

ARTICLES

“Saw You in the Dark”: Exploring Rufus Wainwright’s Emotional Vulnerability in Fan-Captured Live Performance Videos

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Introduction

On December 9, 2010, Canadian-American popular singer/songwriter Rufus Wainwright performed a solo show at the Egg in Albany, New York. Breaking from his usual popular performance practice that incorporated audience applause, between-song banter, and a set list comprised of old favourites and new tunes, he performed his 2010 album *All Days Are Nights: Songs for Lulu* as a complete classical song cycle, or a collection of art songs that are thematically connected through harmonic material, melodic motifs, text set to music, mood, or narrative.¹ As a strict solo piano/voice song cycle, the *Lulu* performances were different from his previous tours, largely because of the personal circumstances surrounding the recording and touring of the album. Wainwright’s mother, Québécoise folk-singer Kate McGarrigle, suffered a rare sarcoma in the late 2000s, passing away in January 2010.² The timing of her illness and the emotional stress of saying goodbye to a loved one profoundly influenced Wainwright’s sixth studio album. This was not only because it was the last completed album his mother would ever hear, but because it became a vehicle through which Wainwright grieved and processed her death.

One fan in attendance captured nearly the entire December 9 show on a Flip Video camcorder and uploaded all but two songs of the twelve-song cycle to YouTube via five separate videos. In doing so, this fan and YouTube user granted individuals lacking access or means to see Wainwright and experience the song cycle in person a digital opportunity via a screen and an Internet connection. Though Wainwright did not personally request that his audience capture live performances of *Lulu* and post them online, fans from a wide array of tour stops managed to record snippets or entire chunks of the cycle digitally. In a May 2016 email interview exchange between myself and Wainwright, he expressed pleasure that fans captured these performances live:

I’m very happy that a lot of it has been captured on YouTube because it was one of the most challenging and difficult and emotionally dangerous tours I’ve ever performed and so I’m grateful that it was captured and that people come back to it and use it as a symbol of grief. I like, in a weird way, that we didn’t film it professionally, that it’s still from a very personal angle from someone in the audience. That makes it even more human.³

The videos of the live tour on YouTube preserve for digital spectators a technologically captured performance of *Lulu*. As Wainwright confirmed in our interview, the *Lulu* tour was never recorded professionally; thus, the live videos snatched from various tour stops are the sole recorded representations of the song cycle. As such, they suffer from inconsistency in clarity and sound, poor/amateur videography, and are often incomplete. Even so, Wainwright’s amenability to the fan-

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recorded videos suggests that emotionally vulnerable live performances warrant a second, more permanent, online life for viewers to consume whenever they wish.

A fan first and a scholar on Wainwright second, my introduction to his art followed this path when a live performance video of “Cigarettes and Chocolate Milk” from the album *Poses* (2001) captured my attention on YouTube (Lucie Clabrough November 25, 2010). I was enchanted by his charisma, vocal timbre, and jovial piano playing and had no idea that I was watching an encore from a *Lulu* tour stop. The vulnerability and honesty in his performance fascinated me. Until I went down the rabbit hole of YouTube recommended videos and discovered the Rufus Wainwright Message Board (RWMB), the official fan forum, I was unaware of why *Lulu* was meaningful.⁴ The wealth of live performance videos at my fingertips gave me the means to absorb over a decade’s worth of information in a matter of months.⁵ I relay my experience of discovering Wainwright’s musical catalogue of official videos and recordings and unofficial fan-captured videos in order to highlight a reality of twenty-first-century spectatorship and musical consumption. YouTube’s live performance video archive allows a user to curate their own viewing experience, including how they introduce themselves to an artist’s work: chronologically, at random, stopping and starting a video depending on whether they enjoy it or not, and/or selecting short clips versus full-length performances if possible.

The culture of “online liveness” creates the circumstances for at-home YouTube audiences to have unexpectedly poignant experiences online (Auslander 2017, 296). For online spectators, YouTube consumption of the *Lulu* performance videos disrupts the way a live performance is conceived and received. Online audiences intentionally curate their online consumption, and their specific choices queer, or disrupt, the original presentation of the performance. Queer in this sense is understood as an interruption, deviation, or alternative series of choices that result in previously unknown or untravelled paths (Sedgwick 1993), thus allowing for multiplicity in meaning and freer interpretation of the work out of time and space. Wainwright’s unabashed exploration of grief through musical performance suggests that his performativity is a conduit for difference to reach audiences who view the performance at a digital distance. Wainwright’s sexuality and gender expression signals “queer” in a more nuanced way than simply defining his identity as non-heteronormative; his gay sexuality is an important part of his identity and factors into his performativity as a singer/songwriter overall but does not predetermine his gender performance or propensity to relay tragic personal experiences in his art. Thus, Wainwright’s performativity is queer because it breaks traditional gender norms and rejects gay stereotypes, challenging male heteronormative social behaviour through his non-binary gender expression and emotional vulnerability. Along this alternate path, Wainwright uses his body to release grief and pain instead of internalizing it under the guise of masculinity. Within online space, the digital spectator experiences Wainwright’s performativity queerly, through the distance of time and space, making meaning out of what they view in the moment.

With this interpretative flexibility in mind, I identify three aspects of Wainwright’s performativity in the fan-captured videos that highlight how preserved live performances offer freedom in meaning-making within digital space: 1) persona as a conduit to normalizing grief (“Who Are You New York?”); 2) the affective impact of convergence culture in reading grief and pain in digital space (“Sad With What I Have?”); and 3) musical style and online liveness as channels for expressions of male vulnerability (“What Would I Ever Do With a Rose?” and “Les Feux d’Artifice t’Appellent”). Using performance analysis of digitally captured performances, I argue that digital viewership queers, or alters, the audience’s experience, thus empowering spectators to engage with the emotional vulnerability, grief, and genre-bending of *Lulu*. Though a small amount of scholarship exploring

Wainwright's songs, lyrics, and queer sexuality exists (Jones 2008; Schwandt 2010; Williams 2016), no research focuses on the intersection of grief, performativity, and digital space in Wainwright's work. Thus, this study explores how persona and grief are read within digital viewings of Wainwright's live performances while framing online spectatorship as a queer practice of meaning-making.

Performativity and Liveness in Digital Space



Screenshot of YouTube performance video entitled "Rufus Wainwright Lulu Part 1b Give me what I want & Martha," posted by BlueScarLady on December 15, 2010.

The *Lulu* tour marked a departure for Wainwright as he embarked on a risky plan in which the first half of the show featured him alone, dressed in a Victorian-inspired, deplumed, black mourning gown, his only accompaniment a stark video shot by Douglas Gordon that features Wainwright's eye (at times eyes) coated in black eye shadow and mascara that stares, blinks, or weeps. Wainwright explained the significance of the eye as a visual aid in press interviews ahead of the 2010 tour:

It's my eye, but thirty feet tall and in various stations, shall we say. Stations of the eye. It's a gorgeous work, and it's reminiscent of many things. It's reminiscent of the Surrealists, it's reminiscent of horror movies, it's reminiscent of Buñuel,⁶ it's reminiscent of going to the zoo and looking at an elephant. It's just all that the eye can conjure up. (Thompson 2010)

The melancholy set up (black eye makeup, black piano, black mourning gown) stood in sharp contrast to the white piano keys and at times bright and pleasant sounds coming from the two instruments on stage: the grand piano and Wainwright's baritone voice. Adding to the funereal atmosphere, audiences were instructed to hold their applause until Wainwright's entrance at the beginning of the second set. The initial press release about the *Lulu* tour on Rufuswainwright.com warned fans that this experience was going to be different:

Rufus has asked us to pass on this message to everyone attending his shows on the tour. The first part of the program will be performed as a song cycle with visuals by

Douglas Gordon. During the first set, Rufus has asked that you please do not applaud until after he has left the stage. His exit is part of the piece. After a brief intermission, Rufus will return for the second part of the show during which you may applaud to your heart's content. (Pratt 2010)

This request was a radical shift from typical popular music performance practice in which cheering, singing along, clapping, and even side conversations are part of the music scene, particularly at Wainwright shows. In our email interview exchange, Wainwright (2016) further contextualized his performative choices, explaining:

Most song cycles are performed where one doesn't applaud in between numbers and waits until the very end, but in terms of the whole *Lulu* tour when I dressed up in the whole outfit, we had that lighting, the Douglas Gordon movie, I was in full throttle in terms of mourning for my mother's death.

Lulu's fan-captured videos blatantly display how mediatization, or the way that technology affects, captures, and circulates live performance within a digital space, signals a departure from Wainwright's customary folk-inspired live performance style. An acoustic grand piano, a microphone set up to amplify Wainwright's voice (oftentimes in acoustically stellar theatres or opera houses), and a digitally projected visual counterpoint are somewhat perplexing but effective tools that brand *Lulu* as an intimate work and an exceptional piece of his catalogue. For online spectators experiencing the *Lulu* song cycle out of time and place, YouTube serves as the platform for experiencing these queer performative aspects.

Landmark studies linking convergence culture, fan participation, and networked media elevated the relationship between participatory culture and digital spectatorship (Jenkins 2006; Jenkins et al. 2013). Capturing and preserving live performances are acts of participatory culture that encourage spreadability via technical resources within the culture industry, including media text and social networks, that allow and encourage circulation of media (Jenkins et al. 2013, 4–9). As a site for participatory culture, YouTube's functions are plentiful, often including performance videos of professional musicians sanctioned by record companies (Burgess and Green 2009). Wainwright fans who capture live performances and share them online are not creating new, original content in the same way that fan fiction, mash-ups, or tribute YouTube videos (clips of a beloved TV show, film, or popular culture icons set to music); they are preserving a single live performance for others to (re)visit or share online. Fan-captured videos of live performance are not unique content but digitally preserved and curated records. YouTube users are like “curators at museums, archives, and libraries,” determining value based on sentimentality and personal interest (Jenkins et al. 2013, 94). Fans who share live performance videos, whether spontaneously captured or pre-planned and regardless of performance quality, grant access to fellow fans who were unable to attend a live performance, thus reinforcing the communal value of YouTube.

In choosing to record and share on YouTube the December 9 *Lulu* performance, BlueScarLady captured the confluence of convergence and participatory culture. The culmination of film, performance art, and musical performance in the song cycle is the result of convergence culture in a live setting, or “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences” (Jenkins 2006, 2). Mediatization bridges live performance and technological reproduction via websites like YouTube (Auslander 1999), taking that which is fleeting and preserving it for the sole purpose of repetition.

Participatory culture therefore enables online fans to vicariously experience queer performance practices set within traditional performance spaces.

For BlueScarfLady, participatory culture extended to responding to comments and keeping her channel public so that it could be hyperlinked and shared on the RWMB. Surveys of the comment sections on YouTube and the RWMB thread about the December 9 performance yielded user comments that emphasize fans' desires to share information about live performance experiences. Two fan forum comments specifically addressed fan-captured recordings: 1) Lys wondered whether any fan-captured videos were taken: "I know I'd probably taken [*sic*] a HD camcorder into the venue and recorded the whole thing!" (December 10, 2010, comment on RWMB); and 2) Toddland linked BlueScarfLady's YouTube channel with the comment: "found a bunch on youtube by THIS USER [hyperlink removed]" (December 26, 2010, comment on RWMB). Comments on YouTube concerning these videos were scarce but included BlueScarfLady's explanation for the incomplete recording (December 17, 2010, comment on "Rufus Wainwright Lulu Part 2 a"); brontedesk's proclamation that "Les Feux d'Artifice t'Appellent" was "real Art!" (December 15, 2010, comment on "Rufus Wainwright Lulu Part 2 b"); and a brief exchange between Raviseante5000 and BlueScarfLady about the "memorable" impact of Wainwright's *Lulu* entrance (December 11, 2010, comment on "Rufus Wainwright Lulu Part 1a"). Taken as a whole, these reactions to the December 9 show fail to say much about the import of viewing live performances in digital space out of time. Nevertheless, they indicate that fans are looking for live performance videos to relive an experience or, as I can attest, to experience that which has already come and gone. Performative multiplicity thus co-exists within digital space, merging, or, in a nod to Jenkins, queerly converging the original live performance, the studio album, and digitally captured fan videos or reactions.

For a work like *Lulu*, one that possesses a studio album but lacks an official music video or a professional live recording, fan videos fill a void, at once cutting a major expense of the artist/label while empowering the audience to capture and share what they find to be meaningful online. A number of scholarly works focus on audiences' experience and interaction with Web 2.0, specifically YouTube, artistic expression, and fan engagement (Helens-Hart 2014; Keltie 2017; Moskowicz 2014; Vernallis 2013; Warner 2013); however, none address live performance videos on YouTube. Studies on live concert experiences and mediatization (Bennett 2014, 2017; Bratus 2016; Danielson and Helseth 2016; Pitts 2017), audience participation and aesthetics in the theatre (White 2013), and issues of liveness, audience theory, and affect more broadly (Auslander 2009, 2017; Jones 2012; Reason 2017; Reason and Lindelof 2017; Reynolds 2012) shed light on how audiences react to and embody technological and emotional aspects of performance. A gap in research that examines digital spectatorship and its relationship to live musical performance and witnessing grief specifically remains. Classical music and opera have a long thematic history rooted in death and melancholy, and memorialization through popular music is vastly studied (Billinson 2009, 2016; Gengaro 2009; Mitchell 2001; Ritter and Daughtry 2007; Schattenkirk 2014; Winters 2013). However, the majority of research about trauma, loss, and creativity focuses on literature, painting, sculpture, theatre, and performance art, largely excluding digital content (Dreifuss-Kattan 2016; Edkins 2003; Eng and Kazanjian 2003; Gluhovic 2013; Kaplan 2005; LaCapra 2001; Landsberg 2004; Love 2009; Phelan 1993).⁸ While limited work has addressed Wainwright's art as examples of camp and/or parody, drawing attention to his tendency to be flamboyant and dramatic while covering songs by or singing about artists who influenced him who had died (O'Connell 2011; Smith 2013), *Lulu*'s digital and fan-captured performativity has not been addressed. The next step in understanding the experiences of audiences who no longer only go to live shows to engage with an artist is to consider what spectators might gain from witnessing another's grief or emotional pain in a digital setting.

Audiences' lived experiences are, as Matthew Reason proposes, an invitation to consider a “*thickening* of our understanding of the experience of live performance” (2017, 9). Building on this idea, I suggest that online liveness, or what a digital spectator experiences watching fan-captured videos, creates new pathways of emotional connection that directly antagonize heteronormative expectations of male grieving in live performance. Through *Lulu*, Wainwright expresses emotional vulnerability and artistry as he sings, plays the piano, and negotiates the treacherous terrain that high emotions and technically challenging music create in live performance. These facets of Wainwright's expression can be understood as performativity, or the presentation of an outwardly projected, intentionally crafted version of one's gender and identity that is, nonetheless, the result of socially constructed scripts and restraints (Butler 1990). As such, queer performativity spurns normative expectations, negating the rigidity of oppositional binaries. Digital space creates the circumstances for Wainwright's queer performativity to flourish at a distance, or within a “third space” (Jarman-Ivens 2011) that mingles technology and human emotion. Digital audiences read Wainwright's direct and non-normative presentation of his emotional state while mourning his mother's death as fluid, emotionally nuanced examples of gender and sexuality that exist on a spectrum rather than within hard boundaries. The “third space” between Wainwright's performance and the spectator's viewing of it captures the complex emotional spectrum that is attached to feelings of loss, isolation, and discomfort. Thus, the “third space” functions as both a safe space and a buffer for audiences who do not have similar personal experiences through which they might comprehend or internalize Wainwright's vulnerable performance.

Seeing Through the Dark: Analyzing Mediatized Representations of Persona and Grief

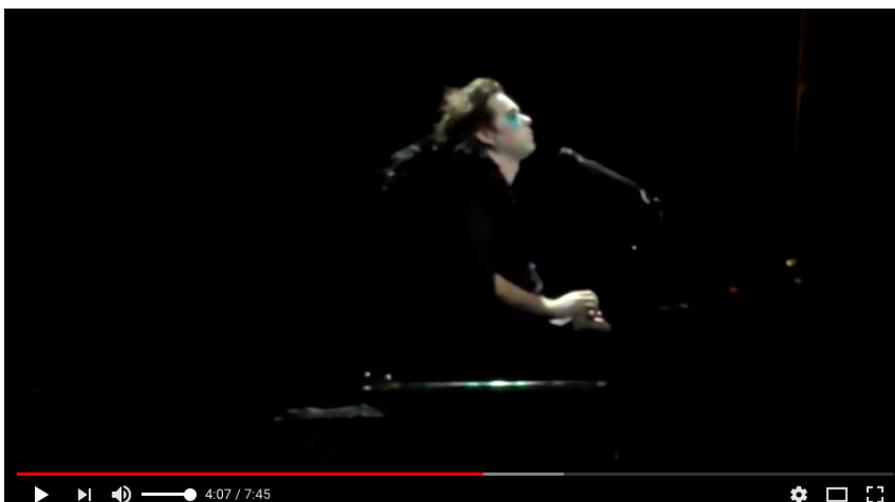
Much of Wainwright's non-normative expression comes in the form of persona, defined as “a cultural identity that simultaneously shapes the individual in body and mind and creates a collective with a shared and recognizable physiognomy” (Daston and Sibum 2003, 2–3). Historical circumstance, social conventions, and genre inform and/or constrain an artist's persona (Auslander 2009). An important distinction between Wainwright's performance of persona and other popular artists is that he never takes on the *name* “Lulu” during this tour.⁹ His performance of persona is not a replacement for his personality or an act of erasure that diminishes or rejects his professional identity as Rufus Wainwright, singer/songwriter; it is a blurry, muddy representation of one facet of Wainwright's identity that is read in his performativity. Lulu, as a manifestation of grief and the female Other, is a conduit for online audiences to experience emotional vulnerability and empathy through the performance of persona, despite being out of time and within the abstract, digital “third space.” I focus on four *Lulu* songs that blur Lulu with the real person, or what people think is the real person, thereby elucidating the function of the persona within mediatization. Digital records of these performances empower audiences to watch the fleeting and liminal blurriness of live performance at a distance while tacitly agreeing to witness Wainwright's grief. Online spectators are able to experience liveness out of space and out of time while fully opening themselves up to the “third space” and an affective, digitally curated experience.

The Power of Persona: “Who Are You New York?”

As the song cycle begins, Wainwright enters, silently and solemnly. The train of his black plumed mourning gown trails behind him. He takes a seat at the piano and pauses a moment to prepare. Wainwright appears hunched over the piano, as if his gown is weighing him down (BlueScarfLady December 11, 2010, 0:00–0:26). There is light blue eye shadow beneath his eyes, a cosmetic choice

that augments his presumed fatigue and isolation. Wainwright does not make eye contact with his audience or acknowledge them in any way; nor does his audience applaud when he glides across the stage, an uncharacteristic entrance for Wainwright. The “third space” unseals in this moment, allowing strangeness, uncertainty, and the first glimpse of pain to emerge. Though the fan-captured perspective of this performance does not reveal any audible audience murmurings, mumblings, or gasps of shock as Wainwright makes his entrance, there may have been audience members in other sections who reacted audibly to the beginning of the *Lulu* cycle that this videographer did not capture. For the digital spectator, the silence is acute, building tension and anticipation, giving no hint of what the opening music might sound like. Within the first twenty-six seconds of the performance, all that is clearly heard is the tell-tale beeping of a digital camera, indicating that other audience members may have been observing Wainwright’s request for silence but were not going to miss the opportunity to record this unique performance for posterity.

In the beginning of “Who Are You New York?” Wainwright’s vocals sound flat, broad and unsupported at the ends of some phrases as if he lacks breath (0:33–4:05). His diction is poor, though not precisely slurred, giving the sung phrases a hint of dejection. The first shot of Gordon’s film reveals a startling blue-green eye peering out of darkness, magnified to an outlandish degree and coinciding with the text: “Saw you on the corner / Saw you in the dark / Saw you on the platform / Of Grand Central Station” (0:40–1:05). The eye, the mediatized embodiment of Lulu, is heavily shadowed, black and spongy-looking, opening and closing slowly, almost as if in boredom or a near-catatonic state. The spirit of the song speaks to seeing but not recognizing or identifying, namedropping other NYC cultural landmarks: Central Park, the Rainbow Room, and the Empire State Building. But the subject’s essence remains unidentified in the song, allowing the spectator to imagine and interpret the meaning of “you,” the landscape of New York, and the unspooling narrative. Midway through the song, the continuous flurry of driving sixteenth notes in the treble clef and the bass clef’s mimicking contrary motion with strong accents signal the first hint of a loss of control. As the steady rhythm and harmonic elongation yearn for resolution, the sloppy climactic piano passages give the overall impression that *Lulu* is an expression of turmoil hidden beneath a mask of stoicism. When the last chord is struck, Wainwright snatches his hands away from the keyboard, still in the slouched posture; it is almost as if, in his dour costume, he is sulking.



Screenshot of the moment after the final chord of “Who Are You New York?”

Wainwright's opening entrance and song imply that there is no one way of living or knowing, extending the understanding of what it means to perform female or male, or to negotiate the unpredictable path of grief. Instead, there is flexibility, fluidity, and agency in crossing boundaries to fit one's personal definition of identity rather than a definition the dominant culture deems appropriate, whether that is in daily life or in extraordinary circumstances like suffering a deeply personal loss. Following the idea that "figures of fantasy" support heteronormativity and heterosexuality, gender performance is merely an attempt to identify and appropriately express what has been understood to be "true" or "real" within mainstream culture (Butler 1990, 136). Wainwright's performance of grief, a direct challenge to normative gender expression, is both a natural part of his life at the time and performed through the live shows; it was not something he could turn on or off, but accompanied him throughout the tour. The affective imprint of this experience is palpable via online liveness. In capturing this performance, BlueScarfLady is sharing with a digital audience the discomfort, uncertainty, and imperfection of Wainwright's artistic expression, "thickening" the digital spectator's viewing experience and the implications of Wainwright's queer performativity. His flat affect registers as exhaustion to the viewer; his technical mistakes hint at carelessness or fatigue. But musically, Wainwright's delivery is forceful and direct, capturing one's attention and suggesting that there is something buried deep down that is fighting to emerge.

Wainwright's appearance in the couture mourning gown as his rich baritone voice envelops the listener signals the fluidity and flexibility associated with gender performance. He essentially performs in drag, juxtaposing interpretations of "female" and "male" on stage. Recalling Butler's understanding of drag as an imitation of gender that allows "sex, gender identity, and gender performance" to mingle, Wainwright's queer performativity results in a kind of parody (1990, 137). Wainwright's commitment to wearing the mourning gown during each performance introduces repetition and ritual within the "third space" that mimics the redundancies of the mourning process and the minuscule release of grief one second at a time. Lulu-the-eye accompanies this drag performance, adding an element of abstract yet maternal watchfulness. Wainwright's expression of identity, grief, and the fragmented Lulu character combine to reveal three aspects of physical performance in music: the real person, the persona, and the character (Auslander 2009). Lulu is a persona that represents Wainwright's personal demons and the eccentric aspects of his personality. Wainwright has referred to Lulu as his muse as well as a "beautiful disaster" that is the culmination of the split between one's light side and dark side, especially after recovery or healing takes place. As Wainwright indicated in the Decca Gold promo video for the *Lulu* album:

The light side develops, but you always still have the dark side—you become two people. In a lot of ways, me, alone at the piano, is the most expressive way that I can communicate this dark undercurrent, which lives in all of us. These songs are, in a way, a kind of sacrifice to that other side of me. (March 18, 2010, 0:59–1:34)

The Lulu persona, the dark temptress to Wainwright's personable warmth, creates a channel (found in the "third space") for audiences to identify with the artist's lived experience through musical and visual narration. Within digital space especially, Lulu's mediatized eye accompanying Wainwright in costume at the piano challenges viewers to parse out what is an act of persona and what is an expression of grief.

Wainwright's musical performance is thus both a fiction or fantasy and a reality. The "real person" is an unknowable entity to digital audiences, and the depth of Wainwright's grief is an unmeasurable

concept, especially at a digital distance. However, BlueScarfLady's recording, an act of participatory culture, allows for repetition of the performance and preserves Wainwright's performances of grief. While the Lulu persona in drag challenges presumed expectations of femininity, masculinity, and identity of a mourning body, at its core, Wainwright's musical performance normalizes grief, allowing the expression of pain to manifest physically, musically, and affectively. Online liveness tethers Wainwright's vulnerable performance to the digital spectator watching the performance on YouTube, offering an empathetic digital environment through which the online viewer might interpret the Lulu persona.

Reading Grief and Pain: "Sad With What I Have"

The relationship between mediatization and Wainwright's vulnerability is apparent in the marriage between the second song of the cycle, "Sad With What I Have," and the segments of Gordon's video that BlueScarfLady captured. As a queer act of convergence, the eye video disorients the viewer (live and digital) while tacitly commenting on *Lulu*'s melancholic themes and Wainwright's performance practice. BlueScarfLady's curated digital recording and the online liveness that I, as the interpreter, experience watching the performance out of time and in the digital "third space" is a representation of convergence culture in motion: Gordon's video, Wainwright's theatrical performance, and his art song converge to craft a fresh perspective. The focus of this segment of the video is a tightly closed eye against a black background. The stillness and magnification of the eyelid conjure both intimacy and Otherness, abstractions that echo the juxtaposition of liveness and distance (BlueScarfLady December 11, 2010, 4:22–7:44). Contrary to how movement and audience identification with characters on screen evoke empathy (Bolens 2012; Donaldson 2012), Gordon's video lacks motion or a narrative structure. Instead, stillness connects the music and the video, conjuring death and loneliness. As a symbol of the Lulu persona, the eye is both familiar and a distant Other. Its cinematic aesthetic of torpid minimalism neither energizes the audience nor tells a clear visual story. It is a visual example of how Wainwright's persona conflates with his artistic self in the live performance, stemming from a haunting and gender-fluid image.

As Wainwright's body on screen evokes the presence and absence of personae, emotionally impacting viewers (in this case, virtual), so does his voice. The text of "Sad" speaks to despondency that is deeply connected to one's lack of self-esteem. For example, the phrases "Then I think of you / How could someone so bright love someone so blue?" and "Sad with what I have except for you" signal insecurity in an individual who does not feel worthy of love. Wainwright's uses of "I" in the song represent moments where he is both himself and Other; the text speaks to his insecurity, depression, displeasure, and ennui. An alter ego who regularly represents addiction, lust, and destruction, Lulu haunts Wainwright with her constant presence in his life, a point that his mourning costume and posture underscores.⁹ The looming video of his magnified eye suggests McGarrigle's presence and absence as it watches over Wainwright while confronting the audience, mimicking a guardian relationship. As the eye is actually Wainwright's, the Lulu persona, both in body and in voice, takes on multiple gender identities, contributing to its queerness.

Wainwright's emotionally nuanced, queer vocal performance within digital "third space" collects, but not precisely connects, the identities, personae, and narratives that comprise the *Lulu* song cycle's emotional guts. Existing within the paradoxes, contradictions, and "no man's land" between what the ear hears and the voice produces, queer vocality allows Wainwright to dispel normative expectations and traditions of mourning (Jarman-Ivens 2011, 4). As Wainwright (the artist) commands his persona to share his painful narrative, the visual media presents an alternate,

disembodied facet of the Lulu persona that hovers above the performer, challenging the audience to look away. As a viewer on a laptop, for example, the image of the eye, less intense because it is not to scale, serves as a constant reminder that we are all under the gaze of someone else—for Wainwright, the remembered but absent loved one.

The constant gaze of the Other becomes more prominent in this performance when Wainwright breaks down the barrier between real person and persona through an error: while his vocal performance sounds flat, or below pitch, he flubs the piano part in the penultimate phrase of the song (BlueScarfLady December 11, 2010, 7:14). This unexpected mistake jars the listener and brings attention to Wainwright's fallible humanity as a performer and person, a reminder that technical imprecision is a popular music convention and a taboo in the classical world. Hearing the error for the first time has the potential to ruin the mood Wainwright creates, but through the permanence of digitization, repeated viewings desensitize spectators. Mistakes captured on video can be unforgiving reminders of a performer's technical failings, but they also infuse the performance with realism that flawless performances do not have.¹⁰ For *Lulu* performances in particular, mistakes break down the performative wall Wainwright crafted, reinforcing the circumstances under which this tour was executed: against a backdrop of emotional duress and exhaustive grief.

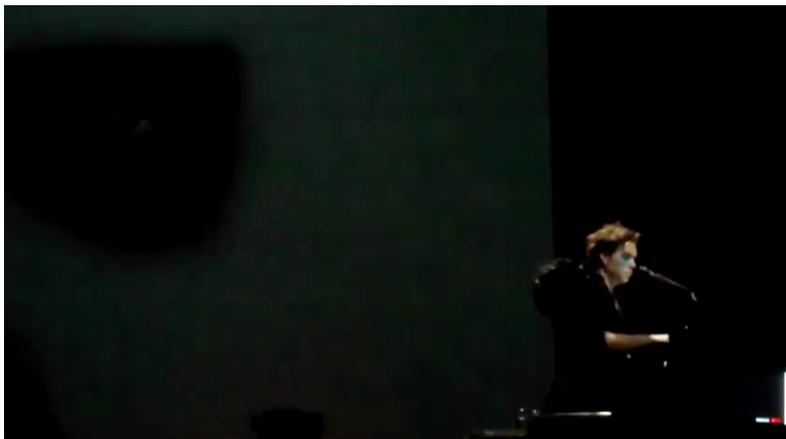
Expressing Male Vulnerability: "What Would I Ever Do With A Rose?" and "Les Feux d'Artifice t'Appellent"
With his mother at the forefront of his mind, Wainwright borrows from crooner ballads and bel canto aria to express a variety of emotions (anger, sadness, desolation, joy) in the latter half of the song cycle. Wainwright (2016) identified the range of musical influences during the *Lulu* songwriting process as diverse in his emailed responses to me:

I've always been effected [*sic*] by Nina Simone so she was definitely hovering. I would also say that a combination of French chanson and German lieder whether its [*sic*] Boret or Schubert or Debussy or Strauss, people like that—all the greats of piano vocal music, with a little Gershwin of course, thrown in for good measure.

Wainwright performed "What Would I Ever Do With a Rose?" and "Les Feux d'Artifice t'Appellent," an aria originally written for his 2009 opera *Prima Donna*, with the bone-deep knowledge of McGarrigle's absence. Through genre-bending, musical aesthetics, and performance practice, Wainwright wrapped his pain in something beautiful, transforming frightening concepts and themes into soothing musical gestures. As such, the distance of time and space in online liveness solidifies the profundity of loss for digital audiences rather than reinforces the fantasy of painless grief.

"Rose" is a song about isolation and feeling unworthy of love. Musically, it uses Romantic aesthetics such as rubato and lush chords to add sophistication, depth, and a touch of dourness to the song's sweet-sounding, C major tonal centre. As it begins, Wainwright's performativity is melancholic, apparent in the conflation of Wainwright the artist and Lulu the persona. The text communicates the fear of loving and being loved, something Lulu grapples with as the character in the cycle, while also addressing a personal struggle apparent in Wainwright's earlier songwriting.¹¹ Phrases like "How would it ever get me high?" "How would it ever get the guy?" and "What would I ever do with you?" allude to themes of unworthiness, low self-esteem, and addiction (substances, men, and sex). Wainwright/Lulu is relaying a story of emotional paralysis and coming to grips with his reality as a motherless son, reeling from the loss of unconditional love. His projection of cruel reality and the Lulu persona's emotional struggle to be vulnerable coalesce in this performance. The use of rubato

(a means of rhythmic expression that accelerates and slows phrasing) in the piano part and the occasional odd metre of 7/8 amongst the otherwise steady 6/8 pulse mimics the sound of waves, signifying swirling indecision throughout the song. In the final measures, Wainwright/Lulu comes to a decision (perhaps to love/be loved, perhaps simply to not change at all—this is unclear) as the melodic rhythm elongates and the accompaniment slows to a halt. A shot of Gordon's film reveals a return to a white background with a static eye (BlueScarfLady December 17, 2010, 5:05–8:32). In sync with the final phrase of the song (“Never does the dream come true / Without the nightmare”), the eye begins to fade and close in a painfully slow manner (8:33–9:00), reading as a final gesture of resignation to vulnerability after years of resistance. At the conclusion of “Rose,” Wainwright pauses to sip water (9:08–9:18), a moment that reinforces for the digital spectator that this was both a planned performance and a documented live moment; the work online viewers witness is born out of physical perseverance, artistic dedication, and emotional catharsis.



Final moment of “What Would I Even Do With a Rose?”

As the cycle continues, “Les Feux” is more subdued, an example of classical aesthetics with accompaniment that is harmonically simplistic rather than jazz-influenced like “Rose.” Textually, “Les Feux” conveys the brevity of fireworks as a metaphor for the brevity of life. Performatively, Lulu takes on the persona of the life-worn diva, the protagonist of *Prima Donna*, while Wainwright the artist performs a swan song for his mother, who, in an eerie parallel to his diva, was nearing the end of her life at the time of the opera’s composition.¹² Queer performativity is found in the language barrier of this aria, potentially stymieing the understanding of the song without a translation. Melisma across long phrases and his non-operatic vocal style exacerbate Wainwright’s typically poor diction, making the French text especially muddy (BlueScarfLady December 15, 2010, 0:10–5:11). “Les Feux” is emotionally and musically laden with non-traditional and surprising elements that flourish in the “third space,” in which strangeness, lack of performance discipline, and singing from the heart are welcome.

Following the dulcet crooning of the early twentieth century and the “beautiful singing” style beloved in nineteenth-century Italian opera houses, “Rose” and “Les Feux” lack rhythmic urgency while showcasing sentimentality. In “Rose,” Wainwright’s vocal warmth draws the listener into a cocoon of comfort (courtesy of the 6/8 rhythm) and ethereal sadness. It unexpectedly creates a “third space” that embraces vulnerability while privileging beauty and Romantic aesthetics like chromaticism that add tension and unrest. Rubato and vocal warmth lull the listener into the depths of nostalgia in “Les Feux,” an escape from emotional pain that encourages empathy. The chic

aesthetics that enrich these two songs dull the sharp edges of grief and unhappiness, permitting online liveness to juxtapose the frank rawness of the texts with honey-coated melodies and the false comfort of repetition in the piano accompaniment. The “third space” allows the nuances and quirks of Wainwright’s songwriting and performance to shield digital spectators from confronting the stark realities that these songs evoke. While Wainwright’s text and varied use of personae explicate the emotional intricacies of “Who Are You New York?” and “Sad With What I Have,” tranquil and lovely musical styles subversively shroud the darkness of “Rose” and “Les Feux.” As a result, digital distance fashions a cushion for digital viewers to digest the material and draw meaning from it in a way that a one-off live performance might not. In the death-phobic West, complex emotion and the labour of grieving are experiences that can be subconsciously and/or cautiously explored through the abstractions of affect and digital space, while engaging in comfortable or familiar musical aesthetics.

Conclusion

The December 9 performance BlueScarfLady captured is a remarkable collection of videos not only because *Lulu* is a notable musical work, but also because a performance was preserved that is without a doubt *live*. The song cycle was steeped in queer performative elements from the moment Wainwright plodded to the piano before “Who Are You New York?” to his exit after the final song, “Zebulon.” The Lulu persona and Wainwright’s musical performance practice layered, blurred, and disrupted the emotional expression and narrative significance of the music with honest displays of male vulnerability and technical imperfections. Theatrical elements such as costume, lighting, and Gordon’s video elevated *Lulu* from a classically inspired popular song cycle to a powerful musical event that confounded some fans and deeply impressed others. All viewers who engaged with the performance, whether live or online, were presented with an artistically ambitious and emotionally challenging experience. Ultimately, all engaged spectators witnessed Wainwright’s grief transfigure itself, evolving from internalized pain to an expression of lived experience.

Within the “third space” of online liveness, *Lulu* traverses the temporal boundaries of live performance and takes on an all-important second life that flourishes through digital repetition. Without YouTube’s housing of the live *Lulu* performances, new audiences would lack the opportunity to immerse themselves in the intense emotional journey that the live videos reveal; nor would they be able to curate their own digital performance experience. The ritual of online viewing via YouTube is thus an intentional digital practice through which Wainwright fans can witness emotional vulnerability out of time and beyond the boundaries of traditional performance space. It is through the repetition of watching the multiplicity of his performativity that death, loss, and grieving become a three-dimensional, relatable experience. For Wainwright’s online audience, repeated viewings of BlueScarfLady’s digitally curated performances lead to understanding and empathic engagement with Wainwright the artist. Though this engagement is out of time, the affective result is a powerful example of how convergence culture contributes to new methods of expression and modes of understanding the Other within the confines of online liveness.

Notes

1. The song cycle is as follows: 1. Who Are You New York? 2. Sad With What I Have 3. Martha 4. Give Me What I Want And Give It To Me Now! 5. True Loves 6. Sonnet 43: When Most I Wink 7. Sonnet 20: A Woman’s Face 8. Sonnet 10: For Shame 9. The Dream 10. What Would I Ever Do With a Rose? 11. Les Feux d’Artifice t’Appellent 12. Zebulon.

2. Kate and her sister, Anna McGarrigle, comprised an influential Canadian folk duo active in the 1970s up until Kate's death.
3. Wainwright responded to this May 2016 email interview request (facilitated by his management team) with in depth answers to ten questions that addressed various aspects of the *Lulu* album and tour.
4. During the second half of this show Wainwright announced that he and his partner, Jörn Weisbrodt became engaged in London after what had been an emotional year of mourning, performing *Lulu* all over the world, and travelling mostly alone. One of the last songs Wainwright performed that night was a cover of his mother's "A Walking Song," a tender and heart-wrenching performance in almost complete darkness. A fan-captured video of the song preserved the tears that marked Wainwright's cheeks and the way his voice changed as he fought through singing while crying (Lucie Clabrough, November 25, 2010, 5:19).
5. My own privilege does not go unacknowledged; I had both a computer and high-speed Internet to aid in this exploration, something that is not possible for many.
6. A Spanish filmmaker known for being a "great subversive" and "mischief maker" with films that combined "surrealist non sequiturs with attacks on the bourgeoisie, the church, and social hypocrisy" (Criterion Collection, n.d.).
7. This excludes *Dying in Full Detail: Mortality and Digital Documentary* (Malkowski 2017), which examines mediated images of live death, some of which exist on YouTube.
8. In this way, he is quite a different kind of performer from artists who have divorced themselves from their pre-fame identities, such as pop stars Beyoncé and Lady Gaga (Kumari 2016).
9. In the earlier years of Wainwright's career, popular publications such as the *New York Times* and the *Guardian*, along with countless music reviews and interviews promoting tours have made reference to Wainwright's struggles with addiction. The idea of Lulu, if not her name specifically, has been a regular part of Wainwright's public discussions about addiction, depression, and the dark lady serving as his muse.
10. Wainwright is a frequently imperfect live performer, a tendency that brings to mind the "in the moment" aesthetic of folk performers. Some examples of mistakes in the *Lulu* tour alone include the August 20, 2010 performance of "The Dream" in Los Angeles, CA (MiaSqueaky, August 26, 2010, 8:15–11:17); the December 14, 2010 performance of "Martha" in Wilmington, DE (Paul Russell, December 15, 2010, 5:07); and the December 15, 2010 performance of "Give Me What I Want And Give It To Me Now!" in Northampton, MA (Maryann Z, December 30, 2010, 1:11).
11. Songs like "Foolish Love" (1998), "Peach Trees" (2004), and "I'm Not Ready to Love" (2007) offer lyrical examples of how Wainwright writes about love/fearing love prior to *Lulu*.
12. For a behind-the-scenes look at the process of staging *Prima Donna* that includes interviews with himself, Kate McGarrigle, Martha Wainwright, librettist Bernadette Colomine, and other important players in the production, see "Prima Donna: The Story of An Opera" included in the *House of Rufus* (2011) DVD/CD Box Set.

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