1998

Comments on: "I Know it's only Rock 'n' Roll but they like it!" by Stefan Bielinski

Carol McDavid

Comments on: "I Know it's only Rock 'n' Roll but they like it!" by Stefan Bielinski

Carol McDavid

Before commenting on this article, I should point out that I have not seen, first-hand, the performances that Bielinski describes in his discussion of using music to present history to community audiences. By his account, however, these performances appear to be a fine example of the "New Social History" enacted in a public interpretive context.

Bielinski exhibits a keen sensitivity to the choice of music in public history presentations when, for example, he rejects romanticized music that was originally intended for "elite ears and egos." His critical eye is apparent in the way he used his alternative musical selection as an educational tool to sensitize his associates to the implications involved in making such choices. His article also provides a welcome degree of reflexivity, in that it illustrates the relevance of his own musical background to the development of this critical perspective. He does not discuss "reflexivity" in abstract terms. He simply is reflexive, in that his taken-for-granteds are applied to his work in a productive and meaningful way. Obviously Bielinski is knowledgeable and sensitive to the contemporary musical zeitgeist, and it is this sensitivity which is part of making his work successful.

He also gives appropriate attention to diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity, and class. Without tokenizing, he appears to have found ways to incorporate differences and similarities among regular, everyday people in the past into his presentation. He seems to have done this in ways that are meaningful to the descendants of those people, and in ways that represent the complexity of human interaction, both past and present.

While I enjoyed reading the piece, and was motivated to want to see (and learn from) the actual production, I also found myself hungering for more information. I will comment briefly on two minor points, and will then discuss the implications of this work for those of us who are not able to see his production first-hand.

First, Bielinski alludes to the "other 98%," and to the ways in which "we are told" that traditional history is irrelevant to many people. While this idea is, indeed, almost commonplace amongst public interpreters of history, I would have liked more on how his work connects (or doesn't) to larger trends within his discipline. I suspect perhaps a few references to other work might do the trick and would serve to position his theoretical framework (which is, largely, unstated) more clearly. While I am not suggesting that he provide a tiresome genealogy of social history, a bit more context might have been welcome.

Second, while Bielinski mentions that he has relied upon his "great experience as a MTV watcher," he does not go into detail about what that means. He takes it for granted that the features of MTV-type media (disjointedness, quick flashes of image, high energy, etc.) and the well-documented impacts of these features on viewers (loss of attention span, occasional disorientation, etc.) are well-known and understood by his readers. He is obviously sensitive to both the upside (such as the energy created by the use of music) and the downside of these sorts of presentations. For example, he found ways to adjust his presentation as audiences became frustrated from seeing images for too-brief periods. Bielinski has very cannily appropriated several components of what could be termed an "MTV-style" in his musical history presentations, and he has done so with a critical eye and for good reasons. He could elaborate on these reasons more fully. Mostly, though, he glosses his approach as an attempt to be more user-friendly, and what he's done is far more substantive than that.

The importance of making these issues mentioned above clear is highlighted at the end of the article, when Bielinski mentions the skepticism he encountered in a professional conference about what an audience would "get out of" his short (but apparently powerful) presentation. In a forum such as this one, or in the conference he described, Bielin-

ski's attention to the above sorts of issues could allay much of the type of criticism he mentioned.

Despite these reservations, what Bielinski has given us is, as it stands, useful and appropriate. What we can learn from Bielinski's work is something about how to enact the concepts many of us discuss more abstractly and (frequently) somewhat sanctimoniously. His work gives us some concrete examples about how to be more interactive (he responds to his audience, and finds several ways to change his presentation according to audience and performance setting). He shows us how to be meaningfully reflexive (Bielinski is no navel-gazer, and skillfully integrates his personal background with his professional aims). He also offers strategies to be more gracefully multivocal. On top of all this, he reports on his work both convincingly and entertainingly. I did not need to see the original presentation in order to use his work to think about these issues, and to think of ways to apply Bielinski's ideas to my own projects (though,unfortunately, I can't leave my reading of his paper humming the tune!).

Belinski's paper is an example of something we need to do more of—to present our "public" work to each other, and to expose it to collegial commentary, just as we do our "serious research." We need to do this in journals such as this one, as well as in professional meetings. See, for example, Praetzellis 1998, "Archaeologists as Storytellers," published as *Historical Archaeology* 32(1), a volume that derived from a "storytelling" session held at have—that our work with them and for them isn't, after all, all that important. That is some

have—that our work with them and for them isn't, after all, all that important. That is something we should take very seriously indeed. meetings of the Society for Historical Archaeology. While not aimed at public audiences per se, the "performances" in those sessions offered much inspiration for archaeologists who believe that it is important to engage people (even each other) in our enthusiasm about the past. There is sympathy between those performances and the work presented by Stefan Bielinski, and both deserve to be taken seriously (even when the work itself has humorous, entertaining, and even frivolous moments). If we continue to marginalize our so-called "public" work outside the mainstream of legitimate academic discourse, we will only perpetuate the (frequently correct) impression that too many "publics" already

Carol McDavid is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Cambridge. She has published in the areas of public archaeology, socio-politics and archaeology, new communications technologies, African-American archaeology, and philosophy in archaeology. She lives in Houston, Texas, and is at present involved in a long-term Internet project with the Levi Jordan Plantation Historical Society.

Carol McDavid
University of Cambridge
1406 Sul Ross
Houston, TX 77006
(713) 523-2649
cam35@cam.ac.uk
http://www.webarchaeology.com