

**BACKSTAGE PASS**

**BACKSTAGE PASS:  
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY  
OF  
AN EMERGENT BLUES MUSIC SCENE**

**BY  
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## ABSTRACT

This thesis uses barroom activities to explore the social production of space and identity. The study centres on the inception of a blues music bar in Oshawa, Ontario. The purpose of the research is to approach a better understanding of the various ideas, meanings, contentions, and strategies involved with the creation of a blues music idioculture. Particular emphasis is placed on the micro level practices of identifying and reworking blues music traditions. Recognizing the variability of definitions of blues tradition, participants in this study, through their everyday interactions, negotiate a working consensus that affirms their tastes and interests. The traditional ideal of “authenticity” is appropriated into an ideological *style* of representation. As a constructed style, authenticity empowers patrons with a social and cultural power over meanings. By and large, individuals conferred with an “insider” status have a greater stake in the creation of barroom meanings and activities. To become an insider, fans and musicians endure a series of stages and rituals meant to assess their loyalty to others. Insiders manage an impression of themselves as committed to the bar’s semantic code of representational authenticity. Thus, this thesis uses the dramaturgy of barroom interactions to illustrate processes of subcultural creation and modification. Through their everyday negotiations, fans and musicians construct an articulative practice that encapsulates local identities and perspectives.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

This thesis presents an ethnographic study of a newly-established blues bar in Oshawa, Ontario. From the perspectives of blues fans and musicians, the present work follows the inception and social construction of the culture of a live blues music scene. Generally, the “music scene” that is the subset of this work is conceptualized as an emergent site of activity and creativity (Straw, 1991). Of particular interest is how the actors at the scene negotiate and organize cultural meanings and behaviours. Emphasis is placed on the micro-level practices of identifying and reworking blues music traditions. To assess these practices, this thesis incorporates both the cultural studies and symbolic interactionist theoretical perspectives. Both approaches focus on how participants, through the course of everyday interaction, actively shape the meanings of their environment.

#### **The Problem:**

Referred to henceforth as “Smitty’s,” the blues bar in question is what Williams (1977) would refer to as an “emergent” culture. A live blues music venue was new to Oshawa, and thus, Smitty’s codes and practices were in a constant state of initiation and development.



By and large, most of the fans and musicians involved in this study worked to achieve a distinct and unified “taste culture” (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986). As will become evident, various participants sought to construct a blues community that would affirm their particular individual interests. However, not all patrons entered the environment with a shared set of cultural ideals and perspectives. Thus, the “definition of the situation” (McHugh, 1968) at Smitty’s was initially problematic. Most patrons were eager to establish a local blues community, yet lacked an agreement on the norms and values that would define it.

Many of the early barroom interactions focused on defining and locating Smitty’s within the overall map of live blues music. Contrary to some previous blues music research (see, for example, Adorno, 1991; Chambers, 1986; Frith, 1983, 1987; George, 1988; and Palmer, 1981), Smitty’s activities were *not* in direct opposition to the “mainstream art world” (Becker, 1982). Conversely, Smitty’s conventions in its early manifestation existed *within* the arena of mainstream music culture. Patrons at Smitty’s tended toward incorporating signs from the blues world-at-large and appropriating them for themselves. With this process of encoding and decoding (Hall, 1980) of meanings, however, there was a potpourri of varying tastes and logics.

“Authenticity” was heavily contested at Smitty’s. Most patrons believed that a credible blues community could be accomplished through collectively embracing the idea of blues authenticity. While using the term as common ground for their interactions, however, the idea of authenticity itself became

contested terrain. As the findings in this study reveal, many of the participants' activities had to do with the political process of negotiating the meaning of authenticity.

In the process of establishing a sense of "community" at Smitty's, participants created a "working consensus" (Goffman, 1959: 10) of authenticity. That is, the competing ideals of authenticity at Smitty's were eventually reworked into an ideological *style* of representation (see, for example, MacCannell, 1973). Within this new style, patrons were able to accommodate their individual tastes and interests. Through the process of constructing authenticity, patrons attained a greater sense of social and cultural power over meanings. Through the course of everyday interaction, Smitty's fans and musicians also struggled to adjust to and *learn* the new style of representational authenticity.

In sum, this thesis concentrates on micro-processes of identity formation and action alignment (Hewitt and Stokes, 1976). Rather than inferring a structural determination of meanings from "above", there is, instead, a focus on individual and collective agency. Having the capacity to create and negotiate meanings, participants constructed a local blues scene through articulative practices of their own. To examine this process, this thesis mixes theoretical tenets from the cultural studies and symbolic interactionist perspectives.

### **The Theories:**

This study is conceptually grounded in the broad rubrics of cultural studies and symbolic interactionism. Cultural studies considers the *organization* of political processes and relationships, while symbolic interactionism addresses micro-level details of semantic negotiation and impression management.

The cultural studies approach is well suited to the study of live music because it interprets interplay between ideology and practice, production and consumption. In the present study concepts from cultural studies help interpret the political formations of “culture” and “ideology”. Particular attention is paid to the cultural and ideological meanings that emerge as a result of political struggles between competing interests. Following Grossberg (1992), this thesis aims to discover how people connect cultural and ideological meanings to their own lives. Acknowledging the theoretical importance of the role of agency, the current study embraces the notion that people act to create and re-create their political environment.

Within cultural studies, subculture theory provides useful ways to interpret the creation and organization of cultural codes. For the present work, subcultural theory is used to conceptualize blues scenes as emergent sites of resistance. In particular, Hebdige’s (1979) explanation of subcultural *style* helps clarify how subcultures generate new meanings. These meanings help distinguish the subculture from the mainstream. That is, subcultural styles are used to “fabricate” a conscious sense of difference from both the generalized

mainstream. In this study, Smitty's participants reformulate dominant blues styles in order to win space within the overall blues culture.

The subcultural concept of "articulation" is useful to this study because it helps account for the various actions and elements between the production and consumption of music (Hall, 1986). Articulation indicates that there is no inherent link between music, fans, and artists. At Smitty's, the fans and musicians were involved in a co-process of articulating musical messages. Because of its emphasis on behaviour, the concept of articulation also allows us to trace the various modifications of subcultural meaning over time. Fans and musicians at Smitty's strove to articulate subcultural "hipness" (Becker, 1963; Thornton, 1995). The criteria of being "hip" was actively constructed and modified according to patrons' abilities to achieve subcultural distinction. To articulate their hip styles and logics, patrons modified the way they dressed, spoke, and presented blues knowledge. To account for the processes of negotiating hip objects and behaviours, this study draws from symbolic interactionism.

Through the course of negotiating Smitty's cultural meanings, participants learned to see themselves through the eyes of others. From this, patrons grasped an understanding of their own roles and capacities within the overall structure of the scene. By understanding their own position, actors became better able to coordinate their activities and perspectives with one another.

In order to "fit in," fans and musicians managed impressions of themselves as competent, compliant, and "in the know." To do this, participants had to first

*learn* the scene. For example, patrons, in an ongoing way, learned the bar's overall "awareness context" (Glaser and Strauss, 1964). They became aware of various identities, knowledges, and pretences. Patrons realized that their interactions were variously shaped by what they knew, what they didn't know, and what they pretended to know.

Actors also sought to discover the identity of others, as well as their *own* identity in the eyes of others. Generally, individuals who were better at mastering the scene's awareness context were more able to convince others of their cultural hipness (competence). The significance of being able to demonstrate cultural hipness was that a participant was better able to enhance his or her subcultural status within a social hierarchy (Glaser and Strauss, 1971). Most people in this study desired an *insider* status.

The interactionist theme of "career" is central to understanding how individuals in this study framed their efforts and interactions. Insider aspirants at Smitty's had to impress others of their mastery of material and symbolic meanings. Individuals "became" insider fans or musicians by advancing through a series of specially designed stages and tests. Drawing from Becker's (1953) classic paper on how people learn to smoke marijuana, this study contends that individuals "became" barroom musicians through various socializations, and not just inborn "natural" talent (see, for example, Becker, 1953, 1982; Mills, 1940; Petterson, 1995; Portis, 1985). To successfully manage an insider identity, the individual's status must be affirmed and reinforced by others.

**Blueprint:**

The thesis is organized into five chapters: the introduction, the literature review, the research design and methodology, the findings, and the discussion and conclusion.

Chapter two introduces the literature upon which the thesis is based. It is organized into two parts: substantive literature and conceptual literature. With particular emphasis on blues music culture, the substantive section discusses social aspects of barroom behaviour. Several disparities within blues music literature are considered. Themes of “folk tradition” and “authenticity” form an organizational framework for a synthesis of the substantive literature.

The conceptual section of the literature review blends material from both the cultural studies and symbolic interactionist traditions. From the cultural studies perspectives, literature is reviewed that has examined political formations of subcultural codes and objects. In particular, subculture theory is used to illustrate how fans and musicians create their own systems of unifying styles. Subcultural style provides an introduction to the ways blues players and fans of a particular scene negotiate subcultural status.

Chapter three addresses the study’s research design and methodology. The qualitative research methods that are used to scrutinize how participants made sense of their temporal and spatial environment are outlined in detail. The chapter also assesses the strengths and weaknesses of conducting participant observation. In particular, the insider-role of the researcher will be considered.

The section also addresses how data was collected, how many trips to the field were made, who was interviewed, and the various obstacles that were met along the way. Finally, Glaser and Strauss' (1967) "constant comparative approach" is discussed as a central technique for data analysis.

The fourth chapter introduces the study's findings, and is divided into three interrelated sections. Each section is sequentially organized to trace the bar's evolution of ideologies and practices. The first section addresses the problematic notion of authenticity. Special attention is paid toward the political process of negotiating constructed meanings of authenticity. The bar was structurally and ideologically overhauled during the period of observation.

The second section of the findings chapter examines the process of becoming an insider. This process reveals which behaviours were situationally appropriate, and which were not. In addition to this action alignment, we find that insiders managed impressions of themselves as being particularly committed to the scene. The section also examines the various stages and ritualistic behaviours a patron must experience to make progress toward becoming an insider.

Thirdly, the findings chapter illustrates how participants verify their status through the presentation of subcultural capital (Thornton, 1995). Patrons collect and display subcultural capital as a strategy for fitting in. Generally, participants are able to manage a favourable impression of themselves by way of accruing capital via their hipness, rituals, dress, and rare collections.

The fifth chapter provides a discussion and overview of the study's findings. The chapter concludes the thesis by revisiting the union of cultural studies and symbolic interactionism.



## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Settings are often not merely copies or replicas of real-life situations but copies that are presented as disclosing more about the real thing than the real thing itself discloses

Dean MacCannell

#### **REVIEW OF SUBSTANTIVE LITERATURE**

This section of the chapter introduces research pertinent to substantive issues referred to throughout the thesis. With particular emphasis on blues music culture, this overview also examines behaviour and interactions that take place at music scenes (Cohen, 1991; Straw, 1991). As opposed to uncovering the meanings and semantics of live sound (see, for example, Eco, 1979; Frith, 1981, 1983, 1987; Stefani, 1973), this thesis discusses social aspects of barroom behaviour. By and large, themes of “folk tradition” and “authenticity” are central topics in music scene research. These themes form a thematic framework for our discussion of the substantive literature.

#### **The Dialectic of Tradition:**

Generally, most analyses of blues music understand culture as “a way of life” (see, for example, Hall, 1992). Blues music is often viewed as a kind of “folk” tradition with its own set of norms and practices. When regarded as such, blues music imposes the weight of the past on the present (Eyerman and

Jamison, 1996). According to Middleton (1990: 127), folk music cultures are "usually seen as the authentic expression of a way of life now past or about to disappear." That is, members of folk cultures draw upon traditions and constantly work to modify, yet maintain, their meanings.

Generally speaking, there are two sets of literature on blues music tradition. The first, and more predominant set of blues writings views tradition as an unchanging opposition to, and rejection of, the mainstream art world (Adorno, 1991; Becker, 1982; Chambers, 1986; Frith, 1983, 1987, 1988; George, 1988; Hebdige, 1987; Palmer, 1981; Shepherd and Wicke, 1997). Second, there is a smaller body of literature that regards blues as a symbolic framework for creating a new community (Eyerson and Jamison, 1998; Grossberg, 1992, 1994; Keil, 1966; Lull, 1992; McRobbie, 1994; Straw, 1991). Though antithetical, both categories help us approach an understanding of how our study's participants experienced blues traditions in their unique culture.

*Tradition as Structure:* The first category of literature on blues tradition insists that "no artistic expression would be possible without a tradition to inform it, or enclose it" (Eyerson and Jamison, 1998: 29). Music traditionalists draw homologies between sound and cultural context, suggesting congruencies between musical structure and cultural meanings. According to folklorists John and Alan Lomax (1966: viii), the blues tradition is "quite distinct from popular

song (made to sell quickly) and cultivated art (made, so much of it, to conform to prestige patterns)... This is a truly democratic art, painting a portrait of a people, unmatched for honesty and validity in any other record.” The significance of the Lomaxs’ work lies in their employment of the ideas of oppositionality and resistance. Their work tends to equate non-Western features of blues music (e.g., call and response, 12 bar structure, slurs, bends, rhythmical emphasis on the weak beats, etc.) with a residual culture of “its people” (assuming that blues fans represent a unified whole). Blackwelder and Danaher (1993: 1) also draw a connection between music and cultures: “Blues lyrics are moaned or slurred almost beyond recognition...far from being litanies of personal gripes, these lyrics are problematizations of social experiences of a subordinated group.”

Middleton (1990: 168) has also contended that blues culture has always occupied a space within the margins of mainstream popular culture. By virtue of its political-economic otherness, blues music gives us a better idea of what mainstream commercial culture is by means of showing us exactly what it is not (Lipsitz, 1990: 13; Middleton, 1990). Ernst Roth, for instance, positions blues music vis-a-vis mainstream Western music by describing it as “savagely hilarious or melancholy... the blues came with heavy syncopation, ‘breaks’, ‘swings’, ‘smears’, and ‘dirty notes’, like swarms of birds of prey or locusts, to devour all the charming European tunes” (1969:246). Roth’s comment reflects the position that blues is a low form of art that commands a lesser sort of attention than one would pay toward higher forms of music. Such a folk/commerce distinction

reinforces perceptions that blues, as a pejorative sub-culture of art, is oppositional to the commercial sphere of production and consumption.

Samuel Charters, a respected authority on blues culture, also believes that over time the blues have been compromised by commercialization:

After the war, there were more and more young blues artists who used their new electric guitars at an increasingly high volume. The poorer musicians turned it up to hide their weaknesses and the others were forced to go along... The blues have almost been pushed out of the picture; and the singers who have survived at all have had to change their style until they sounded enough like rock and roll performers to pass with the... audience (1959: 234).

Here, we can see that Charter's argument for the deterioration of blues music assumes a congruency between tradition and validity. He argues that blues can no longer be defined as "pure" if it is prone to an adaptation of commercial conventions and styles (see, for example, Becker, 1982). Charters also assumes a homogeneous taste culture amongst "the" blues audience. By this notion, any artist who falls short of meeting traditional blues criteria would be considered illegitimate. Like Charters, most blues purists feel that blues music, because of its position relative to the mainstream, is a dying tradition.

*Tradition as Constructed:* The second body of blues music literature discusses cultural innovation as being enclosed *within* a tradition. Tradition, here, serves as a point of cultural reference, rather than a dogmatic following of historic formulas. In other words, tradition serves as a basic guideline for interaction. Furthermore, fans and musicians may consider tradition an "opportunity

structure” for mobilizing further cultural development (Grossberg, 1984; Middleton, 1990; Petterson, 1997; Willis, 1978).

The idea of traditions has been conceptualized as being both real and imaginary at the same time. Eyerman and Jamison (1998: 33) suggest: “A tradition exists, we might say, by being imagined, but what is constructed or conceived as tradition does have real meaning and substantive content for those who identify with it, or believe in its realness.” Of particular importance to this study is the conscious process of cultural diffusion whereby tradition becomes recast in the present (Shils, 1981). Thus, tradition as a social construction represents a double-edged sword; imposing norms that delimit the action of social actors, while simultaneously activating a framework for cultural preservation and extension.

Charles Keil’s *Urban Blues* (1966) represents a significant departure from the entrenched way of conceptualizing tradition as unchangeable. Keil uses the term “moldy-fig” to characterize peoples’ tendency to romanticize blues music’s mythological past. He takes issue, for example, with the presumption that “authentic” blues is designated for black, illiterate, blind, and toothless people from the country (1966: 6). Keil’s work, thus, allows us to examine the impact of tradition as constructing our interpretations of modern-day blues music. That is, by interrogating the moldy-fig ideology we are able to examine the supposition that there is a strict division between “real” blues cultures (traditional) and illegitimate ones (non-traditional).

Following Keil, several writers have proposed that blues traditions must constantly be updated and rearranged. According to Eyerman and Jamison (1998), Negus (1996), and Tilton (1992), a century of social, political, aesthetic, and cultural transformations cannot be accounted for by any one historical supposition. For example, today, there is a multiplicity of inter-genre styles, such as: “new blues”, “country and western blues”, “Chicago blues”, “delta blues”, “rock blues”, “hillbilly blues”, “swing blues”, “jump blues”, “cotton-patch blues”, “white blues”, “black blues”, and even more recently: “female blues” (e.g., Saffire, the Uppety Blues Women), “North-of-the-border blues” (e.g., Jack DeKeyzer), “prodigy blues” (e.g., Jonny Lang), “punk blues” (e.g., Jon Spencer Blues Explosion), “chaos blues” (e.g., R.L. Burnside), and the most contemporary dub: “postmodern blues” (e.g., Ben Harper). Thus, blues music can no longer be considered a single “tradition” with fixed conventions, formulas, and boundaries (Becker, 1982; Grossberg, 1992, 1994; Negus, 1992; Middleton, 1990; Williams, 1977).

Raymond Williams (1977) acknowledged the shifting material and symbolic meanings of blues “traditions”:

What we have to see is not just “a tradition” but a selective tradition: an intentionally selective version of a shaping past and a pre-shaped present, which is then powerfully operative in the process of social and cultural definition and identification... From a whole possible area of past and present, in a particular culture, certain meanings and practices are selected for emphasis and certain other meanings and practices are neglected or excluded (1977: 115).

Also, according to Williams, the particular tradition with which a person identifies serves as a basis for both individual and collective identity (1977). He uses the term “structure of feeling” to account for tradition’s hand in the process of collective identity formation. Structures of feeling need to be conceptualized in relation to real present-day actors (Eyerson and Jamison, 1998; Williams, 1977).

Hence, because of its traditions of protest and rebellion, blues music can evoke feelings of solidarity amongst actors who have no previous connections with one another. The production and consumption of blues music allows group members access to feelings and thoughts that are shared by larger blues collectivities.

The idea of tradition makes it possible to participate in what has been referred to as a “shared” or “imagined community” (Anderson, 1991; Becker, 1982; Cohen, 1991; Frith, 1983, 1987, 1988; Laing, 1969, 1985). Sara Cohen’s ethnographic study on rock bands in Liverpool (1991) examines the relationship between music traditions and social and cultural lifestyles. Following other writers who have studied local music scenes (e.g., Benjamin, 1970; Willis, 1978), Cohen argues that traditional music activities express and reflect the values of its participants. Traditional music scenes, she argues,

...evoke communal feelings, experiences, and relationships... and they play upon a sense of community in their audience and in a way give rise to it... There is a sense that all have experienced the same music, progressing through and growing up with the same bands and musical styles, and thus share a similar history (1991: 188).

Cohen emphasizes the relative absence of scholarly literature on Western popular music, and states: “the discussion presented in this book is inevitably exploratory and much of the literature surveyed has been gleaned from non-academic periodicals, papers, and rock bibliographies” (1991: 7). The scarcity of local music scene literature, to Cohen, is indicative of a broader literary preoccupation with musicological transcriptions (e.g., lyrics, semiotics, reception, etc.) and record industry dichotomies (e.g., high versus low, good versus bad, authentic versus fake, natural versus commercial, etc.). Cohen’s book is among the few popular music readings that engages in ethnographic and microsociological details of an individual scene (1991: 6).

Cohen’s analysis of cultural activities and identities is particularly relevant to this study. In her study, local scene participants use their distinctive music tradition as “a boundary marker to identify themselves and their allegiance with others, but also to express their difference from others” (1991: 224). In Liverpool, for example, the local industrial culture of “flamboyant, assertive, blunt individualism” (1991: 9) purposively translates into their music scene’s sense of loyalty, solidarity and spirit of co-operation. Cohen refers to participants’ fixation on creativity over commerce as a measure of cultural identity and exclusion. Drawing from Becker’s distinction between “hipness” and “squareness” in his study of jazz groups (1963), Cohen illustrates how members of the Liverpool music scene strive to construct their own styles, tastes, and meanings. Insiders share a series of constructed codes and behaviours that act as a collective



boundary marker, giving rise to “strong feelings of allegiance and identity involving all sorts of non-musical factors” (Cohen, 1991: 190). (Both music scene allegiance and the relationship between insiders and outsiders will be further discussed in the conceptual segment of the literature review). Cohen’s work is helpful to understanding how music scene participants work to construct a local identity of their own.

### **Locating Authenticity:**

This section draws from a broad body of literature on the construction of authenticity. Within this body of writing, a lot of work assesses a song’s or performance’s social and aesthetic value by its degree of “authenticity” (see, for example, Barthes, 1977; Lomax, 1977; Palmer 1981; Tilton, 1977). Blues music, in particular, is often expected to reveal elements (e.g., “purity”, “honesty”) analogous to “blues peoples” everyday way of life. For example, Simon Frith (1983: 17) suggests that blues, as a form of “black music,” is “performance music rather than composition music... the value of black music derives from its emotional impact... the essence of black music is the expression of the performer’s feelings.” The political process of authenticating performer and performance (according to a list of musical criteria) has a significant bearing on the present study, since many participants shaped their opinions and expectations of music around perceived levels of authenticity.

However, while most discussions of authenticity and blues music adopt positions similar to Frith's (Negus, 1996), the task of locating similarities between "authentic qualities" and "culture" is well beyond the scope of this project. That is, this thesis makes no attempt to provide an all-encompassing definition of authenticity as it relates to music. As Lionel Trilling (1972: 94) has cautioned, "authenticity is implicitly a polemic concept." Moreover, the claim of authenticity imputes a degree of subjective value relative to its supposed "inauthenticity" (Peterson, 1997: 211). For this reason, the present work follows the position of Richard Middleton, (1990: 139) who claims,

... the supposed purity of folk society (or in liberal accounts, of the essential processes of folk creation) goes hand in hand with the "authenticity" of the music... both are myths.... The judgement of "authenticity" is always directed at the practice of someone else. Either it removes this practice from its own mode of existence and annexes it to the system of an imperialist cultural morality, or it scapegoats undesirable ("inauthentic") practices and casts them beyond the pale... Really authentic music is appropriated music, that is, it is integrated into subjectively motivated social practice.

That said, while the politicized and racialized nature of authenticity in music is recognized here, the current work examines authenticity as a constructed *style*.

*Authenticity as Negotiated:* Richard Peterson's book, *Creating Country Music* (1997), argues that many existing definitions of authenticity are contradictory. On the one hand, authenticity is in some quarters defined as something "natural", "pure", "honest", "genuine", "believable", "spontaneous", and "non-reflexive" (Barthes, 1977; Benjamin, 1936; Fornas, in Straw et al, 1995;

Melly, 1970; Redhead and Street, 1989). On the other hand, authenticity is defined elsewhere as something “different”, “new”, “original”, “fresh”, and “unique” (Bell, 1964; Frith, 1981; Lloyd, 1967; Shepherd, 1992). Peterson interprets this variability as evidence that authenticity is a continually negotiated social construction: “what is taken to be authentic does not remain static but is continually renewed over the years. The changing meaning of authenticity is not random, but is renegotiated in a continual political struggle...” (1997: 220). Country music performers and fans are thereby involved in a continual process of negotiating new forms of “authentic” styles and images.

Peterson defends his position in his investigation of the “fabrication of authenticity” in country music, arguing that “authenticity is not inherent in the object or event that is designated authentic but is a socially agreed-upon construct...” (1997: 5). Thus, many country music performances represent and exaggerate features thought to denote authenticity. For example, Peterson illustrates how Hank Williams came to personify country music authenticity and emerged as a model for those who followed. The key to Williams’ successful image of authenticity, argues Peterson, was his unique recombination of existing elements. Aware of the sorts of styles, conventions, and gestures commonly associated with “good” (authentic) country music (e.g., acting and dressing “naturally”, traditional instrumentation, Southern rural drawl, etc.), Williams constructed a credible and successful self-presentation of authenticity (for a further reading on constructed authenticity, Gareth Palmer, in Whitely, 1997,

explores Bruce Springsteen's staging of "selfless devotion" and "commitment to the fan").

*Communicating Authentic Style:* As suggested above, authenticity is regarded here as an ideological style. According to Grossberg (1993: 205), articulating authenticity as a style enables participants to "manipulate the presentation" for the purpose of attaining a "measure of affective power." In other words, the successful performance of the style of authenticity empowers participants with a greater social and cultural power (Hawkins, in Whitely, 1997: 131). Grossberg (1993: 202, 206) clarifies how the ideology of authenticity may be represented as a style, arguing that interaction:

becomes a self-conscious parody of the ideology of authenticity, by making the artificiality of its construction less a matter of aesthetics and more a matter of image-marketing. The result is that style is celebrated over authenticity, or rather that authenticity is seen as just another style...the only possible claim to authenticity is derived from the knowledge and admission of your inauthenticity.

To anticipate the findings, a fabricated style of authenticity provided for a participatory and relatively equitable environment among the respondents in the present study. Fans and musicians from a variety of social classes and backgrounds were able to explore and problematise images of "community" and "difference" through their interactions. Such a dramaturgical presentation of self only works if participants are mutually aware of, and willing to, embrace authenticity as a style.

Illustrating the tacit nature of such shared understandings, Dawson, Maurin, and Phillips' study of professional wrestling (1996), explores the ideological significance of accepting authenticity as a style. In this scenario, in order to routinize the co-ordination of subcultural activities, participants have to understand that events are not to be taken at face value. Dawson et al. draw a distinction between those who are aware of the ideological representation, and those who are not. In the case of wrestling, "hard core", or "smart", fans (as opposed to "marks") possess an insider knowledge and vocabulary of how cards are "marked" (fixed) (1996: 1, 4). For the smart fan, it does not matter who wins or loses a particular wrestling match—nor is it essential to discern between "good" and "bad" wrestlers. Enjoyment comes, rather, from exercising and displaying one's knowledge of how events are staged. "Smart" wrestling fans, for example, are "in the know" when they recognize a "plant" (disguise) from the crowd as being pre-designated, or marked (1996: 5). "Marks", on the other hand, remain outsiders by virtue of their valorization of, and longing for, the "real" (1996: 4).

*Staged Authenticity:* Consistent with Goffman's front stage/back stage dichotomy (1959), MacCannell uses the term "staged authenticity" to refer to a location purposely designed to portray the "authentic." MacCannell modifies Goffman's theory so to talk of front and back stage regions as a continuum. By

this logic, the entire environment, including “backstage” regions, are really set up to mimic a shared understanding of “authentic” culture.

Some individuals may be attuned to the staged environment, while others may not. Similar to Dawson et al.’s study on the fans of professional wrestling (1996), MacCannell suggests that, “once tourists have entered touristic space, there is no way out for them so long as they press their search for authenticity” (1973: 106). The main point in the staging of authenticity, then, is that it provides a feeling of community for those who accept it as such. Most participants in a staged environment play into the “popular beliefs regarding the relationship between truth to intimacy...(and) being ‘one of them’” (MacCannell, 1973: 94). MacCannell’s analysis is vital to the understanding of how participants in this present study structured their own environment.

## **REVIEW OF CONCEPTUAL LITERATURE**

### **Introduction:**

Cultural texts are created through a range of social relationships and political processes. To interpret these relationships and processes, this thesis incorporates concepts from both the *cultural studies* and *symbolic interactionist* traditions. The cultural studies approach is well suited to the study of live music, as it allows for the mapping of the interfaces between ideology and practice, and production and consumption. And while the field of cultural studies might be

characterized by the absence of a unifying definition, it possesses a history of recurrent themes and generalized concerns.

Within cultural studies, subculture theory conceptualizes social scenes as emergent sites of style and resistance. Within this tradition, Sarah Thornton's concept of "subcultural capital" (1995) offers a rich organizational framework upon which to build the current study. Drawing from Thornton, we understand that participants accumulate and display capital to achieve distance from the mainstream, and to gain leverage within the status hierarchy of their own scene.

This thesis blends subcultural capital with symbolic interaction. Vis-a-vis Howard Becker (1963) and Erving Goffman (1959, 1961), this study examines the various stages and learning cues involved in *becoming* an insider. Of particular interest are the ways in which blues participants construct and negotiate their careers around notions of subcultural "hipness" (Becker, 1963; Thornton, 1995). The ideal career trajectory for the aspiring insider is to learn and demonstrate the subculture's codes of competence. Participants, in an ongoing way, shape their status according to their ability to accumulate and display strategic forms of capital (Glaser and Strauss, 1971).

In sum, this study is located within the broad theoretical rubrics of cultural studies and symbolic interaction. Despite their independent propositions and histories, both theoretic schools provide the thesis with a series of specific, yet interrelated concepts. In particular, *subculture theory* addresses themes of style, scene logic, articulation, and subcultural capital; while *symbolic interaction*

scrutinizes the interpretive process, definition of the situation, awareness context, and career. As such, a juncture between cultural studies and symbolic interaction is vital to the understanding of how participants determine and articulate their meanings, perspectives, and identities.

### **Cultural Studies:**

This section of the chapter addresses the pertinence of cultural studies to the work in progress. First, several key concepts within cultural studies are introduced, with emphasis on subculture theory. The remainder of the section examines style, scene logic, articulation, and subcultural capital.

As an area of study, cultural studies represents a conglomerate of discourses, formations, and trajectories. As an interdisciplinary approach, cultural studies provide both symbolic and material accounts of culture and ideology. Stuart Hall indicates, however, that the terms “culture” and “ideology” are not quite synonymous, suggesting: “Something is left over when one says ‘ideology’ and something is not present when one says ‘culture’” (1978: 23). That is, “culture” and “ideology” are both infused with theoretical polemics; and any attempt to delineate their exact organic properties, especially when combined with one another, would likely result in an ideological (and semiotic) conundrum.

According to Storey (1993: 3), the conceptual space to which Hall refers is that of *politics*. That said, the present work draws from cultural studies to address the political formations of culture and ideology. The potential



“meanings” of any given music/culture issue (e.g., authenticity) are often sites of political contention. This thesis aims to account for the meanings which actually come into use in one particular blues music scene.

Cultural and ideological meanings are generally interpreted according to the tastes and goals of those who are doing the interpreting. For Grossberg (1992: 52-3),

... the relationship between the audience and popular texts is an active and productive one... A text does not carry its own meaning or politics already inside of itself; no text is able to guarantee what its effects will be. People are constantly struggling, not merely to figure out what a text means, but to make it mean something that connects to their own lives, experiences, needs and desires... They can have different uses for different people in different contexts.

Cultural studies, then, represents a polysemy (Hebdige, 1979) of negotiations and meanings resulting from cultural and ideological struggles.

*Mass Theory:* In a somewhat contrary sense, this thesis embraces cultural studies in order to challenge mass theory’s restrictive understanding of music culture. Led by Frankfurt school catalyst Theodore Adorno, mass theorists posited a distinction between the authentic, highly individualized realm of “high art,” and the impure, pseudo-individualized mass of “popular art.” Mass culture theorists viewed the transmission of music as linear, de-concentrated and “pseudo-individualized” (see, for example, Adorno, 1941). That is, mass theory denied artists and audiences the potential for creativity and resistance. With regards to musical introspection, Adorno argued (1941, 1973, 1976, 1978) that

we can never truly know anything real about the aesthetic and social content of music; all we know are statistics of taste, concert attendance, and consumption and distribution. Adorno argued that the production of music as a commodity determined its cultural quality, and that the standardization of music determined its cultural effect (Adorno, 1978: 271). Music could be authentic only if it resided above and beyond the confines of the popular culture industry (Storey, 1993: 106). Adorno, then, placed musical transmission and consumption within the domain of what Marcuse called “the society of total administration” (Marcuse, 1964: 13; see also Patterson, 1976: 269).

According to more recent cultural theorists (see, for example, Benjamin, 1973; Chambers, 1976, 1985, 1994; Clarke, 1990; Frith, 1978, 1981, 1983, 1987; Grossberg, 1987, 1992, 1994; Hall and Jefferson, 1976, Hall and Whannel, 1964; Hebdige, 1979; Riesman, 1990; Straw, 1991; Williams, 1965; Willis, 1977, 1978, 1990), the mass culture assumption that humans are passive recipients of social structures and ideology is flawed. Rather, both performers and listeners are potentially empowered with an *active* sense of control over the meaning of a text. Recognizing the theoretical importance of the role of agency, the present study embraces the notion that people *act* to create and re-create their political-economic environment.

*Subculture Theory:* Subculture theory provides a useful way to interpret the creative capacity of people to transform their symbolic and material

environments. David Reisman (1950) was one of the first subculture theorists to credit “minority” groups with their own *active* forms of ritual and rebellion.

Reisman argued that not *all* music production and consumption is passive and different groups may form their own symbols, argots, networks, and styles in order to create a social niche within dominant culture.

Raymond Williams (1977) described culture as being comprised of three interrelated yet different segments—emergent, dominant, and residual. Within his theoretical scheme, the blues is best seen as an *emergent* subculture. Blues music’s meanings are not necessarily in direct opposition with the mainstream art world. Rather, the blues subculture’s status relies on the situated interactions of musicians, fans, owners, writers, and publishers as a *collective* effort to transform and (re)define its space within the overall arena of popular culture (Williams, 1977: 123). Despite its non-mainstream status, blues is not a residual culture because it still resides *within* the area of popular culture.

*Style:* Dick Hebdige (1979) used the concept of *style* to refer to how objects and actions are used to generate new meanings and communicate a subcultural way of life to the surrounding world. Hebdige built upon Reisman’s earlier distinction between a majority and a minority and extended it to a sharper distinction between subcultural styles and the styles of the mainstream. The styles of these latter two groups are distinguished by the *intentional* way subcultures actively “fabricate” a conscious sense of difference from the

mainstream. Hebdige indicated that the construction of a subcultural style involves an appropriation of existing clothes, commodities, languages, images, sounds, and behavioural codes. Hebdige offered the example of punk rock subcultures, arguing that punks created their own system of unifying codes (e.g., ripped t-shirts, unrefined language). These styles, according to Hebdige, were purposely meant to generate new and spontaneous meanings within themselves. Punks were thereby able to differentiate themselves further from dominant culture, while at the same time strengthening identities of their own.

Subcultural meanings are thereby generated *in relation* to other (dominant) elements. Hebdige used the term “bricolage” to account for how punks inverted the meanings of material objects (e.g. they used baby pins as a sign of counterculture membership). By destabilizing dominant styles, the subculture was able to symbolically win space within the parent culture. For the purposes of this study, subcultural style provides an introduction to the ways blues players and fans of a particular scene gain subcultural status. Insiders can then associate themselves with a distinct, and “fought for”, space within popular culture.

*Scene Logic:* Within subcultural theory, the notion of “markers of distinction” lends nicely to Will Straw’s concept of the “music scene” (1991). Straw premises his term upon the same fundamental ideas of subculture theory, but extends the argument to include a more inter-differentiated sense of change

and symbolic affiliation. According to Straw, a music scene “is that cultural space in which a range of musical practices coexist, interacting with each other within a variety of processes of differentiation, and according to widely varying trajectories of change and cross-fertilization” (1991: 273).

Echoing Frith (1987, 1991), Straw proposes we move past subculture theory’s stubborn preoccupation with unresolved dichotomies (e.g., commercial manipulation vs. spontaneous creativity, oppositionality vs. conformity, standardization vs. individuality, authenticity vs. appropriation, etc.). Straw contends that most subcultural texts view culture as static and undifferentiated. Instead, he suggests that music cultures be conceptualized as undetermined and ever-shifting. That said, Straw broke away from homologies depicting communities as having necessarily fixed elements (such as dress, dancing, and music).

Further to this argument, Grossberg later points out (1992: 41) that Straw’s scene ideology puts to rest the ongoing query of whether or not audiences seek out texts, or if texts construct their own appropriate audiences. Rather, the study of music scenes emphasizes political processes whereby “coalitions” and “alliances” are created and maintained. With this focus in mind, we can turn our attention toward the various ways subcultural members *ally* themselves with both the overall culture, and also with one another.

Building on Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* (1984), Straw indicated that scenes can have variable “logics.” That is, each scene can be recognized by its

unique logic of differentiating itself from other scenes and dominant culture. As Hollingshead indicates,

Persons in more or less continuous association evolve behavior traits and cultural mechanisms which are unique to the group and differ in some way from those of other groups and from the larger socio-cultural complex. That is, every continuing social group develops a variant culture and a body of social relations peculiar and common to its members (1939: 816).

With this in mind, we can approach a richer understanding of the many competing ideologies *within* the blues culture. Though not directly related to the concept of “logic”, Gary Alan Fine’s study of little-league baseball illustrates how idiocultures operate within the realm of an overall subculture (American little-league baseball). An idioculture, in this sense, consists of behavioural creations that are seen as meaningful by actors and observers (Fine, 1987). While cultivating a unique set of symbols and meanings of its own, a particular team is able to assert its own dual-identity as both a baseball subculture, and as a team within that subculture. Fine pays close attention to the acute differences between teams’ stylistic and organizational behaviour. For example, Fine noticed that teams differed in their approaches, not only toward the game (e.g., defensive vs. offensive, winning vs. spirit of the game, names for pitches and hits etc.), but also in their understandings of sexuality, aggression, and moral socialization. Thus Fine’s contribution to subcultural logic allows us to see how participants are able to transform ideas and perceptions (from the outside environment) into a collaborative articulation of their own.

*Articulation and Subcultural Capital:* The concept of “articulation” indicates that there is no linear or inherent link between music, fans, and artists. It is a term that recognizes that songs and styles do not simply reflect or express the lives of musicians or audience members (Negus, 1996: 133; Brackett, 1995: 3). Because of its emphasis on behaviour, the concept of articulation allows us to trace the various similarities and modifications of subcultural meaning over time. Stuart Hall (1986) described articulation as the intermediary movement between production and consumption. In order for a song to have any social meaning, its production has to be *connected* to its consuming audience. In a similar vein, Grossberg argues that articulation involves “the practice of linking together elements which have no necessary relation to each other” (1992: 397). The artist and audience may be involved in a co-process of articulating musical messages. The concept of articulation serves as a solid foundation for this paper, as it rejects theories of determination and linearity and embraces a more *active* sense of communication and identity formation.

According to Thornton (1995: 105), “the logic of subcultural capital reveals itself most clearly by what it dislikes and by what it emphatically isn’t.” Thornton’s concept of “subcultural capital” (1995) works to differentiate insiders from the generalized mainstream. Drawing from Bourdieu’s work on “taste cultures” (1984, 1986), Thornton suggested that a scene/culture may articulate (and further pronounce) its ideologies by way of accumulating subcultural capital. Participants in Thornton’s study of club cultures actively worked to articulate a

logic of independence from those who were *outside* their art world (Becker, 1982). To signify their independent styles and logics, insiders collected rare objects, dressed non-conventionally, and learned the latest “underground” music, dances, and argot. On both an organizational *and* individual level, the insiders’ accumulation of subcultural capital widened their distance from the mainstream.

Similar to studies by Thornton (1995) and Becker (1963), participants in this study associated subcultural capital with articulations of “hipness.” Hence, this study examines the political processes of negotiating “hip” objects and behaviours. Logically, the criteria of being “hip” is actively constructed and modified according to patrons’ abilities and inabilities to achieve cultural distinction. (As examined in this the findings and discussion chapters below, “hipness” is manifested in articulations of *inauthenticity, ritual, dress, and rare objects*). To be clear, participants who garner subcultural capital by way of being hip are considered insiders; and those who are unable to convince others of their hipness are considered outsiders.

Rather than treating subcultural capital as an either/or division, this study recognizes that levels of insidership will vary. Thornton (1995: 12) indicates that the most successful insiders, “often enjoy a lot of respect, not only because of their high volume of subcultural capital, but also from their role in defining and creating it.” The most outwardly involved participants, then, are considered to have the greatest amounts of subcultural capital. In the current study, individuals who presented themselves as instrumental players in the bar’s level of distinction



and success were considered elite insiders. That is, patrons wishing to elevate their status must constantly manage an impression of themselves as committed and in the know. The process of *becoming* “hip” is best conceptualized by the symbolic interactionist theme of “career.”

### **Symbolic Interaction:**

Symbolic Interaction, like cultural studies, encapsulates a broad variety of theoretical directions and paradigms. Many of the theoretical assumptions in this study are steeped in some of the more “classical” tenets of symbolic interaction. To a large degree, this thesis is concerned with discovering the patterned regularities of social conduct (Hewitt, 1994: 20). The task is to uncover the constructed meanings (Blumer, 1969) and awareness contexts (Glaser and Strauss, 1964) that exist beneath the surface of interaction. Thus, a central premise of symbolic interaction is that human conduct depends upon the creation and maintenance of meanings. As a micro-analysis of human interaction and innovation, this study traces the interplay of constructed meanings and behaviours. That is, no attempt is made to infer a causal set of meanings dictated from society-at-large. Instead, this study examines respondents’ efforts to align themselves with their own set of cultural definitions.

Of central importance to this work are Herbert Blumer’s (1969) three premises of symbolic interactionism. Each premise is infused with several key statements about the coordination of human activities. The *first* premise is that

“human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings they have for them” (1969: 2). By “things”, Blumer refers to physical objects, other human beings (individual or group), institutions, ideals, activities of others, and situations. With such a wide variety of directions and sources, Blumer contends that meaning is variable and emergent. Thus, his *second* premise is that “the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one’s fellows” (1969: 2). Implicit in this statement is the claim that meaning is not *a priori*. In other words, meanings are not merely “handed down” from culture or society, and nor are they inscribed in any given object or behaviour. Meanings, rather, are continually transformed as people define and act in situations. That said, Blumer’s *third* premise is that “these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters” (1969: 2). The process of interpretation acts as an intermediary between any inclination to act and the action itself. By this token, all actions are a result of a process of interpretation and definitions. This last point is especially vital to the emergent nature of the social scene in the present study, as different participants offered different perspectives for situations.

*Definition of the Situation:* Human conduct is best explained and understood by looking at the “situation” in which it occurs. Many symbolic interactionists regard a situation as a particular assembly of objects, people, roles, and joint activities

(e.g., Becker, 1963; Blumer, 1969; Cooley, 1964; Glaser and Strauss, 1964; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934; McHugh, 1968; Merton, 1938). For these theorists, actors constantly work to establish interpretations and definitions as they move from one situation to another. As previously mentioned, a situation only has *meaning* once people have negotiated their interpretations and definitions of it. All subsequent actions, in turn, are based upon this meaning.

Participants struggle to organize their perceptions in such a manner that they may act towards them in a coherent way. McHugh (1968) uses the term “definition of the situation” to refer to the social order resulting from the organization and alignment of meanings. The definition of the situation, according to McHugh, results from the various processes of interpretation involved with coordinating activities and perspectives. As themes and patterns emerge in interaction, individuals acquire a stronger sense of the definition of the situation. From this, participants learn to see themselves within the overall structure of the environment. In addition to understanding their own roles and capacities, actors become able to use the definition of the situation to anticipate and understand the actions of others.

A collective action may be regarded as a “joint action”, which, according to Blumer (1969: 17), is “as societal organization of conduct of different acts of diverse participants.” A joint action, while comprised of various actions and perspectives, is different from its components. As an interlinkage of separate acts of the participants, the joint action constantly undergoes a series of

formations (involving reflexive interpretations and designations). As a cognitive map, then, the joint action allows an individual to forge a line of action (Blumer, 1969; Hewitt and Stokes, 1976). Most participants strive for a congruency between their own action and the overall joint action.

*Awareness Contexts:* Following Goffman (1959), participants in this study strove to manage an impression of themselves as competent, compliant and “in the know.” As with other studies, individuals who convey favourable impressions of themselves are usually attuned with the setting’s definition of the situation (which, in our case, is dramaturgical). As many ethnographies have revealed (see, for example, Becker et al, 1961; Goffman; 1961; Haas and Shaffir, 1987; Larson, 1977; Liebow, 1976), actors often vie to *control* and manipulate the definition of the situation, as well as the impressions of others. This control, according to Goffman (1959: 3-4),

...is achieved largely by influencing the definition of the situation which the others come to formulate, and he can influence this definition by expressing himself in such a way as to give them the kind of impression that will lead them to act voluntarily in accordance with his own plan.

On a larger scale, participants hope to establish a definition of the situation that affirms their goals and ideals. In Goffman’s words, “participants contribute to a single over-all definition of the situation which involves not so much a real agreement as to what exists but rather a real agreement as to whose claims concerning what issues will be temporarily honored” (1959: 9-10).

To be more exact, Glaser and Strauss (1964) use the term “awareness context” to characterize self presentations that take into account the various suspicions, pretences, and potential falsehoods of a situation. Conducting a study of the interaction between dying patients and their families and doctors, Glaser and Strauss define an awareness context as “the total combination of what each interactant knows about the identity of the other and his own identity in the eyes of the other” (1964: 3). A dying patient, for example, may not know about his impending death; as a result, the family and physician will strategically act and talk in such a way that the definition of the situation is preserved.

Participants in our study represent what Glaser and Strauss (1964) call a “pretence awareness context”: participants are often aware of one another’s identities, but pretend not to be. As opposed to seeking “true” meanings and identities, much of the barroom interaction is directed around the purpose of creating and maintaining the definition of the situation. The awareness context serves as a general theme throughout the research, as situations and interactions come to be shaped by what people know, what they do not know, and what they pretend to know. Participants who master the awareness context are likely to have a progressive barroom career.

*Career:* The sociological concept of “career” is central to the understanding of how individuals in this study frame their efforts and interactions. As discussed above, the ideal situation for the barroom participant is to become an insider. In

order to do so, the individual must somehow prove to others his or her mastery of material and symbolic meanings. Implicit in this statement is the notion that an aspiring insider must successfully advance through a series of specially designed stages and tests. Consistent with the symbolic interactionist tradition, Goffman (1961: 128) suggests that an individual's career involves a two-sided reflexivity between a "self identity" and a "public/felt identity" (Goffman, 1961). The concept of career, then, allows one to "move back and forth between the personal and the public" (Goffman, in Rubington and Weinberg, 1996: 111). Hence, this study pays attention to the ways in which participants strive to negotiate lines of action that assist their personal agendas, as well as the goals of the bar at large. In a broader cultural sense, Hewitt and Stokes (1976: 848) argue that "people consciously strive to align their actions, one with another and with cultural constraints, either by interpreting their acts in cultural terms or by taking account of culture in the framing of action." In other words, the nature of an individual's career is shaped by its particular cultural environment, and is subject to further modification.

Howard Becker's (1953) classic paper on how people learn to smoke marijuana provides a sharp insight towards the transmissions of career. Becker's premise was that "getting high" was more of a social learning process than a biological response. In other words, an individual's response to marijuana rests on his or her ability to *learn* the drug's effects through socialization and interaction with others. In short, the novice smoker tries to seek the definition of

the situation from more experienced smokers: learning how to smoke, what to feel, and what to enjoy. When all the interaction stages are completed, the neophyte will have been socialized into “pot smoking” and may well identify with the pot smoking subculture. The smoker “becomes” a marijuana user, and smoking pot becomes part of his or her identity.

Similarly, an individual “becomes” a barroom musician through various interactions, and not just through inborn “natural” talent (see, for example, Becker, 1982; Mills, 1940; Petterson, 1995; Portis, 1985). One’s identity and sense of self, then, becomes established through the reinforcement of others. Saying, for example, “I am a blues fan”, requires that other people consistently confirm this label. Thus, in a typical interactionist sense, meanings are constructed, delivered, and then interpreted. That is, the aspiring blues fan projects his image onto others, and in return tries to interpret their response. Each subsequent affirmation of identity may prompt the actor to further expand and modify his or her career.

What happens, however, when a participant’s effort to manage a desired identity is unsuccessful? What happens to a career when an individual’s actions and meanings fail to be reinforced by others? In some cases, a participant’s set of expectations and ideals may not be aligned with the definition of the situation. In such circumstances, the individual must *modify* his or her approach if a successful career is desired. The actor may re-evaluate the situational demands and subsequently recalibrate his or her perspective.

In their study of medical students *becoming* doctors, Haas and Shaffir (1987) describe the sorts of behavioural and psychosocial modifications that students make to accommodate the demands of professionalism. Haas and Shaffir suggest that students, at a stage in their medical career, reevaluate their early conceptions of how professionals ought to work (e.g., a humanistic, caring approach to patients). This reconsideration of beliefs is described as “the waning of idealism” (1987). In short, students learn to “turn off their emotional connection to patients, and to adopt the profession’s expectance of affective neutrality” (1987: 85). Learning to objectify the patient is a crucial stage in the shift towards medical professionalism. According to Haas and Shaffir, the shift is, at the same time, both real and symbolic. The key feature of the shift, however, is that students achieve a new *status* of differentiation from lay society.

The waning of idealism is a central feature of our study, as participants learn to modify their original ideals of “blues authenticity.” An individual’s status passage (Glaser and Strauss, 1971) from outsider to insider may be shaped by his or her waning of blues idealism. The insider is marked by his or her ability to recognize local blues activities as symbolic representations of taste and style.

### **Conclusion:**

The substantive focus of this thesis is blues music culture. Themes of “tradition” and “authenticity” provide a framework for the analysis of barroom scenes and behaviours. This thesis recognizes tradition as a social construction.



As such, particular attention is paid toward research and reviews that embrace practices of identifying and reworking blues traditions. The current work also examines authenticity as a negotiated construction. Authenticity is regarded here as an ideological *style* meant to empower participants with a greater social and cultural power over meanings. Respondents in the present study operate on a shared understanding of a “staged authenticity.”

The theoretical traditions of cultural studies and symbolic interaction provide the conceptual framework for the present study—cultural studies interprets the organization of political relationships and processes, while symbolic interaction assesses micro levels of negotiation and impression management.

Within the cultural studies tradition, subculture theory conceptualizes social scenes as emergent sites of activity and creativity. Subcultural areas of style, scene logic, articulation, and subcultural capital are examined. These areas work together to scrutinize the various ways in which actors organize their subculture. With regards to the current work, subculture theory accounts for participants’ efforts to achieve a stylistic culture of resistance and status hierarchy.

Symbolic interaction is used in this thesis to describe the negotiations and actions involved with our respondents’ construction of a subculture. Within the symbolic interaction tradition, the concept of career allows us to examine the various stages and learning cues involved in *becoming* an insider. In an ongoing way, participants learn and demonstrate subcultural notions of “hipness.”

By combining cultural studies and symbolic interaction, the present study is able to approach a closer understanding of the various meanings, perspectives, and identities associated with participants' activities.

### CHAPTER 3

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

#### **Introduction:**

This study focuses on social behaviour at a blues music bar in the industrial city of Oshawa, Ontario. Referred to henceforth as “Smitty’s”, at the time the research was conducted the bar had been in business for three years. As a relatively young social scene, Smitty’s is what Boden and Zimmerman (1991) have called a “structure-in-action.” That is, the idioculture of the bar was continuously being defined and *redefined*. For example, rules governing behaviour were wide open for actors to co-determine what it took to be, or become, a recognized blues participant.

Qualitative methods are effective for assessing the material and symbolic meanings of a subculture. They allow us to scrutinize in depth how participants make sense of their spatial and temporal environments. In particular, participant observation, with its phenomenological emphasis on social meanings (Blumer, 1969), allows for detailed observation of stages of semantic negotiation and identity formation. Such interplay between structure and action can only be understood in socially situated practices, and cannot be replicated through experiment or grasped well through quantitative analysis.

As a participant at Smitty’s, I was able to observe construction of cultural meaning and identity. My participant observation was multi-tiered, as I gained

“insider knowledge” by *performing* music alongside the informants, as well as *judging* for a summer-long blues competition.

This chapter begins with an outline of the strengths and weaknesses of using qualitative research methods. The next section addresses how data was collected, how many trips to the field were made, who was interviewed, and the various obstacles that were met along the way. Finally, Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) “constant comparative approach” is discussed as a central technique for data analysis.

### **Qualitative Research Methods:**

In a broad sense, “qualitative methodology” refers to “research that produces descriptive data: people’s own written or spoken words and observable behavior” (Bogdan and Taylor, 1984: 5). Qualitative methodology approaches the empirical world in an inductive fashion, allowing for the data to speak for themselves. In other words, rather than testing data against preconceived theoretical models, qualitative analysis allow for themes and patterns to emerge throughout the course of the study. The intent is to provide an accurate fit between the data and the words and actions of the informants. That said, this approach is appropriate for assessing processes of semantic negotiation at Smitty’s.

Qualitative methodology has been dismissed by some critics as a “soft-science”, incapable of accurate and objective analysis. For instance, Douglas

(1976) has critiqued field research for its alleged lack of reliability and validity. He argues that qualitative methodology should be discarded in favour of a more “controlled” scientific procedure, one in which researcher bias and subjectivity have no play in the findings. Other scholars critique field researchers for their assumption that *all* settings and people can be accurately assessed via qualitative methodology. They argue that a method should be selected on basis of its alignment with the problem under investigation (see, for example, Trow; in Filstead, 1970). In general, nearly all critics of qualitative methodology question its ability to produce valid, non-biased, results.

However, dismissing qualitative methodology on grounds of its subjectivity is somewhat of an oversight, considering *all* research is, to some extent, affected by the “demand characteristics” of the investigation (Wax, 1971: 15). The success of a qualitative study rests largely on the execution of research techniques.

For this study, “participant observation” served as the central method of collecting data. As the “mainstay” of qualitative methodology, participant observation refers to “research that involves social interaction between the researcher and informants in the milieu of the latter, during which data are systematically and unobtrusively collected” (Bogdan and Taylor, 1984: 15). If conducted properly, “participant observation” can fulfill the qualitative goal of interpreting peoples’ patterns and meanings as they move through various situations (Blumer, 1969). In fact, participant observation may serve as “a

yardstick against which to measure the completeness of data gathered in other ways” (Becker, 1970: 133). That said, claims about the questionable validity of qualitative research can also be addressed by pointing to the strengths and advantages of participant observation.

Underlying participant observation is the phenomenological assumption that actors constructed their own reality. The task of “phenomenology” is to capture the process of interpretation accompanying human behaviour (Blumer, 1969). In other words, the phenomenologist attempts to explain behaviour through the words and actions of informants. The aim is to discover the group’s “perspective”, which, according to Becker (1961: 436), contains: “a definition of the situation in which the actors are involved, a statement of the goals they are trying to achieve, a set of ideas specifying what kinds of activities are expedient and proper, and a set of activities or practices congruent with them.” Advocates of phenomenology argue its ability to gather first-hand knowledge of social life, without the restriction of preordained formulas and concepts. Phenomenology allows the researcher to use his or her “sociological imagination” to “avoid fetishism of method and technique” (Mills, 1959: 224).

“Ethnography”, a variant of phenomenology, is also concerned with how people view and act in their world as they see it. The main focus for ethnographers, however, is the actual process of “how people make sense of what they do” (Hewitt, 1994: 17). As an “ethnography”, this study examines the accounts, experiences, and interactions from which participants construct

meanings. Cultural meanings and rules from the “ambiguous” world-at-large are appropriated into “codes” (Wieder, 1974) that reflect the group’s organized way of life. At Smitty’s, patrons were engaged in a continual process of making sense of their environment. The general goal of this project, then, is to discover how a group of fans and musicians came to define their world through the process of social interaction.

### **The Study:**

In total, 30 participants were interviewed. Of these, 15 were performers, 10 were patrons, 3 were staff members, and 2 were magazine writers. By and large, the sample’s informants were in their 40’s and 50’s, and all individuals but three were caucasian. Only 5 females were interviewed. From my three years of both performing and observing the establishment, I feel the sample adequately represents the population of the bar in general. While age, race, and gender issues might merit further study elsewhere, neither the interviews nor the subsequent analysis focussed on these factors. Generally the thesis concentrates on issues to do with subculture and career.

In addition to participant observation, data were also collected through interviews. Research methods involving multiple methods of data collection are an example of what Denzin (1978) refers to as “triangulation”. By combining methods and sources of data, and by using a variety of theoretical perspectives, triangulated research allows for resourceful sociological inquiry. As an integrated

approach to qualitative methods, triangulation can also reduce the presence of research bias and provide for a deeper and clearer understanding of the setting.

Over the course of thirteen months (January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1998 to January 30<sup>th</sup>, 1999), forty-five visits were made to the setting. Of these visits, twenty-two were as a performer, twelve were as a blues-contest judge, and eleven were as an observer/interviewer. Research took place on Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday nights, each night having a designated theme at the bar. Wednesday was designated as “experimental” night (other incarnations in the past have included “jazz night”, “hump-day” drink special night, “new talent night”, “open stage night”, and “live Latin dj night”). Thursdays were usually reserved for out-of-town bands. Fridays and Saturdays were assigned to performances by regular local bands—there was a rotation of about eight bands that played the bar monthly. Sundays were designated for “open stage jams”, which for three months in the summer were preceded by a blues contest co-sponsored by Smitty’s and a local recording facility.

The nature of my research required that I be immersed in the setting. To enhance my chances of capturing detail, I usually spent entire evenings at the bar. Most evenings of research would last approximately four hours (10 pm to 2 am). Several forays, however, continued for many hours beyond 2 pm. These after-hour sessions provided valuable data regarding subcultural “etiquette” that was less comprehensible to those without access to the “back stage” (Goffman, 1959; Hughes, 1958: 40).



In terms of interviews, questions were not asked until a comfortable rapport had been established with the informant. Most informants already knew me as a music performer, but not as an ethnographer. In gaining rapport, it was quite common that I would “sit-in” for a show, or a series of shows, before the interview stage was reached. In another case, a blues-magazine writer offered to be interviewed for my study if I would write a feature article on my *own* blues experiences over the past eight years. Quite often, this element of reciprocity would provide informants with a chance to *interview me* in order to gain *my* perspective on the culture. This inverted research dialectic speaks volumes about the informants’ own desires to understand the definition of the situation.

Field notes compiled during fieldwork begin with a contextual description of the evening (what bands were playing, and what promotions or themes were at play). This description was accompanied with an explanation of my particular research role for the night (as band-participant, as judge, or as an observer and interviewer). My notes included detailed accounts of conversations and activities that took place in or around the setting. These data include details such as the patron’s verbatim, the musicians’ performance and interaction, the owners’ strategies and actions, fans’ dancing, drug and alcohol consumption, audience participation, argot, rituals, nicknames, non-verbal gestures, seating locations, dress codes and other blues artifacts (i.e., black fedoras, concert T-shirts, pocket harmonicas), changes in the setting and administrative format, and lastly, reaction to my role as researcher. These data are supplemented with

“observer’s comments”, comments providing a running account of my attempts to understand the setting and its perspectives. From this triangulated method of research I focussed on the creation and circulation of cultural meanings for both the setting, and its participants (Fiske, 1987).

*Role of the Researcher and Ethical Considerations:* My own blues band has performed at Smitty’s on average twice a month since the bar opened three years ago. Although I do not regard these experiences as official forays into the field, they did help establish contacts, as well as the substantiation of my role as a trusted insider. For this reason alone, it was possible for me to undertake scholarly research that would have otherwise been more difficult in this setting. My insider status lead to a deep understanding of, and empathy for, the lives of the people at the bar. Being an “insider” yielded many benefits, yet also posed potentially ethically problematic situations.

One such issue concerned possible over-familiarity with participants’ rituals and language—my familiarity with blues behaviour and argot having long preceded my work as a qualitative researcher. As a result, there was a danger that I might take for granted data that someone less immersed with the culture might find notable. To combat this bias, my field notes were recorded meticulously. At various points throughout my analysis I was able to return to my notes and find valuable information that was overlooked during transcription and earlier stages of data analysis.

My forays into the field may also have been compromised when I was forced to relinquish my role as blues musician due to my obligation as academic researcher. For example, some of the participants who were familiar with my blues-performance persona felt that my academic demeanor represented an “unnatural”, and hence, insincere persona. Similar to Whyte’s classic study of a street corner group (1955), I too was sometimes regarded as an intruder by virtue of my need to act and talk like a researcher. Some patrons had it set in their mind that my musician role was constant, both *on* and *off* stage. That is, they were initially unconvinced by my researcher identity and seemed interested in getting me back on track with my usual musician ways. One informant, for example, comments as follows on my “new” hybrid identity: “The Kermit the Frog news reporter thang ain’t you Hun. You need to git your ass home and sleep or something... Next time I see you, it better be back on stage shakin’ your love over that damn piana” (Head bar maid, Noreen: Sunday, May 10, 1998).

As Miller (1952) suggested, there is a fine line between collecting rich data and establishing an over-rapport. At various times during data collection, illegal activities took place during the after-hours sessions of my research. On occasions like this I consciously pointed out the differences between myself and the informants. As Polsky did in his work with heroin users (1969), I found subtle ways to decline taking part in the activity, while at the same time maintaining respect among the participants. To signify my disinterest in illegal activities I would venture to the corner of the bar and become preoccupied with my field

notes. At first I had to explain my ethical retreats, but soon thereafter participants grew accustomed to my methods.

For purposes of legal protection and confidentiality, I assured the informants that the illegal activities would not “count” as research for my thesis. My interest with these after-hours gatherings was to take note of the back-stage verbatim that took place after the main crowd had gone home. Once the doors had been locked (at around 3am) the remaining elite insiders often talked about issues from earlier in the evening. For example, patrons variously critiqued musicians, complained about customers, discussed the pros and cons of various administrative policies (i.e., underage patrons), and told wild stories about the *behind-the-scene activities* that happened throughout the night (e.g., budding romances, sexual activities, drug use and exchange, altercations, etc...). Following Adler and Adler’s (1971) work on maintaining field relations, I made an effort to create a mutual feeling of *trust* between myself and the participants. In the eyes of the informants, I had to be considered a “wise” (Goffman, 1963) member of the group, vowing to withhold data concerning illegal drug use and sexual activities. All informants were aware of my research and, to some degree, expressed appreciation for having their names kept confidential. As part of the research bargain, I explicitly informed participants that they had the right to withdraw at any time from interviews or activities in which they felt uncomfortable.

### **Analyzing Data:**

The data were analyzed using the “constant comparative method” (see Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Rather than working strictly from a *priori* theoretical assumptions, this approach gleans theories, concepts, and hypotheses *straight from the data*. The analysis of data is an ongoing process, with themes and hunches constantly explored and compared to one another. The purpose of using the constant comparative technique is to achieve an accurate “fit” between the data and the emergent themes under study. Thus, an effort was made to assume theoretical naivete. This was done in order to avoid a marriage between the data and pre-existing theories.

Palpable themes did not emerge until several months into the research. Steps of analytic induction were performed simultaneous to the collection of data (see Cressey, 1950; Denzin, 1978; Katz, 1983). Throughout the course of the analysis, various hypotheses related to, or within, identified themes were continually compared and refined. Negative cases were sometimes encountered; and as a result, certain elements of a working hypothesis would be reformulated and modified to better explain the data (negative cases were any data that contradicted or disproved working hypotheses). In the early stages of research, for example, I made the mistake of assuming a connection between blues music and rituals. Luckily, several informants pointed out that the connection was spurious; rituals were not a result of the music, but rather a technique of homosocial reproduction. From this point onwards, I continually ran

checks with the informants to clarify points and tie up loose ends. The most valuable data came from informants who had become comfortable with my role as researcher. By having data collection and analysis go hand-in-hand, both “emic” (group) and “etic” (scientific) perspectives of the subculture are achieved (see Fetterman, 1971: 90, 91). Without an ongoing comparison, it is less likely that the study would generate valid results.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **FINDINGS**

This is the WWF of Blues Bars. It's all fake. Oshawa's fake—  
But we keep coming back

Andy, House Guitarist

This chapter reports findings from research conducted at Smitty's. The purpose of the chapter is to articulate the perspectives of the bar's patrons. Their words and actions serve as the study's most concretely empirical forms of data.

The chapter is divided into three broad sections, each one sequentially ordered to trace the bar's evolution in terms of ideologies and practices. First, the problematic notion of authenticity is considered. This core issue provided a common ground for their social interaction, yet also was a source of contention. Thus, processes of negotiating constructed meanings of authenticity were a central feature of interaction. During the period of observation, the bar was structurally and ideologically overhauled so to accommodate a new perspective of "staged authenticity."

Second, this chapter looks at the process of becoming an insider. Both fans and musicians could achieve an insider status by enduring a series of ritualistic procedures designed to assess their loyalty to others. During these procedures, aspiring insiders managed impressions of themselves as committed to the scene.

Third, this chapter demonstrates how insiders verified their status through the accumulation and display of subcultural capital. As mentioned in the literature review, collecting forms of subcultural capital was a good strategy for fitting in. Its latent function, however, was to delineate statuses on a *continuum* of insider statuses. Ultimately, actors wanted to work their way up the insider-ladder towards the level of an elite insider (also referred to by patrons as “pro-stars”). Thus, Smitty’s had two levels of insider: a general level and an elite level. For the elite insiders, the end result was an invitation to the after hours “clean-up session.” In addition to mopping the floor and collecting beer bottles, regular barroom attendees knew that the clean-up session involved many *other* alluring activities. Generally, then, participants who managed a favourable impression of themselves were able to accrue capital via their hipness, rituals, dress, and rare collections.

### **THE PROBLEM OF AUTHENTICITY**

The idea of authenticity served as a common basis for interaction and cultural identities at Smitty’s. Despite the fact that the respondents’ definitions of blues-tradition varied widely and were often ill-informed, the idioculture of the bar was unified by the pretence of sharing a set of historical meanings and values. The purpose of this section is to highlight the process of adaptation and mediation that accompanied the participants’ struggle over the “definition of the situation.” As we shall see, through the construction of a joint perspective of



blues-authenticity, a number of patrons created a unique cultural scene based on a fabricated, or “staged” interpretation of authenticity (MacCannell, 1976). Within this dramaturgy, participants aligned their behaviour with *representations* of authenticity, rather than “true” elements of the concept (Baudrillard, 1981; Goffman, 1959; Grossberg, 1984; Hebdige, 1979). The section begins by discussing the significance of authenticity as problematic in the blues idioculture at Smitty’s. Next, we address the initial period of conflict around individuals’ attempts to substantiate personal versions of authenticity. Finally, we will examine how patrons eventually staged their own authenticity.

### **In the Beginning:**

In the early stages of observation at the bar, the majority of participants indicated that the cornerstone of *any* blues community is its veneration of tradition and authenticity. In the opinion of many patrons, steeping oneself in “tradition” is a necessary requirement to be a “legitimate” blues fan or performer. Eddie, the bar’s “house” drummer illustrates how the social organization of Smitty’s was based upon an abstract concept of tradition:

Blues music, and for that matter, all things blues I suppose, are carved out of a big complicated voodoo tradition... This won’t be an authentic juke joint until every last one of these people learns the basic history of the blues... Even me, I really don’t know the ins and outs of the tradition, just bits and pieces. And it’s hard to say exactly what the blues tradition is all about—you just know when it hits you. You can’t describe it, you just feel it... and it’s catching on, I think. But in the meantime, what separates the mice from the men is how well they know the roots (Eddie: June 6, 1998).

Eddie exemplifies the notion of “sacred inarticulateness”; the general inability on behalf of fans and performers to explain their most sacred institution in an objective discourse (Levine, 1972: 140). Despite this, many patrons still believed that blues traditions and conventions, however varied they may be, or vaguely understood, must be honoured (Becker, 1982; Strauss, 1978). That said, the idea of “authenticity” was central to how respondents connected with Smitty’s. The following quotes, collected during the bar’s formative months, illustrate informants’ perspectives of authenticity:

I’ve been to every club in Canada, and most areas of the States—pretty much anything that was on my route... I’m a fan of the blues, I mean I’m a *real* fan. My wife and me come *here* as much as we can—not the other places. Bottom line is that Smitty’s is tryin’ real hard to get the authentic style of blues; no uppety-town horn bullshit or synthesizers or drum machines... I’m all like, ‘don’t insult my integrity with your bullshit blues’... I’ve been everywhere, and I feel like I know everything about the old black guys. Their history and their suffering is so real, heartfelt... authentic (Fan: Carlin, Sunday, August 9, 1998).  
(My Italics)

The Smitty brothers hire only the authentic acts. They know I won’t spend 40, 50 dollars a night drinkin’ to a band pretending to have the blues... There’s an unspoken rule of thumb when it comes to the blues. If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it; and if it’s in ya, well, it’s just gotta come out. You know what I’m sayin’?... I’d rather drink piss than watch a night of fake blues (Fan: Bill, Saturday, March 7, 1998).

I gotta sing it like the original... If I’m not authentic, you know, if I don’t sound like I mean it, and if it don’t sound like that original 1955 Lightnin’ Hopkins Chess recording session—well, it’s curtains. We don’t get asked back... That’s business (Singer: Darryl, Sunday, January 17, 1999).

Smitty's cultural practices were forged over time through active day-to-day processes of authenticity-driven articulations. Among patrons, authenticity served as a basic "structure of feeling" (Williams, 1977). They tended to assume that a shared set of traditional ideologies and values would ultimately lead to a more privileged status at Smitty's. Both fans and musicians employed a "rhetoric of authenticity" (Gamson, 1994) in order to establish themselves as members of a traditionally "resistant" blues culture at-large. Using a master dichotomy of authentic (high/residual/folk) versus inauthentic (low/mass/commercial) culture, informants were able to align their individual identities (Hewitt and Stokes, 1976). The idea of authenticity served as a yardstick by which individuals could negotiate the meanings of their subcultural activities.

An example of the importance of this structure of feeling can be found in expressed reverence among patrons and musicians for accurate renditions ("covers") of obscure blues numbers. In the early months of the bar's formation, there seemed to be an obligation to honour traditional songs. Bruce, a bass player for several of Smitty's blues bands, sheds light on the unifying effects of traditional cover music:

If things are going shitty, a surefire way to get the room back into the game is to pull an old classic out of the hat... Blind Lemon, Robert Johnson or something dirty sounding... Ya, they're done to death, but it brings the crowd together. Everyone pretends they know the tune; they mouth the words and do some hambone dance... they recognize and click with the... traditional shit. 'Cause no one can make sense of blues originals (Sunday, July 19, 1998).

Roxy, a Smitty's regular, reveals her initial thoughts on Smitty's affinity for cover music:

I think Scott even tells the bands to play nothing but covers; all the popular songs, you know... Maybe some people will get tired of it. How many times can I hear "Sweet Home Chicago" in one week? But it gets the crowd into it, I guess... You know I'll dance to any upbeat song, and if the rest of the people are dancing with me, I'm like, 'Hey, all the better'! So I think it's great that Smitty's has its own, I don't know, song list... Top 40 blues (Sunday, May 31, 1998)!

Bruce and Roxy represent an early sentiment at Smitty's that "authentic" cover music helps "bring the crowd together." Fans and musicians, it was agreed, could interact more easily around a shared set of familiar blues symbols. During the early months, then, joint actions were made possible through the simple coordination of easy and familiar blues meanings and behaviours. By honoring basic cues of blues-authenticity, participants could feel aligned with its traditionally marginal subculture.

### **Politics of Authenticity:**

Everyday activity at Smitty's involved a series of ongoing negotiations around the "authentic." Although highly valued (most people were well aware that it was socially profitable to use the word "authenticity"), there was no consensus on the meaning of the term. What was regarded as authentic by one individual was sometimes deemed inauthentic by another. Since, however, Smitty's was an emergent culture, respondents *continued* to hail "authenticity" as a representation and signification of their behaviour (Bourdieu, 1984; Fiske,

1987, 1989). Patrons also discovered, though, that Smitty's was *not* a homogeneous culture and that authenticity, itself, was a contested idea. The *irony* of an authenticity-focussed ideology is that an entirely new culture had stemmed from a traditional concept not often associated with creativity and change (Grossberg, 1984). In this section, the goal will not be to debate authenticity, but rather, to assess the various logics and interactions that led to our informants' appropriation of the concept.

Cultural politics are inherent in the construction and attribution of authenticity. As Peterson has argued (1997: 220): "The changing meaning of authenticity is not random, but is renegotiated in a continual political struggle in which the goal of each contending interest is to naturalize a particular construction of authenticity." And while different versions of authenticity touch upon different cultural studies polemics (e.g., high vs. low culture, incorporation vs. resistance, *langue* vs. *parole*, passive consumption vs. active consumption, and structure vs. agency), the scope of the present research is limited to an examination of the ways in which both fans and musicians consolidate their individual tastes within their larger culture.

As suggested above, people were generally unable to articulate the meanings of authenticity. They would refer instead to what authentic blues was *not*. This was found in three counter-productive forms; the *non-manufactured*, the *non-imitative*, and the *credible* (Peterson, 1997).

Those who evaluated blues-behaviour in terms of a *non-manufactured* sense of authenticity distinguished between actions that were thought to be aesthetically creative and those that were tainted by commodification. Assuming the role of “authenticator”, they constructed their judgements around denunciations of *fake*, or *manufactured* musical expressions. For example, Lynda, a regular customer who also co-edits a local arts magazine, assumed the role of arbiter and posited the authentic (raw material) versus the inauthentic (commercial):

I see too many bands nowadays that play the blues at first, and then pull the rug out from their fans. They're inauthentic jack-offs, faking all along. Sell outs... But Grover stays true to the blues. He doesn't want to make it big; the man would much rather play for beer than money (Sunday, July 26, 1998).

The second group of patrons were those who approached authenticity in terms of its disclosure of the “real” and “original”. They perceived authenticity as the ability to display stylistic originality, while simultaneously remaining faithful to traditional blues signs and conventions. This “realist” perspective created an obstacle for nearly all the *local* blues bands, who were routinely shunned regardless of whether they were following the beaten path of playing cover music, or if they were attempting stylistic appropriation and innovation. In the eyes of the “authenticator”, local bands had not reached international acclamation and, thus, were judged as being lesser. All local musicians were deemed inauthentic by virtue of their lack of cultural mystique and exoticism. This particular ideal of authenticity also posed a hurdle for bands performing

cover renditions of previously recorded songs. Several musicians expressed their fear of being accused of plagiarism or misrepresentation. For example, Tom, one of the house-guitarists, commented on the potentially fraudulent nature of his music:

No matter what I do, people won't put me on the same page as Albert Collins. I mean, I have the same axe, the same twin reverb, I know all his licks; even grew the same beard. I have a re-occurring nightmare that some cranky-dick purist gonna slap my ass into next week for tryin' to sound like the "master of the telecaster"—but, I mean, shit, if the fans want to hear Albert fuckin' Collins, I gotta deliver the real thing, 'cause he's dead! So, ya, it's a tall order... I don't know what to do (Sunday, January 10, 1998).

Respondents who considered themselves purists of the non-imitative visited Smitty's exclusively on Thursday's, when "exotic" out-of-town acts came to perform. Scott, the club owner, was somewhat dismissive of this (perhaps economically necessary) phenomenon:

We have people who come out only on these Thursdays; a real different bunch; rich margarita drinkers—Me and Denny just leave the beer in storage! So, well, I push the fact that someone's from Chicago. That's all I got to print on the promo, "Live from Chicago", and blues fans from, like, Belleville to Toronto will pack the joint... you can just tell that they don't know who the artist is... They just like the sounds of his blues nickname, or that they're fat and black (Thursday, May 7, 1998).

The third type of authenticity centered on a performer's ability to be *believable* or *credible* to the lay observer. The authentic, in this sense, is determined by whether an individual musician accurately represents his or her "natural self".

This argument follows the grain of work by both Roland Barthes and Simon Frith,

both of whom have contended that it is, in fact, possible to detect essential elements of authenticity in self-presentation. Barthes (1977) looks to the singer's "grain" of voice, while Frith argues that, "structures of sound... are *direct* signs of emotion and marks of character" (1983: 35). In a similar vein, Steve, a regular customer and local talent agent, suggested:

I don't care what no one says, you can just tell, or at least I can, when someone is an authentic blues shouter... A certain somethin'... Just a kinda something in their eyes, that kinda truth where they look into the distance searchin' for the right words... These wannabees tonight are too polished. They're not even trying. They're speakin' from their mouth, not their heart (Saturday, April 11, 1998).

This version of authenticity, however, is problematic in the sense that it is a self-referential concept. There is no empirical means of assessing another individual's personal level of authenticity (Erickson, 1995). Such a value judgement sets up an arbitrary set of authenticity criteria, and hence, if *all* patrons adopted this self-directed ideology there would be no common-ground for interaction and evaluation.

The problem with all three interpretations of authenticity is that in some ways they undermine the bar's original purpose of representing "the people". Consequently, often there would be a discrepancy between an individual's "social identity" and "felt identity" (Goffman, 1963). Where social identities are those that others impute to the actor, felt identity has more to do with the actor's personal experiences and self-feelings. Lacking a consensus as to what counted as authentic, sense-making at Smitty's was often disjointed.



Confused articulation around authenticity was particularly apparent during a summer-long blues competition. Competitors frequently expressed concern regarding their difficulties in “solving the crowd” and “guessing what counts as good blues” (House Guitarist: Pete, Sunday, June 14, 1998). For example, “Keyboard Johnny”, one of the Sunday-night contestants, had shown disgust for Smitty’s disordered meaning of authenticity. In the middle of his rendition of “Rockin’ Pneumonia and Boogie Woogie Flu”, Johnny drew his playing to an abrupt halt and began to kick his synthesizer. He was evidently annoyed by the crowd’s mixed signals. He stepped into the microphone and exclaimed the following:

Look people, I wear my balls on my sleeve for you and what do you do in return? You all got your heads turned to the bigscreen at the bar. God damned Horseracing too... None y’all would know the blues if it bit you on the ass. So why are you even... here? If my keyboard was a real broken-down saloon piano, you’d all be up and dancing... You guys shit your pants like I’m a bloody genius for playing Georgia Sattelites, and then you turn right around and bite my head off for playing boogie blues... Fuck this... All you’s, Denny, Scott, call me when you get it together (Sunday, June 14, 1998).

Laurie, one of the contest judges, also commented on the unpredictable environment at Smitty’s:

I probably shouldn’t be a judge; I have no clue what goes over well ... Neither do the musicians. It’s party politics if you ask me. Each person has a different idea about what good, real, blues is—or maybe, really, what it isn’t... Nobody agrees about nothing, or knows what to do unless, like, they’re all sitting together... If you ask me, it’s all a big joke; no one knows nothing (Sunday, May 31, 1998).

As vague and indeterminate as the concept of "authenticity" may have seemed, though, Smitty's members continued to exercise and rework its meaning so that it would serve as a reference point for subsequent ideas and behaviours.

### **The Overhaul:**

At one point during the period of observation, confusion over authenticity had a disabling influence. The bar began to lose customers. It seemed that some patrons felt denied of their opportunity to create and participate in a shared bar-culture.

A small contingent of insiders realized that the bar, as it was configured, was failing to fulfill for its patrons the original promise of providing hometown pride and identity. These insiders were comprised of owners, staff, regular musicians, and fans (usually friends of the owners) who were invested in improving the bar's sense of community and inclusiveness. Although the impetus for this overhaul was ultimately financial, the character of its implementation was also culturally-driven.

These insiders believed a physical change to the bar would help create a unified bar theme. The new focus created an atmosphere that would afford patrons a better opportunity to experience so-called "American-styled" blues. That is, the new "American" theme of the bar was meant to promote a clearer sense of identity and inclusiveness. As one of the owners suggested,

Everything so far has backfired... we've lost too many faces. The familiar guys are drinking at home now... So, now, we're gonna re-

do the bar like a theme-park, a *blues* theme-park—where it's easier for people to experience American-styled blues. I just want something that's painfully simple! Everyone's gotta understand why we're here. No more bickering about the history (of blues music), and no more getting angry about what's real and what's fake... Just max and relax! And soon, *everyone* will feel included and important; like the show can't go on without them... like on "Cheers" (Scott: Wednesday, May 27, 1998).

With Smitty's reconstruction the fundamental emphasis shifted from essentialism to fabrication and representation. That is, the bar was rebuilt upon the premise of "staged authenticity" (MacCannell, 1973); patrons were to be given the sensation that they were experiencing a representation of "authentic" American blues.

The interdependence of the bar's structure and the interests of its patrons became more refined and apparent through the course of the renovations. Other than the staff, approximately five patrons assisted with the process of change—both physical and cultural. These individuals were committed to the renovation, and were consistently present before and after Smitty's regular bar hours. One of them indicated,

Smitty's is sinking...but it's not ready to go down, right? And the way I figure things, the least I can do is lend the Smitty's brothers a hand. I grew up playing hockey with Scott, and him and his whole family were always very giving of, you know, people they trusted... We're (those involved with the overhaul) gunning to make this the best blues joint ever, so ya, I got a personal stake in it. I want people to... smell the ribs and collie greens... Plus, if I take care of Smitty's now, they'll take care of me later... and so if things go like planned, I'll be drinkin' for free (Bill, Saturday March 7, 1998).

The significance of special statuses will be discussed later in the thesis. For now, it is worth noting that several key insiders decided to redress Smitty's instability by committing themselves to a major physical and ideological renovation of the bar.

Smitty's was redesigned into three general areas: A front section with a music stage, dancefloor, and general seating; a middle section with the main entrance and liquor bar; and a back section with washrooms and sofas. Appendix A provides a general illustration of Smitty's redesigned layout. With regards to the actual physical renovations, the front section of the bar where bands perform was redesigned with the purpose of promoting inclusiveness. The intent was to create a physical area in which most people would feel comfortable. To promote a sense of apparent blues-legitimacy, the front section was elaborately decorated with blues-related artifacts and memorabilia. The platform-stage was removed to promote a greater sense of intimacy between the bands and the audience. The new close proximity with the band was intended to bring about what seemed like a unique series of events and experiences each night. Rustic-looking tables and stools were scattered haphazardly throughout the main floor. Carlin, an inside fan, reveals his thoughts on the reorganization of the main floor:

Me and my buds were the ones who originally suggested this change in the first place...now that it's done, we get free bar tabs every so often...it's not so formal now with the zig-zag formation. Because, before it was more like a fucking church, or courthouse ...now with the wooden tables and the random arrangement, people will feel that all seats are equally good... Right up with the

band, it's like you're capturing the moment, always—Like you're an important part of the jam session (Sunday, June 21, 1998).

To emulate the look of Southern juke joints, the tile dance floor was replaced with a tarnished plank of wood. The walls in the front section were decorated with rare-looking black and white photos of traditional blues musicians, as well as prints of concert posters from the 1950's and 60's. Perhaps the largest addition to the walls was a ten foot square drawing of perhaps the most recognizably obscure blues pioneer, Leadbelly. Accompanying the mural was the bar's new slogan, "Smitty's: The Little House of Blues," a moniker lifted directly from a blues bar in Chicago.

The middle section of the setting was the liquor bar. The most significant shift in the signification of authenticity here was the renaming of several alcoholic beverages after traditional blues drinks. Within weeks of the renovation it had become commonplace for regulars to ask for a "Mississippi Moonshine" or a "Texas Cannonball." The entire liquor bar area had been redesigned to look like an old-fashioned saloon. Much of the machinery, though new, was designed to resemble vintage artifacts (e.g., a carnival popcorn machine, a large brass ice-dispenser, and a wood-paneled blender). The décor was completed with the addition of four porcelain statues of black, decrepit-looking horn players.

Patrons often referred to the back section of the room as "the red light zone." There, as part of the renovation, a set of three black synthetic leather couches replaced a seldom used pool table and a peanut machine. This dimly-lit area was intended to resemble a bar's back-stage; a place where musicians and

fans could engage, if desired, in illicit activities such as drug use, gambling, and even sex.

The washrooms were relocated next to the red light zone, giving individuals who were on their way there (or back) an opportunity to check out any backstage action. Andy, a house guitarist, revealed the following:

It's really funny man. Some people are really afraid to enter the zone... They stand at the shitter, have a peek, maybe even look a bit longer, and go back to their table... Makes me feel so damn guilty sometimes—I don't know what the fuck these mo' fo's think is going on back here... not like we have some superhero thing that they don't... And it can't be the black thing either. I see millions of brothers stop dead in their tracks and 180 it... here, we got us the ultimate hang-out (Friday, September 4, 1998).

Through renovation, then, an intimate “backstage” feeling was fabricated by altering key aspects of the bar’s physical setting. What was actually a front stage setting was made to feel backstage. As Noreen, the head barmaid, stated:

Now, a lot of the regulars know that it's one big Halloween costume party, night after night. A real no-brainer every time... Some people get it, while others don't... Honestly, I'm baffled that some people can go on thinking they're really getting a dose of cotton patch blues in Oshawa... But those who are really up to speed with things—the most popular folks—are really good at playing make believe (Sunday, June 14, 1998).

Interestingly, Smitty's new design forged a division between those who understood the artifice and those who did not. Patrons who continued their search for authenticity remained outsiders; while those who became aware of the staged version of authenticity were able to fit in. The next section of this chapter addresses the difference between insiders and outsiders.

## BECOMING AN INSIDER

This section addresses the process of becoming an insider. Adopting Willis's position of "grounded aesthetics" (1990), it will be argued that there are no pre-existing codes for learning the "logics" (Straw, 1991) of Smitty's scene. Clearly, Smitty's subcultural style was not in any sense "natural." Rather, it was a constructed product of cultural work (Hebdige, 1979; Middleton, 1990). As such, then, this section explicates the continual process of negotiation through which patrons learned to articulate the identities and meanings of their behaviour. To understand the process of becoming an insider, we must first discuss the patrons' symbolic ideology of exclusivity and cultural difference (Bourdieu, 1984, 1987). Here, we will examine the personal and collective identities made manifest by Smitty's ideological structure.

Secondly, we will assess how actors *learned* Smitty's symbolic field of culture. In this segment, three types of cultural participants are identified: the "city-slickers" (outsiders), the regulars (insiders), and the "pro-stars" (elite insiders). By and large, the most effective way of becoming a regular/insider was to advance through a sequence of steps leading to an opportunity to perform on stage. Patrons who successfully earned an insider status were able to demonstrate to others that they had discounted "traditional" ideals of authenticity and resistance. That is, insiders learned to approach the idioculture as a site of subcultural style and representation. The *most* successful insiders, referred to as "pros", or "pro-stars", managed an impression of themselves as committed to this

ideology. The main difference between general insiders and elite insiders is that the latter group was able to readily convince others of their insider knowledge and competence.

### **Resistance as Style:**

A particular characteristic of the culture at Smitty's was an emphasis on local identity and pride. This was achieved through differentiation between the "mainstream" and *other* blues scenes. This section focuses on how members of the culture at Smitty's used a style of "resistance" as a symbol of belonging and allegiance (Cohen, 1991; Grossberg, 1984).

Smitty's participants won resistant space through incorporating and excorporating signs from the larger blues culture. But rather than opposing an identifiable bloc of domination, resistance at Smitty's was more of a *style*, incorporation its own micro-hierarchies and intra-genre competitions (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986; Thornton, 1995). Symbolic resistance, proved to be quite *real* in its effects, representing what Baudrillard has referred to as "its own pure simulacrum" (1983: 5,11). That is, resistance served as a simulative model without reference to any essentially "true" or "false" criteria (e.g., point of origin, dominant/parent adversaries, objectives, magical solutions of winning space, etc...). The style of resistance at Smitty's served as an ideological platform for the struggle over prestige.



*Making it Their Own:* Because Smitty's constituents came from a wide variety of backgrounds and statuses, it was difficult to conceive of their activity as a classic "resistance" against an *undifferentiated* mainstream (see, for example, Hall and Whannel, 1964; Hebdige, 1979). Also, as most patrons learned, Smitty's did not operate under traditional blues-imagery of economic struggle. As one patron reveals,

Let's face it. We're not in Louisiana, it's not 1930, and I don't bust my nuts for no sharecropper; I work at Kelsey's for shit sake... What I'm playing tonight is the same song-and-dance routine I play here any given night... And anyone who thinks I'm on my knees trying to capture some freedom is... sadly mistaken—and he's also a racist... Yes, I would say the general feeling of rebellion is an important ingredient of blues *entertainment*, but nothing much more... Sorry folks, no Whoopie Goldberg slave shit tonight (Singer: Jarvis, Sunday, May 10, 1998).  
(My italics)

Thus, Smitty's logic of resistance was not as class-bound as more traditional instances of blues culture (Keil, 1966; Straw, 1991). Rather, Smitty's constituents extrapolated values of opposition from the dominant blues world and transformed them into a new stylistic homology of symbolic resistance—one in which "focal concerns, activities, group structure and collective self image are brought together into a distinctive and coherent ensemble, in which members can see their central values held and reflected" (Hall and Jefferson 1976: 56). As Andy, the house guitarist, suggests:

Smitty's is way more than just the music. Any chump can pick up the guitar... Smitty's is a place for us old dogs who still want to have fun... and to do it our way... (We) got our very own thing happening... here in the motor city. No place in the world can duplicate what goes on... behind these doors, and nobody gonna

take away what we got either... Don't have to worry about... internets, surfing the web, sending faxes, or even about being politically correct, you know, it's still OK to buy a drink for a lady...and it's where brothers respect each other and just chill-out...in fine style too (Sunday, August 23, 1998).

While homologies of economic and racial struggle may be associated with “typical” elements from blues culture at-large (see, for example, Lomax, 1977), Smitty's *own* set of stylistic codes and conventions were cultivated. They were then legitimized in the sense that elements of the culture were re-contextualized and adapted to fit the new setting. However, broader relations of dominance and subordination were less important than a more latent function of creating a shared identity.

*Resistance and Identity:* The purpose of Smitty's style of resistance was both to obfuscate “outside” or master statuses (Hughes, 1978) and to invoke “a fantasy of classlessness” (Thornton, 1995: 12). Not only did Smitty's participants symbolically resist the values and rigors of everyday (mainstream) life, but they also transformed their leisure into a site of creative identity formation. At Smitty's, the traditional politics of blues opposition were transformed to a form of a stylistic (taste) distinction (Bourdieu, 1984). Two members shared their sense of how they relate their personal biographies with resistance as expressed in traditional blues:

I saw B.B. King on the Cosby show back when I was in school—I felt really connected, because, although I'm not black or anything, I've also payed my dues... Just by being here I get chills up my

spine—like I'm a member of some kinda crusade or mission (Fan: Collin, Sunday, May 31, 1998).

National Geographic just had an article on the origins of the deep blues, that Jim Crow slavery stuff down in the swamp and shit... Those people suffer man... they got no choice, so they gotta pour all their frustration and blood into their music or, I guess, or empty their worried mind so to speak... I really don't know any of these dudes myself... and there's no swamps in Oshawa, except maybe lake Ontario—Personally speaking, I feel a sense of honour just to be connected, or to represent, the whole traditional struggle thingy (Harmonica player: Grover, Saturday, January 2, 1998).

As these statements suggest, Smitty's members bought into the overall blues sign of resistance-at-large, while also making an affective investment into Smitty's stylistic codes. "Resistant" activities, then, occurred not at the macro-economic level of class struggle, but within the micro-cultural domain of articulation. Smitty's members engaged in a continual process of encoding and decoding the contextual significance of their activities (Hall, 1980).

However, the subjects had little or no intention of gaining power and wealth from their resistance. Instead, blues signs of "common experience" and "resilience" were decoded of their signification of power, and recoded with the promise of personal *status*. Two fans explained Smitty's role in shaping their sense of self,

Between you and me, I go from a zero to a hero... (I) Work like a monkey... all day... and then I come here on any given night and be treated like a king—like fuckin' B.B. King... It's a kinda Doctor Heckyl and Jeckyl type thing when I step into the bar... The *real* me can be found here at Smitty's, not on G.M.'s (assembly) line... When I talk about Smitty's, even the boys at work get a better

picture of what *I'm* all about (Singer: Darryl, Sunday, January 17, 1999).  
(My italics)

I can't play an instrument... But I get my props in other ways... I got every single promo-shirt that's ever come through these doors—My wife tells her friends that I got my entire wardrobe at Smitty's!... I Got all the house recordings, know all the players on a personal level... Now, I can go up to any regular Joe on the streets—and even my 2 sons in high school who are starting their own band—and tell 'em anything and everything they need to know about *our* own blues scene here... in Oshawa—Grow your own homegrown! It's nice to be a part of it all (Fan: Buford, Sunday, May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1998).

As we shall see in the following sections, statuses at Smitty's were located within “a model of society which is not only hierarchical and individually competitive but is essentially defined in terms of consumption and display” (Williams, 1976: 300). Neophyte fans and musicians at Smitty's had to first comprehend Smitty's stylistic appropriation of resistant ideology, and second, engage in the process of working at subcultural distinction within the scene.

### **Becoming an Insider:**

At Smitty's, participants may be regarded as outsiders or insiders. Just as Dawson, Maurin, and Phillips suggest for the world of professional wrestling (1996), the key to becoming a competent insider at Smitty's was the acknowledgement that events are not to be taken at face value. A fan at Smitty's, for example, would be empowered from exhibiting his or her insider

knowledge that “spontaneous jams” and “guest performers” were actually fixed in advance. For example, an insider fan at Smitty’s revealed the following:

I get my kicks from watching these fur-coat slickers over here—they just absolutely freak-out when Grover gets called to sit in for a number... Can’t they see he’s been waiting by the stage, hanging onto his “D” harp for the past 3 or 4 songs? Him and Andy already arranged this “surprise” guest appearance during the break... And I was sitting right between them in the zone when they talked it over... Bet you it’ll be “Caledonia” in the key of “A”... Are people stupid? I already know Grover’s gonna pretend the reeds on his G (harmonica) aren’t workin’, and then show off like a damn miracle-man by cross-harping with the “D” (Carlin: Sunday, May 24, 1998).

To achieve an insider status, a patron undergoes a process of graduating through the bar’s internal hierarchy.

Generally, there were *three* criterion that had to be met in order to attain an insider status. First, insiders had to be able to credibly articulate Smitty’s representational blues-ideology. Secondly, insiders had to manage an impression of themselves as loyal supporters/fans of the Smitty’s subculture. Finally, and most importantly, an insider had to be able to display his or her mastery of Smitty’s stylistic codes of behaviour. When asked about the distinction between pro-stars and city slickers, Scott (co-owner) indicated:

A guy could be the best technical guitarist in the world and still get shunned out of the building... But you Pro-stars... you’re home-grown soldier-boys who know what’s right, and better yet, what’s wrong... and that’s why we’re (Smitty’s) 100% different than other clubs... and some of our customers are just as popular as our singers... Before long, I won’t have to tell people how to act; they’ll just look and see how the good boys conduct themselves, and the things they say... I mean, it’s just smart business” (Saturday, July 4, 1998).

*Stage One—Understanding Smitty's:* The first step towards attaining an insider status was to develop an understanding of “staged authenticity” at Smitty’s, where all activities were, to some degree, defined by the broader structure of staged blues entertainment. The participant had to thereby come to appreciate Smitty’s unique *representation* of live entertainment.

The shared understanding of staged authenticity allowed for an alignment of action that provided what Hewitt and Stokes (1976: 848) have described as “a social lubricant that simultaneously permits social change and yet allows conduct to be linked to recognized cultural boundaries.” Within the shared boundary of staged authenticity, patrons were able to smooth the courses of interaction, as well as negotiate which actions were, and were not, situationally congruent. In fact, much of Smitty’s success was attributable to this negotiated code of representation. Noreen, the head bar-maid, revealed that learning Smitty’s code of representation was the most imperative step in becoming an insider:

If people want to score a gig with Scott or Denny, they gotta show that they’re down with, what I call, (the) Jurassic Park approach...if these bands wanna play their own material or use drum machines or whatever, they can just take all their fresh ideas to Toronto! ... These musicians, or anyone, who thinks they can reinvent the wheel, are a lost cause... other people who come and go are the grumpy purists of course—damn slickers... Ya, darlin’, we’re a bit harsh... But to really visibly make it pro... all I have to say is, boy, you’d better be a genuine bullshit artist. You don’t have to be Eric Clapton to play Smitty’s—just learn the politics first (Sunday, May 10, 1998).

Roxy, a regular fan at Smitty’s, offered the following advice to aspiring pro-stars:

I was quiet when the bar first started up. I just sat near the bands and quietly watched on, if you can believe that! I learned how to fit in just by watching the popular people; you know, the boys who are allowed to stick around for “clean up”... And what I found out is that you don’t even have to be a blues expert to be popular. Just go with the flow and show your support for the right things... and now I don’t dare miss a night, or the boys will say, “where’s Roxy?” (Thursday, September 3, 1998).

Pro-star candidates also had to break with the entrenched understandings that blues behaviour is “natural” and unpremeditated. That is, they had to be cognizant that Smitty’s activities were actually representations of an imagined past. This, of course, is not to dismiss Smitty’s activities as unreal, or totally contrived. As with any successful socialization process, Smitty’s participants use shared understandings as a way of anticipating certain behaviours.

*Stage Two—Cloak of Commitment:* The insider also had to convince others of his or her unwavering loyalty to the Smitty’s subculture. Thus, a critical virtue of the insider was that of *commitment*. Demonstrations of commitment were very important to the interests of those who were unsure how to work their way towards insiderhood. These people often signified their aspirations by managing an impression of themselves as devout enthusiasts. For example, fans would strategically sit in the same area of the bar for a number of consecutive nights. One fan even wore the same clothes each night as a means of registering his presence: “I don’t say much, but people know me as the ‘man in plaid’. Andy calls me ‘Checkers’, and Bruce calls me the ‘Scottish bluesman’! You can count on me to sit right by the peanut dispenser. And I’m allergic to peanuts” (Isaac,

Friday, August 7, 1998). Another fan passionately expresses his allegiance as follows:

It's no different than being a sports fanatic, you know—Some people, especially in these parts, are die-hard Leafs fans... (they) got their autographed shirts, their season tickets... they let everyone know who they're for, and who they're against; My bud Hershie, the idiot, took blue and white barn paint to his new chev half-ton—Painted Domi's number 28 on both doors, customized his plates... And *I'm* just the same, but different... more like a crazy *blues* fan... I'm a fanatic of Blues; I love it here... But you won't find me dead at the Black Swan, or at the Dollar, or at any other blues bar, I guess. It's in my blood, and I just have to support our hometown boys—You know, because I only come here (Greg, Sunday, July 19, 1998).

Musicians show commitment by giving the management (and sometimes the crowd) their “word” that they would only perform at Smitty's. This was important in the eyes of the owners who wanted to “let people know that our own brand of blues is alive and kicking in Oshawa, and it can't be found nowhere else” (Denny, Thursday, September 3, 1999). A failure to demonstrate such commitment could have significant consequences. For example, at one point, a once-legitimate singer had fallen out of favour because he had cancelled his Smitty's engagement to perform another show elsewhere. Subsequently, the singer was stripped of his pro-star status and banned from Smitty's. This seemingly onerous expectation of blues-bar monogamy was considered normal by some participants, given the alluring prospect of being promoted to pro-star level.

Many bands, particularly those who were developing rapport at the bar, employed several strategies to convince others of their subcultural allegiance. Some performers wore clothes with “Smitty's”, or “Oshawa” written on them.



Others made overt references and dedications to people and events connected with the motor-city culture.

Some patrons wishing to ascend Smitty's hierarchical ladder made other demonstrations of commitments to the culture. For example, some called in sick to their workplace in order to attend Smitty's engagements. Others, perhaps unwittingly, even ended personal relationships to accommodate their career at Smitty's. Eddie, the house drummer, forfeited his wedding:

She told me I spend more time at the club than I do with her. And damn it all, the girl's got a point—it's the old story of choosing between the music and the wife... and I picked the music... Just like in the movies, where the guy rediscovers his youth and his talents—we both decided I'm a happier man playing the skins at Smitty's every Sunday night, doing what I really love... best that we find these life-and-death details out now, I suppose (Friday, January 22, 1999).

The process of assessing a fan or musician's personal level of commitment, however, was complex. One issue was whether apparent commitment was genuine or spurious. Adjudication on this issue had less to do with any inner level of emotion or objective evaluation, and more to do with an outward *impression* of commitment to others. This made the management of impression key. For example, participants who were unable to attend Smitty's five nights a week, or who patronized *other* blues bars, had to strategically disguise their apparent lack of commitment to Smitty's. Marty, a local guitar veteran, said the following:

It's real funny. But also real sad. In the 70's, I could play 5 or 6, sometimes 7 nights a week—all different clubs too. Really fancy ones... But now I gotta promise Scott that we'll play here, and only

here, on the condition that we get a spot at least once a week... On Friday's we're thinkin' of going all acoustic, and on Saturday's electric... But as you know, I take any spot I can get; at any club! Tomorrow I'm doing a 3 show marathon at the fucking Ganny' Tavern in Port Hope... I just don't advertise these outside spots; keep my mouth shut at the right times... 'cause if Scott finds out, my goose is cooked! There's no way people will come out to see us if they feel betrayed... so when I do play Smitty's, I milk the whole home-town shtick for all its worth; the idea is to at least look sincere for Christ sake! I mean, it's the same way deal with Charlene, my girlfriend... I always tell Smitty's that they're the only one for me; but, shit, my track record knows different! (Friday, August 7, 1998).

In addition to Marty, most musicians were secretive about performances at other bars in an effort to sustain a healthy rapport with Smitty's constituents.

Conversely, outsider musicians from Toronto often had a difficult time engaging the Smitty's crowd, not for lack of experience or talent, but because of their cultural otherness. It was assumed that musicians from outside of Oshawa were not attuned to Smitty's ideology of resistance and community. The majority of the players who were from Oshawa took full advantage of their hometown advantage. The general rule for most musicians, then, was to fully commit to Smitty's. If this commitment could not be honoured, the individual should at least manage an *impression* of commitment.

*Stage 3—Learning the Jam:* The Sunday night open jam session was regarded by most patrons as the final learning stage in becoming an insider. The organizational format of Sunday nights was comparatively looser than other nights. In contrast to regular nights (with hired bands), Sundays permitted neophytes a greater stake in barroom activities and decisions. On Sundays, fans

and musicians were free to experiment with various details of the evening (e.g., who is allowed to perform, the duration of musical sets, closing time, etc.).

Above all, the Sunday jam offered an ideal opportunity for aspirants to gain experience and demonstrate their worth. Grover, a harmonica player, indicated, “Oh, just like most blues houses around the world, you gotta pay your dues if you want to hang with the big cats... (people) gotta inch their way up, bit by bit... the Sunday jam is proof in the puddin’ if someone’s got it, or if they don’t” (Sunday, May 31, 1998).

Neophyte fans elected to attend the Sunday night jams as a way of acquiring a general feel for the scene, but also to strategically avoid the potential embarrassment of exposing their unfamiliarity with Smitty’s unique codes. By slowly learning the unwritten rules governing audience participation at the Sunday shows, the aspiring insider fan could later adequately comport him or herself appropriately at regular shows (Monday-Saturday). One fan suggested the following:

I was pretty chicken to even set foot (in Smitty’s)... I’ve heard horror stories at work about people being laughed out of the bar, or even told to leave... But I want to see what all the hype is all about. So here I am—and it’s true, you just can’t sit anywhere and not be noticed... the bands have drawn attention to my baldness 2 or 3 times already tonight! I’m learning to deal with it; I just play along and even sing out loud, if I know the words. And it’s worth it, I think—I’ve been dreaming about a club like this forever (Ian, Sunday, May 31, 1998).

Whether or not a fan had a convincing grasp of Smitty's ideological codes (knowledge of the resistance style, followed with a convincing demonstration of commitment) became evident during the Sunday sessions.

Musicians also vied for audience approval at the jam sessions, as well as for opportunities to play future paying gigs. Those who had the most success at the Sunday jam sessions were the ones who were able to establish a good rapport with the audience. The players who did not succeed were the ones who neglected the audience by concentrating too hard on their music. As one fan attested, "The worst thing a singer could do is play for himself. If the band's looking at each other, or their instruments, or worst of all, the big-screen, I'm out the door—no matter how good or how big they are" (Roxy, Thursday, September 3, 1998). The general rule was that performers concentrate their efforts on connecting with the audience; not in a traditional musical sense, but in a style that imbued crowd members with feelings of inclusion and belonging.

Sunday night jam sessions provided a loosely structured opportunity for participants to assess their position within Smitty's hierarchy. It was obviously crucial that individuals be aware of their status in the grand scheme of interaction. In the process of learning to fit in, individuals strove to draw upon the backgrounds and conventions of fellow participants (Becker, 1982). In the absence of tangible indicators to evaluate social rank, the onus was on the individual to strategically seek out others' assessments of his or her status. One

effective way of making this assessment was through the display of subcultural capital.

### **Mopping Up—The Accumulation and Display of Subcultural Capital:**

This section addresses the articulations of objects and knowledges that participants used to shape their subcultural status (Bourdieu, 1993; Glaser and Strauss, 1971; Grossberg, 1992; Hall, 1986). Rather than distinguish between producers and consumers of blues music (Fiske, 1987), we shall see that Smitty's participants operated on a hierarchical continuum that was based upon the mastery and display of their subcultural (symbolic) capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Roe, 1990; Thornton, 1995). As Bourdieu (1984, 1986) suggests, self-presentations are signaled in "the most automatic gesture or the apparently most insignificant techniques of the body—ways of walking or blowing one's nose, ways of eating or talking."

The preeminent goal for most insiders was to accumulate subcultural capital and become an elite insider, or "pro-star". The elite insider status is conferred by an invitation to Smitty's infamous "clean-up sessions" (At the end of each night, approximately ten elite insiders were invited by staff to convene around the bar for free drinks). A participant's ability to present him or herself as "hip", or "in the know", was often proportional to their rate of involvement at Smitty's after-hours sessions. Thus, the only clear-cut confirmation of pro-star status was an invitation to an after-hours session. As one aspirant indicated, "I'm here all the time, but I guess I'm not all-the-way one of the gang quite yet—I keep

hinting to Scott to have me around for clean-up, but no dice yet" (Bassist: Donny, Thursday, May 21, 1998). Informal verbal invitations to the after-hours session were offered by various staff (and senior insiders) throughout the evening. Invitations were extended on the basis of how well someone appeared to be aligned with Smitty's culture.

The clean-up session served as a forum for a select group of insiders to discuss the sway of barroom events and activities. A more latent function of the session, however, was its role in delineating statuses. While many participants held an insider status, only a few were regarded as pro-stars. The session was only available to an elite circle of insiders who had accumulated substantial subcultural capital (Thornton, 1995). The key to insider status (and its subsequent degrees of creative room) was the ability to articulate Smitty's styles of taste. The status-bearing significance of subcultural capital will be explored by examining categories of hipness, rituals, dress codes, and rare collections.

*Too Hip to be Square:* According to Thornton (1995: 105), "the logic of subcultural capital reveals itself most clearly by what it dislikes and by what it emphatically isn't." From a structural viewpoint, the pro-star crowd owns subcultural capital that distinguishes them from both their "city-slicker" counterparts, and the generalized mainstream. Following Becker's (1963) seminal distinction between "hip" jazz musicians and the "square" mainstream, this section examines pro-stars' coexisting disdain and need for non-insiders.

Individuals who are not insiders fulfill the need for a cultural other—they serve as a strategic counterpoint to proper insider behaviour and etiquette. Thus, a pro-star's accredited hipness was considered a form of subcultural capital. Hip capital set the individual apart from the generalized mainstream, as well as fans and musicians from other blues bars.

Unlike many conventional blues scenes, Smitty's most important code of hipness may be understood in terms of Grossberg's (1992) concept of "authentic inauthenticity" According to Grossberg, "the only possible claim to authenticity is derived from the knowledge and admission of your inauthenticity... The result is that style is celebrated over authenticity, or rather that authenticity is seen as just another style" (1992: 206, 203). The fragility of this situation means that fans and musicians who's efforts appear over-calculated and contrived can become victims of ridicule (Thornton, 1995: 12). At Smitty's, participants had to be able to present themselves as relaxed and naturally-suited to the environment. Pro-stars were incredulous when some fans and musicians presented themselves as legitimate authorities of blues-authenticity. Co-owner, Denny, explains:

Nothing makes people angrier than some (city) slicker in a three piece suit squinting his eyes and crying about slavery... they're trying way too hard, and they're not fooling no one—same thing goes for these shit heads who come dressed as a blues brother and plop their crippled ass down, with their arms folded all night... It makes no sense to sing about the civil war either; it's a cliché, it's overdone, and for fuck sake, nobody in Oshawa gives a flying fuck... (there's) no sense in trying to duplicate an original recording or trying to convince people that you some how picked cotton back in the 20's—it's all shit... You can tell that the pros come here for the show, not the fucking history lesson (Sunday, May 24, 1998).

As a whole, then, Smitty's set itself apart from other blues bars by virtue of its celebration of style over content. A participant was able to garner hip subcultural capital if he or she recognized and acknowledged this semantic inversion.

What, then, of musicians who actually consider themselves authentic? Certainly, players who attempted to convince others of their heartfelt experience and legitimacy were routinely rejected by insiders. For example, artists who attempted to play original material were immediately instructed by management to play blues standards. At Smitty's, musicians had to operate under the principle of what Hebdige (1987: 50) called the "pure aesthetic": "the apparently disinterested contemplation and appreciation of purposiveness without purposes." Thus, musicians wishing to fit in had to limit their inventiveness and focus, rather, on providing a predictable Smitty's-blues show.

Individuals who were unable or unwilling to acknowledge Smitty's hip style of (in)authenticity failed to accrue subcultural capital. This is not to say that accepted musicians were artificial and insincere—they simply had a clear grasp of Smitty's brand of entertainment. Most hip pro-star musicians, despite their sublimation of personal feelings and emotion, considered their music to be very *real* in its effects. They employed a general strategy of customizing their performances for Smitty's goal of standardized behaviour. Some players purposely attenuated their "true" emotions for fear of looking fake. Bruce, the house bass player, commented on his recalibration of performance:

Ya, all the boys know that the Smitty's gig is not like your typical gig. You gotta lay the popular shit on thick, but not too thick. Can't



upset no one... Any successful stint (at Smitty's) is marked by good audience participation—Scott would hire a banjo-playing monkey if it's able to get the crowd to cheer and order margaritas!... Any good musician has his pride; it's just that *here*, you gotta swallow your pride and focus on the presentation of the show, even more so than technical musicianship and inner expression... (and) creativity. Just stick to the standards (Sunday, May 24, 1998).

(my italics)

Roxy, a fan at Smitty's, also comments on Smitty's patterned behaviour:

I think it's pretty clear to most people that, you know, the shows are fixed. It's no coincidence that nearly every band does the same songs, takes the same amounts of breaks, tells the same blues-jokes, tell the same blues-stories... Marty's show at Harwood Blues over in Whitby is totally different. He brings out another guitarist, he puts everything louder—distortion—, he even brings out different friends from his day gig... But at Smitty's, you guys (performers) are told to do a straight-ahead show. No surprises. No monkey business. Play it like the original recording. Scott even told me his strategy... the idea is to get everyone in the bar involved. People are way more comfortable when they can understand what's going on around them... And ya, I sometimes get sick of hearing the same songs done the same way night after night. But it's all done in a sorta easy language we can recognize and understand. Otherwise, it's just Chinese (Thursday, September 3, 1998).

Actions that undermined Smitty's goal of participatory entertainment tended to be censored. Failure to manage one's performance in accordance with Smitty's goals of familiarity and inclusion (via the code of inauthenticity) was frowned on, or worse. On one Friday evening, for example, a local band called "Crossroads" was sent home without pay after their first set. The band had earned their pro-star stripes at various Sunday night jam sessions, and subsequently was considered worthy of a weekend spot. However, to the chagrin of fans and staff, the band elected to abandon their electric instruments for an all-acoustic evening

of what they called “roots” blues. Jessica, a bar maid, recalls the incident as such:

Oh my God, how embarrassing was that? I went to school with two of these guys, and it’s not like they’re retards—But oh my God, we lost so much money tonight. Scott’s almost crying... Never again... we gotta stick to the crowd favourites, or it’s, like, belly up for Smitty’s... it’s not like they’re retarded or suck or anything, but tonight they got all nervous I think—It was their big chance to graduate... but they pretended to be old black guys, which is like, totally gay (Friday, August 21, 1998).

Apparently, the band members thought that Smitty’s patrons needed to know their roots. They proceeded to play a series of original songs, each one prefaced by its own autobiographical story. Unfortunately, the crowd were unaccustomed to and alienated by the band’s unidirectional narrative. Many fans left the bar within the first several numbers. By Smitty’s value system, the band displayed cultural ineptitude and was not hip to the insider culture.

*Ritual as Capital:* Rituals at Smitty’s provided patrons with an opportunity to demonstrate their ability and willingness to participate. Generally, patrons who both initiated and took part in rituals were able to successfully move up Smitty’s hierarchy of insiders.

“Mojo time”, for instance, was a drinking ritual that served as a mechanism for inclusion and exclusion. The singer of a particular band would spontaneously raise his or her drink and prompt the band and audience members to join in a toast. The idea was to scream “mojo time” as loud as possible, and then take a drink. Learning the subtlety of pulling off a successful toast (reaction time, voice

pitch, large swig, enthusiasm, etc...) served as one marker of subcultural familiarity and status. As participants in the ritual, audiences gained the feeling that they had much to do with a particular evening's success as did the musicians.

Ritualized behaviours also helped confirm the meaning and significance of Smitty's collective identity. The most salient insiders were those who valued, modified, as well as initiated such rituals. Pro-stars who attended after-hours sessions would often discuss and tinker with Smitty's repertoire of rituals. As co-owner Scott indicated, "Rituals and routines are the binoculars into the heart and soul of the bar. What are we all about? Look no further than (the) rituals" (Sunday, July 26, 1998).

In terms of Smitty's particular mode of resistance, patrons used rituals to articulate their ideals of solidarity. Just as fans at a baseball game may collectively learn to perform "the wave", Smitty's fans learned to operate within a specific vocabulary of rituals. And similar to the handful of fans who instigate and modify "the wave", Smitty's elite insiders were always the first to engage ritual behaviour.

Smitty's practice of having "special" requests for certain songs illustrates how rituals facilitated a relationship between fans and musicians. Throughout the course of an evening, bands encouraged fans to submit a "special" request for a song. These special requests were unique, however, because the requested song had to be directed toward a particular person or occurrence

outside the arena of blues activity. For example, fans and musicians took pleasure in devising clever ways of matching the title or theme of a song with a chosen object of scorn. For instance, one fan submitted a special request for “Torn Down” by Freddie King, and on the request, he had written “Please play Torn Down—Earlier this week my boss read my proposal ... and tore it up in front of my face.”

One characteristic of special requests was that they tended to reveal something about the requester— who could also render him or herself subject to subsequent teasing. Hence, those who engaged in this activity were often upper tier insiders because only those who felt secure about their subcultural status were comfortable revealing aspects of their life outside of Smitty’s. For this reason alone, special requests represented a form of subcultural capital— individuals who pulled them off successfully were able to signify their hip status.

*If the Shoe Fits:* An implicit obligation of a pro-star was to block potentially wayward entrants from penetrating Smitty’s exclusive culture (Glaser and Strauss, 1971). That is, some actively discredited a fan or entertainer who undermined Smitty’s visions of exclusivity. As Noreen, the head bar-maid, emphasized, “Don’t nobody stroll in here lookin’ like they just staggered out of Tailgate Charlie’s” (Sunday, May 10, 1998). By dissuading would-be entrants from expressing individualistic behaviour, pro-stars maintained and reinforced Smitty’s homosocial structure.

A direct manifestation of Smitty's taste culture was the implementation of a dress code. A sign on the front door says "dress code in effect." Below the sign is an additional message to the effect that baseball caps are "prohibited." These signs were meant to deter other elements of Oshawa's bar-hopping population from entering Smitty's. The dress code also hinted at Smitty's priority of maintaining a distinct and unified taste culture. As co-owner Denny argued, without a dress code, "Smitty's might blend in with all the other two million blues bars out there" (January 17, 1999). As with most other articulations of subcultural capital at Smitty's, the dress code operates on a continuum of success. On one end of the spectrum, an individual could fit-in simply by avoiding tabooed articles of clothing (ball caps, old jeans, etc...). However, participants also soon learned that in addition to avoiding certain garments, respect and prestige could be earned by conspicuously wearing strategic articles of clothing.

Referring again to Grossberg's "authentic inauthenticity" (1984), the mark of a successful insider was his or her ability to give forth an impression of stylistic competence without appearing to try too hard. Thus, insiders scoffed at fans and musicians who appeared to have spent a great deal of time putting together a generic blues-costume. As a pro-star guitarist joked, "If you really got a grudge against being popular, and you wanna sit by yourself, dress like a mammy-fuckin' blues brother... these city fuckers just make me sick" (Tom, January 10, 1998).

With regards to the types of apparel that signify the most subcultural capital, co-owner Scott indicated:

The idea is to get people thinking about why the hell they're here. If they want ordinary blues, they can sit at home with the wife and kids and just sit there and watch variety shows on cable. We want people to come looking sharp—wear your Church clothes for Christ sake; you know, long-coats, long-sleeves, suit jackets, polished boots, dresses for the chicks... There's nothing special about showing up in your fucking work clothes—and that's exactly what we're trying to get away from... if someone new walks into my bar and sees a Coors softball team guzzlin' beer in the corner; what do they think? You know, is this really the "little house of blues", or just another water hole?... People gotta *look* blues for people to believe blues. You know the Stones song "Paint it Black"? Well, we gotta paint everything blue; from the music, to the pictures on the wall, to the bar, right down to the way people dress (Thursday, May 7, 1998).  
(My Italics)

The owners' objective was for participants to regard an evening of blues at Smitty's as a special occasion; one worthy of dressing up. Smitty's dress code represented a homology of taste and style. Those who attended Smitty's desired an opportunity to assert their distinct blues identities. Style of dress reflected and embodied these values. Consequently, patrons seeking approval from peers and management paid careful attention to their clothes. They avoided overdressing or underdressing and made certain not to wear the same ensemble two nights in a row.

Generally, the high status pro-stars successfully signified their status through the way they dressed. Revered articles of blues clothing at Smitty's included sunglasses, vests, fedoras, trench coats, and black ties. Beyond this general repertoire of styles, the most zealous insiders learned to modify their

outfits. In the same way that a Stanley Cup winner might be identified by his ring (and other championship paraphernalia such as pins and hats), Smitty's elite insiders paraded their subcultural capital by incorporating rare blues gear into their ensemble. Thus, it was common to see an insider exhibit his or her subcultural adequacy by wearing a full suit, but over a rare t-shirt. Some pro-stars wore shirts signed by famous, obscure, or deceased blues artists. Others wore shirts that signified their participation in a particular blues concert or workshop.

*Rare Objects:* Patrons' brokering of subcultural capital was also evident in their collection and display of rare objects. The social phenomenon of presenting rare artifacts for inspection shed light on the structure of relations between Smitty's participants. The logic of this behaviour was driven by "the pure imperative of association" (Baudrillard, 1994: 23). That is, objects served as public self-presentations of subcultural allegiance and alignment.

To collect the obscure is to reject the mainstream (Baudrillard, 1968; Straw, 1991, Weisbard, 1994). Smitty's participants often stripped artifacts of their original functional meanings and recode them with a "new, abstract system of manipulable signs (Baudrillard, 1968: 64). An old 45 record of Blind Lemon Jefferson, for example, might be decoded of its entertainment value and recoded with signs of marginality and prestige. Individuals were able to signal their

subcultural knowledge of, and commitment to, Smitty's ideology via the possession and display of rare blues objects.

In addition to bolstering collective oppositionality, obsession with objects and knowledges also revealed aspects of status formation. The display of rare objects shed light on the hierarchical structure of relations at Smitty's. For example, Smitty's fans and musicians sometimes conducted informal show-and-tell sessions before and after musical sets. Individuals who were more able to "wear" and "release" their knowledges were likely members of the upper echelon of insiders (Straw, 1991). The display of rare cultural objects exacted strategic leverage within Smitty's hierarchy. One guitarist discussed the significance of wearing and releasing knowledges through the exhibition of rare objects:

There's an old saying, I can't really remember, but it says you can judge a man not by what he does or says, but by the things he owns; or something like that... It's no secret that there's a connection, man; there's a definite connection that the best players have the best record collections... they have the best vintage gear, they drive the coolest cars... they have rare footage or pictures, like the ones Bruce took down on Beale Street—they gotta be worth a fortune now. I feel like such a pencil-dick 'cause I got nothing to bring to the table... all I own are cassettes and CD's. I've met tons of big (blues) guys, but have nothing to show for it; no autographs or pictures, no nothin' (Marty: Friday, August 7, 1998).

Members used objects to align themselves with Smitty's particularistic codes of taste and consumption. The most popular objects tended to signify exclusive mythological character. The key, however, was to acknowledge artifacts not for their use-value of authenticity, but for their sign-value of delineating statuses.

Baudrillard (1968: 74) clarifies Smitty's contextualization of the rare object



claiming, “it is false in so far as it puts itself forward as authentic within a system whose basic principle is by no means authenticity, but, rather, the calculation of relationships and the abstractness of signs.” That said, those who accredited the authenticity of their own artifact lost ground in Smitty’s hierarchy. The display of rare objects was not a competitive struggle to reveal the authentic, but rather, an opportunity for fans and musicians to calculate their relationship and position within Smitty’s structure.

The ability to translate rare objects into subcultural capital relied on ones grasp of Smitty’s symbolic field. Grover, a harmonica player, revealed the following:

There’s a difference... between cats who bring shit in just to show-off, and those people who bring things in to add to the sense of community. Some asshole can bring in the rarest record on earth, and we won’t give a shit. Why? Because he’s not on the right track; because he just wants to, you know, blow everyone away... The proper way of showing your goods is by doing it, I don’t know, politely? Just sit with the boys after hours, you know, light a J if you want, and see where the other person’s at—a real respect thing... The pros act like a team... so it’s (show and tell) more of a way to keep up to speed, and just to be one of the boys... they always have real neat and interesting things up their sleeve; records, pictures, trading cards... I just swapped 12 original stax/volt records for Stu’s pig-nose amp (Sunday, May 31, 1998).

This excerpt illustrates how pro-stars used rare artifacts as tools to smooth the course of social interaction. Unlike their lay counterparts, pro-stars were able to frame their presentation in a hip fashion. They managed impressions of themselves as disinterested connoisseurs. Marginal objects were brought forth not to impress or to reveal the authentic, but rather, to indicate a knowledge, or

awareness, of Smitty's process of excorporation. Individuals who presented their artifacts on a routine basis were revered as faithful insiders.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION

#### **Introduction:**

The first section of the chapter is organized around two central features of the thesis. First, the concepts of “tradition” and “authenticity” are reviewed. These are pivotal for understanding how participants came to organize their actions and perspectives. Also, they allow us to trace the ideological construction and negotiation of Smitty’s barroom idioculture. Prior to Smitty’s inception, there were no preordained cultural meanings or “ways of life”. Given this, fans and musicians initially adopted ideologies of tradition and authenticity as guidelines for their behaviour. Throughout the period of observation participants struggled with the meanings of these concepts, eventually transforming them into an articulative practice of their own. Thus, through a series of semantic negotiations, “tradition” and “authenticity” became socially reconstructed. In a broader sense, these substantive concepts help shed light on the political process of creating a local space and identity.

Second, in light of the findings, this section considers the theoretical marriage of cultural studies and symbolic interaction. On one hand, cultural studies provided an excellent groundwork for discussing the organizational framework of the bar. The cultural studies tradition allowed for an examination of the processes involved with the delineation of styles, codes, and statuses. On

the other hand symbolic interaction helped explicate the various interpretive processes involved with learning how to “fit in”. We see that actors learned to modify their behaviour to enhance their status within the bar. In short, symbolic interaction helped explain the articulation of identities and ideologies. By combining symbolic interaction with cultural studies, we were able to approach a clearer understanding of the various structures, ideas, strategies, and meanings involved with the creation of a blues music idioculture.

### **Tradition and Authenticity:**

The substantive issues of this thesis were blues music tradition and authenticity. Both were instrumental to Smitty’s ideological development. In trying to establish a viable blues environment, participants in our study drew from the traditional understandings of authenticity and cultural resistance. Both concepts served as broad references within which interactions took place.

As discussed above, there was some variability within accounts of tradition and authenticity in existing literature. Rather than rejecting certain approaches in favour of others, though, the current work posited a *dialectical* relationship between competing definitions. Antithetical versions of authenticity (e.g., “innovative” v.s. “genuine”), for example, were co-informed through an incorporation and reworking of their meanings.

At Smitty’s, patrons’ mediations and negotiations led to a novel social environment within which versions of tradition and authenticity were embraced as

stylistic guidelines for barroom interactions. Thus, in contrast to more deterministic accounts of cultural development and transmission (e.g., Frankfurt School writers), agents in this current work actively created and modified the meanings of their subculture.

The concept of "tradition" was particularly significant to this study, as it served both as a springboard for the creation of new meanings, and as a frame of reference for personal and collective identities. Tradition provided an opportunity for the mobilization of cultural development, as patrons constantly worked to connect a selected past with the present. The goal was to establish a "working consensus" (Goffman, 1969) that would represent the cultural tastes and objectives of the idioculture. In other words, participants used select elements from the blues music tradition as stylistic guidelines for their behaviour.

For instance, traditional blues codes of *marginalization* and *rebellion* were appropriated into a "structure of feeling" (Williams, 1977); and without actual overt resistance, fans and musicians partook in activities that *signified* rebellion (i.e., rituals, dress, talk). By having a stake in the ongoing articulation of resistant tradition, fans and musicians created an "affective alliance" (Grossberg, 1984). Participants in the alliance felt empowered by their membership in the culture.

Similar to the construction of tradition, participants in this study approached "authenticity" as a representational style. Again, though, "authenticity" was socially problematic. Most interactions, especially in the early stages of the study, involved the politicization of authenticity. The interpretive

function of authenticity was not immediate or pre-ordained, but, rather a contested terrain. Participants interacted within an idioculture that was still in its early stages of development. In their efforts to fit in, informants promoted meanings that protected and reaffirmed their own ideals of “authentic” blues culture. Both musicians and fans articulated their own accounts of authenticity within the overall fabric of the culture. Eventually, a *new* Oshawa blues-culture crystallized as a consequence of struggle over meaning. Patrons used authenticity to help construct an overall definition of the situation.

During the period of observation, Smitty’s underwent an physical and ideological overhaul. To facilitate its goal of achieving local identity and participation, a *representational* version of authenticity was incorporated. It took the form of a *staged* environment (MacCannell, 1973); one in which a wider variety of fans and musicians were able to participate. Similar to professional wrestling, for example, (see, Dawson et. al., 1996) most fans and musicians in this study came to recognize their activities as “fixed”, or pre-staged.

The unique strategy of the overhaul adopted a single definition of authenticity that would appeal to a wider group of patrons. Within this new definition of the situation, patrons were able to realign accordingly (Hewitt and Stokes, 1976). They were able to eradicate quarrels over authenticity and what constituted “real blues”. Also, most participants accomodated their initial ideals of authenticity within the new definition of the situation. In other words, they came to recognize and accept Smitty’s activities as symbolic representations of

their own taste and style. The resulting staged authenticity thereby provided fans and musicians with a clearer understanding of their environment. From this, participants could more easily coordinate actions and establish identities.

### **Putting it all Together:**

Through their adaptation of blues concepts, Smitty's participants created a subculture congruent with local tastes and perspectives. Similar to Cohen's study of a music scene in Liverpool (1992), participants in this study transformed cultural signs from the world-at-large into an articulative practice of their own. Collectively negotiated reworkings of tradition and authenticity incited feelings of "difference" from the generalized mainstream (Bourdieu, 1984).

To account for this phenomenon, the present work incorporates theories from cultural studies and symbolic interaction. The cultural studies tradition helped interpret the organization of cultural processes and relationships, while symbolic interaction illuminated micro levels of negotiation and impression management. Both approaches were vital to the understanding of how Smitty's participants created and modified their idioculture. Both conceptual theories were used interchangeably throughout the thesis. The remainder of this section discusses this work's main theoretical interpretations and contributions.

As an *emergent* subculture, many of Smitty's styles and meanings were in early stages of development. That said, it would be erroneous to assign its culture a set of firm, definable properties. Traditional subcultural tenets,

however, sometimes tended to conceptualize group meanings and activities as homogeneous and unchanging (see Frith, 1987, 1991; and Middleton, 1990). Thus, as a variant of subculture theory, this work conceptualizes Smitty's as a "scene" (Straw, 1991).

Straw's concept of the music scene departs from earlier forms of subculture theory, and focuses more on change and differentiation. In this view, the "scene" embraces the *range* of activities that happen within a group. That is, Straw proposes we move past subculture theory's preoccupation with fixed dichotomies (e.g., commercial manipulation vs. spontaneous creativity, oppositionality vs. conformity, standardization vs. individuality, authenticity vs. appropriation, etc.). Also, Straw suggests we break away from using homologies to depict a culture (e.g., set ways of dressing, talking, dancing, etc.). Hence, rather than viewing culture as static and undifferentiated, the current work echoes Straw's emphasis on cultural creation and variation. Perhaps the most telling evidence of Smitty's cultural modification was its structural and ideological overhaul during observation. During this time, the bar became transformed into a staged environment, designed to *portray* traditional blues.

The overhaul also demonstrated that Smitty's state of being was not "determined" from above. Although it took months of negotiation and refinement, Smitty's actors were able to achieve their own "logic" of stylistic representations (Bourdieu, 1984; Straw, 1991). As such, Smitty's differentiated itself from other blues subcultures. Establishing its own micro meanings and characterizations,



Smitty's carved a space within the overall fabric of live music culture. Just as Fine (1987) observed with minor league baseball teams, Smitty's patrons were able to transform ideas and perceptions from the larger subculture of blues music into a collaborative "idioculture" of their own. That is, Smitty's developed various codes (e.g., words, rituals, dances, cheers, outfits, routines, etc.) that set it apart from other blues bars, as well as from the generalized mainstream. Behaviours and meanings at Smitty's were ever-shifting, and created from within.

Tied to the idea of agency is the concept of "articulation". Due to its emphasis on everyday practice and behaviour, articulation may be viewed as the fulcrum of this thesis. The bulk of the findings reported above were extracted from patrons' articulations of knowledge and style. In their efforts to establish their music scene, fans and musicians developed their own unique set of meanings. The richest data was derived from patrons' efforts to articulate, or carry out, these meanings.

The interactionist idea of "impression management" helps explain much of the articulation that took place at Smitty's. By and large, fans and musicians desired to manage an impression of themselves as "hip" (Becker, 1958; Thornton, 1995) and "in the know". Those individuals who could manage a hip identity were often better attuned to the bar's "pretence awareness context" (Glaser and Strauss, 1964). That is, not only were they aware of Smitty's designed environment, but they also had a good idea of how others perceived

them. The main advantage of managing a favourable impression, however, was a leverage in status.

The interplay between “career” and “subcultural capital” (Thornton, 1995) provides an example of this thesis’s theoretical blending. In short, the most efficient means of both forwarding and verifying one’s career was by way of accumulating and displaying subcultural capital. As the data reveals, many participants in this study tried to become insiders. To become an insider, a patron had to endure a series of tests and stages designed to challenge hipness. Similar to Becker’s (1953) study of marijuana users, Smitty’s patrons became insiders through a social learning process. Most aspiring insiders at Smitty’s had to first demonstrate their knowledge of the staged environment. Next, they had to convince others of their loyalty towards the scene. Once these issues were established, the individual could proceed through subsequent stages such as Sunday night jams, and so forth.

For many participants, however, it was not enough to become an insider. Most people discovered that they could have a greater impact on the scene by achieving the status of elite insider. Hence, this ethnography is slightly different than others in the sense that it expands the insider/outsider division into a *continuum*. Fans could achieve an elite status by accumulating and managing subcultural capital. A relatively straight-forward concept, subcultural capital refers to cultural actions or objects that signify an independence from the mainstream. Similar to Bourdieu’s work on taste cultures (1984, 1986), Thornton

suggests that a scene, or individuals within that scene, may articulate their ideologies through the display of subcultural capital.

At Smitty's, subcultural capital counted as anything that signified their local version of "hipness". As the findings indicate, Smitty's version of "hipness" came in the form of inauthenticity, rituals, dress codes, and rare objects. The ability to collect and display subcultural capital varied among participants. The greatest success, however, usually came to those who managed the most convincing impressions of their capital.

### **Conclusion:**

This thesis traces the development of actions and meanings within an emergent blues music scene. Data for this project were derived from thirteen months of participant observation at a newly established blues bar in Ontario. Referred to as "Smitty's", the bar provided a dynamic environment for observing micro-level interactions. Throughout the study, Smitty's patrons continuously defined and shaped their environment. Most barroom activities were rooted in the creation, negotiation, and appropriation of cultural meanings. As demonstrated in the findings, participants struggled to establish a music scene that would ultimately satisfy their personal set of ideals and interests. As such, the definition of the situation hinged upon social constructions of blues "tradition" and "authenticity". Once established, constructions of tradition and authenticity

helped smooth the course of interaction at Smitty's. Ultimately, joint actions were made possible through a *staging* of events and activities.

In addition to the construction of barroom meanings and styles, most patrons attempted to "fit in". Individuals perceived to fit in were regarded by their peers as insiders. For most participants, the ideal career trajectory was to become an insider by way of enduring a series of learning stages and rituals. Certain insiders were able to gain additional leverage within Smitty's internal hierarchy; these people were regarded as elite insiders, or "pro-stars." On a nightly basis, elite insiders signified their status by participating in after hours "clean-up" sessions. These sessions included activities and conversations that could not take place during regular bar hours. That said, elite insiders were rewarded with the power to control and refine Smitty's codes and logics.

In sum, this thesis has provided an in-depth account of barroom identities and interactions. Smitty's was a favourable environment to study, as many of its meanings and perspectives were in the process of development. The transformation of the bar into a staged environment demonstrated both agency and cultural innovation. Smitty's participants appropriated larger cultural signs into a joint articulation that made sense in Oshawa. Through their everyday practices, Smitty's patrons established personal and collective identities that set them apart from others. As a blues scene, Smitty's came to represent the tastes and interests of its participants. Above all, the various micro-interactions and

relationships at Smitty's provided an excellent demonstration of subcultural creation and modification.

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**APPENDIX A – Smitty’s Layout**

