

Benefit Concerts and the Sound of Self-Care in Pop Music

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Abstract

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Less than two weeks after a suicide bombing killed 22 people at the Manchester Arena following an Ariana Grande concert, the singer was back on stage in the city. She capped her three-hour [One Love Manchester benefit concert](#) with the 2015 single, “One Last Time,” which had found its way back into the [UK Singles chart](#) in the days following the blast. It was technically a solo performance, but Grande was joined on stage by the many artists who had already held the mic that day. At one point she was too overwhelmed to sing, and the audience took over for her. Grande’s occasional loss of voice is moving to watch. Throughout the concert, she would frequently struggle to speak, mostly sticking to short introductions of singers and a variation of “Thanks for being here; I love you so much,” her voice often cracking or sounding uncharacteristically pinched, the tears barely held at bay. Until “One Last Time,” she could always find her full voice through song, but as dusk settled on the city and the concert drew to a close, Grande could no longer sing through the weight of the moment, so the community she’d called together so she could “see and hold and uplift” them lifted her.



<https://youtu.be/cshg5ktpPtI>

Benefit concerts and the products surrounding them—as well as the critiques that target them—have become familiar fare since the 1984 Band Aid recording of “[Do They Know It’s Christmas](#)” spun off to form 1985’s Live Aid, a multi-site concert event complete with commemorative souvenirs and the performance of the USA For Africa single, “[We Are the World](#).” Skeptical accounts of benefit concerts fall like crumbs from Marx’s beard: [they’re capitalism deployed as band-aids on problems capitalism created](#); [they’re opportunities for celebrities to enhance their brands](#); [they’re colonial](#); [they’re neo-colonial](#); [they’re exaggerated performances of wokeness intended to absolve people of their complicity in systems of violence](#). As communal rituals in response to tragedy, though, benefit concerts also function as metaphorical keystones that hold the tension of competing emotions, politics, and sounds. Listening to music emerges as a form of self-care, but that act may not sound the same for different people. Looking at the case of Grande’s One Love Manchester, I will map self care in the context of this contemporary moment by filtering the Manchester concert through Cheryl Lousley’s feminist analysis of benefit concerts (2014). Specifically, in order to highlight what’s different about One Love Manchester, I’ll start with

Lousley's attention to the way feminized compassion is performed through benefit concerts as an outward-facing love. Here, Grande performs the same kind of feminized compassion but shifts the focus of the benefit to an inward self-care. But not all selves experience care or self-care the same way. I'll end by listening to Grande's "One Last Time" alongside Solange Knowles's "Borderline" (2016) in an effort to situate those sounds in contemporary politics that shape who has access to what kind of care.



Screenshot from 1984's Band Aid song, "Do They Know It's Christmas?"

Cheryl Lousley, in "[With Love from Band Aid: Sentimental Exchange, Affective Economies, and Popular Globalism](#)," grants that benefit concerts aren't just about fake feeling, but she doesn't lose sight of capitalist and imperialist critiques. For her, benefit concerts are events "where feeling is validated, where space is made for feeling." For her, if we allow that participants (whether organizers, performers, audiences) can be aware of the capitalism-fueled problems of benefit concerts but choose to be involved with them anyway, then we can access further dimensions of cultural analysis. In Lousley's case, that includes gender and emotion, as she keys in on how the performance of feminized compassion and love creates an "affective economy" of "*feeling too much*." When confronted with tragedy enormous enough to press the limits of the social imaginary, society looks for somewhere to put their big feelings and turn them into some kind of action. Benefit concerts like Live Aid invoke a moral imperative to give of one's own wealth to someone who needs it, a public moral activism Lousley grounds in feminized emotional labor, a gendered compassion that extends to the entire nation. She demonstrates that public Anglophone discourse surrounding the Ethiopian famine leading up to Live Aid revolved around domestic scenes of feminized affect performed across gender boundaries. The affect of Live Aid, then, included a gendered performance of love and compassion turned outward, and this has been the template for numerous benefit concerts since, including Farm Aid (1985), Concert for New York City (2001), and Hope for Haiti Now (2010), among others.



The announcement of Ariana Grande's One Love Manchester echoes Lousley's idea of the benefit concert as a gendered performance of love and compassion. A skim of her [Twitter post](#) (which is a picture of a message longer than 140 characters) announcing the event reveals emotive terms and phrases throughout. Grande offers sympathy, compassion, admiration, solidarity, and, importantly, music, the latter in the form of a concert where she and her fans can *feel too much* together. What's different about Grande's benefit concert, though, is that it's pitched not as an outward demonstration of compassion for others, but as an inward compassion for one's self, what I call here "self-care":

From the day we started putting the Dangerous Woman tour together, I said that this show, more than anything else, was intended to be a safe space for my fans. A place for them to escape, to celebrate, to heal, to feel safe and to be themselves...[The bombing] will not change that.

At the concert we can hear Grande model self-care for her audience as she struggles to maintain her composure and then gathers it through song, performing for herself the same kind of care she wants concert attendees to extend to themselves and their city.

Analyses and critiques of self-care generally start with Audre Lorde's [A Burst of Light](#) quote, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare," then contextualize how this quote functions for Lorde, a queer woman of color, differently than it does for the white women who have become the faces and consumers of #selfcare. Caring for one's self when the world wishes to marginalize and destroy you is, indeed, warfare. And while white women suffer at the hands of the patriarchy, the long history of feminist movements also reveals that white women not only have access to privilege and resources unavailable to women of color, but also that they have wielded that privilege in ways that further marginalize and harm women of color. In other words, self-care means something different based on who the self is and—and [Sara Ahmed has outlined this in characteristically brilliant terms](#)—*who else will show up to care for you*. Intersectionality shows us that queer people and women of color and people with disabilities often must perform self-care because the world is not organized to care for them. "For those who have to insist they matter to matter," Ahmed writes, "self-care is warfare," a necessity for survival. What I want to explore below is how self-care can *sound* different based on who the self is and whether that self must "insist they matter to matter."



Ariana Grande's performance of "One Last Time" at

One Love Manchester presents self-care for a self who also receives support from others. Here, Grande mirrors the collaborative nature of Live Aid by performing alongside other pop stars whose presence—confirmed relatively last-minute, almost certainly with a degree of effort to rearrange busy schedules, and without the usual compensation for their performance—tells Manchester and those harmed by the bombing that they matter. For "One Last Time," many voices join together to provide "a safe space for [Grande's] fans" to take care of themselves, and they, in turn, are able to take care of Grande when her voice escapes her. The underlying theme of [many critiques of white feminist self-care](#) is that it is frivolous, a market-driven excuse to indulge, a selfish pursuit of happiness for happiness's sake. And sure, as with benefit concerts, capitalism is a big problem here, and sometimes we call something self-care when it really is just self-indulgence. But I'd like to suggest we can make a finer distinction that doesn't require the oversimplification that comes with divvying up some actions or products as care and others as indulgence (or: [Schick's self-care marketing of a razor](#) may be exploitative at the very same time the razor actually functions as a form of self-care for some), and this is one reason I find the One Love Manchester concert compelling. Manchester and the survivors of the blast and Ariana Grande and her touring team could absolutely use the safe space the concert is trying to create. As Lousley reminds us, the performed compassion of benefits isn't simply fake feeling; the trauma Grande and the city and her fans experienced was real, and it's especially audible in the moments Grande's voice is pinched off mid-lyric. Let's consider others who could use the safe space One Love Manchester is trying to create: victims of bombings and terror throughout the world. The music industry isn't as eager to remind them that they matter. Self-care, it turns out, is easier for some to perform because the world is literally willing to invest in the care of those selves.

By contrast, Solange Knowles's "Borderline (An Ode to Self-Care)" (from her 2016 album *A Seat At The Table*) is lyrically rooted in the black feminist work of community organizing and activism. The singer explains to her lover that she needs a night off so that she can have the resolve to go back out to the "borderline" and fight again. Self-care as warfare, indeed. The singer's self-care has more than one purpose: it's a time to remind herself that she matters, and it's a time to restore the energy needed to go out and insist that her community matters. Instead of a bevy of pop stars lending their voices to create a safe space for her or an audience of adoring and grateful fans ready to take over if she can't, Solange's "Borderline" calls forth a more intimate setting. She multitracks her voice so that she collaborates and harmonizes with herself, with a faint doubling on the hook from Q-Tip, who is turned down in the mix and following Solange's lead. "Borderline" is a mostly solo act of self-preservation that enables the singer to go out and create safe spaces for others.

<https://youtu.be/p8FC5kXx0Co>

This inward-to-outward focus of self-care is evident in the instrumentation. After a smooth piano-and-bass duet in the introduction, the kick drum enters at the 0:28 mark, overblown and rough around the edges. The effect sounds like oversaturation, where the signal's gain is driven so that we lose some of the fidelity of its lower frequencies. This effect gives the kick a brighter timbre as the higher frequency overtones shine through and also muddies the lower frequencies so that they sound as if you've blown your car speakers and are getting noise in the mix that isn't supposed to be there. The drum kit also includes a white noise sound (think "tsshhh") that hits on the upbeat of the first, third, and fourth beats of each measure, joining the kick drum in creating a generally rough texture. This texture stands out because it sounds imperfectly mixed, like a sound engineer who messed something up. I hear in this a sonification of what Solange describes in her lyrics – a world that has frayed her edges, a world at war with her, a world disinterested at its best and hostile at its worst to the idea of her preservation. Hence, she pleas to retreat and preserve her own self.



"Solange" by Flickr user Greg Chow, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

The [interlude](#) that follows "Borderline" is the immediate payoff of this, as Solange sings with Kelly Rowland and Nia Andrews that she has "so much [magic], y'all, you can have it." Then comes "[Junie](#)," a fresh and energetic funk track that finds the singer back out on the activist grind after the night off that made it possible for her to return to the borderline.

As self-care proliferates in so many different practices performed by different selves, and as the term is emptied of meaning one hashtag at a time, one way we might track how power circulates through self-care is to listen to sonic representations of self-care. In Grande's "One Last Time" performance at One Love Manchester we hear self-care staged and protected by cultural icons and government officials who assure attendees that their selves matter, while in Solange's "Borderline" we hear self-care as an intimate, closed act that makes self- and community-preservation possible even when cultural icons and government officials refuse to participate in that preservation. In "One Last Time" we hear a community who shows up to help a singer when the world is hard, while in "Borderline," we hear a singer having to reassure her own self that it's okay to step away for a moment when the world is hard. By listening carefully in these moments, we can hear which selves are more readily recognizable as worthy of care—a chorus of voices

surrounded and kept safe by heightened police presence—and which selves are more likely to have to perform care for themselves quietly or privately, for [fear of retribution](#). Sound, in this instance, calls our attention to details that can let us more firmly hold onto a concept like self-care—a concept and series of practices that have been fundamental to the survival of black and queer women in a hostile world—that otherwise threatens to slip from our grasp. But hold on tight, and we just might make it back out to the borderline.

Featured image: Screenshot from Youtube video “Ariana Grande – One Last Time (One Love Manchester)” by user BBC Music

Justin Adams Burton is Assistant Professor of Music at Rider University. His research revolves around critical race and gender theory in hip hop and pop, and his book, [Posthuman Rap](#), is available for [pre-order](#) (it drops October 2). He is also co-editing the forthcoming (2018) [Oxford Handbook of Hip Hop Music Studies](#). You can catch him at [justindburton.com](#) and on Twitter [@j_adams_burton](#). His favorite rapper is one or two of the Fat Boys.



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