MOTION:

“POP ARTISTS SHOULD BE JUDGED ON THEIR WORK, NOT THEIR LIFESTYLE”
Michael Jackson’s death in 2009 prompted much discussion over how the pop-star should be remembered – as ‘Wacko Jacko’, the tabloid figure famed for his erratic behaviour, extreme plastic surgery and accusations of child abuse, or as an extraordinary talent who produced an exceptional body of work over his musical career? [Ref: The Times]. The question is whether pop artists should be judged on their work, or on their behaviour and lifestyle. Whilst many artists are celebrated for the work they produce, the coverage given to the likes of Pete Doherty and Amy Winehouse suggests that their work is but the support act to their many personal dramas. [Ref: Independent] Is this focus on lifestyle damaging? Is it a necessary side-effect of many artists’ alleged status as role models for the young and impressionable? Are pop stars today victims of a celebrity culture, or do they have themselves to blame for becoming a part of it? Does focus on an artist’s lifestyle damage their work?
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The death of Michael Jackson has also prompted debate over whether his work was damaged by ‘the tawdy freak show that his life had become’ [Ref: Independent]. Cult singer-songwriter Patti Smith [Ref: Wikipedia] is damning of the media’s lack of restraint with regard to divulging artists’ lifestyles, claiming that it ‘creates an addiction’ that diverts people from appreciating artists’ work, [Ref: The Times] with Shingai Shoniwa (of The Noisettes) adding that the media ‘don’t seem to want artists to do the job of entertaining and emancipating people’ but are more interested in making them suffer: ‘the more problems you have, the more records you’re going to sell.’ With many pop stars, perhaps most notably Britney Spears, under 24-hour scrutiny by paparazzi and press in order to fill the bloated pages of internet gossip and celebrity magazines, increasingly it seems as if pop stars can no longer get away with anything or live ordinary lives. However, there are historical precedent to this discussion: the ‘cult of personality’ created by artists such as Oscar Wilde and Lord Byron, who were in many ways the ‘pop stars’ of their time, can be seen to be as influential and lasting as their work [Ref: The Times] The private lives of some pop stars have inspired new, original art works, ranging from music biopics to paintings, which display the benefits that this knowledge can give, when placed in the right hands. [Ref: The Times] Many also suggest that since artists utilise and manipulate their own public images to create publicity, they therefore make themselves complicit players in the game of celebrity culture. Is it fair that they should be able to market their private lives when it suits them and then claim invasions of privacy when it doesn’t?

Role models?

One reason for the scrutiny of artists’ lifestyles is that they are widely regarded as role models for young people. In 2005, Michael Howard, then leader of the Conservative Party, condemned Peter Doherty as a bad role model for children due to the singer’s highly publicised drug habits, [Ref: Telegraph] but also hit out at the media for giving Doherty “celebrity coverage” and “the impression that drug-taking is cool.” Doherty’s perceived influence was enough that police banned his band Babyshambles from headlining the Moonfest festival in 2008, fearing that his performance would cause violence. [Ref: Sky News] If the result of young people idolising pop stars is that they imitate their behaviour, then it could be argued that the quality of their music becomes irrelevant. Journalist Sonia Poulton has stated that, despite her love of rap, she now aware that rap music that “celebrates violence” also makes the “Thug Life” lifestyle of rappers such as the now deceased Tupac Shakur dangerously appealing to its “many young impressionable followers”. However, is the pop star ‘role model’ in itself a media creation? It is unclear whether or not musicians really have any impact on the behaviour of their fans, or whether this is a false perception that unfairly assumes the naivety of young music fans. [Ref: BBC News] Even if artists are role models, is this enough to justify the exploitation of their conduct and private lives by the media? Is it right that, as Michael Jackson stated in an interview, ‘becoming successful means that you become a prisoner’? [Ref: The First Post]
Can pop artists be judged solely on their work?

For those who think that artists should be judged on the merits of their work alone, there is an assumption that it is possible to divorce a celebrity’s work from his or her personal life. But is this relationship quite so clear cut? Moses Albubala, a member of the Kenyan choir that sang at US President Obama’s inauguration, states that one of music’s greatest attributes is that though it, ‘you are able to learn about someone’s lifestyle’. [Ref: The Times] As all art is born from the mind of the artist, it is more than likely that it will be influenced by their experiences and reflect their lifestyle in some fashion. To some artists themselves, their lifestyle is as, if not more, important than their actual work – it is an artist’s task to be, in the words of Marc Almond, ‘flawed and extinguishable, but never mediocre’. [Ref: Independent] For many, the highs and lows of an artist’s lifestyle provoke their interest and also allow them to better relate to the artist, and thus have a greater understanding and appreciation of their work, as evidenced by the strong demand for celebrity biographies. It is also possible that a greater understanding of artists’ private lives acts to humanise these figures, and to prevent the kind of ignorant idolization of musicians that could lead to the imitation of their mistakes. However, the focus on the private lives of artists has been criticized for creating a shallow cult of celebrity which idolizes ‘talentless non-entities who are famous merely for being famous’. [Ref: BBC News] The fear is that if the attention is on the lifestyle, the work can all too easily slip from view.
**ESSENTIAL READING**

**FOR**
- Jacko was off the wall, but I’ll rock with him
  Sophia Heawood *Independent* 28 June 2009
- Wait, Beth Ditto sings, too?
  Kate Harding *Salon* 19 June 2009
- The role of the artist
  Miranda Sawyer *Observer* 11 November 2007
- Leave Lindsay Lohan alone
  Nick Johnstone *Guardian* 24 November 2006
- Our gossip-hungry culture is as immature as those it demonizes
  Deborah Orr *Independent* 24 September 2005

**AGAINST**
- Hip hop and Violence: ‘I have to ask myself – did I help promote violence?’
  Sonia Poulton *Independent* 10 July 2009
- Voices of change: emblem of Obama’s heritage
  Ben Machell *The Times* 27 June 2009
- Is Biggie Smalls a worthy role model? Hell, no
  Lindsay Johns *The Times* 12 February 2009
- The brand of Oscar Wilde
  Giles Brandreth *The Times* 6 April 2008
- Let Amy Winehouse do drugs
  Mark Ravenhill *Guardian* 3 September 2007

**IN DEPTH**
- For all Michael Jackson’s flaws he was the greatest entertainer of his age
  Richard Williams *Guardian* 26 June 2009
- Slaves to fame
  Patrick West *Culture Wars* 23 October 2008
- Patti Smith, Juliette Lewis and Shingai Shoniwa on rock stardom
  Sophie Heawood *The Times* 19 October 2007
- Control and I’m Not There avoid the biopic pitfalls
  Jessica Winter *Slate* 10 October 2007

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**BACKGROUNDERS**

- Bookworm David Gray learns rock history through biographies
  *Spinner* 3 August 2009

- Hardcore fans say Britney Spears saved them
  Jessica Bannet *Newsweek* 22 July 2009

- Alexis Petridis reviews the Gossip’s new album, *Music for Men*
  Alexis Petridis *Guardian* 12 June 2009

- Should Britney Spears be under her father’s control?
  Christopher Goodwin *The Times* 7 June 2009

- Have celebrities finally snapped?
  *Guardian* 4 May 2009

- Prophet and loss – How the web’s hottest gossip empire lost its mojo
  Tim Walker and Alexis Ashman *Independent* 8 January 2009

- Hey Gawker, Leave the Travoltas alone
  *New York Magazine* 5 January 2009

- Should Pop Stars be role models?
  *Pop Music Scene* 14 July 2008

- Media intrusion: sharing the blame
  Nicholas Jones *Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom* 05 February 2008

- Is it OK to like R Kelly?
  Sam Richards *Guardian* 20 March 2007

- Why I love celebrity culture
  *Guardian* 21 February 2007

- Miss Britney, CEO
  Michael Wuebben *CBS News* 11 January 2007

**NOTES**

- *Clapton: The Autobiography* by Jeff Clutterbuck *Daily Vault*

- *Celebrity culture and the right to privacy* by *Science Museum*
Judge sentences Chris Brown to five years probation  
*Guardian* 25 August 2009

Kanye West: “Fame is like cigarettes with no surgeon general warning”  
*New York Times* 31 July 2009

Lady Gaga: “I make soulless electro-pop”  
*Guardian* 2 July 2009

Paul Theroux remembers shy Jacko  
*First Post* 29 June 2009

The music will be his legacy  
*Independent* 27 June 2009

Chris Brown pleads guilty to Rihanna assault  
*Guardian* 23 June 2009

Amy Winehouse wins court ban on paparazzi at her home  
*Guardian* 1 May 2009

Chris Brown and Rihanna – Singer condemns domestic violence  
*Telegraph* 10 February 2009

Doherty ‘one of rocks greatest’  
*BBC News* 8 February 2009

“I’ve felt famous my whole life”  
*Guardian* 21 January 2009

Amy Winehouse ‘shot down’ in name of art Cristina Ruiz  
*The Times* 9 November 2008

Festival Pulled over Doherty Ban  
*Sky News* 20 August 2008

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How rap music has gone from condemning drug music to glorifying it  
*Daily Mail* 2 April 2008

Celebrity culture ‘harms pupils’  
*BBC News* 14 March 2008

X Fails to hit the spot  
*Scotsman* 23 November 2007

Teens see parents as role models  
*BBC News* 7 January 2007

Doherty sets bad example, say Howard  
*Telegraph* 25 February 2005

Fears over lure of rap’s violence and obscenity  
*Telegraph* 21 August 2000

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