versa. When Talking Heads first played in Nashville, the announcer declaimed, “Punk rock comes to Nashville! For the first, and probably the last time!”

Both of these places are bars. People drink, make new friends, shout, and fall down, so the performers had to play loud enough to be heard above that—and so it was, and is. (FYI: the volume in Tootsie’s is *much* louder than it usually was in CBGB.)

