

Nonlinear Narrative and Identity Construction in Music Memoirs: The Cases of Jarvis Cocker's Good Pop, Bad Pop and Nick Cave's The Sick Bag Song

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Abstract. Music memoirs have become one of the most commercially visible forms of contemporary life writing, yet their formal departures from chronological autobiography are still frequently read as defects rather than as deliberate strategies of identity construction. This paper compares two deliberately non-sequential music memoirs — Jarvis Cocker's *Good Pop, Bad Pop* (2022) and Nick Cave's *The Sick Bag Song* (2015) — and argues that their shared rejection of linear chronology sustains two opposed but structurally comparable identity projects. Both books replace narrative with inventory: Cocker organises his text around an attic of kept and discarded objects, Cave around twenty-two airline sick bags whose originals are reproduced beside their revised versions. Reading these material conceits against theories of the autobiographical pact, of mediated stardom, and of collective memory, the paper shows that Cocker uses nonlinear form to deflate the industrial myth of the rock star into a studied performance of ordinariness, while Cave uses it to inflate a private register into an explicitly mythological public persona. The paper concludes that both memoirs dissolve the opposition between authenticity and artifice on which popular-music biography usually depends. Nonlinearity, on this account, is not a failure of autobiographical truth but the formal condition under which a musician's identity is authored and contested.

Keywords: music memoir, life writing, nonlinear narrative, identity construction, celebrity persona

1. Introduction

Autobiography has traditionally been associated with a linear account of a life. Events are arranged chronologically, major stages are traced in sequence, and the narrative implicitly promises to preserve the authenticity and coherence of the subject's lived experience. As popular music culture and contemporary literary practice have evolved, however, many musicians' autobiographies have departed from the empirical constraints of traditional biography, shifting towards more active, artistic modes of self-expression and self-fashioning. Scholars of musical autobiography now treat musicians' life writing as a distinct sub-genre that has become increasingly self-conscious about its

own generic conventions and about the relationship between musical persona and autobiographical representation [1, 2].

Jarvis Cocker's *Good Pop, Bad Pop* [3] and Nick Cave's *The Sick Bag Song* [4] exemplify this departure. Neither work is organised around a sustained chronological account of its author's life. Both instead knit personal history together through associative memory, fragmented impressions, and stream-of-consciousness reflection, producing texts that are dispersed, digressive, and chronologically fluid. This paper argues that such disorder is not a defect of autobiographical form but the enabling condition of a particular mode of identity construction, and that the two books realise that mode in opposite directions.

Two features make the pair unusually suitable for comparison. The first is a shared material conceit: Cocker's book is built around the inventory of an attic, Cave's around twenty-two airline sick bags collected on tour. In both cases the organising device is spatial and archival rather than temporal, and in both cases the self is presented as something assembled out of surviving fragments. The second is a shared polemical stance. Each book positions itself against a life story that has already been written on the artist's behalf by the record industry, the music press, and the accumulated conventions of rock biography. Cocker's volume announces in its paratext that it is not a life story but a loft story [3]; Cave's book, by contrast, extends rather than resists the mythologising impulse that his records had already established [4]. In different ways, then, both present themselves as alternative narratives rather than as records, and it is this shared orientation to the narrative that conventions have imposed on them which makes their formal differences worth comparing.

The paper proceeds in five stages. Section 2 sets out the theoretical framework, drawing on theories of the autobiographical pact, of mediated stardom, and of collective memory. Sections 3 and 4 analyse the two memoirs in turn. Section 5 develops the comparison explicitly, and Section 6 concludes.

2. Theoretical framework: life writing, stardom, and associative memory

Philippe Lejeune's account of the autobiographical pact provides the baseline against which both books must be read. Lejeune argued that autobiography is defined less by its content than by a contractual relation between author, narrator, and protagonist, underwritten by the identity of the proper name [5]. That pact guarantees referentiality: the reader is invited to believe that the narrative refers to a real person's real life, recounted in the order in which it was lived. Music memoirs strain this contract in ways that have become increasingly visible. As Smith and Watson argue, life narrative is never a transparent window onto experience but a performative act in which identity is produced rather than recorded [6]. The question a memoir answers is therefore not only what happened, but who is speaking and in whose interest.

That second question is particularly acute for musicians, because the subject of a rock memoir is never simply a private individual but a mediated image. Richard Dyer's foundational argument that stars are images or texts produced by an industrial apparatus, rather than people merely described by it, establishes that a star's public identity is manufactured, composite, and semiotic [7]. Philip Auslander extends the point to performance itself, arguing that rock authenticity is not the opposite of theatricality but one of its available effects: the sincere, unmediated self is a register that performers can adopt [8]. Taken together, these positions complicate the assumption that a memoir's authenticity consists in revealing a pre-existing private self behind a public mask.

Memory requires a parallel qualification. Halbwachs's account of collective memory holds that remembering is socially framed: what an individual recalls, and in what form, depends on the groups

through which the past is mediated [9]. Nostalgic industries, including the music press and the heritage apparatus of popular music, supply such frames. Here Genette's analysis of narrative order becomes useful. Genette distinguishes story, the chronological sequence of events, from narrative, the order in which they are told. Departures from chronological order he calls anachronies: analepses that reach backwards and prolepses that anticipate [10]. Both memoirs are built almost entirely out of anachrony, and this is not incidental. Order is precisely the dimension of narrative in which a writer exercises most visibly the authority to decide what a life means. Finally, Yelin's work on celebrity memoir shows that the commercial memoir is a negotiated form, shaped by the competing demands of publishers, publics, and the celebrity subject, and that its apparent intimacy is often carefully managed [11]. A memoir by a musician is thus a contested document: an industry product that is also a claim by its author to define himself.

3. Jarvis Cocker: the attic inventory and the performance of ordinariness

As the frontman of Pulp, Jarvis Cocker became one of the defining figures of the Britpop era. Pulp's music is grounded in the lives of ordinary people, attentive to the small frustrations, desires, embarrassments, and pleasures of everyday existence, and Cocker's stage persona is flamboyant, ironic, theatrical, and deliberately irreverent. Rather than reproducing the conventional rock-star image of rebellion, excess, and heroic individualism, however, *Good Pop, Bad Pop* shifts away from that register altogether.

The book's organising device is a loft in London and the decision, repeated for each item Cocker retrieves, whether to keep it or discard it, which in his native Sheffield slang means to "cob" it. The scope of the narrative is deliberately modest: it runs from childhood in Sheffield to the threshold of the 1990s, stopping before Pulp's commercial success and therefore before the period for which its author is best known. The objects, a school photograph, a shirt, pairs of broken spectacles, and a demo tape handed to John Peel, function as mnemonic anchors, each opening onto a fragment of memory. Because the sequence of the text follows the sequence in which the objects come to hand, chronology dissolves into an arrangement that is spatial and evaluative rather than temporal.

The formal consequence is a decisive change in the kind of self the book constructs. The attic inventory does not build a grand artistic achievement or a polished celebrity origin story; it keeps the narrative close to the textures of ordinary life. The effect is deflationary, and it is tempting to describe it, as much of the book's reception did, as the recovery of an authentic self behind the theatrical mask. That reading should be resisted. Cocker's ordinariness is not a pre-existing fact that the memoir finally discloses; it is a position he has consistently occupied as an artist. The flamboyance of Pulp's performances and the self-effacement of the memoir are two registers of a single project, which is to treat ordinary life as the material of art rather than as an escape from it. Auslander's argument is directly relevant here: sincerity is one of the registers available to a performer, and it requires no less construction than flamboyance [8]. What the memoir performs, then, is not authenticity but the deliberate and sustained renunciation of glamour, a counter-persona assembled out of disavowed objects.

This has consequences for the book's relation to its own genre. In insisting that its evidence is junk, in reproducing the stuff of a life as photographs and physical ephemera rather than as narrative, and in refusing a story arc with a triumphant ending, *Good Pop, Bad Pop* withdraws from the biographical frame that would position Cocker as a success. The book is better understood as an inventory than as a memoir in the conventional sense, and an inventory, unlike a story, makes no claim to have grasped the meaning of what it catalogues. The movement between public persona and private self that Cocker stages therefore belongs to a broader tension within popular-music

autobiography, in which musicians negotiate the relationship between celebrity identity and the recovery or reconstruction of a more private self [11].

4. Nick Cave: the sick bag archive and self-mythologisation

Where Cocker grounds his narrative in the material residue of an ordinary life, Nick Cave relies on theatrical invention to build a romanticised self-mythology. Throughout his career, Cave's musical output and stage performance have been characterised by dramatic tension, religious symbolism, gothic poetry, and intense emotional expression. His public identity has never been a reproduction of private life but a continuously refined artistic role, and *The Sick Bag Song* extends and amplifies that role rather than interrogating it.

The book was written during Cave's 2014 North American tour with the Bad Seeds, in the form of notes made on twenty-two airline sick bags, and the published volume incorporates a reproduction of each original bag alongside the composed text that grew out of it [4]. This is a formal decision of considerable importance. The book does not merely describe a process of imaginative transformation; it displays one, staging the passage from a scribbled fragment of experience to a carefully wrought literary artefact. The result is an unconventional hybrid of prose, poetry, lyric, travelogue, and autobiography. This hybridity is characteristic of popular-music life writing, which frequently crosses the boundaries between conventional autobiography and other artistic forms [2].

The book's structure amplifies this effect. Lacking a rigid chronology or a conventional plot, it intertwines reflections, absurd imaginings, and fragmented memories, producing something closer to a sequence of stations than to a journey with a destination. Recurring motifs bind the fragments together: a frightened boy on a railway bridge, a woman who will not answer the telephone, encounters with musicians and muses, a dying dragon. These are not the materials of a documentary record but the materials of myth, and the narrator who assembles them is a version of the author rather than the author himself.

Unlike Cocker's project of discarding a stage mask, therefore, Cave's nonlinear writing constitutes a literary extension and intensification of his stage persona. Possessing a high degree of role-consciousness, Cave understands his public identity as a cultivated artistic creation, and the memoir acts as a further medium through which that creation is extended. Fragmented narrative and surreal lyric are the means by which he blurs the boundary between reality and artistic fiction, drawing his own history into the gothic world his songs have already built. The book is best read as one instalment in a career-long, transmedia construction of the Cave persona: it appeared two years after *20,000 Days on Earth*, the documentary in which Forsyth and Pollard presented a fictitious twenty-four hours in Cave's life and staged a visit to his personal archive [12]. Across film, memoir, and record, Cave's self-portraiture consistently prefers invention to testimony.

The vocabulary of magical realism that this writing sometimes invites should therefore be used with care. What *The Sick Bag Song* stages is less a magical world than a mythic consciousness: a mode of narration in which the boundary between a life and the story told about it is deliberately held open. Where the attic yields an inventory of what a life happened to contain, the sick bags yield the raw material of a legend about what a life can be made to mean.

5. Comparative analysis: deconstruction, mythologisation, and performative truth

Read together, the two memoirs expose a shared premise and two divergent strategies. Both authors refuse the celebrity label assigned by the music industry, and both reclaim authority over their own

self-fashioning through nonlinear form. They then take that form in opposite directions. Cocker employs a fragmented, object-based, and mundane narrative to deconstruct the commercial mythology of the rock star. By grounding his text in scattered everyday memories, he dismantles the cliché of the rebellious rock idol and demonstrates that his flamboyant stage persona is an external artistic construct in the service of his music. Cave deploys stream-of-consciousness, surreal, and absurd narration to reinforce, rather than dismantle, a distinctive artistic mythology, permitting his performative persona to become the defining core of his identity. Table 1 sets out the comparison systematically.

Table 1. Comparative structure of the two memoirs

Dimension	Good Pop, Bad Pop (Cocker)	The Sick Bag Song (Cave)
Organising device	Loft inventory; keep or "cob"	Twenty-two airline sick bags
Temporal order	Chronology dispersed across objects	Chronology dispersed across tour stations
Dominant register	Mundane, ironic, conversational	Surreal, lyrical, mythic
Status of the primary document	Object photographed as evidence	Original bag reproduced as draft
Relation to stage persona	Deflationary: persona shown to be a construct	Inflationary: persona extended into myth
Identity strategy	Demythologisation; performance of ordinariness	Self-mythologisation; mythic consciousness
Counter-narrative posed	Against the celebrity origin story	Against the rock tour diary and documentary record

The table makes visible a symmetry that is easy to miss when the books are read separately. Each text takes a public image and a private register as its two terms; what differs is which term is asked to absorb the other. Cocker moves from the public towards the private, dissolving the star into a keeper and discarder of objects. Cave moves from the private towards the public, dissolving the details of a tour into a legend. Both movements are possible only because the narrative order has already been broken. A chronological account would commit each author to the biographical sequence in which persona and person can still be told apart; anachrony, by contrast, allows the two to be held together until they can no longer be distinguished [10].

Neither work, finally, fits the template of traditional documentary autobiography. Together they demonstrate a central insight of contemporary life writing: artistic fiction is not necessarily a departure from autobiographical truth but can function as a conscious strategy through which the self is interpreted and reconstructed [6]. The designed stage personae and the deliberately fractured narratives of Cocker and Cave solidify into identities that their publics accept as authentic precisely because they are coherent as constructions. Both books are, in this sense, counter-narratives: alternative accounts of a life produced in answer to accounts already in circulation. Their value does not depend on fidelity to a documented sequence but on the authority of the self that the narrative constitutes.

6. Conclusion

The nonlinear memoirs of Jarvis Cocker and Nick Cave represent a vital literary path for identity reconstruction among contemporary musicians. By abandoning the linear documentary conventions of classic autobiography, both artists use associative memory, fragmented narrative, and the

blending of fact and fiction to move beyond passive self-recording towards active self-interpretation and persona fashioning. Cocker's object-anchored inventory deconstructs celebrity culture in order to return to the ordinary; Cave's stream-of-consciousness narration extends and intensifies his dramatic persona in order to complete a thorough self-mythologisation. Though opposed in method, both paths illuminate a defining trait of contemporary popular culture: a musician's identity is rarely an innate given but an ongoing artistic artefact, reshaped through stage performance and literary practice.

Nonlinear narrative is more than a structural device for these two authors. It is their core strategy for self-knowledge, self-definition, and self-fashioning. In the era of modern pop culture, a memoir is no longer a terminal record of a life already lived but a dynamic instrument for defining an identity, and increasingly for contesting the identities that industries and publics have already begun to write.

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