

“A self-styled mockney chav”: Reading accent, language, and British class identity in Lily Allen’s popular music

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Abstract

In the UK, accent and speech style are particularly strong markers of social identity and class status, and British vocal performers are judged (on factors including likability, relatability, and authenticity) by the way they sing and speak. Lily Allen, a divisive figure in British popular music associated with a chav (white underclass) persona, embodies the complexities of modern Britain through her lyrics, accent, dress, and other style choices. Through analysis of the language used in her songs, this paper sets out to critically examine Allen as a cultural artefact and to explore not only her cultural representation, but perhaps more importantly, her reading.

Keywords:

Chav, British cultural representations, class identity, accent.

The loved and loathed British singer-songwriter Lily Allen has, in accordance with the various style choices she has made, been identified as a “chav”. The word *chav*, used predominantly as a descriptor for young people, is a “ubiquitous term of abuse for the white poor” (Tyler, 2008), who are characterised by: unemployment, benefit claiming, laziness, smoking, drinking, obesity, promiscuity, criminality, low levels of articulacy, certain linguistic features, and a particular ‘look’ (trainers, sportswear, ponytails, tattoos, gold jewellery, Burberry) (Savage et al., 2015; Jones, 2016; Tyler, 2008). Arising around 2003, the pejorative was widely used in the media, on TV, and in public discourse for the following decade, and is still in use today. Allen’s accent or linguistic style has been the focus of much attention and criticism in that it has features of the speech patterns of the urban underclass, despite her (arguably) privileged background, drawing accusations of fakery. The quote in the title (“a self-styled mockney chav”) is from a chat forum in which contributor ThatToastyBass describes Allen as “the greatest fraud ever to emerge as a ‘musician’” (2015), *mockney* meaning mock (or fake) Cockney; Cockney being the language of London’s lower social classes.

As one of the minority of British performers to sing with a local, rather than General American (GA) accent (Trudgill, 1983; Beal, 2008), Allen’s distinctive linguistic features and stylistic choices warrant closer inspection as a point of departure for examining conflicting cultural identities and expression of multiple affiliations. The themes of engagement this paper seeks to explore include the way she performs the underclass or lower-class identity, and how is it read (Barthes, 1973) and perceived in the sociopolitical and cultural context of her time in millennial Britain. It also examines the values she is indexing when she employs Cockney-like pronunciations, vulgar language, and local references, and how she contributed or contributes to and disrupts the anti-underclass narrative framing notions of *chavness* and cultural expressions associated with marginalised British white youth.

First, this paper examines class in Britain today, then Allen’s class background. It presents a brief overview of accents in British music, before outlining the key features of the class-related accents of the London area. Analysis of the language and accents evidenced in Allen’s vocal performances is followed by discussion of the key themes.

Class in Modern Britain

Class, like other signifiers in modern Britain, is a complex field. Savage et al. (2015) document the history of attempts to categorise British people according to their social class, noting that the Registrar General’s schema, developed in the early 1900s, was based on the occupation of the head of the household (with unskilled manual workers at the bottom). They describe the eight class bands currently used by the Office of National Statistics (ONS), with “higher managerial, administrative and professional” at the top in band one, “routine occupations” in band seven, and “never worked and long-term unemployed” as the lowest band. Savage et al. note the weaknesses in this model, pointing out that occupation or wealth alone cannot account for class status (you can have money without being ‘classy’). Taking Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of accumulated economic, social, and cultural capital as a starting point, they used the the largest

survey of class every carried out in Britain, the BBC's 2011 Great British Class Survey (hereafter, GBSC), alongside interview data to develop a more sophisticated understanding of class identities, exploring patterns in finances, occupation, age, cultural tastes, and social networks. Seven bands were established: a distinct, exclusive “Elite” (about 6% of the total, often university graduates with careers in finance, law, or medicine), then a fuzzier “Established middle class”. The sixth band is “Emerging service workers” (with the youngest average age) and at the bottom is the “Precariat” (about 15% of the total, in unstable work, reliant on the welfare system, and mostly without educational qualifications). The interview findings showed that people in the precariat class face extreme stigmatisation, and are regarded as having a valueless, repulsive, “immoral” (p. 335) way of life, characterised by a lack of taste, with labels such as *scum* and *chav*. Two of their findings are particularly pertinent to this paper on Allen’s Mockney/London pop accent: first, they uncovered the importance of London for the lives of the elite, explaining that “having a relationship with London and its ‘scene’ is now fundamental to the new elite-class practices” (p. 319). Second, they discovered that while older members of the elite favour high-brow culture, younger members are more engaged with emergent culture, such as popular music. The study showed that these privileged young people enjoy culture in a different, more *knowing* way, confident that their tastes are legitimate and discerning.

The GBSC essentially takes a snapshot of one’s class status at a moment in time, but class is not static, and class-shifting does occur. Biressi and Nunn argue that class is formed not only by the privileges one is born into and experience in early life, but is “an ongoing social process experienced across our lifetime trajectories” (2013, p. 1) which may be affected by changing socio-economic circumstances, such as career advancement or divorce. They argue that people are also shaped by “the classed judgements of others” (p. 1) including political and popular discourses which can affect lives in both material ways (e.g. social mobility) and emotional ways (inducing hope, pride, or shame).

Exploring the classed identity of a celebrity is not a straightforward endeavour; as Biressi and Nunn note, “the celebrity is certainly a troubling, tricky and significant subject for the serious critic of culture and society” (2013, p. 100). This could be attributable to three factors; career success can bring sudden increases in wealth (increasing class mobility) with associated changes in lifestyle; the unstable nature of fame means that any gains in status could be transient; and a celebrity’s work inherently involves elements of public performance.

The following section examines Allen’s life story and class background.

Lily Allen: Biography and Class Background

As documented by her biographers (Howden, 2008; Wolfson, 2010) Lily Allen (b. 1989) is the daughter of comedian, actor, and former prison inmate Keith Allen, and film producer Alison Owen. And although Allen was raised by a single mother—a “stigmatised identity” which is “used as a proxy for class” (Savage et al., 2015, p. 377) — she was sometimes taken care of by ‘nannies’. Her home-life was unusual, filled with bohemian parties and music festivals, and contact with celebrities and artists. It could also be

considered somewhat chaotic, as both Allen's parents used drugs and her mother was "in and out of rehab" (Wolfson, 2010, loc. 216) for alcohol and narcotic addictions. Her biographers report that Allen was privately educated (a privilege accorded to only 7% [ISC, 2018, p. 12] of the British population), but was expelled from a number of schools before she abandoned her education at 15 without qualifications.

Her biographers (Howden, 2008; Wolfson, 2010) explain that following a failed deal with London Records, Allen spent a period of time unemployed, and then working briefly in a bar and as a florist, but was financially supported by her mother. She received treatment for mental health problems and made a suicide attempt after a relationship failed. At this point, aged 18, she began writing and recording the songs which appeared on her first released album *Alright, Still*. Allen worked with British DJ and producer Mark Ronson, who encouraged her to exaggerate the "mockneyfied vowels" in her vocals (Howden, 2008, loc. 926) and helped her make a recording deal with Regal Records. With her album still not complete, Allen, by now aged 20, began posting her music to the social networking site MySpace, where she kept a blog. Her fanbase grew, and the record company released "LDN", followed by "Smile". The singles and the album (released in 2006) had strong sales in the UK, the US, and worldwide. Her second album was released in 2009, and her third in 2014. Her most recent album to date was released in June 2018. All have achieved commercial success, and Allen has won a number of awards.

In addition to her successful music career, Allen has hosted a talk show and experimented with running a clothing store. In interviews she has discussed her personal life, including experiences of stillbirth, drug abuse, motherhood, and divorce (Plagenoef, 2006; Sawyer, 2018). She has also expressed her political views, aligning herself with environmental and left-wing causes. Her political affiliation was further confirmed when Allen performed her cover of Keane's "Somewhere Only We Know" at a tribute event for the murdered Labour MP Jo Cox in 2016. The same song was used as the backing track to the Labour Party's 2017 election campaign video, which included a montage of ordinary people and the slogan: "For the many, not the few".

Allen's unorthodox upbringing and complex life story makes it difficult to assign her to any single class descriptor. As an unemployed 17-year-old, she fit the ONS lowest band, and as a barmaid, ONS band seven, and possibly GBCS band six. Her education in independent schools is associated with the higher bands of the GBCS, but the lack of qualifications and university degree is more typical of lower groupings. At her debut, as a non-home-owning teenager, she would not have been a member of the elite class, whereas now, being the owner of a £2 million home in Notting Hill, London (Collier, 2017), she meets the GBCS criteria. Allen herself appears conscious of the need to foreground her lived experience of a more raw, edgy, urban existence entailing struggles and hardships which she feels helps justify her assimilation with the lives of her less privileged fans. Plagenoef (2006), reporting an interview with Allen, quotes the singer:

I'm not writing all of these songs as if they were from my perspective, and those are the things I'm experiencing. But at the same time, my mother came to London when she was 17 years old with one daughter and a suitcase and nothing else-- no money, no education. She was a punk. And, we didn't have any money for the first 10 years of my life. We lived in what you call the projects, and we ate beans on toast. My mom came from that background, but she just worked really hard to feed us and keep a roof

over our head, and that probably keeps my eyes open.

But people don't see that because now my mom is a film producer and my dad is an actor. [...] they think it must be really easy-- “she was really rich” -- and that's not true. My dad left home when I was four. I didn't speak to him really until I was 15. So, I feel that I can talk about things with some conviction because I have experienced them to some extent. But it doesn't mean that I'm saying, “This is my life.” I don't live in a council flat, but I live in London, which is an incredibly cosmopolitan city. I see a variety of people and things just riding through it.

In the same interview, Allen reveals that she has the social capital to achieve commercial success. Aware that this could serve to de-authenticate her urban, edgy, chav persona, she claims that she avoided making use of those advantages and instead chose the more authentic path of establishing herself as a singer who expresses her real identity:

I have the connections with which I could have achieved a lucrative a pop career by doing nothing, do y'know what I mean? I could have said to my dad, talk to your friend to get me a deal and I'll go to the gym everyday, maybe get a boob job, and sing whatever songs people want me to sing, but that's not what interests me.

Allen explores this issue in her song “Silver Spoon” (2014) which opens with the lines: “So I went to posh school / Why would I deny it? / Silver spoon at the ready / So don't even try it” and parodies the way her privileged background has been exaggerated and misrepresented in the media: “I'm getting hungry, could you fetch my butler?”, lines which suggest a refined, aristocratic life, out of touch with the lives and difficulties of ordinary people. In the song Allen again emphasises the fact that others cannot understand the complexity of her class background, and foregrounds her authenticity: “Doing my thing I'm just / Keeping my head down and / Do we have to / Keep talking about / Where you think it is I'm from?” Allen claims to be just *doing her thing* (i.e. being herself).

The next section explores the particular choices faced by British singers in expressing their vocal identities which manifest through their national, regional, and class affiliations as performed language.

Local British vs. American Accents in British Popular Music

The majority of British vocalists sing in a General American (GA) accent which features the five characteristics which Simpson (1999) labelled the USA 5; pronouncing the intervocalic [t] in words like *better* as [d]; pronouncing the the vowel sound in words like *dance* as [a] instead of [ɑ:]; rhoticity; replacing the diphthong [aɪ] with [a] in words like *life*; and pronouncing the vowel in words like *top* as [a] instead of [ɒ]. Trudgill (1983) has ascribed this phenomenon to singers emulating (on some level) the Americans who have dominated the music scene, though Beal affirms that singers do this “as a matter of course without any conscious act of identity taking place” (2009, p. 229). This is likely to be true, though Crystal and Crystal (2015) argue that the nature of the singing process, particularly for trained singers, results in accent levelling, as the identifying features of accents disappear. This includes intonation (which is replaced by melody), rhythm, vowel length (as vowels are frequently elongated) and vowel quality, as vowels become more open in singing. Singers whose vocal style is closer to speech are less likely to use these GA sounds; Beal, citing

Simpson's study of Ian Dury's voice, notes that his singing is more like a spoken voiceover, and explains that "the less a singer 'sings' ... the weaker the influence of the external code and the stronger the approximation to the singer's own vernacular usage" (1999, p. 360, cited in Beal, 2009, pp. 228–9).

Making a choice not to use GA pronunciation makes the artist seem more edgy and less commercial (Beal, 2009, p. 229). Beal contends that the Arctic Monkeys use northern English pronunciations, dialect words, and local references in their music and not the GA of mainstream pop to "index independence and authenticity" (p. 224). Like Allen, the group promoted their music themselves on MySpace, an approach which allowed them to have a more 'authentic' and direct contact with their fans.

British singers rejecting GA in favour of an accent which foregrounds their own national identity enter a complex territory. British accents vary greatly, with the strongest accents and dialects posing intelligibility issues to non-locals. Moreover, accents reveal not only regional, but ethnic and class information, and convey cultural narratives. Some regional accents are regarded as warmer or more accessible than others. General British or GB, (previously termed Received Pronunciation, or RP) is the most region-neutral accent, but it conveys social information (high class, educated). In the past GB was the dominant language of television, carrying connotations of trustworthiness and prestige, but in recent years it has acquired negative connotations, and regional or "rougher" accents are preferred in advertising and the entertainment industry (Crystal & Crystal, 2015). Beal points out that "Southern" accents (by which she presumably means accents close to GB, rather than Cockney) are regarded as "middle-class, soft, and pretentious" (2009, p. 230). Performers from London and the surrounding areas are left with a tricky choice; speak with an accent closer to GB and potentially be regarded as elitist, pretentious, and distant, or attempt to achieve a cool, grimmer, edgier status by speaking with a lower-class London accent and risk being either scorned as a chav and/or reviled for inauthenticity if the accent is perceived as contrived.

The following section outlines the main identifying features of London lower-class accents.

London Lower-Class Accents

Cockney and Estuary English

Cockney has two main forms; broad Cockney, and what is termed *popular London*, the working/lower-class accent which has many aspects of broad Cockney, but is slightly closer to GB. Broad Cockney is associated with East London, but migration has spread it over a wider area, and both forms have spread into Kent and Essex. Cruttenden (2014) highlights the following pronunciation features of Cockney:

Consonants

- omission of /h/ so hammer becomes ['amə]
- replacement of /θ, ð/ with /f, v/ so father [fɑ:və] and think [fɪŋk].
- dark /ɪ/ becomes vocalic [ʊ]
- /t/ and sometimes /k/ and /p/ are replaced by glottal stop [ʔ]

Vowels

- diphthongisation of /i:/ → [əi], /u:/ → [əu], and /ɔ:/ → [ɔʊ] or [ɔwə]
- distinctive pronunciation of several diphthongs, including /eɪ/ → [aɪ], /aɪ/ → [aɪ], /eɔ/ → [aʊ], and /aʊ/ → [a:]

Mott (2012) adds the following two vowel features:

- schwa is more open in word-final position: dinner ['dɪnə] (p. 72)
- in some words /aɪ/ is replaced by [ɪi] e.g. my pants [mɪ 'p.ɪnz], Friday ['frɪdɪ 'daɪ] (p. 78)

Cockney also features distinct expressions, some of which came from rhyming slang, such as “have a *butchers*” (meaning ‘look’), shortened from *butcher’s hook* (Mott, 2012), and non-standard grammar, including irregular past-tense forms, use of *ain’t* for negative forms of auxiliary *have*, and use of *don’t* for third person singular negative auxiliary *do* (Hughes et al., 2013).

Many people in and around London speak Regional GB (RGB), which is GB with some Cockney elements. This hybrid or mixed accent is often termed Estuary English (EE). Cruttenden (2014) notes that EE speakers tend to avoid the more stigmatised forms such as replacement of /θ, ð/ with /f, v/ and that EE may include glottal stops before an accented vowel or a pause, but not before unaccented vowels intra-word or inter-word.

Forms of Cockney and EE are both stigmatised to some degree. However, Mott (2012, p. 72) points out that Cockney has “covert prestige” in literature, film, comedy, and songs, and Cruttenden claims that while GB can be a handicap in some situations, eliciting a hostile response, EE has some “street credibility” (2014, p. 82).

Multicultural London English

Younger people in London (even those who live in outer London and speak with many of the features listed above) no longer identify as Cockney, which they associate with the older generation, being white, and being a chav (Kershaw, 2013). Since the early 2000s, with the increase in the number of people who were born outside the UK living in the capital, the younger inner-city generation have started speaking Multicultural London English, MLE (Cheshire et al, 2011; Kerswill, 2013). Called Jafaican in the media, MLE is a mix of influences from Creole, ex-colonial languages (e.g. Bengali) and learner varieties of English. It shares many features with Cockney, but is different in significant ways.

First, there are some differences in grammar. MLE uses ‘why...for’ in place of ‘what ... for’ and ‘this is me’ (instead of ‘I said’). There is frequent use of non-standard *wasn’t*, in addition to the non-standard *was* and *weren’t* found in Cockney (p. 181). Article allomorphy is also simplified; in MLE stressed *the* is pronounced [ðə] not [ði], and [əʔ] is used in place of [ən] before vowel-initial words (Cheshire et al, 2011). There are some key pronunciation differences (Kerswill, 2013), listed below:

- narrow diphthongs and monophthongs replace broad diphthongs in FACE and GOAT: [æɪ] → [eɪ] → [e:] and [ʌʊ] → [oʊ] → [o:]

- backing of /k/ before low back vowels to [q]
- full reinstatement of /h/ (no h-dropping)
- extreme goose fronting
- more syllable-timed (staccato) rhythm

MLE also has distinctive vocabulary; there is heavy use of US- or Caribbean-influenced words such as *ghetto*, *rude*, and *safe* (meaning ‘good’, also a greeting) and the following words occur frequently: *guy*, *man*, *okay*, *brothers*, *blood / blad* (friend), *mandem / boysdem / girlsdem* (*friends*) and *olders* (Kerswill, 2013, pp. 142–3). However, these forms were used less by Anglos (people resident locally for two or more generations) who preferred Cockney terms (e.g. *mate* for friend).

Analysis of Allen’s songs

This section presents the findings of analysis of Allen’s lyrics and vocal identity. The study was limited to the singles on the four albums Allen has released to date and their official videos on her YouTube channel. Other performances, such as backing vocals on other artists’ work, were beyond the scope of this study.

Portrayals and representations of Britishness

Allen’s language roots her firmly in Britain. In terms of accent, Allen’s vocals are distinctly British. She does not employ any USA 5 features in any of the songs on her four albums. Similarly, Allen chooses to employ British English vocabulary. The following lines from “Friday Night” (2006) serve as an example: “There’s a massive crowd outside so we get in to the *queue* / It’s *quarter* past 11 now we won’t get in *till quarter to*”. Queue is the British term for a line (of people), and *quarter past* is usually expressed *quarter after* in American English (Merriam-Webster, 2018). “Everyone’s At It” (2009) includes the lyric, “Yeah, you’re *well* up for *slating*.” Oxford Dictionaries (2018) categorise both the submodifier *well* (meaning “very; extremely”) and the verb *slate* (“criticise severely”) as British informal. In “Our Time” (2014), the line: “Bring some *fags* and bring some Rizlas” includes the British slang for cigarettes (*fags*) and rolling papers (*Rizlas*), named after the brand Rizla, which is widely used in the UK. In the song “Apples” (2018), on her most recent album, we again find *fags* and also the British *mummy* (not the US *mommy*). Only in tracks which were co-written with American Greg Kurstin do we find US language such as *butt* (buttocks) and the phrase “be *real* good at cookin” (*really* good, in British English) from “Hard Out Here” (2014) and “that’s *swell*” in “As Long As I Got You” (2014).

Allen’s lyrics contain numerous British cultural references, which British people will recognise but may be unfamiliar to non-Brits. These appear in the first two of her albums and the fourth, but are missing from the third, which mostly consists of songs co-written by Kurstin. “LDN” (2006) mentions a major British supermarket chain: “There was a little old lady, who was walking down the road / She was struggling with bags from *Tesco*” and “Who’d Have Known” (2009) refers to a popular Channel 4 lifestyle TV series: “You said tomorrow would be fun, / And we could watch ‘A Place In The Sun’”. Similarly, in “Trigger Bang” (2018),

the line “I never got home for *Neighbours*” references the long-running Australian soap watched on a daily basis by millions of British people since the mid-1980s.

Allen’s music videos also reference the UK and especially the capital; “Our Time” (2014) has iconic London images such as a black cab, Big Ben, and Tower Bridge. This is significant in the light of Savage et al’s (2015) findings that London is an important centre for the elite, and also in that Allen claims her London roots provide her with a range of experiences to draw from artistically, substantiating her credibility. Like Allen’s lyrics and visual presentation, the video references the kind of activity that is associated with chav culture; smoking, drinking, fighting in the street outside a fast-food restaurant, being questioned by the police, vomiting, and evading a cab fare.

Vulgar language

In all four albums we find copious use of rough, vulgar language and profanity in keeping with Allen’s drinking, smoking, tattooed, chav persona. Several examples (italicised) are found in these lines from “LDN” (2006), which include the British slang word *slapper*: “A fella looking dapper, but he’s sitting with a *slapper* / Then I see it’s a *pimp* and his *crack whore*”. On Allen’s first album the language is particularly crude, including use of the most offensive word in the English language in “Friday Night” (2006), which is censored in some versions: “Girl on a guest list dressed like a *cunt*”. Singles from Allen’s third album include similar offensive words, such as “Hard Out Here” (2014) with: “Forget your *balls* and grow a pair of *tits*” and “Sheezus” (2014) “Give me that crown, bitch, I wanna be Sheezus”. Her final album only includes one profanity, but it is used multiple times in multiple songs; “Come On Then” (2018) for example, includes the word *fuckin’* and “Waste” (2018) the phrase: “who the *fuck* are you”.

Cockney / Mockney

All of Allen’s singles contain some elements of Cockney pronunciation. These range from those which are on the verge of acceptable in GB, such as the vocalisation of the word-final /l/ sound in *mental* and *unwell* as [ʊ] in “you messed up my *mental* health / I was quite *unwell*” (“Smile”, 2006) and more stigmatised forms associated with broad Cockney, such the glottal stop before the final /l/ sound in: “But with a *little* help from my friends” and the open vowel sound at the end of words like *never* [neveɹ] and *whenever* [weneveɹ] in the same song. Allen also evidences non-standard grammar forms typical of Cockney: “You say that you want me back / And I tell you it *don’t* mean jack / No, it *don’t* mean jack” (“Smile”, 2006), using *don’t* instead of doesn’t in the third person and an abbreviated form of *jack shit*, a vulgar term meaning ‘nothing’. On the same album on the track “Friday Night” (2006) we find another example of non-standard grammar: “Guy on the mic and he’s making too much noise, / *There’s these girls* in the corner want attention from the boys” (in standard English: “there are some girls”).

A range of stigmatised broad Cockney sounds can be identified in songs from the beginning of Allen’s career to the present, without the diminishment you would expect to find as the singer matures from a teenager into an established, wealthy celebrity and parent. In “LDN” (2006) we see stigmatised consonant sounds, such as th-fronting in *with* [wɪv] and *everything* [evrɪfɪŋ] in the lines: “When you look *with* your eyes / *Everything* seems nice” and again in the line, “I’ll take us right *through* from sunrise to sunset” (“Our

Time”, 2014) where the /θ/ in through is replaced by [f]. Stigmatised vowel sounds are even more abundant. Examples in “Silver Spoon” (2014) include Allen’s *here* [hi:jə], which has two syllables, with an intrusive [j] and open final vowel (compare the GB /hɪə/), and *you* [jə:] (compare the standard GB rounded /ju:/) which rhymes with Allen’s pronunciation of *major* [meɪjə:] with the same open final vowel sound. In “Family Man” (2018) we find a number of both stigmatised vowel and consonant sounds: “I know that you love me” has a glottal stop at the end of the word *that*, and *me* has the broad Cockney form [m̩ iɪ], and in “I am tired, I’m helpless” we find the Cockney vowel glide [tʰaɪ̯əd]. In the same song, in the lines: “ ’s not always easy / Being a family *man* / Baby, *don’t* leave me” the *not* ends with a glottal stop, the /n/ in *man* is nasalised as [mæŋ̩] and *don’t* is realised [daʊŋ]. We also hear in, “Don’t go forgetting me / I don’t like most people / But I’m scared, not evil” *go* /geʊ/ realised with the Cockney vowel [gəʊ], *forgetting* with a glottal stop (in this environment, stigmatised), and the dark ɪ in *evil* vocalised and extended [ivo:].

Not all of the key features of Cockney are present in the songs on Allen’s albums; there are no instances of /aɪ/ replaced by [ɪɪ] in words like *Friday*, for example. This may in part relate to the fact that Cockney has considerable variation, and we would not expect its speakers to evidence all of the recorded forms listed in the previous section. Moreover, mixing is common (as in EE), so a mixed accent would be unremarkable. However, the mixed accent found in Allen’s songs would be unusual in spontaneous speech.

The peculiar feature of Allen’s vocal identity is that it is highly inconsistent. Even within the same song, a word or a sound can be pronounced in different ways. In “Smile” (2006), for example, we find both the fully-rounded *you* [ju:] and Cockney-sounding unrounded *stressed* [jɛ:]. Similarly, in “22” (2009) we find carefully enunciated /t/ sounds in the word *twenty-two*, followed by an exaggerated glottal stop in the word *thirty*, and at the ends of the words *bright*, *out*, and *night*: “When she was twenty-two the future looked *bright* / She’s nearly *thirty* now and she’s *out* every *night*”. In “LDN” (2006) we find inconsistencies in the realisation of /aʊ/ sounds: “I see *these* girls and they’re *shouting* [ʃæʊʔɪn] through the *crowd* [kraʊd] / don’t understand why they’re being really *loud* [laʊd]”.

This mixed and inconsistent accent is a feature of her vocal performances on all four of Allen’s albums, and may be related, at least in part, to the demands of singing. Singers are trained to pay attention to diction and to exaggeratedly articulate sounds so that the lyrics can be clearly discerned, which creates tension when the singer wishes to manifest a vocal identity with vernacular forms in which sounds are not clearly articulated. We find this tension on Allen’s most recent album, in the track “Lost My Mind” (2018) where the final /t/ is dropped (replaced by a glottal stop) from the words *rut* and *at* and *couldn’t* (giving Allen her distinctive lower-class London sound), but in the word *difficult* [dɪfɪkəlt] she pronounces the dark / ɪ / and final /t/ with very clear diction, as a trained singer. Some of the inconsistencies are particularly jarring; in the same song we find the Cockney vowel sound in *now* [na:], but the word *served* is strangely realised [sɑ:vd], as in the refined Conspicuous GB (CGB), spoken at the opposite end of the class spectrum (Cruttenden, 2014, p. 81). Some of these inconsistencies can be accounted for by singing style; Allen half-speaks some parts of songs, while singing other parts. Half-spoken *phone* [faʊŋ] and *stones* [staʊŋz] early in the song are realised with a Cockney [aʊ], but *stones* in the final lines of the song, is sung [steʊnz].

Multicultural London English (MLE)

Despite the fact that inner-city people in the same age bracket as Allen typically speak MLE rather than Cockney, MLE features are notably absent from her lyrics and vocal performances. In “Smile” (2006), we find the lines: “But you were fucking that girl next door / *What'd you do that for?*” with the standard ‘what...for’ found in both GB and Cockney (not the ‘why... for’ of MLE). In “LDN” (2006), similarly, we find the (dated) cockney slang for the police (pronounced with th-fronting on the final consonant, [filf]), rather than *the feds* or *po po* we might expect in MLE (Epsey, 2012): “Riding through the city on my bike all day / Cause *the filth* took away my license”. There are a few incidences of black, ghetto, US-influenced expressions on her third album, such as “all gon’ try” and “imma make you see” in “Silver Spoon” (2018). These may appear in rap-influenced youth MLE, but as these lyrics were co-written by Kurstin (discussed above) their inclusion is more likely due to her co-writer than contact with the MLE-speaking community.

One feature of MLE which Allen does display is the fully pronounced /h/ sound. We found no examples of /h/ omission in any of her songs. She clearly pronounces the /h/ in words like *help* and *health* in “Smile” (2006), in *hungry* and *humble* in “Silver Spoon” (2014) and in “Lost My Mind” (2018) strongly aspirates word initial /h/ even in auxiliary words like *has*, *had*, and *having*, which would be unusual in spontaneous conversation in both GB and MLE (in her song the rhythm gives them additional prominence). The pronunciation of /h/ may be an aspect of MLE which Allen is performing, but since this is also a feature of GB and EE, this factor does not strongly suggest identification with MLE speakers.

Allen’s co-performer in Trigger Bang (London rapper Nathaniel Thompson, stage-name ‘Giggs’), performs with a vocal identity much more identifiable as MLE. Allen’s own alignment with a Cockney (instead of an MLE) accent may be a way of indexing her whiteness, and wishing to avoid appropriating an accent more associated with other ethnicities. It may also reflect her older social circle, who still speak popular London, rather than MLE.

Discussion

Authentic or Not

Much of the discourse around Allen seems rested on the question or *problem* of authenticity; is Allen ‘authentic or not’; is she an imposter. When not singing, Allen has a mixed accent, a variant of EE. Video footage of Allen and her father show both using some features of Cockney in their spontaneous speech, and although this may also be ‘performed’ to an extent, it is not as carefully crafted as recorded, rehearsed vocals. At a brief press interview recorded at the Brit Awards in 2007 Keith Allen, for example, pronounces *proud* as [pra:d] and Lily replaces the /t/ in the word *nominated* with a glottal stop (BRITs, 2007). In Allen’s songs, as her biographer noted (Howden, 2008), some artifice has been involved in emphasising and adding to those Cockney elements to present a chav-like persona which is also evidenced in the singer’s visual image (hooped earrings, trainers, smoking) and her outspoken manner and ‘wild’ activities; swearing, fighting, partying.

Allen’s building of a chav-like persona could be considered part of the widespread practices of

poverty porn and chav-bashing; privileged people dressing up as and speaking like chavs in order to mock them. Examples include university students attending chav parties, or the TV comedy actor Catherine Tate playing Lauren Cooper, with her th-fronted catchphrase: “Am I bovvered?” (Jones, 2016, p. 122). The key difference is that Allen has always presented her visual and vocal performance identity as reflecting her own lived (and vicariously lived) experiences, rather than a separate character, and she has maintained this identity consistently for over a decade. Rather than mocking, Allen appears to be expressing her complex, mixed background (vintage dresses with trainers; GB pronunciations mixed with Cockney) and embracing—even celebrating—those aspects of life which lie outside a narrow, sanitised middle-class existence or elite bubble.

Allen could be accused of culturally appropriating signs and symbols from a subclass of which she is not a bona fide member. However, this position fails to take into account social theory on the nature of performance and presentation. Goffman’s (1956) thesis is that language use differs in accordance with the relative position of the individual i.e. that use is in flux and varies not only in response to one’s interlocutor, but also one’s environment. Hernández-Campoy and Cutillas-Espinosa (2012) take these ideas further, noting that Speaker Design theory views language style choices as strategic, and arguing that there is no ‘natural’ speech which does not involve the speaker playing a role, shaping their identity not just reactively but proactively, in response to the situation; “identity is dynamic and all speech is performance” (p. 4).

Her Reading

The image below (figure 1), taken from the comments section for the video for the single “Smile” posted on her official YouTube account demonstrates the polarity of Allen’s persona. For some, perhaps because of the British accent and references (see figure 2) and vulnerability she displays in her lyrics, she is perceived as being authentic; “no show, just real”. For others, the deliberate exaggeration in aspects of her accent and inconsistencies within the accent, and between the accent and her known economic status and class background, she is perceived as fake. When an already empowered, privileged person appears to try to gain additional power or prestige through taking on the covert prestige of a Cockney/chav persona, it can be perceived as both insulting to the group whose characteristics she is appropriating, and rapacious.

The fact that Allen has been effectively endorsed by the Labour Party (e.g. by their choice of her song as the backing track for their 2017 campaign video), shows that she must be thought someone that (young, ordinary) people could identify with and unite behind. Some negative responses (see figure 3, below) indicate that that this view was not shared by all; clearly one of the privileged ‘few’, some felt she is an inappropriate spokesperson for the ‘many’. The Labour Party’s reading of Allen as a representative of the British masses perhaps demonstrates their commitment to bringing the marginalised poor, demonized as chavs (Jones, 2016), back into the fold of society.

The next section explores how Allen may have contributed to this demonization of the chav, while at the same time challenging it.

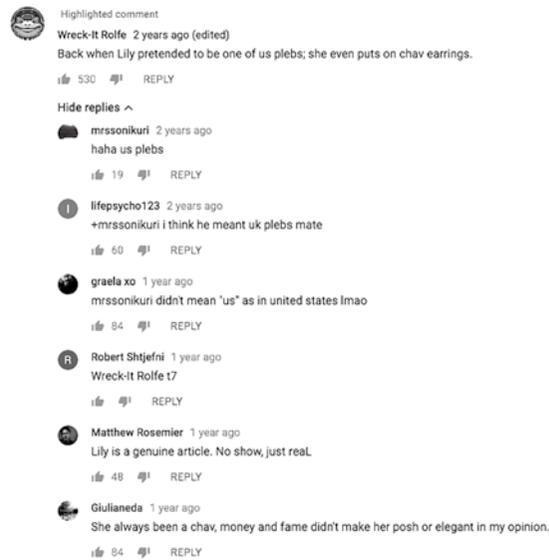


Figure 1: “Pretend” vs. “real” comments on YouTube video (Wreck-It Rolfe, 2016).



Figure 2: “Relatable” comment on YouTube video (Happy little raincloud, 2018).



Figure 3: “Bad choice” comment on the YouTube Corbyn Channel (Parry, 2017).

Reinforcing and Disrupting the Chav Representation

Simply by *repeating* (Tyler, 2008) aspects of the demonic chav caricature which have been circulated in the media and public discourse, Allen can be said to have reinforced the chav representation. The drinking, smoking, promiscuous, and criminal behaviour seen in her music videos (“Smile”, 2008; “Our Time”, 2014; “Trigger Bang”, 2018) coupled with Allen’s white, Cockney (rather than MLE) accent and chavvy visual image (ponytail, earrings), has, by reinforcing negative stereotypes, contributed to the increased stigmatisation of those on the periphery of contemporary British society.

At the same time, Allen’s representation also disrupts the negative tropes pervasive in much of British media. Not only is her rebellious image attractive and her music appealing, but there are strong elements

of play, humour, fun, and youthful energy even in the videos where there is criminal activity and shocking violence. Moreover, Allen's persona suggests that young people have cultural capital which the older generation cannot understand or appreciate. The video for "LDN" (2008) begins with Allen asking in a record shop for a very specific kind of music:

Hi, I'm just wondering have you got any kind of like sort of punky electronica kind of grime kind of like new wave grime, but kind of maybe like more broken beats, like kind of like dubby broken beats but a little bit kind of soulful, like kind of drum and bassy but kind of more broken drum and bass, like broken beats with like breakbeat kind of broken drum and bass, kind of... d'ya know what I mean? No?

Savage et al (2015, p. 649) discuss this kind of knowledge:

The nature of cultural capital has changed, so that it now takes cosmopolitan and ironic forms which appear to be pluralist and anti-elitist. [...] it is one's ease and grace in moving between different genres, playing with classifications and typologies, which might count as cultural capital today.

Allen demonstrates some of this ease, expressed in her mixed / Cockney accent with fillers ('know what I mean') and hedging words ('kind of, sort of') which may be associated with inarticulate chavs. In this way, she can be considered to redefine chavs as both agents of cultural and social change, and as a group who is empowered with cultural capital which they define not according to the lexicon of the elite, but rather in their own terms.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the performer Lily Allen from the standpoint of her being both a cultural icon and artefact of contemporary British society. Allen has continued to walk a thin line between those who perceive her as real and a reflection of underclass Britain, and those who see her wealth and success as being antithetical to her supposed urban roots and underclass allegiance. In this paper we have suggested that notions pertaining to the diametrics of *inauthentic* or *authentic* tend to miss the complexities of the discussion. Allen's choice to sound British, white, and "chavvy" is agentic rather than a disingenuous attempt to deceive. It is also argued that Allen has given voice to the voiceless underclass in representing the potentiality of Corbyn's Labour Party, which has positioned itself as representant of a powerful, complex, and inclusive British identity.

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