



# 10

## Temperance and religiosity in a non-marginal, non-stigmatized brand community

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'[Bob] Dylan told me recently I was a poet. Although I was impressed by what he said, I couldn't help feeling it was like being told you're an archer. Well, they may think you're an archer, but you know you don't own a bow'.

(Tom Petty from 'Tom Petty – in His Own Words'  
[superseventies.com](http://superseventies.com))

'I have people approach me on the streets and say, "Thanks for writing the soundtrack to my life." I can't tell you how good that makes me feel as a songwriter'.

(Tom Petty as quoted on [gonegator.com](http://gonegator.com))

'I love that about TPATH's music. It just sinks into your psyche and never leaves'.

(LizzyB, posted on TPATH Message Board 28 June 2006)

It is well understood that brand communities have a strong narrative component. Storytelling, by both the marketer and the consumer, fosters the construction of a larger than life brand mythology and allows consumers to insert themselves into this mythology. Recent inquiries have suggested that these mythologies frequently contain ethereal elements. Brand communities are the site of many magico-religious behaviours. Aspects of religiosity have been seen in brand communities centred on Apple Macintosh (Belk and Tumbat, 2002; Kahney, 2004), Apple Newton (Muñiz and Schau, 2005), Saab (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001), *Star Trek* (Kozinets, 2001), *Star Wars* (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry, 2003), *Xena: Warrior Princess* (Schau and Muñiz, 2004), and the *X-Files* (Kozinets, 1997). Aspects of religiosity are also common in celebrity fan communities, such as those centred on Barry Manilow (O'Guinn, 1991) or Cliff Richards (Caldwell and Henry, 2006), and even in more generic entertainment communities, such as those centred on headbangers (Henry and Caldwell, 2006).

Now that the body of research on these closely related phenomena has grown, commonalities need to be considered. Looking across these brands, celebrities, and lifestyles listed above, some patterns emerge. The first thing that is evident is that most of the communities listed above are for small share, marginal brands or activities. For example, Saab's market share is less than 1 per cent in the US (Automotive News, 2000) and just over 1 per cent in the UK (Carpages, 2006), while Apple's share of the home computing market is just over 3 per cent (TWICE, 2005). There are, of course, exceptions to this observation. *Star Wars*, it could be argued, is a large market-share brand, as recent box office receipts would attest, and Kozinets (2001) presents data demonstrating that a large percentage of Americans watch *Star Trek*. However, both of those brands, like most of the others on the list, suffer from a certain amount of stigmatization, particularly for those who self-identify as fans. Brand communities, in general, may be said to be characterized by a sizeable degree of stigmatization. Kozinets (2001), Muñiz and Schau (2005), and O'Guinn (1991) all note the stigmas surrounding *Star Trek*, the Apple Newton, and Barry Manilow communities, respectively. Even Harley-Davidson still bears a stigma owing to the outlaw origins (Thompson, 1996) of its brand community (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995).

These traits have obvious benefits. Marginality and stigma can be an important source of tension. Tension can be a driving and unifying force within brand communities. A common struggle unites. It is well accepted that stigma-based tension has been used to market brand community brands, such as the self-deprecating ads for the original Volkswagen Beetle (Fox, 1984). This assertion, however, begs a few questions. Why is it that brand community so far has been strongest among low share brands? Is marginalization necessary for a strong brand community to form and sustain itself? Moreover, is marginalization (and the resulting stigma) necessary for a brand community to evince religiosity? To answer these questions, we turn our attention to a successful,

mainstream, and non-stigmatized rock act, Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers (TPATH), and the broad fan community centred on that brand.

## **The way of the rockstar**

The rockstar lifestyle has been immortalized in numerous songs. It is a wild *fantasy of extreme excess and privilege, excess and privilege to a degree to which even most royalty cannot match*. In today's vernacular, 'rockstar' has come to mean a high achieving person in any endeavour. Whether the rockstar lifestyle is fact or fiction (or most likely somewhere in between the partying and the liver transplant), the notion of rockstar is synonymous with success. Rockstars are adored and even worshipped by their fans. Some rockstars go far beyond their 15 minutes of fame, their one hit, and even their celebrity status to become rock legends.

Tom Petty is a Grammy Award winning musician with a career spanning over three decades. His setlist for any given performance is guaranteed to delight and disappoint. It will delight owing to the large number of excellent tracks from which it will draw. It will disappoint for the very same reason. Tom Petty cannot get through all of the songs his fans want to hear in 90 minutes. He cannot cover his greatest hits, tap underground favourites, and still plug a new CD within the confines of a single show. It is an enviable dilemma, but a dilemma nonetheless. To fill the void, TPATH has inspired, like many other rock legends living and dead, tribute bands. (Klosterman, 2002), which perform as TPATH, covering their music and imitating their mannerisms for eager fans who need a fix of live TPATH off the official scheduled tours. By virtue of these measures, Tom Petty has easily achieved rock legend status. In 2002, this legend status was confirmed when TPATH was officially inducted into the Rock-n-Roll Hall of Fame and reaffirmed in 2003 when Tom Petty was recognized with the Legend Award at the Radio Music Awards.

Following and consuming this legend, we see a strong brand community, a brand community with magico-religious aspects. However, compared to the previous examples of fan and brand communities in which religiosity has manifested, the TPATH fan community is quite different. For starters, it is more mainstream, with a much larger share. Unlike many bands emerging in the 1970s, TPATH successfully managed and leveraged the music video art form, earning an MTV Music Video Award and a place on various compilations of the most influential music videos. TPATH has sold millions of albums and videos on various formats (records, 8-track, cassette, CD, MP3, VHS, DVD). Their 'Greatest Hits' album was certified 10xplatinum in 2003, while their debut release continues to sell globally; new fans emerge across generations and around the world. Tom Petty hosts a popular global weekly radio show on XM Satellite Radio called Tom Petty Buried Treasure in which Tom features his favourite deep cuts from various rock and blues artists. In 2006, ABC contracted with TPATH to use their song 'Runnin' Down a Dream' to promote the NBA Finals; the song was featured at the start of all playoff and

finals games (www.ESPN.com). Moreover, TPATH is one of the few rock acts that has consistently garnered both mainstream popularity (enormous volume of record sales) and critical acclaim. Critics consistently give the band's output high marks (Erlewine, 2006) and other musicians (most recently Bob Dylan) consider Tom Petty to be a gifted musician, storyteller, and poet.

As a result of this widespread acclaim, TPATH fans are not stigmatized. There are no skits about obsessive TPATH fans needing to 'get a life' on Saturday Night Live, like there are about Trekkies (Kozinets, 2001). TPATH fans aren't stereotyped as geeks or druggies or losers. Compared to Barry Manilow, Tom Petty is a non-polarizing persona. No one is ashamed to be a fan of TPATH. In fact, it is very respectable to be a TPATH fan. Their fans are omnipresent. If you mention you are a Tom Petty fan, chances are good that someone within ear-shot will declare themselves to be one, too.

## **Our approach**

The data for this chapter are drawn from a long-term engagement with the Tom Petty fan community. The first author has been an avid fan of Tom Petty for over 20 years; it has been 22 years since her first concert. She admits that perhaps a day may go by without a TPATH or Tom Petty track accessed, but never a week. Pieces of her TPATH and Tom Petty collection are on her iPod, Rio; desktop, laptop, Garmin (GPS device), cellphone, CD players and satellite radio. She has enduring engagement with the band. This includes participation in multiple online forums devoted to Tom Petty. She follows several fansites and participates in several fan chat spaces. She has gone to fan parties and has hosted one herself for regional fans. She has spoken with hundreds of fans on and off 'the record'. She has collected fieldnotes of TPATH concerts (33 concerts over the course of 20 years) and has even published a short story of her experience at a TPATH concert in *Hawaii Review* (Schau, 2002).

She used a Tom Petty concert poster for an example in her advertising class in Spring 2006 and three students came up after class to disclose that they were hardcore fans. One, a young man from the UAE, shared that he has been to three TPATH concerts with his dad who is also a fan. He claimed he was anxiously awaiting the new single 'Saving Grace' and was trying to get Milwaukee tickets for 'Summerfest'. The other two students had inside information about the new single, had attended TPATH concerts, and were also planning to catch concert dates in summer 2006. In fact, it turns out that one of the students and the first author had attended the same concert a few years back. Both could recite the playlist. This kid is 23 years old! Perhaps even more amazing, she excused her class 30 minutes early to attend a TPATH concert on 4 October 2006 and discovered that in a class composed of 55 undergrads, four students also had tickets for the show and two more were planning to drive to the venue (90 minutes away) to buy tickets or at least 'party in the parking lot'. Incidents like this are not uncommon for the first author and explain a large part of her experiences in the community.

While her involvement may appear like a groupie, it has an important difference: she does not seek proximity. She has turned down invitations to 'party with the band' on numerous occasions and has never used a backstage pass. She has met the members of the band on one occasion. Tom Petty sang 'Make It Better Forget about Me' to her on stage. That night she talked with him and the band briefly afterward at the side of the stage, but declined to go backstage after two band members (Tom Petty and Stan Lynch) invited her themselves. She is a fan of the music and the art they produce not the men who produce it. The second author is a non-participant observer who enjoys TPATH's music, but does not self-identify as a Tom Petty fan, *per se*. He owns and enjoys several Tom Petty albums, but has never seen him in concert.<sup>1</sup> These differing viewpoints provide crucial interpretive perspective and tension in this endeavour (Denzin, 1998).

### **My life/your world: religiosity in the TPATH fan community**

It comes as no surprise to find that the TPATH fan community is strong, and easily meets the criteria for brand community (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001). Consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions, and moral obligation are all present. TP fans congregate at concert venues, at private residences, and in chat rooms and online forums. They meet to pay homage, to spin yarns, to share Tom Petty brand experiences and expertise, and to commune with other aficionados. In their devotion to Tom Petty, members display a 'passion for life' (Maffesoli, this volume). Some TPATH fans congregate more often than traditional religions mandate. During Tom Petty's active concert seasons, faithful fans make a vacation of following Petty on tour devouring brand experiences greedily in case it is the last opportunity (based on numerous rumours over the past decade). Indeed, the most credible threat of TPATH's 'last concert tour' comes from Tom himself in a *Rolling Stone* interview, where he claims that the 2006 tour will be his last 'for a very long time' (Strauss, 2006, p. 73). While at first blush this may seem somewhat similar to Deadheads or Parrot Heads (followers of the Grateful Dead and Jimmy Buffet, respectively), but TPATH fans are not known for their rowdy reverie or perpetual partying. They follow the band with temperance taking in one leg of the tour (West Coast, or Northern Sea Board) and planning it out as a vacation (two online forums are devoted to TPATH vacations). Multi-generational fan sets bring up their children or younger music fans in the Tom Petty fold. It is quite common to see children under 12 years at the concerts and to see multi-generational groups enjoying the show.

The TPATH brand community evinces religiosity (Muñiz and Schau, 2005). Traces of the magico-religious are widespread and abundant. Members tell a variety of stories that utilize religious discourse and demonstrate these motifs. The ways in which these tendencies manifest have their own idiom here,

<sup>1</sup> He knows he really needs to correct this oversight. And soon!

reflecting the particulars of TP and his fans. In the following, we will describe and analyse the culture of the TPATH brand community to further our understanding of brand communities and the source of their communal strength, with particular emphasis on religiosity.

### Temperance in the TPATH brand community

O'Guinn (1991) notes, there are appropriate and inappropriate behaviours for members of the Barry Manilow fan community. In large part, these codes are derived from the values Barry Manilow promotes and publicly embodies. Similarly, the religiosity evident in the TPATH brand community is strongly influenced by Tom Petty's values, which hold God, family, friends, environment, and America in highest regard. Members of the TPATH fan community have a code of acceptable behaviours, influenced by the charismatic focal point of the community. Tom Petty is not known for wild antics, but rather bold acts of conscience. He has valiantly fought record labels over price hikes, ticket sellers for excessive ticket prices, and radio as an industry for their over-reliance on commercially derived playlists. Possibly due to his public statements against elements in the music industry, he was a victim of an arsonist who set fire to his residence in Southern California in 1987, destroying his home and possessions and nearly taking his life and the lives of his wife and two daughters. Undeterred by this act of violence against him, Tom Petty remains an independent critic of the music industry's commercialism with strong environmental and political convictions (*Greenpeace endorser and outspoken anti-terrorist*). Occasionally, these issues bring him into the media's eye but he is not a paparazzi darling.

The TPATH fan community shares Tom's convictions and his faith in God, family, America, and rock-n-roll as evidenced in popular songs like "Free Fallin'": 'She's a good girl/Loves her mama/Loves Jesus and America too/She's a good girl/Crazy 'bout Elvis.' In concerts, Tom Petty actively references and thanks God. He frequently uses gestures that dramatically invoke God as the source of his inspiration and the source of blessings like his fans' praise (i.e., placing his hands palms together outstretched upward toward the sky and outward toward the audience with bowed head). His latest single, 'Saving Grace' is about the search for redemption in life's ambiguity. This informal sense of God is part of the value system Tom represents. It contributes to his reputation as a 'good', 'regular', and 'nice' guy with a conspicuous moral barometer. Tom is perceived within the brand community as a grounded family man who happens to be a rockstar. TPATH fans relate strongly to him and his values, protecting the brand from anything they view as indecent (i.e., sexually explicit material and endorsement of some illegal substances).

Online, fans monitor, even police, postings on the official message board for content that is appropriate or 'good' which does not require an age restriction. When postings reference overtly sexual desires, established members of the community will chastise the poster, 'Hey now, we don't want this thread

to be "18 and over" (posted by pettygrl on TPATH Message Board on 13 May 2005 in response to a poster who detailed a sexual fantasy about Tom Petty). Similarly, a guy posting about a romantic night featuring TPATH as the soundtrack elicited the comment 'Did ya get lucky' by gonegator (on the TPATH Message Board on 28 June 2006). A rebuke quickly emerged from a fellow member, Bluegill, 'No use walking on the sidewalk when you can get down and roll in the gutter with GoneGator ☺' posted moments after the gonegator question. Similarly, images posted on TPATH's official MySpace site are monitored by the community and occasionally censored. Skweezme, a MySpace member, posted a picture of herself from behind wearing only a red thong. Immediately, members (male and female) posted comments disapproving, 'Nice ass hun, real classy to post it online. Hope your mom sees it' (posted by Steve03 on 27 September 2006). Another response to the same image, 'So, I'm not gonna show my ass, but I will say they ROCKED Hollywood Bowl last night' (posted by luna14 also on 27 September 2006). These sort of family-friendly constraints on the message board content are rather unique for a board devoted to a rockstar.

Interestingly, references to marijuana and alcohol are not strictly censored, but references to other substances (cocaine, crack, heroin) are. In the community, 'weed' and drinking are clearly accepted but only in moderation. Grant, a 32-year-old engineer, describes his experiences with other TPATH fans, 'Once in awhile we get together, get stoned and stay up all night. We party but that's not all we do' (personal interview, 15 February 2002). Here, Grant makes the distinction between a life of excess and occasional celebrations, which he deems to be within 'normal parameters of a productive person' (personal interview, 15 February 2002). In the late nineties, following his separation from his wife of 20 years, Tom lived like a hermit in a run down house in Southern California where friends and family feared he was using heroin, but the community held strong that his admission of severe depression was true, 'This talk of heroin is blatant anti-Tom propaganda - probably some [industry] insider tired of Tom's criticisms' (posted on Jake's Tom Petty fansite 2000). Similar community statements affirmed this sentiment, 'He's in the middle of a divorce, who wouldn't be depressed? Heroin is unlikely ... it's just not him' (posted by wild1 on the official TPATH Message Board on 16 December 2000). The community was willing to accept depression, a respectable result of separation and divorce, over heroin for his reclusive behaviour. For the community, depression was a logical outcome of a broken family bond. Temperance, or moderation, rather than excess are condoned and celebrated within the brand community. This jibes with Tom's music, his environmentalism, and his family-oriented lifestyle.

### God by proxy: not proximity

Lest we be misunderstood, TPATH do have groupies, but these people tend not to be in the brand community. Groupie's goals differ markedly from TPATH community members. The community's interest in TPATH focuses on

the music, the stories and the performance of both. The first author attempted to describe this phenomenon in a short story based on fieldnotes she compiled of her first concert:

It isn't the truly magnificent that ignites, or reaffirms your faith in God, deities, or the spiritual supernatural; they can be too easily debunked. Take the cosmos (Big Bang), and human life (Evolution), both are grand and so easily dismissed by the scientific among us. It's the little things that steal your breath and strike a cord that resonates within you that make you believe.

For me, it's Tom Petty. He's not God, but he provides sustenance for my faith that God exists. Some may say he's not conventionally handsome or not equipped with a wide vocal range. While I can and do take issue with the first, I must surrender on the second. But that's not the point. Tom's songs resonate with me. Perhaps on face value it doesn't make sense. I'm not male. I'm not a Southerner. I was a teenager in the late 80s, not the 60s. I don't idolize his heroes (Elvis and Dylan). I've gone down another life-way (no sequins or leather). Yet somehow, I connect with Tom's music.

(Schau, 2002, p. 5)

...

I suppose it doesn't make rational sense. It's not about Tom Petty the musician, or Tom Petty the man. It's about the possibility that someone exists who is not constrained by the insecurities that plague me. It's about Tom Petty the performance and Tom Petty the experience. It's his mix of vulnerability and open disdain for those who wronged him in his songs that steal my breath and make me believe there is something beyond what I know. It's about the Heartbreakers as quintessential American artifact. It's about long hair, jeans and defiance and a girl/woman who dreams of a peace within herself that comes fleetingly if at all. Tom Petty is God by proxy, not by proximity. He is a man, musician and legend who is (re)invented the moment I hit <play> or see him take the stage. He is my proof of something beyond my own subjective reality of anxiety and the never-ending search for someone else's approval. Tom is as I consume him, one disc, one video, one concert at a time, and a montage of my life playing in 3 minute segments.

(Schau, 2002, p. 19)

TPATH and Tom Petty in particular are not ultimately the objects of lust/hero worship for most fans, but rather signify camaraderie embedded in songs that strongly relate to a broad set of experiences any person may encounter. Tom is at once a legend and a guy everyone can relate to. The Message Boards are filled with statements of resonance, of TPATH creating soundtracks of fans'



individual lives. Fans relate to the music and the stories linking them intimately with their own personal life narratives. For example, Mark, a 37-year-old bartender, explains,

Tom sings my life. He couldn't possibly know it, but I have lived my life playing and singing his songs. Each song has my memories of it and of what was going on in my life around that song. He sings about real people and real problems. Nothing gansta or sappy.

(personal interview 22 July 2001)

Sarah, a 29-year-old registered nurse, explains, 'Lots of artists sing about bling and pimpin' or stuff that is very foreign to me . . . Tom's songs are about my life and my feelings' (personal interview, 16 August 2005). TPATH's appeal is that the music Tom writes depicts common human experiences in a manner that feels authentic. The authenticity stems from this tension between greatness and normalcy. Alan, a 33-year-old realtor summarizes:

He's a real guy who made it. He could be you or me . . . if we were musically talented. He enjoys making music with Mike [Campbell – TPATH lead guitarist and Tom's lifelong best friend] and he has been super successful. We always say to do what you love . . . well he did and he never forgot who he is.

(personal interview 28 July 2001)

While informants within the brand community repeatedly refer to Tom as 'just a normal guy' the hint of the ideal is never far behind; he is great and tempered by normalcy.

## Touching greatness

The Tom Petty brand community also displays evidence of the Touching Greatness phenomenon (O'Guinn, 1991). Any kind of connection with Tom Petty that travels beyond the typical musician-fan (or groupie) relationship is enchanted and therefore cause for discussion. Any kind of personal connection to TP is valued highly and is a source of cultural capital within the confines of the community, except if it is perceived by members of the brand community to violate the norms and image of TPATH. Consider the following message posted to a TPATH community forum:

'My TP "claim to fame" (sort of . . .)' – Thread Title

Just thought I would share my claim to fame with other TP fans. I'm almost middle-aged, with an 18-year-old daughter – we live in Ohio, but I grew up in Florida. My family still lives in Gainesville (Tom's hometown, as you well know). During my last visit to G'ville, I happened to mention Tom's name at the dinner table with my aging

parents present – I probably made some reference to his being from G'ville, etc. . . . My father pipes up and says, 'oh, yeah, Earl's boy'. . . . I dropped my fork and said, 'huh??? You know Earl Petty, Dad?' . . . Turns out that Tom's dad and my dad sold insurance together at the same regional insurance company. My father had the pleasure of meeting Earl in the late 1970s and early 1980s . . . he tells the story of how Earl once mentioned to him early on how his son was just breaking into the music business and how he hoped he would make it, given the difficulty of the business. Earl has passed on, but my father speaks of him warmly.

(Posted on TPATH Message Board by  
MissinFlorida on 26 June 2006)

Given the gravity such claims carry, they are closely scrutinized by other member of the community. Consider the following exchange from a TPATH message forum:

'My Mom Dated Tom Petty!' – Thread Title

In the 70s my mom went out with Tom Petty a few times. He was in Toronto at the time. I think that's pretty cool! Tom rocks!

(Posted on TPATH Message Board  
by SexyKitten on 7 July 2005)

And would this have been before or after he married his high school sweetheart, Jane? And before or after he left our hometown of Gainesville, FL to go to California and start the Heartbreakers? Since he graduated high school in 1968, was forming the band in Gainesville in the early 70s . . . (I was at some of their free concerts here) . . . and left here in 75 or 76 for California . . . (and was already married) . . . that does not leave a lot of time for traveling or dating . . . lol. If it is true, great . . . but as 'fussman' said . . . we need details.

(Posted on TPATH Message Board  
by LL Campos on 7 July 2005)

Look, I'm gonna level with you, Sexy. Every once in a while, someone comes on the board . . . from out of the blue, mind you . . . and makes some outrageous claim about Tom. We even had someone who joined the board just to claim that she had had Tom's 'love child'. Turned out, she was soliciting some . . . 'business' . . . something about internet porn. So, please understand our . . . um . . . *skepticism* . . . quite honestly, we've heard everything. If you can prove your claim, fine. But, seriously, we just aren't apt to buy it, either way.

(Response posted on TPATH Message Board  
by little nel on 7 July 2005)

The members of the brand community are protective of Tom and claim about Tom. TPATH is a family guy and the accusations of infidelity, while believable for most rockstars, are preposterous to TPATH fans. There is significant tension between fans claiming to have had encounters with Tom (sexual, friendly, drug related) and other fans who publicly state their scepticism. Hardcore fans maintain Tom's image as a genuinely nice guy who happens to be a musical genius and a rock legend. He is thought to be faithful in his domestic relationships, devoted to his children, loyal to his friends, a patriot, a private person, and a guy everyone would like to be friends with.

That talk about Tom going solo and leaving Mike and Benmont [Tench – TPATH keyboardist/pianist and lifelong friend] is crazy. That guy never met him. That's clear. He wouldn't toss away decades of friendship over creative differences or to make a few more bucks.

(Kim, personal interview, 13 May 2006)

Here, Kim argues that the three solo albums Tom (with Mike) produced are not an indication that the band is breaking up or that friendships are falling apart. Spike echoes this incredulousness at some people's assertions about Tom:

I'm not sure why these lunatics come on and claim to know him, claim to have slept with him, claim to have been beaten up by him, claim to be doing smack with him . . . It just isn't true. He's a decent guy who is a rock icon. Why is that so hard to believe? He is a rockstar without the excess. The truth is *Boño can win a Nobel Prize*, and Tom is nice guy who rocks.

(Spike stated in chat November 2005)

Touching Greatness in this community means a proximal human relationship with the artist outside the confines of typical musician–fan interaction (music and performance appreciation) but within the boundaries of TPATH's ethos of 'good' behaviour.

## Transformation

Brand communities are host to many transformative behaviours. They allow members to access parts of themselves that they might not normally access, to become more. Saab drivers tell of 'eventful, sometimes harrowing, but always meaningful journey[s] in their Saabs' (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001, p. 423). Jeep drivers attending Jamborees emerge changed from the communal experiences (McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig, 2002) and similar experiences are reported by participants in Harley posse rides (Fournier, McAlexander, Schouten, and Sensiper, 2000). The TPATH community is defined, in one

sense, by a similar capacity. Consider the following exchange, posted under the un-ambiguous thread title 'Sign from God'.

I just had one of my greatest TP experiences I've ever had! Of course, I listen to Saving Grace every day now since its release, but I hadn't heard it yet on the radio. So tonight I was driving with a girl (our first date) and I happened to turn the radio to 107.1 (a Canadian Rock Station) and there it was – the now classic riff and percussion of Saving Grace. Now she thought it was weird when I went nuts hearing it on the radio for the first time. But I looked at her and said 'I just want you to remember that the first time you heard this song and the first time I heard it on the radio we were together.' And I think she liked that. I'm only 17, but I think hearing this song for the first time on the airwaves at that moment could have been some kind of like omen. I don't know. That is when I felt the spark of connection to her.

(Posted on TPATH Message Board  
by wake^time on 28 June 2006)

Here wake^time is detailing an omen. Hearing the song on the radio together with this girl sparks a connection or a foreshadowing of a serious relationship. This influences others to post similar stories in response, 'I love that story. I have almost the same story except it was 1981 and the song was "The Waiting". The cool part is we are still together. 25 years goes by in a flash. Treasure those moments' (posted by lacytom on TPATH Message Board in response to wake^time's above posting on 29 June 2006). The implication here is that Tom's songs bond people and transform relationships from trivial to meaningful. Here a 17-year-old boy (wake^time) and a 40 something year old woman (lacytom) talk about love and the resonance and impact of Tom Petty's music in their respective lives.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, Danielle, a 38-year-old school teacher, describes Tom's music as glue, 'When I'm mad at my husband I play *Hard Promises* and it puts it all in perspective. I guess it's the glue in our marriage' (personal interview, 26 July 2004). Danielle affords the album *Hard Promises* the power to hold her marriage together, or transform situations from intolerable to tolerable.

### Tale of the miraculous

Muñiz and Schau (2005) described the tales of the miraculous visible in the Apple Newton brand community. There, miraculous tales centre on Newtons that had, as if magically, survived conditions that should have destroyed it or had their batteries regain efficacy. Tales of the miraculous are also evident in the TPATH brand community. Here, they centre on recovery, either emotional

<sup>2</sup> This intergenerational connection is rather unique for a shared interest in a rock band.

of physical, experienced by members via Tom Petty songs, concerts, and fellowship. Consider the following posted under the heading of 'Divorce Survival':

I was going through a rough time. The roughest I've ever been through. I was breaking up with my wife after 16 years. I was alone. My friends didn't want to 'choose sides' so they dropped away. It was 1997 and life looked hopeless. I retreated from a lot of the world. I concentrated on my work and on music. I listened to Tom Petty constantly. It helped. I read an article about him separating from his wife, Jane, after 22 years. It struck a chord. In photos and video he looked haggard and drawn. He was alternately skinny and bloated. He had this scraggly grey beard and a paunch. I read he was having kidney issues. I took a hard look at myself. Clearly we were going through the same thing. I was a mess. I don't mean to say I took pleasure in his pain or that he has the power to heal me by some divine gift, but he saved my life. Knowing that a legend like Tom is human – not immune to the trials of ordinary men gave me hope. His music, esp. the songs written in the midst of his pain, *Echo* (1999), were inspirational to me. I think I might have just killed myself had I not had that strength from him. And as time went on that same strength from watching Tom move on and marry again gave me strength to try marriage again. I remarried last year [2002] and I know I wouldn't have had strength and inspiration to live life again after the divorce.

(interview excerpt from Gavin 2003)

Gavin claims Tom's music and life saved his own, allowing Gavin to move on and remarry after a painful divorce.

Here is another miraculous story of a fan's healed knees:

The boards were buzzing about Tom having some knee problem. I don't know if he did or didn't. I'm not him or his doctor. But, I knew my doc was telling me I have to change my runs. That surgery might be necessary. I'm 34 years old. I live to run. It's what I do every day for 20 years. I felt frail. I felt lost. I read the board postings with interest. I had my tickets for the concert. I went and Tom didn't show any signs of knee problems. He was hopping around the stage like he was 20 years. It was a great concert. The next day I got up and headed for my medicine cabinet but the pain was not there. It just wasn't. I ran my old run after 6 weeks of gym work (eeewww) and it was hard. I was out of shape. But, my knee was fine. It was fine. How could a concert do that? I dunno, but that's my story.

(email excerpt from Chris 14 August 2005)

Somehow, Chris' knee was healed seemingly by proximity to Tom at a TPATH concert. The details are sketchy and Chris is a little disbelieving even as he testifies to it.

Lest you believe Tom Petty's 'power' only applies to human emotions and body parts:

So my amp has been on its last leg for some time. I nurse it along because well I can't afford the one I want yet. Anyhow, so whenever it starts acting up, giving out, I play 'Refugee' or 'Honey Bee' and the amp comes back to life. It's good for maybe an hour afterward.

(Terry, 26-year-old musician, personal interview,  
8 November 2004)

Here, playing these TPATH songs cures the amp temporarily. These stories are similar to those found in the Apple Newton community where failing PDA batteries miraculously repair following a complex pattern of turning the device off and on (Muñiz and Schau, 2005).

## Rituals and traditions

Brand communities are host to a variety of rituals and traditions that serve to reify the community and its culture. Methods and modes include celebrating the history of brand, sharing brand stories and myths, ritualistic communication and utterances, special lexicon, and communal appropriation of advertising, market icons, and commercial text. Obvious examples are the ways in which Saab wave, beep their horn, or flash their lights to other drivers of the same brand (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001). VW Beetle, Jeep, and Miata drivers, as well as riders of Harley-Davidson motorcycles, engage in similar activities.

The TPATH brand community is host to a variety of rituals and traditions, some unique to followers of Tom Petty, others reflecting the more general domain of rock performers. Rock concerts are, after all, the site of many general ritualized behaviour: from lighter/cellphone waving to concert t-shirt wearing, to ticket stub saving, to singing along. Individual TPATH rituals also exist. They include pre-concert parties that extend from private residences and public bars and restaurants to the parking lot – tailgate style. One ritual is that during the concert the entire audience sings 'Breakdown' with only pantomime and occasional vocals from Tom Petty. Other songs are as popular, but this song seems to have been embraced by the community as a sing-a-long that routinely embeds a cover of 'Hit the Road Jack'. Whereas acts like Tom Jones may inspire middle-aged women to shed and toss underwear at the stage, TPATH inspires camaraderie and environmental activism. Similarly, there is no mosh pit like you'd see at an old school metal (Judas Priest) or punk show (Beastie Boys) or new millennium Buckcherry concert. Fans sing along with Tom in a friendly communal atmosphere without the high drama of crowd aggression or legions of groupies trading sexual favours for the conquest.

TPATH fans tend to don casual cotton clothing in black or patriotic colours to concert, frequently including denim materials (jeans, skirts, jackets). These denim clothes most often paired with cotton shirts (tank tops and t-shirts) are likely to be emblazoned with TPATH logo (a heart with a guitar through it) as

in official concert tour wear or homemade decorations. In concerts, fans display lots of hearts painted on faces, tattooed on bodies (permanent, henna, and temporary), displayed on clothes, written on signs or gifts (i.e., stuffed animals).

This particular conglomeration of behaviours is unique to TPATH: the communal singing, the casual cotton clothing, and the hearts. This is not to say that there is never a fight or that groupies don't hound the band, only that the brand community condones neither.

### Tests of true fans

Muñiz and Schau (2005) reported nascent consumer rituals in the Newton brand community that created important knowledge, while demonstrating members' true devotion to the brand. Such tests are not uncommon in brand communities and the TPATH fan community is no different. There is cultural capital to be gained from choosing less commercially successful TPATH songs as your favourite songs. As mistereeman posts, 'What do you expect? His favourite song is 'Don't Do Me Like That'. No deep cuts. He just doesn't get it' (posted on TPATH official Message Board on 11 August 2004). And conversely, 'I knew he was cool when he told me his favourite TPATH song is "Spike". A deep cut guy! I fell hard and fast' (posted on the official TPATH Message Board on 16 July 2005).

Similarly, there is cache in knowing the band history, including the following paraphrased '10 Things Every TPATH fan knows' (posted on Jake's personal website):

- 1 TPATH are from Gainseville, Florida.
- 2 Tom and collaborator (lead guitarist), Mike Campbell, are lifelong best friends.
- 3 Elvis and Dylan inspired Tom.
- 4 TP dropped out of high school at 17 to focus on Mudcrutch (precursor band to TPATH).
- 5 Tom married his high school sweetheart, Jane.
- 6 TPATH was considered a New Wave band in the early 1980s.
- 7 Tom fought price increases on recording and tickets.
- 8 TP is a member of the Travelling Wilbury's.
- 9 Tom's house in SoCal was burned to the ground by arsonists. He and his family survived but lost almost everything they had.
- 10 *The Last DJ* is critical of the recording and radio industry and was boycotted by radio stations that refused to give it air time.

While the band history is much richer, you get the idea – you need to know the band to engage in fan chatter. As Lillian, a 31-year-old physical therapist, comments, 'its fine to have an opinion [on TPATH's material] but an educated one means a whole lot more' (personal interview, 15 August 2006). Tim, a 37-year-old mechanic, echoes 'its clear who is in [the community] and who is not. Just listen to them talk' (personal interview, 24 July 2004). People who

don't know the history are not deemed to be authentic (Arnould and Price, 2001) community members.

## Journeys/Treks/Pilgrimages

Fans one-up each other in escalating displays of commitment to purchasing new releases, waiting in line for performance tickets, and travelling to attend concerts. Fans who access the music before it is commonly available are seen as more committed to the band and better community members. Jenny, a 31-year-old web designer, boasts,

I got the 'Saving Grace' and 'Big Weekend' tracks off the web before anyone I knew. Everyone wanted to hear them and share them. I was the girl to know last Spring and now people on the forum think I'm some sort of expert.

(personal interview, 12 September 2006)

Jenny's standing in the fan community went up due to her access to coveted new tracks.

Similarly, tales of getting tickets to the shows are informally ranked based on difficulty, with fans encountering more obstacles to the ticket sales being more serious fans. Fans who travel for the concerts achieve more social capital in the community than those who only attend local dates. For example, a 41-year-old New Jersey fan, Jon, 'won' a spirited TPATH commitment test when he revealed that he and his wife flew to San Francisco to catch the TPATH show at the Fillmore in 1999. Not only was he lauded for travelling so far to catch a show, but he also got coveted tickets to the concert series that was made into a DVD release. Todd, also a New Jersey fan, commented on Jon's tickets and trek, 'Damn, you lucky bastard. I wish I got those tickets. I'd have got some serious play outta my girl for weeks afterward.' Here scoring the tickets and taking the trip amounts to not only winning the commitment test for Jon, but also Todd laments that the tickets would've scored him some grateful reciprocity affection from his girlfriend. Stories of catching multiple live shows in a tour, following the band, and making pilgrimages to first concert sites or first concerts with loved ones sites are common. Consider Donovan's story,

I saw my first TPATH concert with a then girlfriend. We had long since broken up, but stayed friends. I decided to get tickets to the show for us . . . a 20 year anniversary of our first TPATH concert. It was a great time. Now, we're living together and talking about getting married. Pretty cool, eh?

(personal interview, 10 July 2004)

Donovan tells the story of reconnecting with his girlfriend to many TPATH fans who emphatically convey their respect for that story. Fans at concerts and



events discuss the above tests of fan commitment as early communal identifiers and as status markers among established fans.

## Concluding thoughts

Cultural critics both classic and contemporary have concerned themselves with the death of enchanting experiences. Weber (1978/1922) felt that market capitalism fostered the 'disenchantment of the world' (p. 177) and destroyed the sense of connection between individuals and the world provided by myth, magic, and religion. Modernity, via the increased cultural emphasis on reason, disenchanted the world, disconnected the individual, and led to alienation (Ellul, 1964; Freud, 1989/1930). More recently, Ritzer (1999) lamented the controlling nature of contemporary consumer culture and claimed that consumers are becoming disenchanted with consumption. He claimed that contemporary consumer culture succeeds only to the degree to which it lulls consumers into dreamlike and uncritical states that engage them with consumption.

Among members of the TPATH brand community, we see consumers thoroughly engaged with consumption. However, contrary to what has been suggested by Ritzer and others, these consumers are far from uncritical. Fans of TPATH are engaged, critical and actively involved in the creation and perpetuation of enchanting experiences centred on a contemporary marketplace entity. Once again (Brown et al., 2003; Kozinets, 2001; Muñiz and Schau, 2005; O'Guinn, 1991) we are seeing a branded marketplace entity offering consumers the opportunity for re-enchantment. Fans of Tom Petty are finding magic and fellowship in his creations. Tom Petty has achieved in life the kind of power and immortality that most artists can only achieve after death (Klosterman, 2005). The crucial difference this time is that the focal brand is successful, non-abandoned, mainstream, and non-stigmatized. That we are seeing manifestations of the magico-religious among the followers of such a successful brand suggests that enchanting experiences in the marketplace need not be limited to the few followers of fringe brands or entertainers.

Religions are powerful and pervasive social institutions that provide a familiar discourse of greatness and morality. Members of the TPATH brand community are simply applying pervasive and accessible leitmotifs and cultural scripts, primarily those of the magical, mythic, and religious to a marketplace phenomenon – most with understated cool and perhaps a little irony. Their themes, motifs, and idioms are very portable. Part of the reason for this portability is their applicability to a wide range of human phenomena. They help us make sense of the world. In this case, they are helping us make sense of a branded entertainer.

Religion, magic, and the supernatural can survive in a consumer culture. These forces have proved themselves to be quite adaptable. As religions have become savvier marketplace players, it should not be entirely surprising that other marketplace entities should also reflect this intermingling and show traces of religiosity. Brands will increasingly play host to many of these

processes. Brands, even those that are mainstream, are increasingly the centre of the social world. They are assuming, for better or for worse, many of the functions once performed by other, older social institutions: moral arbiter, communal spirit, social acceptance, and social order.

While the strength of brand communities may indeed be enhanced by common threats and marginalization, we see in the TPATH fans a cohesive brand community for a mainstream brand without stigma attached and religiosity steeped in temperance. In essence, marginality is not a prerequisite for a successful enduring brand community to exist, nor is religiosity a response to stigmatization.

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