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Is It Just Rock 'n' Roll? A Comment on Stefan Bielinski's Community History, Popular Music, and Public Audiences

James G. Gibb

A later generation, with hindsight's infallible judgment, found the atomic bombing [of Hiroshima, Japan] easy to condemn as a crime in which we all had connived, if only subconsciously. Neither my mother's letters nor mine, however, indicated that we even realized anything very extraordinary had happened. And so we drifted on, oblivious to history and the future's judgment, lost in the small chaff of humanity's humdrum concerns. (Baker 1983: 231)

Walk into any chain bookstore in the United States and browse the history section. The offerings—with few exceptions—could lead you to believe that history is a succession of wars, nothing less and little more. Politicians and generals grab the limelight. They are the makers of history, occasionally tipping hat or saluting the ordinary person as a hero, a half-god illegitimately descended from those in power. Is it surprising, then, that Pulitzer prize-winning author Russell Baker should drift on, "oblivious to history" and his part in it? Baker, trained as an aviator during the Second World War, never saw combat and never left the United States. What part could he have had in history, and how could he be held responsible for historical events? Those of us of lesser talents and no fame seem destined to remain spectators to the succession of events called history, represented at best as numbers. Sometimes our names appear in books, a mere writer's trick to humanize and democratize the past.

Although rarely articulated, many Americans see themselves as apart from, rather than a part of, history. (Disagree? Examine

20th-century voter registration and voting patterns.) Why, then, should citizens take an interest in archaeological and historical research, much less fund historic preservation? Aren't we all little more than spectators who can choose to watch or not? How can scholars convey their findings—analyses and results that increasingly focus on community and all elements of society—to a public that does not appreciate the role of ordinary men and women in history? Stefan Bielinski has discovered that it isn't enough to research and write social history. One must grab the public's attention and convince each individual that ordinary folk and their actions are the stuff of history. Bielinski's "Albany Theme" is an innovative and, apparently, a successful solution to the problem of engaging audiences.

I first heard Bielinski's soft-rock tune as part of his slide presentation in the plenary session at the 1996 meeting of the Council for Northeast Historical Archaeology (Bielinski 1996). Flashing images and a loud pop tune sharply contrasted with the normal low hum of scholarly papers and the interminable succession of slides, all of which have faded from my memory. Some snickering in the audience suggested that not everyone present at the plenary understood or appreciated what Bielinski was trying to do: create an audio-visual montage embodying two ideas, rather than conveying specific historical knowledge. And, let's face it, the "Albany Theme" is not a Bob Dylan/J. S. Bach/Guiseppe Verdi piece (choose your preferred genre and composer) destined for greatness. On the other hand, more of the conference participants on their way to lunch probably left humming the theme song than reciting choice passages from any of the preceding five papers. I don't mean to disparage those five papers: they were excellent and I feel very fortunate to have captured their key points in detailed notes taken in near complete darkness. But the 10-minute audio-visual extravaganza made an impression, and that, so far as I can tell, was the intent.

Bielinski's presentation was not intended to teach the conferees the early history of Albany. He showed us visually and acoustically how to grab an audience's attention and instill the concept that a community is a

product of all of its members' actions. By extension, each member of the audience also is a part of history, an important contributor, even if individual contributions are difficult to define and assess. Bielinski described his dynamic presentation in his essay as a warm-up, a means of preparing an audience for a more conventional presentation on recent research and interpretations from the New York State Museum's Colonial Albany Social History Project. His is a popular, as opposed to elitist, medium consistent with his message: people—all people—make history. Images and lyrics work together, demonstrating that diversity created and continues to recreate the city. The program establishes common ground for audiences that probably exhibit as much cultural diversity as the population of colonial Albany.

The principal weakness of the various incarnations of the program, as Bielinski describes them here and as one of his critics pointed out, is the rapid succession of images. Presented in musical video fashion, these images appear too briefly on the screen for audience evaluation. They make their mark on the viewer through redundancy and juxtaposition, through the use of different but similar images in a non-random, but unspecified order. The presentation became all the more problematic when, in 1993, Bielinski started to use it not as a warm-up, but as a self-contained program. At first blush, cynical viewers and aficionados of 1960s spy-thrillers might suspect hypnotism and an attempt to implant subliminal messages. But Bielinski appears to have turned this weakness into a strength.

The major criticisms had been the inability of the audience to see the images for more than a few beats and that there was no opportunity to ask questions before being confronted with the next image. The new format provided relief for audience anxieties and frustrations.

After the musical presentation, the slides were re-set and I began to interpret each image. Some were considered in depth. Others were skipped over or just mentioned, depending on the stated theme of

the particular presentation, my other *agendas-du-jour*, and audience curiosity (p. 4).

I like this approach. Here is an opportunity to guide audiences in a critical assessment of historical images and of the past those images putatively represent. It is one of the ironies of modern American life that we are trained from early youth to critically evaluate the written word and, through programs like American Bandstand, to evaluate music. But images? Americans are bombarded with images every day from billboards, magazine advertisements, musical videos, television news, and situation comedies that imply verisimilitude to current lifestyles. Outside of college-level art history courses, however, I see little attempt within our society to teach one another about aesthetic and moral interpretation and assessment of images. Why not use history and historical images to teach not just about the past, but about pictures and the biases that underlie their production and use?

Is "Albany—A Song of Community" just rock 'n' roll? No, I don't think so. Bielinski's lyrics and music are a form of communication, a way of conveying ideas and information—but mostly ideas—to diverse audiences. The combined slide and music program creates common ground for heterogeneous audiences and, most important, it explicitly hypothesizes that communities grow and change, products of the actions, motivations, and ideas of their constituent members, irrespective of wealth or political influence. By extension, the viewer has the power and responsibility to make a strong, positive impact on the history of his or her community.

Bielinski, almost fortuitously, chose to make this point by combining music with images. Not all archaeologists, of course, are musicians, and few of our efforts at verse go beyond doggerel. I don't see that as a problem. Standard slide presentations, undertaken with energy, good humor, and appropriate choice of material can engage, entertain, and inform: they can provide a forum for discussing and critiquing historical interpretations and current issues. Like Bielinski, my public slide talks stress diversity and the role of ordinary folk in community, regional, national, and

international developments. From this common ground I build interpretations of the past on frameworks of widely recognized knowledge and recent research findings. I don't sing, but I do perform. I don't particularly care for rock 'n' roll, but I like what Bielinski does with a popular medium.

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