

The Use of Nonverbal Signs in Live Rock Band Performances

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Abstract:

Rock and Roll is a musical genre that emerged in the late 1940s United States. The music later developed into the popular genre of music that we are familiar with: Rock music. The music was almost always performed by a small group of people, known as “rock bands”. As Rock became increasingly popular, the number of live rock band performances also increased significantly. In these live performances, the band not only have to perform the music, but also have to interact and communicate with the audience in other ways. This makes nonverbal signs, both visual and auditory, a necessary communication between the band and the audience. These signs are crucial for live performances in that they enable the performer to better convey emotion and provide the audience with a more complete listening experience. This research paper aims to discuss and analyze the use of different nonverbal signs in live band performances by examining the presence of these signs and their effects in several live performances of rock bands. In this way, the extent to which nonverbal signs are crucial to live band performances can be investigated.

Keywords: Rock band; nonverbal signs; live performance.

1. Introduction

Rock and Roll was born in the mid-20th century as the fusion of the previous genres of blues, gospel, country, and jazz. Rock differentiates itself from its predecessors through its upbeat tempo, strong backbeat, and catchy melody. At first, Rock and Roll was just a type of dance music, characterized by heavy beats and rhythms. However, as the popularity of Rock and Roll grew, multiple subdivisions also began to emerge. Just to list a few, some of the major ones include Hard Rock, Alternative Rock, Progressive Rock, Grunge, Soft Rock, and Pop Rock [1].

Although they are all considered as “Rock”, these subgenres differ from each other significantly. For instance, Billy Joel’s “Piano Man” and Nirvana’s “Smells Like Teen Spirit” seems like two songs of completely different styles, but both are considered rock: “Piano Man” is categorized as Soft Rock, and “Smells Like Teen Spirit” is categorized as Grunge. Because of its diversity, Rock music quickly became popular across the world, especially among teenagers, who utilize this music as a way to express themselves.

However, despite the variety of subgenres, one thing

seems to stay the same for all of the songs: the live performance where the energy of the music comes to life. What makes these live performances different from listening to the song on a radio or walkman is that they do not merely provide the auditory experience of the song, but also communicate to the audience through other senses. For instance, the visual image of the guitarist strumming the guitar; the sensory feeling of being shoved in the crowd; or clapping along to the beat together with other people. All of this comes together and becomes the “nonverbal” part of the performance, factors that are absent when listening to the radio or Walkman. During live performances, the audience’s engagement is not only about the music; it is about feeling the music and gaining a fully immersive experience. This part of the experience is as important as the actual performance of the song and is vital in communicating and conveying certain moods, messages, or emotions to the audience.

The first section of this research introduces the basic concept and different classifications of nonverbal signs. The second section presents several specific examples of live band performances and analyzes the impact of the nonverbal signs within them. The purpose of this research paper is to use specific examples of live band performances to investigate the role of nonverbal signs and their impact on communication, both between band members and between the performers and the audience.

2. Basic concept and classifications of nonverbal signs in live band performances

2.1 The basic concept of nonverbal signs

In the study of communication, the term “signs” refers to

fundamental units used to represent information, ideas, and emotions. Signs can take the form of words, objects, images, sounds, and more, as long as it is used to signify something. The famous linguist Ferdinand de Saussure defined signs as being composed of two parts: the “signifier” or the form which the sign takes, and the “signified” or the meaning that the sign represents [2]. Take the phrase “Thank you” for instance, the signifier would be the words “Thank you” and the signified would be the concept of gratitude. In live band performances, signs are the forms of communication used by the band members to interact with the audience and also to express themselves. These signs can be categorized into two main systems: verbal signs and nonverbal signs.

Firstly, the verbal sign system is the system that utilizes language as a means to transmit information, such as words, numbers, or symbols. This system has become the most essential way of communication between people, such as the countless languages that people of different countries have created. Nonverbal signs, on the other hand, have a much larger coverage than verbal signs. Nonverbal signs refer to any form of communication that transmits information without the use of spoken or written words [3]. These signs may include facial expressions, postures, eye contact, or sounds.

Table 1 shows a clearer display of the two systems. Two different aspects comprise each of the two systems: vocal and nonvocal. For verbal signs, the vocal aspect refers to the spoken words, and the nonvocal aspect refers to the written language and sign language. For nonverbal signs, the vocal aspect refers to paralinguage, which is the vocal part excluding the spoken words, such as the pitch, volume, and verbal pace. The nonvocal aspect refers to body language, facial expressions, and eye contact [4].

Table 1. Vocal and Nonvocal Elements of Verbal and Nonverbal Communication

	Verbal communication	Nonverbal communication
Vocal	Spoken words	Paralanguage (pitch, volume, speaking rate, etc)
Nonvocal	Writing, Sign language	Body language (gestures, facial expressions, eyecontact, etc.)

One major difference between verbal and nonverbal signs is that verbal signs are cultural based and nonverbal signs are biological based [5]. In other words, verbal signs usually do not share the same meaning around the world (evidently, as different languages have different words for the same object), whereas nonverbal signs usually do share that recognizability. An example will provide a better explanation: saying “Ni-Hao” (hello in Chinese) cannot be understood by everyone around the world, but a hand-

shake or a wave of hand will most likely be understood. In the context of communication, nonverbal signs complement verbal speeches, providing additional emphasis, tone, or emotion to the words. In fact, nonverbal signs may even carry more importance than verbal communication. Ray Birdwhistell claimed in his studies that the audience can receive around 35% of the information through only the words, but can receive the other 65% through nonverbal signs [6]. While verbal signs are capable of

expressing the content of the information, nonverbal signs are responsible for adding emotions and context, helping the audience to better understand the content [7]. Take the word “Hello” as an example, it is very different hearing the word from a robot and a human being. This is because humans add tone, facial expressions, and gestures to the actual word so the meaning can be better understood. A person might say “Hello” with a huge smile on his face, waving hands and excited eyes, whereas another person might say the same word with a poker face, no hand gestures, and looking somewhere else. In these two instances, although the verbal signs completely the same, it is the nonverbal signs that fundamentally changes the meaning of the message. As a result, nonverbal signs are complementary to the verbal signs and together are able to transmit the true and complete meaning of the message.

2.2 Classifications of nonverbal signs

Nonverbal signs can be divided into two main categories: visual nonverbal signs and auditory nonverbal signs. As Table 1 above demonstrates, there are the “vocal” and “nonvocal” aspects of nonverbal communication. However, in live band performances, these should be slightly altered. The “vocal” aspect of the paralanguage can be seen as the specific way in which the singer sings the words, or the way the band members are playing their instrument [8]. For instance, they may be using particular singing techniques or playing techniques. The “nonvocal” aspect can be expanded to the performer’s costume, the backdrop, the setup of the stage, the lighting, etc. It can also refer to the persona that the band created for themselves, just like the iconic hat and poses for Michael Jackson. In other words, the vocal aspect of live band performances can be identified as auditory nonverbal signs, and the nonvocal aspect of live band performances can be seen as visual nonverbal signs.

2.2.1 Visual nonverbal signs

Visual nonverbal signs refer to everything that the audience perceives through their eyes during the performance. One example would be the costumes that the band members are wearing. These costumes have a huge influence on the audience’s perception of the band, as they give the audience a first impression of the band. Usually, when a live performance starts, the first thing that the audience perceives is the visual image of the band members’ costumes when they enter the stage. Additionally, the costumes can set the general mood of the performance. For instance, the more reserved suits that The Beatles wore in the 1965 Ed Sullivan Show set a very different mood from the more exposed costumes of AC/DC at River Plate, 2009. In short, costumes play a vital role in complement-

ing the mood of the music.

Another example would be the lighting during the performance. Lighting is essential in setting the tone of the performance, whether through colors, darkness, or brightness. The lighting will serve as a strong visual sign to the audience. In addition to establishing the overall tone of the performance, lighting can also be used to signify important moments in the song. One of the best demonstrations of lighting would be the live performance of “Do I Wanna Know” by Arctic Monkeys in Manila, 2023. The song is known for its upbeat guitar intro, so as a result, as the drummer starts the song, the whole stage turns dark, with only the outlines of the band members visible. Then, the moment the guitar intro comes in, the lighting immediately focuses on Alex Turner, the one who plays the intro. In this way, the lighting helps the performance by complementing the structure of the song.

The persona of the performers is also important to the performance. For example, The Beatles is known for their iconic hairstyle of “mop-top”, as shown in Figure 1. The Beatles were able to connect their songs with this persona, so that every time the audience sees this hair, they will be reminded of the music of The Beatles. Also, during live performances, the audiences will be able to connect the song with the visual image of the hair and gain a full authentic experience of the performance.



Fig. 1 The iconic “mop-top” haircut of The Beatles[9]

2.2.2 Auditory nonverbal signs

Auditory nonverbal signs refer to things that the audience perceives through the ear but exclude the actual words/ lyrics of the song. Although these nonverbal signs may not be as obvious as the visual nonverbal signs, they are still crucial to the live performance. This may include a specific tone that the singer uses, the voice of the audience singing along, or even the sound of clapping. During Oasis’ performance of “Wonderwall” at Knebworth in 1996,

the audience started clapping along to the song as the first verse came in. Receiving the nonverbal sign of the sound of clapping, the audience was able to enjoy a more authentic experience of the live performance.

Singers also often use specific tones or ways of singing that make the lyrics of the song sound different. In Måneskin's live performance of "Beggin" at the American Music Awards in 2021, lead singer Damiano David used the particular vocal technique of growling to add to the texture of the song. It is a key element that adds to the raw energy of the song. This is very different from just speaking out the lyrics or singing using the common pop music technique, and the use of vocal distortion and vibrato greatly enhances the expression of emotions in the performance.

Hearing the audience singing along is another auditory nonverbal sign. One great example of the audience singing along is the live performance of "Yellow" by Coldplay in Glastonbury, 2002. For the entire first verse, Coldplay did not sing a single word, and just played the chords of the song. The only words that could be heard were the voices of thousands of audiences, together singing the first verse. Although these are still the words of the song, the texture of the voice and the whole experience is completely different from hearing the band sing. It is almost like hearing the performance of a choir, but made out of the audience. This presents the audience with a whole new experience of the song, much different from what they usually hear on the radio.

3. Specific examples of live band performances and the use of nonverbal signs

3.1 Queen's Live Aid Performance, London 1985

On July 13, 1985, a benefit concert called "Live Aid" was held simultaneously at Wembley Stadium, London, and JFK Stadium, Philadelphia. The event organizers, Bob Geldof and Midge Ure, aimed to raise money through this concert for the people of Ethiopia, who after years of war are suffering a famine that killed hundreds of thousands of lives. The most famous bands and musicians were invited to the concert to perform, raising millions of dollars for the people of Ethiopia [10].

Here, Queen presented one of the most memorable live band performances in history. What makes this live performance so memorable is not only the significance of supporting the people of Ethiopia, but also the excellent way in which Queen performed their songs. Many non-

verbal signs contributed significantly to the performance. One nonverbal sign during the performance would be Freddie Mercury dancing with the microphone stand, just as Figure 2 shows. This is a visual nonverbal sign that gives the audience a strong visual impression and fires up the crowd. Another nonverbal sign is the clapping of the audience. This auditory nonverbal sign is most notable during the songs "Radio Gaga" and "We Will Rock You", both of which possess a strong sense of beat. Additionally, Freddie Mercury also did a call-and-response with the audience. The audience would copy the voice of Freddie Mercury, who sings not lyrics, but words of improvisation such as "Ey-oh". These interactions between the band and the audience. the audience can feel the gain the immersive experience of being at the live performance and feel the authenticity of the performance.



Fig. 2 Freddie Mercury dancing with the microphone stand [11]

These nonverbal signs differentiate this live performance from the audio tracks the audience usually listens to on the radio. They are presented with so many authentic experiences that the radio could never provide. Just as Dave Grohl of Foo Fighters said, "Queen smoked' em. They just took everybody... that's why they should be recognized as one of the greatest rock bands of all time, because they could connect with an audience" [12].

3.2 The Eagles "Hotel California"

Having the drummer sing is not a common practice among bands. However, The Eagles did just that in their song "Hotel California". What makes the live performance different from the audio track is the visual nonverbal sign of Donald Henley striking the drum and singing at the same time. On an audio track, the listener cannot perceive the drummer singing. This visual nonverbal sign gives astonishment to the audience.

The three guitarists harmonizing side by side is another visual nonverbal sign. The three guitarists create a beautiful progression of chords, each playing one note of the chord.

The audience was able to relate the visual sign of the three guitarists playing side by side with the harmony they heard. The lighting also serves as an important nonverbal sign. At the beginning of the song, the light was mostly dim and focused primarily on the drummer, who was singing. After that, when the guitars came in to harmonize, the lighting shifted its focus to the three guitarists. Another visual nonverbal sign would be the double-neck guitar that the guitarist used during the solo, as Figure 3 shows. As double-neck guitars are not usually seen, the visual image of the guitar would immediately attract the attention of the audience, which matches with the music as the audience would focus on the guitar solo that comes in.



Fig. 3 Double-neck guitar used for guitar solo in “Hotel California”[13]

3.3 Nirvana’s “Smells Like Teen Spirit”

Nirvana performed “Smells Like Teen Spirit” in Reading, 1992. However, what makes this performance different from the previous two examples is that Nirvana did not play the music. The producer of the show mandates the band to “play along” to the audio track, which in other words, to fake perform. Despite having to fake perform, Nirvana used this as an opportunity to show the irony of having to play along to an audio track, despite being live. As a result, they presented the audience with several nonverbal signs that passed on their message.

Firstly, at the start of the song, where the guitar riff comes in, it can be seen that guitarist [name] is “playing” the guitar without touching the strings. In fact, he used a flat hand and hovers it above the strings. One of the guitarists was also dancing with his guitar when the audio track was still playing his part. This visual nonverbal sign tells the audience that they are forced to fake perform. Also, in multiple instances throughout the song, the drummer can be seen playing differently from what is on the audio track. For instance, he intentionally hits the cymbal twice when the sound is snare drum. One auditory nonverbal

sign would be the intentionally poor singing of Kurt Cobain. He sings it with his mouth almost engulfing the microphone, at one moment when he swallows it. This is very different from Nirvana’s usual performance of the song, and it sure is able to attract the attention of the audience. In this way, they can pass the message of their fake performing in a humorous way, without having to confront the show organizer directly. From a purely musical perspective, this would just be a bad performance, but along with the nonverbal signs, the band successfully turned it into a protest against fake performance.

4. Conclusion

This research investigates the extent to which nonverbal signs contribute to the overall experience of a live band performance. This paper first provides a general definition of nonverbal signs, in addition to the classifications of nonverbal signs in the circumstance of a live band performance. After that, this paper discusses three case studies of specific live band performances and explores the nonverbal signs used, concluding that nonverbal signs are crucial to live band performances and contribute significantly to the overall experience of the audience. These nonverbal signs provide a sense of authenticity to the performance, allowing the performers to communicate emotions and express themselves better to the audience. By engaging with both the visual and auditory nonverbal signs, audiences can resonate more deeply with the band and the music, experiencing a performance that is not just heard but felt. With the advancement of technologies, bands are able to add more and more nonverbal signs than before, such as lighting, and special effects. Nevertheless, it is important to find the balance between the verbal signs (the music) and the nonverbal signs. If one focuses too much on nonverbal signs and overlooks the verbal signs, then the fundamental purpose of the performance, which is to play music, is defied. As a result, future bands must take this balance into consideration in order to provide the audience with the most immersive experience.

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