

# SHIP ‘FAM’, FESTIVAL ‘VIRGINS’, & A CRUISE TO NOWHERE:

## LIMINALITY AND CRUISE SHIP MUSIC FESTIVALS

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It may be a startling thought to a festivalgoer on a cruise ship, as they sit watching Cannibal Corpse play from the luxury of the hot tub at the side of the stage, but the luxurious space in which they are apparently sipping beer, slowly pruning their fingers, and potentially suffering hearing loss, doesn’t actually exist.

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At least in the way the space of many land-based festivals do. Cruise ships are an example of what Augé (1992) calls 'non-space'. Humans create and construct places from spaces by naming them (Relph, 1976). Cruise ships, however, exist in the dark and nameless spaces oceans where it is hard for humans to survive. To do so, we have to build ships and even then, sometimes, people do not survive at sea. And yet, being among the largest humanly constructed moving objects, cruise ships are also mobile geographies unto themselves, named by the ship's geography, such as lido deck, forward, in the Blue Sapphire lounge, or cabin 942. Casey (2009, pp. 3–6) notes the distinction between maritime space and place in his account of Admiral Cloudsley Shovel becoming lost in fog for eleven days in 1707. Although Shovel's men knew where they were on the ship (ship place), their geographic place had devolved into space with no idea of where they were.

Over the past decade and a half, music promoters, seeking to monetise live performance as much as they can, have begun to organise music festivals within the hyperreal and liminal non-spaces of cruise ships. Cruise ships are, in many ways, an ideal place to place such festivals. Performance spaces already exist with cutting-edge technology. Accommodation is plentiful and luxurious. Food and drink is available. Security is in place. They are regarded as luxurious and exotic vacation products. Consequently, such aquatic festivals have become successful, significant, and profitable cultural tourism experiences. They share many parallels with their land-based counterparts. They celebrate a genre of music. They offer many of the same enticements that land-based festivals do such as concerts, autograph signings with star performers, and celebratory events. However, there is a fundamental difference. Land-based festivals exist in a geographic place and often celebrate that place. Cruise music festivals occur within the mobile

experiential placelessness of a cruise ship. There is nothing but the ship with which to interact. There is no 'local'. This enhances the liminality and experience of the festival as there is no distracting 'outside' for festivalgoers to engage with. The physical limits of the festival are delineated by the confines of the ship. Within these boundaries, exists a visceral, hedonistic, neotribal, and liminal experience—a celebration of music without the distractions of a place.

This paper is the result of research undertaken in 2016. The views of 129 cruise festivalgoers were sourced via an open-ended survey. Follow-up interviews with key informants were conducted and analysed using a grounded theory approach. Resulting themes were considered and analysed. The datasets were further enhanced by my own experiences as an orchestral pianist on board cruise ships between 2004 and 2008.



## INTRODUCING CRUISE SHIP FESTIVALS



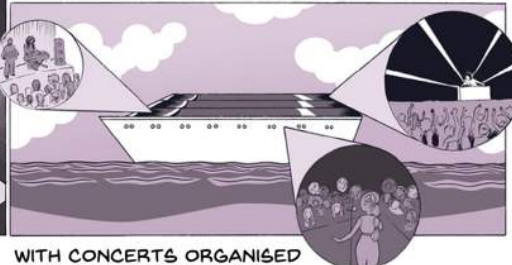
CRUISE SHIP MUSIC FESTIVALS ARE CELEBRATIONS OF MUSICAL GENRES THAT OCCUR ON A CRUISE SHIP.



FESTIVALS MAY REVOLVE AROUND ROCK, SINGER/SONGWRITERS, BLUEGRASS, THE MUSIC OF ELVIS, OR ANY MUSICAL CONCEPT.



A LINE-UP OF FEATURED ARTISTS IS GRADUALLY ANNOUNCED OVER THE YEAR LEADING UP TO THE FESTIVAL.



WITH CONCERTS ORGANISED FROM MID-MORNING UNTIL SUNRISE THE FOLLOWING DAY, AND MULTIPLE VENUES AROUND THE SHIP, THERE IS NO SHORTAGE OF SHOWS TO ATTEND, AND MANY TRY TO ATTEND THEM ALL.



FESTIVALGOERS AND STAR PERFORMERS OFTEN REFER TO EACH OTHER AS 'SHIP FAM'.



IF THE SHIP IS ANCHORED OFF ONE OF THE CRUISE LINE'S THEMED, RENAMED, AND LEASED ISLANDS, FESTIVALGOERS CAN CHOOSE TO GO ASHORE AND WATCH THE ACTS PERFORM WHILE WADING IN THE WATER.



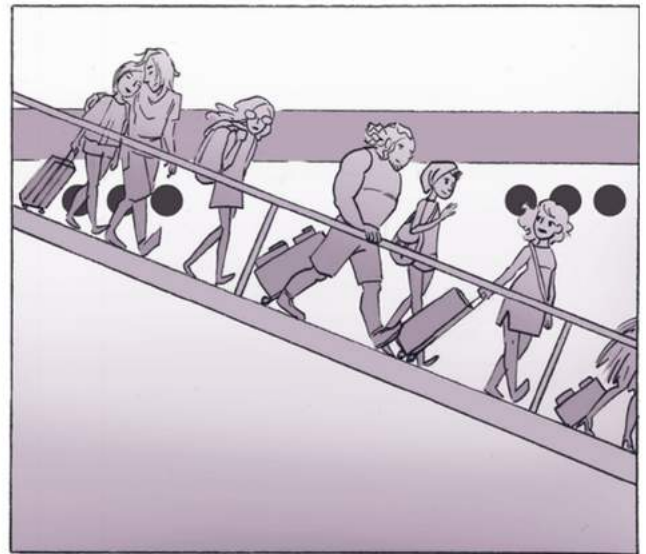


A FEW HOURS BEFORE SUNRISE, THE LAST DEDICATED PARTY PEOPLE STAGGER BACK TO THEIR CABIN TO CRASH, AND START AGAIN IN THE MORNING.

THE NIGHTS OFTEN COMPRISE THEME NIGHTS WHERE FESTIVALGOERS ARE ENCOURAGED TO DRESS IN COSTUME, WHICH THEY OFTEN DESIGN MONTHS IN ADVANCE.



THE COMPARATIVELY SMALL NUMBER OF FESTIVALGOERS (LIMITED BY THE SIZE OF THE SHIP) BRINGS AN INTIMACY TO THE OCEANBORNE FESTIVAL THAT IS MISSING ON LARGER LAND FESTIVALS.



AT THE END OF THE CRUISE, HUNGOVER, TIRED, AND HAPPY FESTIVALGOERS EXCHANGE SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNTS WITH THEIR SHIP FAM, AND STAGGER DOWN THE GANGWAY.

**Author's note:** This article adapts the concept of legal design, a process whereby legal documents are translated into cartoons for accessibility. This process adapts well to academic making difficult concepts accessible and personalising the data.

.More information on legal design is available at <http://www.lawbydesign.co/en/legal-design/>

This basic formula, repeated on popular music cruises between different production companies and cruise lines, comprises a standardised and profitable approach. Like the cruise product, it results in expectation realisation. Even if moving between different cruise ship festivals, festivalgoers know what to do, how the festival operates, and thus consistency of product across the industry is ensured.

While rock music cruises are recent phenomena, they emerged from previous models of cruising. In particular, their origin is in excursion shipping, a tourism product that originated in the mid-nineteenth century. Commercial estuary and coastal steam-powered vessels of this time were financially affected by the development of the faster and more convenient railways. In an effort to reverse declining fortunes, pleasure or excursion cruises were organised, where a ship would take passengers on a short voyage, returning them to their origin at the end of the day. The provision of professional musicians, still decades away on ocean-going vessels, was often offered on these trips as an inducement to partake in the pleasures of such cruises. Even when musicians began appearing on oceangoing steamers in the 1880s, pleasure cruises continued play the waterways – and still do; over the years I have played for dozens of weddings and functions on pleasure cruises in Sydney Harbour. With the rise of the modern cruise industry in the 1960s, new opportunities for pleasure-cruising arose. In 1970, a promoter named Richard Groff attempted to charter Greek Line's SS *Queen Anna Maria* for a waterborne reconstruction of Woodstock, which Groff reportedly liked, except for the mud. This venture ultimately failed because Bermuda, the destination, felt the cruise was 'alien to the way in which Bermuda has been promoted over the years'; also the Greek government, which flagged the ship, had recently voiced disapproval of rock music. However, the idea of chartering a ship for a music festival was a sound one, and between 1974 and 1979, Holland America's SS *Rotterdam* hosted a biannual jazz cruise. The idea was revived from 1983 aboard the SS *Norway*. Classical cruises began appearing in the eighties in the Mediterranean, but rock cruises would have to wait until the new millennium.

On the Labor Day weekend in 2001, the first Rock Boat festival was launched aboard Carnival's tiny MV *Jubilee*. Organised by Floridan alternative band Sister Hazel for 450 of their fans, it proved so successful that it became an annual event, with its upcoming 2020 festival marking the twentieth consecutive Rock Boat. Sister Hazel (now trading as Sixth Man Productions) began to organise other cruises themed around performers (KISS Cruise, Kid Rock Cruise) and genres (roots-themed Cayamo, country cruises, blues cruises, EDM cruises). So successful was this formula that other companies began organising similar cruises such as EDM-themed festival Holy Ship (organised by American music festival HARD) or 70,000 Tons of Metal, organised by Swiss promoter Andy Piller. These festivals keep increasing in number and success.

## CRUISE SHIP FESTIVAL SPACES

Cruise ship festival spaces are hybrids made up of several other experiences. On one hand, they take place amid the non-space of the ocean. But they also exist onboard the cruise ship and also take into account music festival spaces. Some do not engage with the land at all, preferring instead to remain at sea. Others do go to land, but only to the hyperreal, and cruise-line leased islands, which are constructed as nameless and deserted Caribbean islands. Others do go to ports, and some interaction with these places, such as Jamaica or St Thomas, does occur; however, given that the ship stays in port only for a short time, these are more of a transitory destination than a real engagement. The main festival space is aboard the cruise ship.





## THE INFLUENCES ON A CRUISE SHIP MUSIC FESTIVAL



\* UNNAMED NON-SPACE IN THE DEEP OCEAN (AUGE 1992, RELPH 1976), PERMANENT HUMAN INHABITATION DIFFICULT (PAPATHANASSIS, 2012).

\* CRUISE SPACE: CONSTRUCTED, MOBILE, LIMINAL (TURNER, 1978; MA AND LEW, 2012), LUXURIOUS (YARNAL AND KERSTETTER, 2005; EL-MAHGARY, 2013), HYPERREAL (KULHANEK, 2012), ESCAPIST (YARNAL AND KERSTETTER, 2005; RADIC, 2018), EXPERIENTIAL (WOOD, 2000; HOSANY AND WITHAM, 2010), OLDER AGE DEMOGRAPHIC, PERCEIVED STABILITY.

\* LAND BASED MUSIC FESTIVAL: LIMINAL (1992), CELEBRATING MUSIC, NEO-TRIBAL (MAFFESOLI, 1996; CUMMINGS, 2006; ANDERTON, 2007), CELEBRATING GEOGRAPHIC PLACE (GIBSON AND CONNELL, 2005; MCCLINCHEY AND CARMICHAEL, 2010)

CRUISE SHIP  
CRUISE FESTIVALS  
AND LIMINALITY

The camaraderie between festivalgoers, as well as festivalgoers and star musicians can be understood within Morgan's concept of 'social interaction', which he also refers to as *communitas*. This term has overtones of equality within a community. *Communitas* is a core



concept within the anthropology of ritual as pioneered by Victor Turner (1969). Turner (1974) also believes that travel as well as ritual also constructs *communitas*, a view shared by subsequent tourism scholars (Cohen, 1979; Wang, 1999; Franklin, 2003, pp. 49–52; Yarnal and Kerstetter, 2005; Duffy et al., 2011). Urry and Larsen (2011) note that a tourist, out of their usual social and spatial residency, experiences liminality, where the individual finds him/herself in an ‘anti-structure ... out of time and place’ – conventional social ties are suspended, an intensive bonding ‘communitas’ is experienced, and there is direct experience of the sacred or supernatural. (p. 27) However, the social structures of music also generate *communitas*. In discussing music as a device for social ordering, DeNora (2000) notes that music can foster ‘a co-subjectivity where two or more individuals may come to exhibit similar modes of feeling and acting, constituted in relation to extra-personal parameters, such as those provided by musical materials’ (p. 149). Of particular relevance to cruise festivals is Connell and Gibson’s (2003) observation that music tourism sub-cultures have emerged around the tours of particular artists, with groups of highly committed fans (even ‘groupies’), who follow performers around from concert to concert, even generating a sense of ‘communitas’ through shared experiences, fan clubs and traditions maintained on-tour. (p. 228) The inhabitants of a liminal space “dress differently, eat and drink differently, sleep differently, act differently, play differently, and feel differently” (Yarnal and Kerstetter, 2005, p. 370).

Cruise ship festivals are considered liminal because they result from the convergence of music festivals—a liminal experience (Kim and Jamal, 2007; Gibson and Connell, 2012)—and cruise tourism—also a liminal experience (Wood, 2000; Yarnal and Kerstetter, 2005). Cruise festivalgoers recount how a music festival on a cruise ship improves on both models. It forms a memorable life-affirming experience, where strangers become family and you get to meet your musical heroes. A strong sense of *communitas* is established with the other festivalgoers.

Festivalgoers enter the festival space of the cruise ship, have an intense and life-affirming experience in close proximity to like-minded fans and, and at the conclusion of the festival go back to their lives; however *communitas* and liminal space continue as participants maintain contact through social media.

## FESTIVALGOERS TALK ABOUT THE CRUISE

IT IS A 'LOVE FEST' IN EVERY ASPECT. I LOVED THE MUSIC, I LOVED THE OTHER FANS, I CONNECTED WITH, I LOVED THE VIBE AND I REALLY LOVED GETTING TO KNOW SOME NEW BANDS. THE CRUISE ASPECT PROVIDES ALL FUN, ALL DAY LONG. IF YOU DON'T HAVE FUN ON THIS CRUISE, YOU MIGHT NOT HAVE A SOUL.



STANDING ON THE BEACH IN COZUMEL, DRINK IN HAND, WITH SEVEN OF MY BEST FRIENDS, SINGING ALONG TO HEY JUDE WAS JUST SO GREAT



THE ATTRACTION OF BEING ABLE TO SEE THESE BANDS ON A CRUISE SHIP WITH ALL THE MOD CONS AND ALL THE LUXURIES OF A ROOM AND BED AND FOOD PROVIDED, IS FAR MORE ATTRACTIVE THAN GOING TO EUROPE AND CAMPING IN THE MUD WITH 70,000 OTHER PEOPLE AND EATING COLD FOOD AND DRINKING WARM BEER.



The experience of music festivals on cruise ships is intense, hedonistic, and short. Ties with everyday life—family, work, and home—are severed and participants are placed in an experiential cocoon. The *communitas* of a cruise festival is more intense than the larger festivals on land due to the smaller numbers and more intimate nature of the festival, and that ship festival *communitas* includes the star performers, a feature that is not part of larger land-based festivals. The star musician you saw on the stage last night is lining up in the breakfast queue in the morning. Regularly festivalgoers recount meeting their musical idols around the ship. Some festivals mandate fan interaction in their contracts with musicians. Everyone is on the same ship and there is no opportunity to leave. Many cruise music festivals do not approach human habitation and culture for the duration of the cruise; the only lands they may approach are the hyperreal and constructed cruise line-leased islands for a hedonistic beach party. Some do not even do this and spend their entire duration at sea.

This liminality separates participants from their daily lives and permits immersion in a constructive and hyperreal festival. As liminal spaces, cruise ships festivals construct an experiential cocoon conducive to the evolution of quick but intense friendships (a manifestation of *communitas*) among fans and star performers. Several accounts in academic literature, in fire camps, within the anthropological field, within expat communities, and within cruise ship crews, document the development of intense relationships within the combination of intense experience and unfamiliar surroundings (Cupples, 2002; Altork, 2007; Walsh, 2007; Kaspar and Landolt, 2016). These might be platonic or sexual relationships. Altork, for example, describes the experience of documenting the world of rural firefighters in North America, an intense and unfamiliar environment, which sometimes led to unusual intimacy and even eroticism between firefighters and support staff. One of her informants notes:



'll tell you, after five days men get horny as hell and they will proposition anything they think they can bed. We call them fireline romances. You're very tight with people and shut off from the outside world (Altork, 2007, p. 123)

Both in my own experience, and within Forsythe's research (2012, pp. 29–30), working on board a cruise ship suffers the same disconnect, the same intensity of experience, and the same powerful platonic and sexual relationships. It is not unexpected then that the music festivals aboard cruise ships engender that same quick intensity of relationships within participants within a cruise ship festival, whether star performer or festivalgoer. Festivalgoers and star performers refer to each other as 'ship fam' (or variants thereof) and post to social media with the hashtag #shipfam.



Festivals are social and high-intensity events. They involve “social interaction with family, staff, and other visitors, leading to a sense of communitas” (Morgan, 2008, p. 84). Many scholars have noted the relationship of festivals, liminality, and the generation of communitas (Turner, 1978; Arcodia and Whitford, 2006; Rutherford, 2008; Heerden, 2009). Cruise ship festivals are a particularly strong example of communitas within the tourism model. Strangers become friends, friends become family, and star performers become relatable people, friends, family kicking back in the corridors of the ship with a guitar, having a few beers, or lining up in the breakfast buffet.

## BEHAVIOUR AND ESCAPISM

The liminal space of the cruise ship festival contains unrestrained behaviour and an escape from reality. During the cruise, festivalgoers are encouraged to adopt patterns of behaviour they would not exhibit on land. This might be dressing up in costume on theme nights, drinking and eating to excess, and dancing until 6am. This unfamiliar and hedonistic environment, where excess is demonstrably exhibited by festivalgoers, is actively encouraged both by the production company for the festival, interested in creating a memorable experience, and the cruise line, interested in maximising profit from onboard revenue streams such as the casino and alcohol sales. Cruise festivalgoers recount this weirdness and abandon as one of the most memorable parts of the experience.





Despite such excesses, festivalgoers also account the space of festivals as a 'safe space'. One informant observed:

First off, you're safe: there's a doctor on board and tons of staff that care about your well being. If you're feeling sick, you can go back to your cabin and rest. If you're hungry, you can walk five minutes and grab free food. If you're dehydrated, you go to a water station and grab a glass of water. Outdoor festivals have NONE of those things, and if they have those things, they're expensive, inconvenient, or difficult to access. A cruise ship is so, so insanely safe.

## IMPLICATIONS

Music festivals on cruise ships remove guests from their everyday lives and place them into a liminal, encapsulated, and themed experience. These festivals isolate participants from their regular, everyday life and create a hyperreal experience with which participants engage. Such festivals are different from normal cruises which engage with destination ports as well as



the ship, instead avoiding any aspect of the actual for the constructed. These festivals typically engage only with the ship experience, the extensions of the ship experience (themed islands, cruise ship tours) and the theming of the festival.

Because cruise festivals draw their liminality from both the festival and cruise tourism models, liminal experiences in themselves, they develop a sort of hyper-liminality. The experience is more engaging. The rite of passage and escape from reality more striking. The behaviour within the liminal space more extreme. The *communitas* greater where fans and musicians who barely know each other become family and catch up year after year. This manufactured liminality and *communitas* is highly seductive and, along with the music, one of the points of the festival that is extremely marketable, contributing to the success of the festival and ensuring sustained profitability.

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