

Trying On New Names to Plumb the Mystery of 'I'

By MICHAEL KRAMER

"IDENTITY is the crisis can't you see," declared the female singer Marion Elliott, better known as Poly Styrene, in a 1978 punk rock song. Proving the prescience of Ms. Elliott's words, a number of musicians have begun to explore notions of identity, so often a part of pop music's appeal, by adopting not just one pseudonym but many. They make the continual reinventing of musical personas perhaps as entertaining and meaningful as the music itself.

The hip-hop producer Robert Diggs (known as RZA), the underground rocker Will Oldham (Palace) and the electronica experimentalist Paul Miller (DJ Spooky a.k.a. That Subliminal Kid), among others, move through multiple aliases as if names were so many outfits in a costume closet. Recognizing that pop music is as much about role-playing as instrument playing, they raise intriguing questions about identity. Is a person by any other name still the same person? Can a renamed individual actually become someone new? Or do musicians with more than one name become something in between?

Using aliases to refashion identity has a long history in popular culture, from Hollywood actors to pulp fiction authors. In pop music, some names have been humorous, as in the Big Bopper (Jiles Perry Richardson). Others have transformed musicians into more marketable entities: Gordon Sumner became Sting, Steve Georgiou became Cat Stevens, Mary O'Brien became Dusty Springfield. Not until recently, however, have individual musicians employed so many different pseudonyms, and rarely

Michael Kramer is the pop-jazz producer at nytoday.com, a New York Times Web site.



David McLimans

have they used them so often to examine identity.

That's not to say they're the first musicians to experiment with more than one pseudonym. In the 1970's, David Bowie (born David Jones) recreated himself as

Ziggy Stardust, Aladdin Sane and the Thin White Duke. But Mr. Bowie's name-changing always came across as self-indulgent and commercially calculated. What distinguishes the current batch of multiple pseudonym-takers is that they seem less con-

cerned with the stylishness or financial success of their alter egos than with the simple thrill of continually concocting new versions of themselves.

Something very American and democratic also unites them. In their hyperkinetic fashion, these musicians echo a practice of taking new names that runs deep in American culture, from European immigrants eager to assimilate to African-Americans reacting against the legacy of slavery. They enact a kind of egalitarianism, the longheld

Musicians adopt one pseudonym after another to keep things jumping. But then who's left at the center?

American dream that given identities matter less than self-invented ones. Simultaneously, their multiple aliases are reflective of modern developments like the Internet, in which identity becomes a scrambled, many-layered thing of alternate e-mail names and disembodied chat room exchanges.

"We named everything like Adam named things in the Garden of Eden," Mr. Diggs, said last year, referring to how he and the members of the loosely affiliated group he leads, the Wu-Tang Clan, recreate themselves and their environs from scratch.

When Mr. Diggs put on a mask, took on a new moniker and released an album called "RZA as Bobby Digital in Stereo," his behaviour harked back to the Mississippi blues guitarist Charlie Patton. In the 1920's, Mr. Patton also concealed his face and took on a new name, the Masked Marvel.

But while Mr. Patton's disguise was merely a promotional gimmick — his record label gave away free recordings to anyone who could identify the singer — Mr. Diggs's alter ego is more complicated. Bobby Digital is a full-fledged fictional character, the street-tough protagonist (played by Mr. Diggs) of a direct-to-video movie. The pseudonym is also an allusion, at once casual and coldly high-tech, to Mr. Diggs's actual name. Playing himself once removed, Mr. Diggs obfuscates his true identity. Behind his mask, he teases listeners. Is the real Mr. Diggs the violent, low-down Bobby Digital or the artistic, sophisticated RZA? Shifting between his alter egos, Mr. Diggs manages to become a sort of trickster figure, changing names and shapes like a video game superhero.

Mr. Oldham pursues a similar strategy of multiple aliases. Recording his quirky songs — which can resemble the folk-rock musings of Neil Young — Mr. Oldham has employed different pseudonyms for a decade. He possesses a fine sense of the absurd, releasing solo albums under the name of Palace Brothers and group efforts, recorded with his actual brothers, under the name Will Oldham. Best known as Palace, Mr. Oldham now calls himself Bonnie Prince Billy, an apparent nod to Prince (born Prince Rogers Nelson), a musician infamous for changing his name to an odd symbol.

The lyrics on Mr. Oldham's album aren't related to anyone in actual life, he said recently. Yet his songs are rife with what seem to be ironic self-references. Characters like Stable Will, Billy Riley and Pushkin Will make appearances, suggesting that Mr. Oldham himself is a central, if fictionalized, figure in his own work; a listener doesn't know, which is part of the allure of Mr. Oldham's songs.

Mr. Oldham's many pseudonyms, like his

Continued on Page 36

Trying On Names To Investigate the 'I'

Continued From Page 30

songs, possess a spiritual component. For him, changing names is, as he put it, "religious more than anything." Going one step farther than the country singer Hank Williams, who used the alter ego Luke the Drifter to tell tales of sin and salvation, Mr. Oldham adopts multiple names to make himself timelessly enigmatic yet ultra modern.

WHILE Mr. Oldham can strike a rustic pose with his pseudonyms, Mr. Miller uses his aliases to create an air of science fiction. "For me it all comes down to the word *persona*," he said. "It comes from the word *per*, which means person but also means through, and *sona*, which is like sonar — sound waves — so *persona* means a person moving through sound waves."

While his etymology may be suspect, Mr. Miller makes music that does seem to move through sound, creating evocative but disembodied sonic collages under the guise of his two-pronged alias (Spooky comes from a television commercial and That Subliminal Kid from a William S. Burroughs novel). He also writes articles under his given name. While

his writing can be almost musical in its stream of consciousness, the music Mr. Miller makes is highly abstract and theoretical, sampling other recordings to comment on their cultural significance. Moving among his aliases, he confounds the traditional roles of performer and critic.

Entering the disorienting world of multiple aliases created by Mr. Miller, Mr. Diggs, Mr. Oldham and others like the rappers Keith Horton (Kool Keith, Dr. Octagon, Black Elvis) and Russell Jones (Ol' Dirty Bastard, Big Baby Jesus, Osirus), the quandary of identity can appear to take place in a funhouse. Because they use so many pseudonyms, even their given names seem to become distorted images of the actual person, who can never truly be recognized. These musicians make identity something joyfully unstable, forever mutating and ultimately mysterious.

"It's a common thing to change your name," one of pop music's most famous name-changers, Bob Dylan (né Robert Zimmerman), said in a 1978 interview with *Playboy* magazine, adding: "It isn't that incredible. Many people do it. Names are labels so we can refer to one another. But deep down inside us, we don't have a name. We have no name." □