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### It's Such a Fine Line Between Stupid and Clever: A Genealogy of the Music Mockumentary

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# “IT’S SUCH A FINE LINE BETWEEN STUPID AND CLEVER”

## A Genealogy of the Music Mockumentary

*Michael Brendan Baker and Peter Lester*

Imitation is the sincerest [form] of flattery.

—Charles Caleb Colton, 1820

In 1934, on the Aran Islands off the western coast of Ireland, pioneering filmmaker Robert Flaherty and his crew were collecting material for a feature-length nonfiction film documenting the premodern conditions endured by residents of the rough North Atlantic outpost. Discussing the ways in which Flaherty prearranged character interactions and informally scripted many of the scenarios that would ultimately feature in his films, camera assistant John Taylor later recalled for filmmaker George Stoney that he wrote in his notebooks at the time the word “mockumentary” to describe this creative treatment of the nonfictional material (*How*). Although the term would not circulate in a more meaningful way until the mid-1970s and would not be widely adopted by critics and audiences until the mid- to late 1980s, “mockumentary” has become the standard descriptor for works of fiction which appeal to documentary aesthetics and modes of representation in order to establish an interpretative frame for the audience. These “fake” documentaries generally make no effort to conceal their “fakeness” from the viewer and instead use the form in creative, often playful ways for a wide range of purposes, including humor and critique.

Within the mockumentary genre, the music mockumentary constitutes a coherent subgenre with a small number of vastly influential films. Styled primarily upon the rockumentary genre—specifically, the observational films of the 1960s, the concert films of the 1970s, and the archive-based expository music documentaries of the last 40 years, each invested in the historicization of popular music and musicians—the basic premise of the music mockumentary is comedic engagement with the world of popular music through satire, farce, and parody, using (or presenting the illusion of) the representational strategies of nonfiction. The music mockumentary leverages the audience’s knowledge of the codes and conventions of the rockumentary genre and, more generally, those of popular music, to establish and deliver a variety of comedic premises.

Recognized primarily for its commercial breakthrough with Rob Reiner’s *This Is Spinal Tap* (USA, 1984), the music mockumentary dates back to the 1970s and comprises dozens of films and television programs addressing a range of musical styles and performers with an emphasis on comedy writing and comic performances. Within the mockumentary genre, theatrically released music mockumentaries are historically strong commercial performers and several endure as pop cultural touchstones (see “Mockumentary”). Beginning with *The Rutles: All You Need*

*Is Cash* (Eric Idle and Gary Weis, UK, 1978) and the iconic *This Is Spinal Tap*, the cult appeal of music mockumentaries has been proven time and time again, despite ever-diminishing artistic returns. Drawing upon Roscoe and Hight's typology of the mockumentary form, general theories of parody and satire, and the foundational influence of the rockumentary genre, this chapter presents a genealogy of the music mockumentary, detailing its successes, limits, and potential.

## Music Documentary and Mockumentary

The primary point of reference for the music mockumentary is the rockumentary. This music-focused documentary genre emerged in the 1960s and rose in critical acclaim and commercial popularity through the 1970s, both in North America and elsewhere. Mirroring the spectacular heights of rock's mainstream appeal in the first era of stadium tours and multimillion selling albums, the rockumentary genre visualized popular music in ways that would persist through subsequent decades and across media formats and platforms. The category is not simply a collection of nonfiction films on the subject of popular music, but rather an evolving audiovisual genre that is both premised upon and integral to the music, the industry, and the communities it celebrates. These films canonize not just the music and musicians but also the stagecraft, performance styles, equipment, itineraries, rituals, outsized egos, and fans that comprise rock culture (and popular music culture, more generally). And while the term "rockumentary"—as obvious a portmanteau word one can conceive of—was coined in 1969 in promotional material for a radio documentary on the history of popular music, it is most often attributed to the fictional character Marty DiBergi (Rob Reiner), the filmmaker at the center of the most beloved music-focused mockumentary of all time: *This Is Spinal Tap*.

The mockumentary (and "fake" documentary) is integral to documentary studies (Roscoe and Hight; Juhasz and Lerner; Lebow) though the terms remain fluid and imprecisely defined. Roscoe and Hight introduce a model of "mock-documentary" that balances the intention of filmmakers with the interpretative freedom of audiences, and highlight the degree to which "fake" documentaries encourage reflection upon the documentary genre itself. The model is concerned primarily with "the type of relationship which a text constructs with factual discourse" (64). While documentary genres are most often identified in terms of the subject matter with which they engage (e.g., the nature documentary), mockumentary film and television have a more nuanced relationship with its source material, and categorizing the work requires a sensitivity to the filmmaker's intentions and the audience's interpretative frame. "Parody mockumentaries" are identified by Roscoe and Hight as those films which "feature the consistent and sustained appropriation of documentary codes and conventions in the creation of a fictional milieu" and "make obvious their fictionality (the audience is expected to appreciate the text's comic elements)" (68). Humor, here, is founded upon the contrast between the discourse of sobriety central to classical documentary representation and the comic or absurdist subject matter examined by the mockumentary filmmaker. The authors astutely acknowledge that most mockumentary films illustrating a parodic approach "adopt a strong frame of nostalgia in their presentation of fictional representatives of an era or cultural idiom," and this is especially true of the music mockumentary (68). While parody is the primary form of humor mobilized in the music mockumentary, there are key films Roscoe and Hight would characterize as "critique." Such mockumentaries move beyond simple parody and engage with larger social and cultural forces by "incorporat[ing] a partial or muted critique of media practices themselves (and especially documentary as a mode of inquiry, investigation and examination)" (70). In this way, the parodic tendencies of one form of mockumentary give way to more satirical examinations of the subject matter and introduce higher degrees of reflexivity as the films "open more space for an audience to recognize the problematic nature of any appropriation of documentary codes and conventions" (70).

The distinction between parody and satire or critique is important for understanding both the development of the music mockumentary and the divide which separates the strongest work within the genre from its weaker counterparts. Parody involves the imitation of existing work and generally adapts or deforms specific features of that work in service of a comedic premise. Satire, on the other hand, addresses larger aspects of society but may use parody to achieve its goals. Zoë Druick, building upon the work of Hutcheon, Dane, and others, addresses this dynamic within the context of audiovisual practice:

Parody is a double-voiced discourse and as such addresses a sophisticated reader or viewer expected to decode multiple texts in dialogic relation. Parody is, then, by nature a self-reflexive textual maneuver. Satire, by contrast, is a commentary not on a text but on the social world. Where parody is a discourse on texts, satire is a discourse on things. (107)

While the most successful music mockumentaries balance the parody of particular artists and their portrayal in visual media with the satirical exploration of specific popular music milieus (e.g., fan cultures, the music industry), many are merely parodies of canonical works that lack the satirical depth of their more accomplished progenitors. These lesser films often resort to farce in a manner that completely explodes the nonfictional conceit presented to the audience, thus diminishing the impact that the other comedies are able to achieve by leveraging the anxiety and discomfort of both the fictional characters and the imagined filmmakers when the events of the film are purportedly “real.” With all of this in mind, the music mockumentary is most often effective—most funny—when the humor operates on two complementary levels: at the level of parody engaging the audience’s knowledge of the mockumentary genre, its urtexts (most often *This Is Spinal Tap*), and the popular music referent; and at the level of satire with the audience’s extra-textual knowledge of popular entertainment more generally, including the worlds of celebrity, industry, and audiences.

The commercial imperative of the music mockumentary subgenre reflects that of its nonfiction parent, the music documentary or “rockumentary.” Like rockumentary, all of these films rely on the interest of an already established music audience for their success. Indeed, the two most distinctive traits of the music mockumentary throughout history are the commitment these films have to the genre’s basic formulas established in a corpus of work crystallized within the subgenre by the mid-1980s, and the closeness with which the appearance of these films directly correlates to the commercial profile of the music genre or artist-referent featured in the “fake.” There is a direct correlation between the commercial profile of any given musical genre and the number of “fake” documentaries produced about imaginary figures from that musical milieu. Consequently, the following discussion is organized partly on the basis of genre, as well as Roscoe and Hight’s important distinction between parody and satirical critique. But we begin with the founding texts.

## **Ancestors**

If there is a single film that serves as a gateway into the music mockumentary for filmmakers and audiences alike, it is without question *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984). The film is a titanic balancing act of thoughtful characterization and expert improvisation that simultaneously retraces the history of documentary film and popular music at large. However, Rob Reiner’s classic sits alongside, and actually postdates, two television productions that together serve as the true foundation of the genre. The first, *The Rutles: All You Need Is Cash* (Eric Idle and Gary Weis, UK, 1978), is a remarkable re-imagining of the history of popular music and the place of prominence occupied by the Beatles. The second, *The Comic Strip Presents... Bad News Tour* (Sandy Johnson, UK, 1983), is an intelligent and hilarious critique of the hardscrabble mythology of rock music. Across these three examples, subsequent generations of filmmakers would find both the conceptual and

aesthetic horizons and the basic comedic formulas of the genre laid bare. Both *The Rutles* and *This Is Spinal Tap* are the subjects of other chapters in this volume,<sup>1</sup> so our discussion of them here will be brief, with more emphasis laid on *Bad News*.

*The Rutles: All You Need Is Cash*, a made-for-television film co-produced by NBC and BBC Two, effectively introduced the world to the music mockumentary as a fully formed subgenre of film comedy. The story of the imaginary Rutles is presented as a hosted television documentary examining the career and explosive popularity of a band that pre-dates the Beatles yet mirrors their career in comically precise ways. Through faux-archival footage, talking-head interviews and stage performances, the filmmakers create a parallel world in which four young men from Rutland (England's smallest county) chart a course for the young lads from Liverpool, but then disappear from pop history. The film contains sequences wherein the Beatles' iconic television appearances and on-screen performances are faithfully recreated and then fully parodied; the level at which myriad Beatles references are made is microscopic, with visual iconography, lyrical allusions, and particular production techniques, all brought into the realm of the Rutles in utterly convincing and often hilarious ways.

*Bad News Tour* (Sandy Johnson, UK, 1983), produced as an episode of the sketch comedy series *The Comic Strip Presents ...* (Channel 4, Season 1, Episode 4), departs from the classical compilation style mocked by *All You Need Is Cash* and adopts a hybrid observational-participatory style (often referred to as *cinéma vérité*) in its chronicle of a metal band's attempts to create and establish a mythology with little in the way of discernible musical talent, a seeming disadvantage further exacerbated by the highly dysfunctional interpersonal dynamics of the group. The response to the program was such that, like the Rutles before them, the fictional band, Bad News, became real-world performers; and structurally, stylistically, and thematically, *Bad News Tour* appears to have been a direct influence upon *This Is Spinal Tap*, though the films were in production concurrently—the resemblance between these two films and their influence on rock music and culture is so striking that contemporary audiences would likely be confused as to which film came first.

The sequel, *More Bad News (The Comic Strip Presents ...)*, Series 3, Episode 17, Channel 4, 1988, directed by Adrian Edmondson, tracks the band's reunion after a spectacular collapse several years earlier. It follows more closely the conventions and iconography of the rockumentary genre with such well-established rock-doc elements as the recording studio, contract negotiations, the production of a music video, internecine disagreements, and a “where are they now” framing device that re-introduces the main cast. A degree of self-reflexivity, missing from the first film, is present here and is very effective in demonstrating the music mockumentary's awareness of itself as a genre. The film culminates with the real-world performance of Bad News at the Monsters of Rock Festival at Castle Donnington in August 1986 alongside Ozzy Osbourne, Scorpions, Def Leppard, Motörhead, and Warlock. In many ways, *More Bad News* is both a satire of the rockumentary genre upon which all of this work is based and a direct response to the audience expectations established by *This Is Spinal Tap*.

For many audiences and critics, the music mockumentary is Rob Reiner's 1984 comedy classic *This Is Spinal Tap*. The influence of the film is so profound that for many, the “fake” defines its parent genre, the rockumentary. The film performed acceptably at the box-office before exploding in popularity across successive home video formats, confirming its status and appeal across generations of audiences, and serving as a point of reference (or point of departure) for all music mockumentaries made in its wake. The visual iconography of rock music—and heavy metal, in particular—is intrinsically linked to the film's parodic and satirical treatment of rock-and-roll excess, life on the road, outsized egos, malevolent record company types, and clashing creative personalities. There is arguably no better distillation of both the hijinks of *This Is Spinal Tap* and the very nature of the music mockumentary itself than David St. Hubbins's (Michael McKean) remark, “It's such a fine line between stupid and clever.”

## Descendants

The full impact of these films and programs would not be felt immediately. The music mockumentary recipes they established spent several years percolating in the public consciousness before coming to fruition in the 1990s. Leading the charge was Julie Brown's television special produced for Showtime, *Medusa: Dare to Be Truthful* (directed by Julie Brown and John Fortenberry, USA). Originally aired in December 1991, the film, like *This Is Spinal Tap*, found a wider audience after its VHS release later in 1992. Brown served as writer, producer, codirector, and star in what is an obvious parody of Madonna's 1991 concert tour documentary, *Madonna: Truth or Dare* (Alex Keshishian, USA). Though the influence of *This Is Spinal Tap* is not as pronounced in *Dare to Be Truthful* as it would be with later music mockumentaries, Brown was quick to cite it as an obvious point of reference: "Even before I saw [*Truth or Dare*]... I knew we could do the Spinal Tap version [of Madonna]" (qtd. in Rhodes). As parody, *Dare to Be Truthful's* reference points are almost entirely limited to the original source material. The film mimics *Truth or Dare's* format of alternation between "behind the scenes" black-and-white sequences and color concert sequences, wherein Brown's songs playfully send-up Madonna's originals. Most scenes are virtual shot-for-shot recreations, a choice that occasionally dilutes the film's parodic intent, given how frequently outlandish the source material is in the first place. Its irreverent stance, not to mention its generic positioning, is succinctly stated late in the film by Shane Pencil (Donal Logue), Medusa's Sean Penn-esque boyfriend, as he reflexively remarks, "This is a rockumentary; it's not even a real movie!"

As a subculture and musical genre, hip hop emerged in the 1970s, thrived throughout the 1980s, and, by the early 1990s, was fully a part of mainstream musical culture. The early 1990s saw the near-synchronous release of two important music mockumentaries specifically attuned to the hip-hop world. Though the two films, *CB4* (Tamra Davis, USA, 1993) and *Fear of a Black Hat* (Rusty Cundieff, USA, 1993), have been closely linked for historical, narrative, and thematic reasons, they differ in certain ways, and especially in terms of their engagement with the mockumentary format. First, *CB4* was a major studio release, distributed by Universal Pictures, and was a considerable box office success; on the other hand, *Fear of a Black Hat* (the title a riff on the acclaimed 1990 Public Enemy album, *Fear of a Black Planet*) was a low-budget independent production that opened at the Sundance Film Festival early in 1993 and was not distributed theatrically until the following year. Second, although it is frequently cited as an example of mockumentary, *CB4's* actual relationship to the genre is tenuous. Rather than defining the overall form of the film, the mockumentary mode effectively serves as a narrative device within the film's diegesis, which motivates the "back story" flashback that occupies the first half of the film, as a white documentary filmmaker (Chris Elliot) sets out to capture an "authentic" profile of the gangsta rap group CB4. The production of this "rapumentary" within the film prompts the early narrative exposition of the group's rise to fame, but as the "backstory" catches up with the "present," the documentary illusion disappears completely and the film reverts to rather conventional narrative and stylistic techniques for the remainder of the film.

*Fear of a Black Hat*, on the other hand, demonstrates far greater commitment and adherence to the music mockumentary format. Framed in its opening sequence as a thesis project by Nina Blackburn (Kasi Lemmons), a PhD student in sociology, the film consistently maintains a raw, *cinéma vérité* aesthetic, not unlike that established by *This Is Spinal Tap*. Similar to *CB4*, *Fear of a Black Hat* engages in a parodic project well-tailored to hip-hop audiences and fans. The faux music video is one of the most consistent and enduring conventions of music mockumentaries, and both films engage with this convention, featuring spot-on, perfectly rendered spoofs of specific hip-hop tracks and subgenres. However, the tone in both films is frequently as celebratory as it is scathing; thus, while occasionally sharp and poignant, the overall impact of the satire is blunted, since both filmmakers clearly share a strong affinity with their target.

Music mockumentaries rooted in hip hop have followed sporadically in the intervening years, but none has captured either *CB4*'s popularity with audiences or *Fear of Black Hat*'s sharp insights and commitment to the format. *Da Hip Hop Witch* (Dale Resteghini, USA) was released direct to video in 2000, close on the heels of 1999's enormously successful horror mockumentary *The Blair Witch Project* (Eduardo Sánchez and Daniel Myrick, USA). Ostensibly, a parody of that film set within the hip-hop community, the film is an incoherent assemblage of staged interviews with prominent (and not-so-prominent) rap artists, discussing their various encounters with the mysterious "hip-hop witch," interspersed with multiple narrative threads devoted to tracking this entity down. Rapper Eminem wisely disavowed his appearance in the film and even attempted, unsuccessfully, to block its distribution entirely.

After the success and exposure of *CB4* and *Fear of a Black Hat*, *Gangsta Rap: The Glockumentary* (Damon Daniels, USA), released nearly 15 years later in 2007, is at once redundant and anachronistic. Another parody rooted in the world of west coast gangsta rap, the film is nevertheless notable for its obsessive devotion to *This Is Spinal Tap*: it functions less as parody of that film than it does blatant and reverent homage. As such, the film does little to advance the music mockumentary format. But as a cultural text, *Gangsta Rap: The Glockumentary* is telling all the same, if for no other reason than in the way it reveals just how embedded *This Is Spinal Tap*'s narrative and stylistic conventions are within the DNA of the genre.

Other hip-hop mockumentaries include the 2009 independently produced *Steamin' + Dreamin': The Grandmaster Cash Story* (Shaun O'Connor, Ireland, 2009), and its 2011 sequel *Steamin' + Dreamin' 2: Cash Back* (Brendan Canty), both minor entries in the genre, with humor that derives largely from the supposed incongruity of a witless white Irish gangsta rapper plying his trade in Cork, Ireland. A recent American entry in the genre, *I'm Still Here* (Casey Affleck, 2010), though not overtly comedic, is noteworthy for its sheer audacity and willingness to take the format into new territory. The film closely follows the personal life of Joaquin Phoenix after his announced retirement from acting to pursue an unsuccessful attempt to launch a career as a rap artist, culminating in an infamous appearance on the *Late Show with David Letterman*. Later revealed to be a carefully orchestrated media hoax, the film is notable for the extent to which it is willing to explore, and explode, the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction.

Just as hip hop's ascendancy into mainstream public consciousness was quickly accompanied by music mockumentaries attuned to the specificities of that genre, a similar pattern emerged with the "boy band" craze of the 1990s and early 2000s. Although boy bands have been a fixture in popular music for decades, the form arguably hits its peak of global popularity in the late 1990s and early 2000s, marked particularly by the success of groups Backstreet Boys and NSYNC. This era saw the release of numerous boy band-themed music mockumentaries seeking both to capitalize on the craze and to undermine it. The first, *2gether* (Nigel Dick, USA), aired on MTV in 2000, and quickly spawned a TV series spinoff on that same network. Following the pattern established by *Spinal Tap*, the actors in *2gether* quickly transformed into a transmedia presence, both touring in character and releasing actual albums in addition to the initial film and TV series.

Formally, *2gether* is typical of a subset of music mockumentaries, in the sense that it consistently makes overtures to the accepted parameters of the format, but is all too willing to break with this commitment as the narrative demands it. Moments of exposition wholeheartedly embrace the techniques of documentary, notably "masked" interviews, where characters address the camera directly. Yet the moment "action" occurs, and narrative developments take precedence, the filmmakers drop the mockumentary pretense, and revert to stylistic tendencies more associated with fictional filmmaking, such as multiple camera setups not typically available to "on the fly" documentary filmmakers and rapid cutting, not consistent with the form it claims to emulate. This cinema of convenience adopts the techniques of documentary for its purported claims of authenticity, but quickly abandons them when more conventional, fictional filmmaking techniques can propel the narrative—and the comedy—more effectively.

The boy band subgenre of music mockumentary introduced its own set of narrative conventions and semantic/syntactic components. Notable among these is the persistent return to anxieties surrounding authenticity and, specifically, the act of lip-synching. High-profile lip-synching controversies, most famously around Milli Vanilli—a duo whose name has since become synonymous with the practice—are a recurring theme in boy band mockumentaries. Thus, one of the few genuinely funny moments in *2gether* occurs when the most dimwitted member punctuates a debate among the band about lip-synching with the earnest query “Do WE lip-synch?” Most of the film’s humor, however, as with much parody, derives from insider knowledge of the musical genre, most notably the composition of a boy band roster (“the cute one,” “the bad boy,” etc.), yet the critique found throughout the *2gether* franchise rarely rises above the level of the obvious.

A more effective and skillfully executed sendup of the global boy band phenomenon is *Get Ready to be Boyzvoiced* (Espen Eckbo, Henrik Elvestad and Mathis Fürst), a Norwegian boy band mockumentary also released in 2000. The film received little international attention but its commitment to the mockumentary form is greater than that of *2gether*, and its satirical teeth dig deeper. In addition to the obvious semantic components of the musical genre (such as frosted tips and ridiculously complex facial hair), the film manages to tackle some of its deeper, underlying syntactical underpinnings. For instance, hints of underage sexuality, always lingering just below the surface in terms of boy bands’ relationships with their fans, are exploited for an uncomfortably comic story line when one of the very much adult band members unknowingly engages in a relationship with a 12-year-old fan and later writes a song about it—the darkly hilarious “Twelve Year Old Woman.”

Subsequent boy band mockumentaries emerged throughout the decade. *Sons of Provo* (Will Swenson, USA, 2004) follows the basic conventions of the genre and offers an original take through its focus on a Mormon boy band. However, as Mormons themselves, the filmmakers’ proximity to their material seemingly dulls the critical edge on subject matter that might otherwise be ripe for satire. *The Naked Brothers Band: The Movie* (Polly Draper, USA, 2007), like *2gether*, debuted on TV and spawned a follow-up Nickelodeon TV series. It is noteworthy for widening the range of target audiences, which is unmistakably, at its core, preteen children. *The Heavenly Kings* (Daniel Wu, 2006), a Cantonese language film from Hong Kong, depicts a fictional boy band, Alive, and reflects the global popularity of both the boy band phenomenon and the music mockumentary format as a means of cultural commentary. Late to the party was *Popstar: Never Stop Never Stopping* (Akiva Schaffer and Jorma Taccone, USA, 2016), which, as the film’s title suggests, takes as its most obvious point of reference the 2011 music documentary *Justin Bieber: Never Say Never* (John M. Chu, USA). Despite a decent critical reception, the film, starring Andy Samberg as the titular “pop star,” was an unexpected failure at the box office, perhaps signaling audience fatigue and/or disinterest in the genre.

Although hip hop and boy band pop represent obvious coherent musical genres that have been more frequent subjects of music mockumentaries in recent years, examples, both notable and unremarkable, can be found throughout popular music more generally. Perhaps most notable is *Bob Roberts* (Tim Robbins, USA, 1992), a *vérité*-style portrait which subverts the implicit progressive, liberal politics of the world of popular music—and the iconicity of Bob Dylan, in particular—in service of a deeply conservative, “crypto-fascist” character who adopts a Dylan-like persona to achieve regressive political goals. *The Life and Hard Times of Guy Terrifico* (Michael Mabbot, 2005), a Canadian take on the genre, tells of a talented but unknown country-rock musician from Alberta who wins the lottery, opens a bar, and is thereby able to indulge both his dream of hanging out with famous musicians and his appetite for excess. Following a convention established by *All You Need Is Cash*, the documentary illusion is reinforced by the appearance of real-life celebrities, including musicians Kris Kristofferson, Merle Haggard, Levon Helm, and Donnie Fritts, Canadian VJ and television host George Strombolopoulos, and Phil Kaufman, former manager of the late Gram Parsons with whom the fictional Terrifico shares much in both life and (possibly) death.



*National Lampoon Presents Electric Apricot: Quest for Festeroo* (2006), directed by and starring Primus front man Les Claypool, is notable for expanding mockumentary's subject matter to "jam band" culture and for the ways in which it exemplifies the pattern of the mid-2000s where festival showcases were leveraged to attain deals for home video distribution. The bar-band scene was lampooned in the music mockumentary, *David Brent: Life on the Road* (Ricky Gervais, UK, 2016), a sequel to BBC's *The Office* and a biting satire of misspent artistic ambition. *People Just Do Nothing* (BBC 3, 2014–2018) is a British television sitcom directed by Jack Clough that follows the lives of a gaggle of aspiring musicians, DJs, and entrepreneurs who operate a pirate radio station, Kurupt FM, in West London. Not particularly innovative in terms of form, although it extends mockumentary to new musical genres (UK garage, drum and bass), it is produced with the skill and wit typical of other such BBC mockumentaries as *The Office* (2001–2003), *Twenty Twelve* (2011–2012), and *This Country* (2017–present). Middle-of-the-road, album-oriented rock is featured in *Rock Legends: Platinum Weird* (Robert Boockcheck, USA, 2006), significant primarily as one part of an experiment in adapting the music mockumentary to a multipart transmedia format (sound recordings, live performances, video biography, fan websites) in order to create a fictional band (Platinum Weird) and a back story to market a real-world musical commodity—a set of songs written by Dave Stewart and Kara DioGuardi, originally intended for the Pussycat Dolls, but which sounded more like 1970s *Rumours*-era Fleetwood Mac. What to do?

The clearest music-themed progeny of *This Is Spinal Tap*, and perhaps the most successful is *A Mighty Wind* (Christopher Guest, USA, 2003). It features the same core of writer-performers and creative talent, including Christopher Guest, Harry Shearer, Michael McKean, plus *Second City TV* alumni Catherine O'Hara and Eugene Levy (who co-wrote the script with Guest). One key difference, however, is its depiction in the music mockumentary of the restrained world of folk music, as opposed to the excessive world of rock. Here the humor is located, in part, in the way the conventions of the rockumentary genre—ordinarily focused on energy, rebellion, and outsized spectacle—are subverted to serve the intimate world of folk. Furthermore, the gifted performers under Guest's expert direction highlight the distinction, frequently overlooked by lesser music mockumentary filmmakers, between the often-amateurish impact of ad-libbed lines within a loosely scripted scene and the more sophisticated, technical accomplishments of true character work and improvisation in a focused environment.

Of contemporary mockumentaries, however, perhaps the most skillfully rendered, purely text-focused parody is the IFC television series *Documentary Now!* (2015–present). Each episode is typically geared toward a send-up of a specific, often canonical, documentary film, and to date, the series has produced two music mockumentaries in this fashion. The first, a season-ending two-part episode called "Gentle & Soft: The Story of the Blue Jeans Committee" (Season 1, Episodes 7 and 8, 2015), takes as its primary source material the 2003 HBO documentary, *History of the Eagles* (Allison Ellwood, USA), but the humor is more widely targeted at the California soft rock of the mid-1970s and its lifestyle-inspired offshoot known as "yacht rock." The second, "Final Transmission" (Season 2, Episode 5, 2016), explicitly zeros-in on Jonathan Demme's iconic 1984 Talking Heads concert documentary *Stop Making Sense*. Importantly, however, the parody soon departs from its referent, shifting away from the concert film structure and incorporating more and more elements of the biography format, allowing for extended scenes of dialogue and first-person address wherein the comedic elements of the exercise truly emerge. In its ability to balance a faithful rendering of the source material's aesthetics with a larger commitment to comedy, *Documentary Now!* appears at the vanguard of the music mockumentary as it enters its fifth decade.

## Conclusion

While by no means a comprehensive account, this chapter has provided a genealogy of the music mockumentary, from its foundational texts in the late 1970s and early 1980s to its present-day

transmedia incarnations. In large part, the genre has remained remarkably static as its core conventions have evolved very little. Aside from a few outliers, the genre has rarely demonstrated itself as a place for narrative or stylistic innovation, and for the most part, it has remained an essentially apolitical form. The very legible, global appeal of music stardom and the specificities associated with that stardom in any given musical genre render the rockumentary format ripe for comedy. Typically, audiences have a firm grasp on that which is being parodied, satirized, or treated ironically: the trappings of stardom; the labor of creative work; the personal costs of a career in the music industry; and, finally, the paradox of the fan, at once central to the success of the artist and necessarily kept at a distance to ensure that the mythology remains secure. These are among the foundational myths of popular music, and they rest at the core of the music mockumentary. Despite diminishing returns in terms of its artistic accomplishment and commercial success, the music mockumentary retains an undeniably appeal in the way it embodies, enshrines, and gently undermines these collective myths.

### Note

- 1 See Chapters 31 and 32 in this volume: Ch. 31, Kenneth Womack, “*All You Need Is Cash*: Skewering a Legend with the Prefab Four”; and Ch. 32, Colin Helb, “This Chapter Goes to Eleven: *This Is Spinal Tap* and the Blurring of Authenticity and Fabrication.”

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