LISTENING THROUGH POPULAR MUSIC

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Abstract

What are those listening expectations associated with the popular music that surrounds us, and how do we use them to make sense of this music? The sphere of contemporary Western popular music (roughly post-1955) embodies a rich, ever-evolving syntactic and semantic language. I present a new high-level model for this music’s textural design and apply it to numerous examples from today’s diverse stylistic spectrum. I further discuss this music’s formal language and investigate how these structural principles facilitate appreciation within this “listener-oriented” music. I demonstrate these textural and formal principles across subgenres, examining how this design facilitates specific perceptual inroads audiences might use to connect to this music. I subsequently repurpose V. Kofi Agawu’s application of Topic Theory toward contemporary Western popular music, revealing how this music constructs rich semantic networks which help explain “how the work means”.
Acknowledgments

For the music

and for Katya.

At the beginning and the end of this,

alone, were there, waiting for me

to play.
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Introduction

“If a song establishes itself within the pop genre, then I listen with certain expectations. I can become bored more easily by a pop song that doesn’t play by its own rules than by a contemporary composition that is repetitive and static.”

— David Byrne, *How Music Works*

What are those listening expectations associated with the popular music that surrounds us, and how do we use them to make sense of this music? As musicologist Leonard B. Meyer once stated, “Embodied musical meaning is ... a product of expectation” (35). The sphere of contemporary Western popular music (roughly post-1955) embodies a rich, ever-evolving language of musical and extramusical signifiers that facilitate meaning. My goal here is to highlight properties of this music that uncover a perspective on how we listen to contemporary Western popular music and what we listen for, that is, how the music “works”. How might listeners immersed in this tradition parse this music within its cultural context in order to connect to it? As we will see, there exist common textural and formal devices that support a topical process of sensemaking for listeners.

What do I mean by contemporary Western popular music? The second half of this chapter will discuss the historical boundary I use for the term “contemporary.” In attempting to describe the more problematic subdomain of contemporary “popular” music and its associated listening expectations, musicologists have noted numerous normative features:

1 By “embodied” Meyer means to indicate expectation of events based on prior events of the same type, i.e. the expectation of musical gestures based on prior musical gestures.
• Modal, tonal constructions consisting largely of root position triads.
  ○ In looking at the genre of rock, Walter Everett noted that more than 98% of these pop-rock examples would be classified as tonal with the greatest percentage further amenable to standard Schenkerian treatment.²
  ○ In Dmitri Tymoczko’s detailed analysis of the intersection between rock chord progressions and voiceleading, he demonstrates the prevalence of a “heavily diatonic chromaticism”.
  ○ In comparison with numerous classical composers, Tymoczko has also demonstrated that nearly 90% of triads in rock occur in root position with very few sevenths:

![Figure 0.1: Rock Triad Inversion Proportions](image)

**Figure 0.1: Rock Triad Inversion Proportions³**

² Everett also notes that much rock avoids standard Schenkerian descents, e.g. The Beatles’ “Julia” and “The Long and Winding Road.”
³ “Proportion of Inversions” chart taken from Tymoczko’s website. This data comes from the Temperley/de Clercq and the McGill Billboard project databases.
• 4/4 meter with rhythmic emphasis on the backbeats (beats 2 and 4).

• Standard instrumentation featuring drums, a dedicated bass instrument, keyboards/guitars, and vocalists, often with other melodic instruments (e.g. guitar, sax).

• Modular forms including verses, choruses, and bridge sections.

While the normative presence of these and other features certainly help establish listening expectations I incorporate into my own perspective, there is no question that countless examples defy such norms. Everett’s own comparison of tonal harmonic function between the most popular rock songs of 1957-58 and those of 1999-2000 reveals a move from an extremely homogeneous traditional harmonic function toward a much wider variance in practice. Indeed, at the far end of the contemporary spectrum of these hits lie very weakly tonal or octatonic songs like Portishead’s “All Mine” (1997) and KoЯn’s “Hey Daddy” (1999) respectively. By Everett’s estimation, the former work’s “E-flat tonic is suggested largely by vocal assertion” while KoЯn’s song buries “the pentatonic and major scales in the distant past. The introduction and verse of their song ‘Hey Daddy’ is made from five pitches of the 23 octatonic scale on B” (Everett).

The reality is that even popular audiences in the 1990s championed music within a wide range of harmonic practice, sending these singles to the top of the charts. The same exceptions can be demonstrated with regards to the other key features. Led Zeppelin’s “Four Sticks” with both 5/8 (verses) and 6/8 (choruses), The Beatles’ “Eleanor Rigby” in its dismissal of conventional instrumentation in favor of overdubbed string quartets, and the countless internationally revered “Intelligent Dance Music” artists making “electronic listening music” where timbre, noise, and evolving

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4 As originally described in the liner notes of Warp Records’ seminal 1992 compilation Artificial Intelligence.
rhythms are the chief currency. For audiences, these works are no less popular music for their deviance from the above norms. Indeed, their deviances are often an effective and memorable highlight of such works. If these were Byrne’s “rules” which when broken lead to boredom, how can these deviations remain among the key points of interest for these songs?

While such song outliers are easy to find, one might wonder how relatively prevalent they are. Unfortunately, given the ever-expanding and stylistically omnivorous contemporary musical landscape, it can be challenging to gather an accurate assessment of these features across popular music as a whole (we note the above harmonic studies are restricted, loosely, to rock and pop). Unlike days past, examining commercially prominent examples from the Billboard charts is increasingly less and less representative of popular music in practice. The sea change occurring in the music industry over the last 18 or so years is making these tools an increasingly questionable proxy for popular listening practice. Instrumental indie bands like This Will Destroy You and EDM (electronic dance music) artist Squarepusher have amassed huge audiences, playing sold-out shows around the world without putting so much as a dent in the charts. Such features are constantly up against what is available (i.e. commercially dominant) and what can be easily quantified (e.g. music with chords), making a corpus suitable for such general technical conclusions currently out of reach.

But the question of how prevalent such musical outliers are departs from the purpose of this dissertation which is not to question the validity of these preexisting syntactic norms. In the context of musicological inquiry, a structural perspective

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5 Music-centric file-sharing pioneer Napster went online June, 1999.

6 As an example, two dominant corpora, the Temperley/de Clercq corpora and the McGill Billboard project are based on Rolling Stone magazine’s list of the “500 Greatest Songs of All Time,” and Billboard charts respectively.
strives for more than mere technical summation; it offers insight that hopefully intersects meaningfully with the work and its audience’s own aesthetic values. Indeed, if we look beyond the superficial normative features earlier cited, we can uncover a listening perspective that, while subsuming such deviations (however variant), also more easily approaches the difficult question of how audiences find meaning in this music on its own terms.

As a first clue to such a perspective, in his comparison between how popular and classical music engenders meaning, aesthetic philosopher Theodore Gracyk discusses the devices Led Zeppelin’s “D’yer Mak’er” and “Black Dog” employ to convey culturally rooted semantics, in this case their sense of humor:

“The important point is that the humor of ‘D’yer Mak’er’ and ‘Black Dog’ display musical intelligence. However, their humor is not confined to the intentionality that arises from expression through expectations centered around the song’s tonic. The song’s arrangements are the key to their humor, rather than the movement of tones and of harmony formed through voice-leading ... instead of aiming at the closure of the music’s final tonic, the music subordinates harmony to the role of support for melody, rhythm, and language (166).”

In sympathy with such insights, the structural perspective I present is grounded in this music’s textural design (the arrangement between rhythm, harmony, and melody), supplementing these principles with key formal devices. I demonstrate this model through numerous preeminent examples, many of which are non-normative with respect to the above features, e.g. Squarepusher’s harmonically ambivalent, noisy, spectral narrative in “303 Scopem Hard” and The Beatles’ left-field instrumental arrangement for “Eleanor Rigby” that also does without backbeat accents.
Given the stylistic diversity of even the examples above, one might reasonably doubt such a unifying perspective. But today’s rich aesthetic diversity itself suggests its usefulness. Turning the argument about anthropologically, I would suggest listeners immersed in popular culture’s multifarious musical landscape can reasonably be expected to develop listening practices that instinctively uncover common patterns within their soundscapes, now ever-expanding into newly available (and randomly shuffled’) genres due to listening habits facilitated by Pandora, Spotify, YouTube, etc. Quite simply, a block of songs that begins with Bob Dylan’s lyrically transportational “Tangled up in Blue”, proceeds with Beck’s harmonically iconoclastic “Lonesome Tears”™, continues into the odd-time beat dismantling of Venetian Snares’ “Tache”, and concludes with Björk’s hit collaboration with Congolese percussionists Konono Nº1 (“Earth Intruders”) featuring electric likembé and dismissing backbeats, would now, more than ever, be an unremarkably common experience. Searching for unifying, high-level patterns is central to how we make sense of such a non-regional world and is in many ways the cognitive backbone behind our variously connected, intertextual culture. As much as such patterns emerge in response to the music, popular music’s natural “listener-oriented” practice, as musicologist V. Kofi Agawu describes classical music, encourages music makers to create in response to how people listen. It is from the springboard of such a listener-oriented premise that our own deep dive into this music’s various realizations, and their shared functional principles, departs.

Despite acknowledging important musical norms that inform expectations, I have not established what I mean by “popular” music. Indeed, a technical description of a genre’s normative practice cannot exist prior to defining the genre itself — how would we know what music to analyze for such trends? We arrive at a philosophical

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7 e.g. as in the random sorting of iPod Shuffle.
8 as discussed at length by Everett.
quandary with practical aesthetic implications. If we hope to explore popular musical meaning, we must acknowledge the cultural context critical to its boundaries, however fuzzy they may be.

As Gracyk describes, “popular” has remained open to a variety of overlapping and even conflicting interpretations. An immediate definition already problematized above might simply measure the extent of popular appeal, e.g. quantified by record sales. Clearly this aesthetically agnostic definition excludes less successful artists making music stylistically identical to their mainstream peers. Another measure might track the moving target between perceived “high” and “low” culture, e.g. Louis Armstrong’s Hot Five as received in 1920s nightclubs versus the same work’s musicological scrutiny today. One might propose popular music to be that with intent of widespread appeal, thus recovering artists that did not achieve widespread commercial success including, as Gracyk indicates, artists like Yoko Ono. Alas, many subcultures’ music we might wish to include within our purview specifically adopt strategies to defeat their music’s commercial appeal (e.g. punk). A final ontology includes music defined as popular only within the context of the subculture that produced it, e.g. Frank Zappa in concert but not as presented at a musicology conference (Gracyk 7-8). One might propose an additional definition to the above set, e.g. music that is stylistically “similar” to music of “reasonable” commercial success, i.e., popular by genre. Nonetheless the boundaries of “how similar” and “how commercially successful” remain significantly arguable points with non-trivial aesthetic consequences.

Thus, I resign myself to the same position on “popular” which Gracyk presents in his own well-considered conclusion: “In short, ‘popular music’ designates what philosophers call an open concept. No one expects precise criteria for using the phrase, and its scope of application continues to expand and contract” (8). This is to acknowledge both the usefulness and limitations of all the above ontologies and the
necessity for a certain degree of situational flexibility.

The first part of the work proceeds to establish my structural model as seen through prominent musical examples drawn from genres ranging from rock, to rap, to EDM, to folk, describing key structural features in the textural (Chapter 1) and formal (Chapter 2) domains. Developing a perspective on contemporary Western popular music’s high-level structural design is an important, tangible mechanism toward our understanding of this music’s unique affect. Finally, in Chapter 3 I use this structural model in conjunction with methods of topical analysis established by Agawu to demonstrate a method for answering the question he posed for classical music: “how the work means.” Throughout, I hope to evolve our baseline understanding of popular music to make fruitful comparisons between works, honing in on those important details which lie beyond the normative.

Following publications from major influential thinkers such as Theodor Adorno’s scathing 1941 treatise “On Popular Music”, popular musical aesthetics have a long history of being considered commercially tainted and unworthy of such a perspective by mainstream intellectuals, even morally beneath the sophistication of art music. Gracyk points out that while there have been numerous recent inroads into treating popular musical culture as a topic of legitimate sociological inquiry, aesthetic issues remain largely ignored if not outright dismissed (6).

The Original Crossover Music: The Transition into Contemporary Western Popular Music

Though the domain of my popular musical research is by no means limited to a

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9 Gracyk continues on page 29: “the academic journal Psychology of Music still publishes research on music education that posits a preference for popular music as evidence of a failure of music education.”
single musical genre, it will chronologically begin with the birth of rock and roll. This revolution in music rapidly replaced big band genres as America’s dominant form of popular music. While a full historical account of this complex musical trajectory and its international impact lies outside the scope of this dissertation, some historical context surrounding this dramatic transition will help frame this paper’s musical inquiry.

Rock and roll’s origins have consistently been described as a meeting between rhythm and blues and country and western music (Bogdanov). While the former discipline was characteristically black, originally labelled as “race music” on Billboard’s charts until 1949 (Whitburn), and the latter characteristically white, cross pollination between both cultures of musicians and their audiences was critical to each genre’s development, resulting in rock’s earliest universally popular incarnation, rockabilly. As 1950s rock progenitor Chuck Berry explained to music journalist Neil Strauss, in many of the theaters he performed in,

“Whites were on one side and the blacks on the other. And the whites responded well to black music (the blues) while the blacks responded well to white music (country). So, in part by trying to please both audiences simultaneously, rock and roll came to be” (Strauss 461).

To this extent, rock and roll’s origin is inextricably tied to America’s post-war struggles for racial integration and the Baby Boomer generation’s rejection of parental values.

The big band swing jazz music that preceded World War II then dominated 70% of record sale profits (Swing: The Velocity of Celebration). These large dance bands (typically ranging from 12 to 25 players) featured saxophone and brass sections over uptempo, swung rhythms which often left room for instrumental improvisation. Art-
ists like Coleman Hawkins and Lester Young had placed the saxophone at the center of jazz, liberating it from previous novelty (Ibid). Though all swing bands featured “blue notes”, Count Basie popularized a propulsive style that derived directly from the shared formal structure of the blues. While vocals were common at prescribed refrains the instrumental arrangements were generally the focus, typically with tight, polyphonic textures, dramatic coloristic effects, and flashy solos over complex, syncopated, swung rhythms: Chick Webb’s “Harlem Congo” maintains an up-tempo swung snare pulse throughout, over which lyrical saxophones are soon joined by fast, dodging brass lines, eventually (0:40) arriving at a swinging, polyphonic texture. Benny Goodman’s 1937 hit “Sing, Sing Sing”\(^{11}\) begins with a syncopated tom drum part over which a repeating 3+2+3 brass line lets flamboyant trumpet and sax parts jump and bounce — catalyzing the day’s dance crazes.

There were, of course, notable collaborations between swing bands and vocal stars like Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald, but as Jazz historian Peter Soderbergh described, “Until the war most singers were props. After the war they became the stars and the role of the bands was gradually subordinated”\(^{12}\) (136-137). The wide range of big band styles were as varied as their bandleaders/arrangers, themselves often instrumental virtuosos whose playing helped define each band’s unique sound.

Several key factors surrounding World War II transitioned jazz away from its dominant, popular appeal, leaving room for other genres to take its place. In order to get major American record companies to pay musicians royalties, the American Federation of Musicians began a two year strike on August 1, 1942. No new records

\(^{10}\) e.g. Duke Ellington’s 1931 song “It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got That Swing).”
\(^{11}\) as performed by the Benny Goodman Orchestra.
\(^{12}\) Perhaps one of the most notable artists of this transition is Frank Sinatra who had already been introduced to audiences with the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra, e.g. performing Blue Skies (see link in discography).
could be recorded with instrumentalists during this time. Vocalists like Frank Sinatra and Bing Crosby thus set out on their own, recording new works with only vocal backing groups, leading to a crooning style of music palpably different from the instrumentally driven swing tunes. Following the strike, jazz artists themselves began to turn away from big band swing as deteriorating economic conditions made these ensembles prohibitively expensive with many artists also drafted into service.\(^{13}\)

Contemporaneously, jazz artists including Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie were leading the discipline in a whole new direction which ratcheted up the music’s harmonic and rhythmic complexity, instrumental virtuosity, and tempos into what would become bebop. Bebop heralded jazz’s move from a discipline focused on a commercial, dance-driven audience toward music guided by the artistic and technical goals of its musicians. Parker himself ascribes boredom with existing jazz tropes as a key motivator:

“I’d been getting bored with the stereotyped changes that were being used, … and I kept thinking there’s bound to be something else. I could hear it sometimes. I couldn’t play it … I was working over ‘Cherokee,’ and, as I did, I found that by using the higher intervals of a chord as a melody line and backing them with appropriately related changes, I could play the thing I’d been hearing. It came alive.” (Gerhard)

Likewise, Max Roach’s innovative drumming style divorced the kick and snare from their roles as time keepers, using them gesturally in dialogue with the horns as a more subtle sense of time splashed across the ride cymbal.

\(^{13}\) e.g. bandleader Glenn Miller was drafted in 1942 and eventually killed in service. During his time at war, he formed the Glenn Miller Army Air Force Band, helping modernize the army band.
The result of this and other such innovations was the move from a popular to a more purely artistic agenda built not for dancing but for listening to the exploration of musicians constantly playing with the music’s sense of cohesion. A live 1948 recording of Parker’s take on “How High the Moon”, including Roach on drums and Miles Davis on trumpet, is a good example of this music in transition. Here, the main theme, loosely delivered by Davis, is easily discarded at 0:44 following the intro in favor of the soloists’ melodically abstract elaborations. The soloing takes center stage, with the composed, thematic material acting largely as bookending signifiers. In comparison with their popular forebears, this jazz eschews melodic repetition and ensemble part-writing in favor of personal, improvised exploration. In the particularly poignant conclusion at 2:34, we hear Davis holding down the reprised theme while Parker surrounds him with a sort of funhouse counterpoint, smearing the phrases with freely administered, scalar responses. Likewise, Roach’s drumming and the percussive piano comping from Al Haig offer a much more fluid bounce than that of the big bands.

Though this music would evolve into what is now mainstream jazz, not all jazz artists followed suit into these more rarefied regions. The necessarily smaller bands used newly available amplification and a new style to sustain the volumes and danceable energies audiences still craved. Former swing band artist Louis Jordan was one of the leading exponents of “jump blues”, a swinging, blues-based dance style with prominent vocal parts that drive the work’s narrative. Swing’s horns were now wilder, blown harder for a rougher aesthetic to match the energy of fervent dancing.\(^\text{14}\)

We can already hear rock’s beginnings in songs like the 1949 hit “Saturday Night Fish Fry” as Jordan cries out, “It was rockin’ / It was rockin’ / You never seen such shufflin’ and scufflin’ till the break of dawn” during the chorus of this blues in verse / chorus form. The instrumental roles of the piano, guitar, bass, and drums are

\(^{14}\) e.g. Louis Jordan and His Tympany Five performing “Jumpin’ At The Jubilee”.
likewise well defined here, never deviating in support from their respective textural function over which the vocalist delivers the song’s narrative. In this song we hear swing’s intricate, polyphonic horn parts now relegated to subtle harmonic accents or as concluding melodies after the vocal ends, signifying the song’s conclusion. As importantly, the horns are mixed beneath the more dominant electric guitar and the piano’s riffs and rhythms.

In a 1987 interview, Chuck Berry stated that Louis Jordan was indeed his main inspiration. Musicians Roy Orbison and Keith Richards have described the important contribution Berry himself made in fusing the roles of singer and songwriter, directly short-circuiting the Brill Building approach that typified most American popular song of the day. In Richards’ words, “Before 1956 or 7, a singer sung songs and a songwriter wrote them and the twain never did meet and if it was a great song 15 people did versions of it ... he put it back into the troubadour ...” (Hail! Hail! Rock ‘n’ Roll) As Berry, Little Richard, Bo Diddley, and others forged rhythm and blues into more flamboyant, star focused rock and roll, white artists from country and western genres were incorporating these influences into their own “hillbilly” music, creating a new sound called rockabilly.

While jazz developments centered around cosmopolitan urban centers like New York, Chicago, Detroit, and Los Angeles, the southern Appalachian region had long been a cultural melting pot for the poor since the 18th century including a huge population of Ulster-Scots immigrants and blacks brought via slavery. In addition to purely vocal ballads, the dominant original accompanying instruments for the prevalent Irish/Scottish/English/Welsh traditions were strings, specifically the fiddle, as can be

15 “Maybellene” (1955)
16 “Long Tall Sally” (1956)
17 “Bo Diddley” (1955)
heard in brother and sister duo Hobart Smith and Texas Gladden’s rendition of murder ballad “Down In The Willow Garden”. The fiddle would enjoy a featured position in country and western akin to jazz’s saxophone for years to come.

The banjo, which would become central to this music, was derived from instruments of black slaves and later popularized during 19th century minstrelsy. The zither, dulcimer, and eventually the guitar were subsequently added to form the string bands identified with the country and western sound of the early 20th century. African-American delta blues (itself influenced by gospel music) migrated into the region around this time, adding “blue” notes and other genre-derived inflections into the musical and narrative vocabulary of many white artists, e.g. Doc Watson’s “Sitting on Top of the World”. The Great Depression would migrate many Appalachian musicians to Atlanta, where recording studios would package, market and present the genre’s first stars to the world.\footnote{e.g. Jimmie Rodgers, here performing his 1928 hit Waiting for a Train (www.youtube.com/watch?v=gbzc77TZ6PA)}

By the 1930s, country musicians from the lower great plains had incorporated jazz into their own large string bands, now playing “hot”, uptempo dance music widely popular at white dance halls. This music was dubbed Western swing and was the countrified cousin of big band jazz music, including dense arrangements and improvisation amidst rural themes. Cecil Brower’s 1948 “Dill Pickle Rag”\footnote{e.g. Cecil Brower and His Kilocycle Cowboys performing “Dill Pickle Rag” at KCKA, Odessa, Texas in 1948 (www.youtube.com/watch?v=Se-09LTZmpc)} is a duple time Western swing lead by flashy, catchy violin melodies. Unlike urban jazz, the rest of the strings bounce together in an unsyncopated accompaniment — without drums.

The differences between cosmopolitan big band swing and the rustic Western version were many. According to the Country Music Hall of Fame:

\footnote{e.g. Jimmie Rodgers, here performing his 1928 hit Waiting for a Train (www.youtube.com/watch?v=gbzc77TZ6PA)}
\footnote{e.g. Cecil Brower and His Kilocycle Cowboys performing “Dill Pickle Rag” at KCKA, Odessa, Texas in 1948 (www.youtube.com/watch?v=Se-09LTZmpc)}
“Drums were scorned by early country musicians as being “too loud” and “not pure” — so much so, in fact, one story has Bob Wills’ drummer being forced to play behind a curtain at the Grand Ole Opry in December 1944.”

Eventually however, drums inevitably found a home in Western bands (and later, country at large), even if not in as prominent a position as within their jazz counterparts. The resistance to incorporating jazz elements, including horns, was also tied to resistance towards racial integration and the corresponding disdain for progressive urban culture many country DJ’s felt fans would react against. KXLA disc jockey George Saunders once declared, “Let’s stick to strings and leave the hardware where it belongs” (La Chapelle 97). Importantly however, these traditions remained in constant musical dialogue with many bands incorporating blues and jazz elements. Music historian Peter La Chapelle stated that,

“Jazz style improvisation provided migrants with a powerful way to assert a new Okie modernism by allowing Okie performers to experiment with an ostensibly urban style while maintaining a connection to country music’s purportedly rural and populist roots” (La Chapelle 95).

Indeed, La Chapelle reports Western musician Merle Haggard describing an important synergy between these two seemingly antithetical notions, with improvisation reinforcing the populist celebration of the “unschooled”, in stark contrast with improvisation’s role within the more “sophisticated” swing jazz bands: “Western

20 e.g. Tex Williams was known for his blues talking style of vocals as in his 1947 hit, “Smoke! Smoke! Smoke! (That Cigarette)” (www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWXbVsMkJU)
swing is nothing more than a group of talented country boys, unschooled in music, but playing the music they feel, beating a solid two-four rhythm to the harmonies that buzz around their brains. When it escapes in all its musical glory, my friend, you have Western swing” (La Chapelle).

In a more dramatic display of the “unschooled” aesthetic, 1940s County Barn Dances founder, Bert “Foreman” Phillips, once instructed his house bandleader Hank Penny to play “more hillbilly” and fire musicians who were “too good ... for the type of people we play to” (La Chapelle 97).

World War II would provide the same material obstacles to Western swing as it did its jazz cousin. Southern artists who came up in this tradition were also exposed to jump blues, gospel, and country boogie and so began writing their own songs for small combos, extending their “hillbilly” roots into dance-driven tunes that showcased bluesy, outspoken vocals with the newfound energy of the electric guitar over swung backbeats. The instrumental support was the rhythm and blues combo consisting of guitar, piano, drums, and bass, with occasional remaining vestiges of the jazz horn section for accents or brief countermelodies. With the electric guitar often dominant in these smaller ensembles, its homophonic design greatly simplified (and clarified) the vocal support relative to big-band music, often played by the vocalist themselves.

Piano playing followed a similar style, implementing showy flares over bouncing, homophonic blues progressions with root-embracing bass lines. In Jerry Lee Lewis’ 1957 hit “Whole Lotta Shakin’ Going On”, the instrumental combo of guitar drums and piano uniformly pound out the backbeat as one cohesive rhythm section, consistently cycling their blues progression. This unified throbbing texture becomes the backdrop for Lewis’ flamboyant vocal narrative punctuated by the occasional,

21 country’s response to boogie-woogie, e.g. Arthur Smith’s 1948 Guitar Boogie (www.youtube.com/watch?v=qTBQSwqB3ac)
pounding piano lead. At the fifth verse, a quiet breakdown prepares us for the big finish two progressions later: a simple, homophonic texture of repeating phrases have been used as the palette for an extremely clear, formal arc driven by the vocal lead and a simple dynamic shift.

Musical innovations were continuing on the rhythm and blues side of this music as well. The music’s now clear and cohesive ensemble roles focused on those underlying, repetitive beats driving the blues framework in support of vocal showmanship. To this effect, several rhythmic innovations occurred. Charles Conner, Little Richard’s original drummer recalled,

“In rhythm and blues you had a shuffle with a backbeat, but Little Richard wanted something different ... with more energy ... So Richard brought me down to the train station in Macon, Georgia in 1954, and he said ‘Charles, listen to the choo-choo, choo-choo, choo-choo.’ I said you probably want eighth notes or sixteenth notes. We went back to his house couple of days later ... and we came up with that beat” (Koskoff 461).

Songs like “Tutti Frutti” (1955) and “Long Tall Sally” (1956) featured Richard’s new beat and became hits, crossing over from rhythm and blues into the pop charts, popular with both black and white audiences (Billboard Magazine). Likewise, Bo Diddley introduced his signature “Bo Diddley Beat”, a syncopated rhythm tied to the African-American plantation Juba dance (also known as hambone), executed on electric guitar with maracas and drums backing him up. The eponymous 1955 song was an instant rhythm and blues hit. Artists like Bo Diddley and Chuck Berry began placing the electric guitar, an instrument preferred by white audiences, at the center of this music, helping them launch popular crossover careers (Koskoff 461).
Both African-American rhythm and blues and white rockabilly artists relied on standard blues progressions, allowing the regularized combos backing these stars to step in with little to no rehearsal. Bruce Springsteen reports as the leader of one such back-up band in the early 1970s that Chuck Berry offered no set list, key signatures, or even advance notice as to which song was next, providing only foot stomps to cue the initial downbeat (*Hail! Hail! Rock ‘n’ Roll*).

Memphis label Sun studios owner Sam Phillips has been cited as saying he could make a fortune with a white singer that sounded black (Bogdanov, et al.). While Elvis Presley’s string of five singles for Philips between 1954 and 1955 remained regional hits until his move to RCA, Bill Haley recorded “Rock Around the Clock” (1954) in New York. Following its use in the 1955 film *Blackboard Jungle*, the song launched the international rock and roll craze, forever linking it with new teen culture (Dawson) and becoming the first rock and roll song to break into the Billboard pop charts where it remained for 8 weeks (Bronson). As predicted, with Phillips’ growing stable of white Rockabilly artists including Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis, Roy Orbison, and many others, Sun amassed top selling talent playing blues forms to white audiences and establishing the early Memphis production style that would define rockabilly’s canonical sound.

By the time Presley released “Heartbreak Hotel” in 1956, his first million selling single, rockabilly’s successful fusion of country and R&B had made its mark as youth culture’s new popular music. Like the work of Lewis, Berry, and Presley’s other contemporaries, this song is driven by its vocalist’s unique, affected performance, indeed beginning with the theme nearly a capella amidst light, accompanying band hits. It’s worth noting that for an early, major example of new youth culture, the song is neither loud nor dance-friendly. Its appeal lies in its soulful, sensual narrative delivered over the consistent pulse of a tastefully rendered, repeating ensemble accompaniment.
The birth of this new contemporary popular music highlights several features that have been important since its emergence and will resurface in subsequent discussions. These include:

- A shared language of simple formal devices, e.g. the blues, is used to allow musicians to quickly learn to play together while simultaneously providing a common language for listeners.
  - These shared, repeating forms allow the focus for both musicians and listeners to shift toward their gestural implementation, e.g. stylized vocals (Little Richard’s signature “woo!”’s), expressive, instrumental gestures (Chuck Berry’s deep guitar bends), or extra-musical stylistic devices (e.g. Jerry Lee Lewis’ inevitable leap to his feet while playing the piano). Indeed the devices themselves, along with the vocals, help structure these forms which often otherwise remain musically constant (e.g. Bo Diddley’s guitar work between singing during the vocal breaks in “Bo Diddley”).
  - Likewise, with simple, assumed formal models, the focus shifts to specific elements of texture — repetitive rhythms (Little Richard and Bo Diddley’s developments in the beat) and stylized vocal melodies (Elvis and Roy Orbison’s crooning).

- Vocalists have become the stars, now often writing their own music. This helps develop the cult of authenticity surrounding artists delivering their own narratives. In corollary, instrumental support operates as a homophonic background catalyst, sustaining the songs relatively constant energy.

- The now smaller combo form provides specific roles for each musician, simultaneously providing more instrumentally parsable music for listeners.

- Artist image has always played a particularly critical role in this music’s function.
  - At the birth of rock and roll the most important artistic image was that which conveyed race and its associated topics. While black musicians struggled, often successfully, for crossover success, white rockabilly artists
with country roots launched the music into the international spotlight. In a particularly poignant example, Pat Boone’s tamed down, whitewashed, cover versions of Little Richard’s songs surpassed the author’s own pop chart success. Indeed, this phenomenon would resurface in American popular music amidst the 1980s popular success of rap music.

○ More generally, rock and roll and other contemporaneous movements (e.g. the folk revival) helped demarcate a distinct youth culture. For rock, this was signified by its loud, high-energy rebellion. This aspect has remained a critical hallmark of the music and the genres it influenced to this day, reinvented with each generation.

Rock, in synergy with other parallel genres, would of course continue to parent, grandparent or otherwise influence other concurrent musical sub-languages in a long lineage of styles including folk, metal, pop, punk, funk, disco, hip-hop, and electronic dance music to name but a tiny subsection. We now turn our attention back to this contemporary landscape as we introduce a structurally founded model that offers a specific perspective on how this music might be heard and finally, understood.

\[22\]
\[Pat Boone performing “Tutti Frutti” (1957) (www.youtube.com/watch?v=DAwBa8Pqi6Y)\]
Chapter 1: Texture

In this chapter I will focus on textural design — the arrangement of rhythm, harmony, melody, and instrumentation. My perspective on texture also takes into account local temporal effects, that is, small-scale formal implications at the level of phrases. I will begin with a general inquiry into texture, using examples from other musical contexts in contrast with contemporary Western popular music. I will then introduce my model for the textural design of contemporary Western popular music. Following a description of this textural model’s basic principles, I demonstrate how the model is realized through several songs across musical genres. I then use these popular musical analyses as the foundation for a listening perspective that suggests these structural principles are tied to specific musical effects critical to listener appreciation. Such a perspective will help establish a “baseline” of listening expectations which can then be used to examine how specific works uniquely realize (or thwart) these basic structural tenets. In comparing how different works achieve such effects, I hope to uncover fruitful interpretations as to what is at stake for listeners, and the mechanism by which this music facilitates its process of audience engagement.

Other Textures

The textural design of music across cultures and time periods varies tremendously. Since texture is so fundamental to musical organization, its impact on audience listening expectations is likewise tremendous. Indeed, texture is inseparable from the sound of these distinct musical traditions which derive from listening expectations shared by composers and their audience. To dramatize this point I will briefly consider some alternative textural organizations found in music history.

Below is the opening from the Sanctus for SATB choir from Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina’s late mass Missa Aeterna Christi munera, composed toward the end of the 16th century.
Missa Aeterna Christi munera - Sanctus

Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1525? - 1594)

Figure 1.1: Missa Aeterna Christi munera, Sanctus, mm. 1-15
The foundation of imitative counterpoint that motivates the composition is immediately evident, creating a smooth, homogeneous texture of polyphony. Unlike the single, dominant vocal lead of most Western popular music, these four voices hand off melodic focus, imitating the melodies of their predecessors in transposition, an effect seen openly over the first three measures, again at measures 13-15, and beyond. The modal harmony here, avoiding the repeating progressions of contemporary popular music, is largely a consequence of these combined melodies carefully managing their movements from dissonance to consonance via those prescriptive rules that would become the archetype for strict, contrapuntal vocal practice. Indeed, unlike popular music, the music in this excerpt never repeats, narratively proceeding by resetting imitative phrases into ever novel ensemble constructions. The result is a smooth, blended textural surface which stands in stark contrast with the easily parseable, texturally distinct layers of contemporary Western popular music.

The rhythm of the work presents perhaps the most abstract textural element. While keeping in mind that works of this era were written without modern time signatures or measures, we see varying emphasis on different beats during different passages, in clear contrast with the repeating rhythmic cells and steady meters of Western popular music. Phrases often begin on weak beats of the measure, sustaining melismas across bar lines while avoiding downbeats as per the soprano and alto’s “Sanctus” entrance at measure 7, beat 4. Indeed, in nearly every measure we can find a variation among the voices, some accenting beats one and three and others accenting beats two or four. In measure 10 for example, the voices converge together onto the downbeat, completing “Sanctus”, but the inner voices begin the next phrase immediately at beat 2 while the outer voices continue to bisect the measure, proceeding a beat

\[23\]

While repetition of textural elements is absent, some formal repetition is not uncommon: the *Hosanna in excelsis* element in Mass movements often reuses the music following the *Sanctus*. 

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\[23\] While repetition of textural elements is absent, some formal repetition is not uncommon: the *Hosanna in excelsis* element in Mass movements often reuses the music following the *Sanctus*. 

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23 While repetition of textural elements is absent, some formal repetition is not uncommon: the *Hosanna in excelsis* element in Mass movements often reuses the music following the *Sanctus*. 

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later. This constant staggering greatly contributes to the forward motion of the work, never settling at hard seams, dovetailing phrases until the final cadence.

While a steady tactus can be felt by near-constant quarter note motion, this effect is again spread throughout the ensemble and not the domain of a specific instrument or group of instruments. Here it becomes impossible to tease apart the rhythm, harmony or even melody into consistent, discrete instrumental roles.

In contrast, Javanese Gamelan music (karawitan) features often large ensembles of mostly metallophones, gongs, and other percussion instruments. Melodic instruments like the stringed rebab and vocalists are also common. In this tradition, all instruments are divided into several specific ensemble roles. The slenthem, saron demung and saron panerus metallophones together perform a one-octave version of a work’s “core” melody known as the balungan. The balungan can vary widely in length, aligning with the chosen cyclic form of this repeating music (Perlman 139).

Elaborations over this melody from the other instruments are played concurrently, creating what has been described as a heterophonic texture — multiple concurrent variations of the same melody. In the trans-notation below of an excerpt from the work Ladrang Wilujeng Sléndro Manyura\textsuperscript{24}, the balungan group at top is elaborated upon by a bonang barung (pitched gongs), a rebab (bowed string instrument), a gendèr barung (metallophone), and a gambang (xylophone):

\textsuperscript{24} The title of the composition itself is Wilujeng. Ladrang represents the chosen cyclic form for this particular realization upon which the composition’s melody is superimposed. Multiple such forms may be possible in this regard. Sléndro Manyura indicates the particular tuning and “pathet” (system of tonal emphasis) of the ensemble used for this rendition.
The imitative melodies evolving from the beginning of the work create a homogeneous blend of melody shared by the entire ensemble. Each individual part’s specific elaborations and its temporal offset from the other parts diminish our ability to hear a single voice as dominant, let alone narrative, in favor of a collaborative melodic image. Unlike the carefully managed dissonances of Palestrina or the mostly tonal landscape of Western popular music, this music eschews notions of harmony or intervallic regulation. Concurrent melody and cyclic forms, punctuated at evenly spaced intervals within the cycle by various gongs, are the focus.

A final example of both similar and alternative musical texture can be found in Hindustani classical music. This tradition from Northern India received much attention in the West during the 1960s due in large part to George Harrison and The Beatles’ association with Hindustani sitar performer/composer Ravi Shankar. Today, references to this music can be heard across contemporary Western popular genres, from the tabla rhythms in Missy Elliott’s “Get Ur Freak On” (2001) to the sitar opening of Metallica’s “Wherever I May Roam” (1991).
A drone pervades the Hindustani composition, played by a *tanpura* (or a modern, electronic surrogate), most often voicing a perfect fifth or fourth. A music with little notion of harmony, this static interval serves to center the scale and melodic framework employed, known as a *rāga*, that soloists explore. Hindustani music is a monodic tradition: a single melodic line is presented with the manner of improvised melodic construction being of utmost importance.

Following the unmetered opening *alap* in which the soloist freely explores the tones of the *rāga*, we come to the *gat*, (or in vocal music the *cīz*) upon which the *tabla* (small hand drums) enters establishing the *tāl*, the rhythmic pattern that underlies the rest of the composition (works with multiple *tāl* also exist). The texture is then completed as the melodic solo voice rejoins over the drone within the metrical framework established by the rhythms of the *tabla*. At this point we can hear certain similarities to Western popular musical texture: a melodic, narrative lead over repeating rhythms with independent instrumentation managing each. While such similarities likely facilitated Western popular appreciation of this music, it is worth pointing out some key differences in how these textural roles are tied to form and its ramifications for listeners.

The repeating framework of the *tāl* typically extends well beyond the beat durations of Western popular music’s repeating rhythmic cells and displays more elaborate metrical groupings. In the *tāl* design (*theka*) below, mnemonic beat syllables or *bol* (including a “-” that indicates sustaining for an additional beat) may be labeled with "+" (initial strong beat, or *sam*), 0 (unaccented beat, or *khali*) or an integer above 1 (secondary accents, or *tali*), below 2 and 3. The older *Dhammar tāl* consists of 14 beats in groups of 5, 2, 3, and 4:

```
+ 2 0 3
|: ka ddhi Ta dhi Ta dhaa - Ga Di na Di Na taa - :|
```
Audience members often participate during these concerts by gesturally counting the accents of the tāl using a series of claps (for tali) and waves (for khalī). Audiences delight in arriving with the performers’ on the sam that begins each cycle following often elaborate improvisations. Such effects offer a simple musicological understanding of the work that has no parallel in Western musical listening practice.25

Later in the composition, a soloist’s improvisations focus on increasing speed. Indeed this ordering reflects the formal nature of the Hindustani composition itself, beginning with the slow melodic explorations of the alap, proceeding with the rhythmic introduction of the tāl at the gat, after which a series of increasing tempos are used at different developmental stages. As ethnomusicologist Alison Arnold describes:

“The order in which a singer performs different types of improvisation, following the initial presentation of the composition, is characteristic of Hindustani classical music in general: attention first to melody, then to rhythm, then to speed” (Arnold).

Thus we can see how Hindustani classical texture is dynamically focused in various ways throughout the work, conceptually extending into its form as a whole. Though different in design, one might likewise anticipate a synergy between textural and formal principles in contemporary Western popular music. As I will explore in the next chapter, like our discrete, often modular, repetitive textural components, the formal sections of contemporary Western popular songs are themselves discrete, modular, and repetitive in design.

Textural designs are often linked to profound aesthetic goals beyond mere syntax as aesthetic values link to cultural values at large. Later, I investigate this im-

25 The information in the preceding three paragraphs is paraphrased from pages 28-30 of The Rags of North Indian Music by N. A. Jairazbhoy.
important topic for contemporary Western popular music. Here, such couplings include the religious ideals of praise and piety found in Palestrina’s smooth, homogeneous polyphonic surfaces, the controlled ritual of communal interdependence reflected in Javanese Gamelan’s cyclic, collaborative melodies, and the Hindustani artist improvisationally exploring emotional states (rasa) derived from those melodic tones (nada) of spiritual origin with his audience.

**Contemporary Western Popular Music: A Model of Layers**

I propose a model of contemporary Western popular music centered around multiple, perceptually discrete layers of music, concurrent during a performance. Two functional layers define the music’s affect, with other layers bridging or supporting these two dominant poles. I call these layers the *rhythm layer* and the *narrative layer*. The *rhythm layer* includes not only the percussion but all pitched material describing the repeating harmonic and rhythmic structure of the music. In guitar-based rock, this might typically include the drums, bass, and rhythm guitar. “Rhythm” here thus includes the harmonic rhythm. The *narrative layer* is most commonly filled in by vocalists, guitar leads, or keyboard melodies, etc. It is often (but not always) higher in register than most elements from the *rhythm layer*. “Narrative” in this context describes the teleological musical effect of these parts and thus is not limited to lyrical vocals. Indeed the literal narrative of vocals often play an assistive role in this function, but it is not required for the effect I describe.

A key feature of these layers is that they are discretely parseable by ear. Both the narrative layer and the rhythm layer “make sense” on their own though either alone may seem aesthetically incomplete. This aspect of decoupling has several obvious advantages for practitioners. Musical parts can be written easily in isolation — vocal melodies are often written to an already established rhythm layer for example. Further, accepting slight modifications to facilitate cross-layer compatibility, rhythmic
and narrative components have a particular independence. Both these aspects facilitate group songwriting where experimenting with different combinations of rhythmic and melodic ideas often provides a practical way to develop new work. As I will explore, contemporary Western popular music typically displays a close link between the techniques of production and an audience’s own listening strategies.

A related feature is instrumental specialty with respect to textural function. Individual parts often encompass at least one textural aspect of the music, be it harmony, melody, or the underlying rhythmic feel. This facilitates our ability to audibly parse apart this music into its affective constituents. Unlike in Palestrina’s music, each voice clearly describes its own texturally significant, affective contribution which remains more or less consistent throughout the work. This clear association of textural function with instrumental parts that are parseable by ear provides a palpable conduit for listeners to connect directly with this musical material. We are often listening to these discrete textural devices — rhythm, harmony, melody — directly through the parts that own them. These perceptual avenues into the music allow us to better appreciate their affective contributions, e.g. the propelling, rhythmic drive of the drums, the specific harmonic mood set by a synthesizer, the melodic narrative unfolding through a vocal.

Textural specialty also helps listeners develop well-formed expectations for the roles of these instrumental components — audibly, we know what the bass should do. The musical tropes available to these instruments and their relationship with the other forces at work already lives within our ears, often informed by nuanced, genre-specific details (e.g. how the bass in a funk groove should snap and bounce versus its chugging juggernaut in heavy metal). Thus, a foundation for musical meaning is established, helping shift our attention to the details of realization, the deviations. Whether comparing dance artists’ beat constructions, Rap emcees lyrical flow, or other musical features, fans are constantly extracting meaning by honing in on how artists express the details of these genre norms.
**A Canonical Example: "Disintegration"**

Below is a graphic representation of the layering model as applied to one verse over 16 bars of The Cure’s 1989 song “Disintegration” off the album of the same name. The blue tiles represent the self-contained “cells” of each instrumental part. These cells are akin to phrase groups in that they offer clear semantic boundaries palpable for listeners. Here one drum cell is one bar. Excerpted lyric samples are provided for reference in the vocal part, which consists of four simple phrases.

**Figure 1.3: “Disintegration” bars 81-96.**

*Melodic cell: 16 bars, harmonic cell: 4 bars, rhythmic cell: 1 bar*
The Layers and Time

As seen above, these dual layers are realized by constituent textural components that also relate to one another in a nested, temporal manner. Rhythm, harmony, and melody (or a non-melodic narrative lead, e.g. in rap), are typically arranged in this order as a bottom-up hierarchy with the length of phrases increasing as these layers ascend: the foundational rhythm layer (orange) contains phrases having the smallest time frame; the narrative layer (green) having complete phrases of the longest duration. Smaller textural components concatenate beneath components of longer duration using repetition, often with functional variations at key moments — the drum part repeats until a fill at the cadence for example. These durational relationships can be stated concisely by a few simple statements:

**bottom-up hierarchy:**

\[
duration(\text{rhythmic}) \leq duration(\text{harmonic}) \leq duration(\text{narrative})
\]

**nesting:**

\[
duration(\text{narrative}) \% duration(\text{harmonic}) = 0 \\
duration(\text{harmonic}) \% duration(\text{rhythmic}) = 0
\]

where \(duration(\text{rhythmic})\), \(duration(\text{harmonic})\), and \(duration(\text{narrative})\) represent each component’s respective cell lengths.\(^{26}\) Because of the nesting design described above, the repeating harmonic, rhythmic, and narrative cells in this music line up together to create powerful cyclic arrivals.

Contemporary Western popular music’s homophonic design and distinct textural function allows listeners to further parse out the harmonic function, often explicitly defined by the bass in conjunction with elaboration via a guitar, keyboard, or synthe-

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\(^{26}\) The \% operator denotes the remainder of a division operation. For example, \(10 \% 5 = 0\).
sized sound serving a comparable role. The harmonic component, built directly on top of the rhythmic texture, uses time intervals longer than the rhythmic cells, but less than or equal to the duration of melodies in the top level narrative layer. These relationships, based on repetitive cells of increasing duration, help give the rhythm layer the sound of a foundation, built brick by repeating brick beneath the narrative layer.

Other representative features surface from the “Disintegration” example as well. While the complete vocal cell is 16 bars long, the antecedent and consequent phrases are half that, specifically twice as long as the harmonic loop held down in the middle, harmonic row by the electric bass and guitars. It is not unusual to observe such exponential contraction of cell length as we move down the hierarchy, e.g. melodic phrases twice as long as the harmonic cells, and harmonic cells four times as long as the rhythmic cells. However, other, similar variations in nesting are also common.

Likewise, the fundamental structure of each textural component depends on the components below them. The repeating rhythmic cells provide a framework then populated by the instruments driving harmony, which in turn provide the framework over which a narrative melody might operate. The reverse is not true; a modified chord in the harmonic component does not require a modification in the underlying rhythmic framework. Of course, quite often it does imply a modification to the vocal melody. Even when such a melodic modification is not absolutely necessary to avoid unacceptable dissonance, the character of the re-harmonized melody and its narrative implications will be distinctly different, as with Roberta Flack’s vocal arrival into a picardy third at the end of her 1973 version of “Killing Me Softly with His Song”, offering an optimistic closing sentiment. Hip-hop group Fugees’ version (1995) uses a more contemporary, loop-based compositional approach (0:46-1:03) typical of the genre, declining this parting singularity. Lesser details that decorate the fundamental structure of these parts, e.g. occasional drum flourishes, of course do not necessitate
changes in the upper textural parts. Performers mine this gray area, personalizing common, musical tropes with their own style.

It is perhaps an overstatement to suggest too clean a parsing of these textural musical concepts. For example, there is typically an important synergy between the strictly rhythmic framework presented in the drums and the harmonic foundations described by a bass line. Indeed this partnership constitutes the joint affect of the rhythm layer, which I subsequently discuss. Regardless, once a rhythmic framework is established it is common to see more frequent deviations in harmonic pattern (and more harmonic patterns) than underlying rhythmic patterns, and likewise a greater number of narrative (e.g. melodic) patterns than harmonic patterns.

While for notational convenience I will continue illustrating the layering model linearly as above in “Disintegration”, the generalized version of the model is perhaps best illustrated as a wheel rotating at the tempo of the work. Each nested ring in the wheel corresponds to a textural component divided into its repeating cells. The number of cells in adjacent rings is described by a neat, often exponentially increasing multiple, with outer rings having fewer, longer cells than their inner neighbors (this multiple may not always be simply four times as much as below). Like a tape machine, if we imagine a “play head” hovering over the wheel at the twelve o’clock location, we see four times as many rhythm cells cross this point as harmony cells, and four times as many harmony cells as melodic (narrative) cells. Indeed, the cyclic design of this illustration closely mirrors the interlocking, repeating textural thinking that underlies popular music:
Expanded Ensembles and Intermediary Layers

The stratified roles of contemporary Western popular music’s rhythm and narrative layers and their inner textural components make it easy to expand ensembles, creating alternative arrangements that elaborate on these discrete textural aspects. This has the advantage of allowing artists to support foundational textural elements with other parts that add important stylistic references. These additional parts exist in what I label *intermediary layers* and frequently alternate their textural contributions, variously decorating either the rhythm or narrative layers. These supporting contributors may punctuate rhythms in one bar and sing counter melodies in the next, briefly claiming the narrative role.
Stevie Wonder’s 1972 funk classic “Superstition” offers a good example of intermediary layers at work. The song carries a swung 16th note groove built off of Wonder’s famous clavinet part. The studio version is composed of numerous different overdubbed clavinet parts but we can necessarily focus on the loudly mixed lead riff for our purposes. The drum part (also created by Wonder) likewise digs deep into this groove while the bass pulses steadily beneath. In the background, a guitar part picks an E♭m7 chord in sympathy with these swung rhythms, thickening the mix. This repeating rhythm layer cell (ignoring its frequent decorative inflections for clarity) is summarized below:

![Figure 1.5: “Superstition”: Rhythm section](image)

The clavinet part establishes its funky two-bar, E♭m7 groove, bisecting this cell at the second bar by replacing the E♭ downbeat with an important lower neighbor, resolving upward to the chord’s fifth. Note that the staccato sixteenth notes have very little pitch profile on this bright, amplified instrument, becoming percussive gestures detailing the swung groove. Here again, the drum set establishes a simple one-bar cell, grounded by alternating kick and snare. Ongoing subtle variation in its high-hat part helps acknowledge the clavinet’s two-bar cycle, bridging these textural components.
Proportionally identical to "Disintegration’s" relationship with harmonic cell length, the narrative layer’s vocal cell here is 8 bars.

But let’s focus on the horn section entrance in the second half of the verse, 8 bars after the vocal’s entrance. These punchy, repeating trumpet and saxophone melodies add energy to the rhythm layer by elaborating its simple harmony and punctuating the rhythmic groove beneath. More importantly, they don’t distract from the ongoing narrative of Wonder’s vocal on top, their phrases inserted between Wonder’s while accenting his re-entrances with flamboyant eighth note bends:

![Figure 1.6: “Superstition”: Horns verse — rhythm layer](image)

The complete layering model for this section is below. The intermediary layer occupied by the horns, here nested within the rhythm layer, is outlined in darker blue:
Following this section, the horns pull back into harmonic pads. Later, immediately following the song’s bridge at bar 33 (1:18) as Wonder’s vocal recedes into the verse, the horns takeover the narrative, playing melodically:

*Figure 1.7: “Superstition”: Verse layers*
Like the previous example, the countermelodies in mm. 29-31 decorate the harmony and rhythmic groove, while here also supporting the vocal, heterophonically tracing its melody. Their repetitive, grooving application helps maintain their association with the other repetitive elements in the rhythm layer until their full-fledged immersion into the narrative at measure 33. This is equivalent to the intermediary horn layer simply moving into the narrative layer, replacing Wonder’s vocal part. The song’s outro gives these melodies even more room to spread out, antiphonally echoing one another before returning to their original rhythmic groove. As we will see again while examining “Eleanor Rigby”, this alternation of textural roles is common for such decorative intermediary parts, moving between the music’s
codified rhythm and narrative layers while helping define the textural profile of each section.

**Collapsing the Ensemble**

As artists rely on contemporary Western popular music’s stratified, loosely coupled textural design to create expanded arrangements of their work, they also employ reduced arrangements of full works. Indeed, many artists begin in these reduced contexts, writing the core of a song alone on guitar or piano with vocals, later filling out these basic textural ideas in a band context. But even these solo works can succeed on their own as they fulfill, in their simple way, the same textural requirements seen above.

An example of this is Neil Young’s 1969 folk-country ballad “Helpless”. The 1970 release of this song with Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young features piano, drums, bass, and acoustic and electric guitar (with volume pedal), with Young on lead vocal and his bandmates singing harmonized backup. The overall textural model of the chorus, below, is straightforward, with the drum cell again occupying one bar, repeating an unornamented, downtempo drumbeat. An intermediary layer of backing vocals support Young’s lead in the narrative layer.
These supporting vocals separate neatly from Young’s with their glassy blended texture, quieter volume, and critically, their downbeat arrivals, a beat before Young’s own statements. Their literal repetition and tight harmonies also give them a structural flavor, simultaneously supporting the rhythm layer’s repeating cadences. This dual role helps the choruses stand out for their sudden, vocally forward textural cohesion, as opposed to Young’s free-floating singing in the verses where the backing vocals are strictly harmonic pads coloring the rhythm layer’s progression. In contrast, Young’s own inflections in the choruses (and in the first chorus, his lyrics) display variation, maintaining narrative focus amidst the other repetitive elements.
In Neil Young’s solo acoustic performance of this song recorded at Massey Hall in Toronto in 1971, one can see how these layers texturally converge, with the guitar performing the dual roles of rhythm and harmony beneath Young’s narrative vocal. Such examples describe a projection from the multi-part space of the full band onto the simple, dual instrumental arrangement of guitar and voice. In this light certain elements from the original, the melodic ornaments from the electric guitar and piano for example, are discarded or abbreviated while key elements like the rhythmic patterns and harmonic progression collapse into the acoustic guitar part supporting the vocal. The guitar part in the chorus might be transcribed thusly (though each iteration involves decorative variation):

![Figure 1.10: “Helpless”: Chorus guitar](image)

Multiple features in this part perform the same roles originally fulfilled by individual members of the full band. The first of these are the clearly demarcated accents outlining the halftime backbeat, subsuming the original drum cell. The rhythmic sound of the picked acoustic guitar makes a fine, more intimate proxy for percussion. The melodic embellishments ending phrases that were previously provided by the guitars and piano can be seen in the guitar variations in the last two measures where Young’s vocal lays out. Above, this includes sustained chords with syncopated arrivals on the last eighth note of the third bar followed by a bold rest, a syncopated return, and a final melodic run of four eighth notes. These are even more pronounced in the verses with melodic riffs concluding most progressions. These rhythmic inflections might also be likened to drum fills which acknowledge the harmonic cycle of
the rhythm layer. The dual harmonic and rhythmic roles of this guitar part along with Young’s vocal in the first chorus is modeled below. The use of italics acknowledges the inflected guitar rhythm in each progression’s last bar:

![Diagram showing rhythm and narrative layers for the song "Helpless"]

**Figure 1.11: “Helpless” layers**

**No Guitars, No Drums, No Keyboards, No Problem: “Eleanor Rigby”**

The scope of my textural model is not confined to the well-parsed formulas of guitar or keyboard-driven rock and folk genres. To demonstrate, I now turn our attention to representative excerpts from The Beatles’ 1966 song “Eleanor Rigby”. Producer George Martin’s radical conception for the song supports the vocals with an arrangement using a pair of overdubbed string quartets alone — no drums, no guitars,
no keyboards\textsuperscript{27}. Efforts like these and Brian Wilson’s *Pet Sounds* album, released in the same year, helped define the style of “Baroque Pop”, with numerous artists incorporating the style and instrumentation of classical music into their work.

In investigating this example we might ask: how does this song compositionally evoke Baroque music (besides its choice of instrumentation)? It is important to remember that the proposed textural model of contemporary Western popular music does not necessarily discriminate this music from other spheres, only seeking to meaningfully describe how this sphere functions. Textural intersections with the music of other spheres can be a fruitful avenue for crossover creativity. There are certainly musical works from the classical era, for example, that might be successfully parsed using this model. But like much other music earlier examined, Baroque music, on the whole, does depart from contemporary Western popular music’s stratified, homophonic design. Yet, as we will see, this song’s arrangement fulfills popular music’s textural expectations while featuring certain aspects that evoke the Baroque.

In the score excerpts below, the green highlighting continues to represent the narrative layer, again occupied by the vocal part. Likewise, the orange highlighting encapsulates the rhythm layer. The rhythm layer defines both the work’s rhythm in its simple undifferentiated pulse as well as the harmonic progression here moving from i to VI in E minor in a novel five-bar cell length — a rather un-Baroque feature. The rhythmic cells here are derivative, repeating one-beat units, which lend the melodies they support a more free, floating quality than would the hard demarcations of the standard backbeat.

\textsuperscript{27} The Beatles’ *Anthology 2* album includes a version of the song with these string parts without vocals.
Here in the verses, the narrative layer consists of two vocal phrases presented as consequent/antecedent, each ending with a one bar tag. As seen in previous examples, the melodies in both phrases are nearly identical, but the sound and meaning of the words binds this phrase pair into a 10-bar unit. As with our first example, this length is twice that of the repeating harmonic cell.

The vocal melody highlights the $\hat{4}$, beginning and ending its four-bar units with
A, which is never part of the underlying harmony. Characteristically, it is the vocal that expresses these attention-grabbing, coloristic pitches, particularly in closing on a non-chord tone. Pitch choices like these help further distinguish the narrative layer from its underpinning harmonic support. Likewise, its dorian use of C# creates a modal sensibility revisited by the second violin in the subsequent bridge.

Similar to Neil Young’s solo guitar work in “Helpless”, we can see how the string ensemble’s harmonic cells adjoin (here overlap with) their rhythmic cells. This relatively common textural partnership merely reveals the dual textural role of these string pulses, a topic I revisit below. The string arrangement also features several key moments where melodic lines in support of the vocal melody emerge from the rhythm layer. It is in these codified passages that the song evokes Baroque music through these scalar melodies and their contrapuntal relation to the voice and to one another.

The countermelodies in this intermediary layer serve to decorate the vocal part and are indicated in blue. These countermelodies operate in one of two ways: at bars 30 and 35, the Cello I part fills in the pause in narrative phrasing before the final one bar tag in the five-bar phrase, helping outline the comma that separates this 

\[(1 \text{ bar } + 3 \text{ bar}) + 1 \text{ bar}\] construction. Alternatively, Cello I or a violin part is used to underpin the vocal melody, accentuating key arrivals. Notes in support of this effect are indicated in the score using †. For every vocal note marked as such, there is a temporally corresponding note below in the Cello I or Violin I part also marked with † in support. For example, in the second phrase nearly every vocal arrival is supported in rhythmic unison. This assists the supportive role of these parts when present with the vocal, striving to decorate but not challenge the narrative layer.

We see identical textural roles in other sections. The strings are almost always pulsing the underlying chords or playing such countermelodies. Otherwise, the playing takes on a distinctly harmonic role as with the slow, descending chromatic Violin
II line in the chorus (0:32-0:39), shown in the next example. Over the E drone in the Celli, this part can be heard as describing a four-bar move from tonic through a dorian reference via C# to the inverted VI chord (with another strong vocal lean on the in phrase 1) before returning back to E minor. If the passage is heard as a held E minor chord, the second violin part still provides an important harmonic shading of these second and third bars while its descent outlines the rhythm layer’s repeating unit. This progression again constitutes half the length of the complete narrative vocal phrase group, again leaning heavily on the non-chord tone 4.

![Figure 1.13: “Eleanor Rigby”: Textural Layers, bars 19-22.](image)

Melodic cell: 8 bars (half shown), harmonic cell: 4 bars, rhythmic cell: 1 beat

The string ensemble thus functions either within the rhythm layer as the rhythmic and harmonic framework of the piece or within an intermediary layer as a Baroque-styled decoration of the narrative layer’s vocal melody or as a Baroque-styled interjection like the verse Cello tag at measure 30. In the latter case, these intermediary layers briefly claim the narrative, as seen earlier with “Superstition’s” horn parts. Whether derived here from The Beatles’ roots as blues musicians or elsewhere, we
see this antiphonal effect often where instruments pick up the narrative where vocalists leave off, “as antiphonal answers to the voice in those measures in which they are featured.”

The dual modes of the arrangement offer either the unified pulsing string ensemble as its own instrument, serving both rhythmic and harmonic roles, or distinct solo lines within intermediary layers as the clearly parseable components. These lines either directly decorate the vocal in the case of the violin (e.g. mm. 32-34), or, in the case of the cello in mm. 35-36. The cello pad in the chorus serves a more common bass-line role, with harmonic consequences. The clarity of these intermediary layers is heightened by the infrequent co-occurrence of multiple string countermelodies and the counterpoint audible between these lines and the vocal. As with our other examples, these audibly parseable incarnations of the ensemble are directly tied to the specific textural functions described above.

Given the context, it would not be unreasonable for listeners to hear these string pulses evoking the absent guitar in a staccato effect not unlike picked downstrokes against metal strings. Indeed this is precisely the technique used during Paul McCartney’s live performances of the work as seen in multiple online videos. Likewise, the crispness of these attacks and their regularity subsumes the role typically reserved for percussion. While the dual roles of the ensemble described above are stable, the strength of the arrangement lies in its pacing and the innovations in its textural shifts, reshuffling the arrangement of the pulse or inserting countermelodies like clockwork following each consequent/antecedent pairing.

Stylistically, we might conclude that in popular musical fashion, this arrange-

28 Regarding the Blues (Brooks 55).
29 e.g. McCartney's performance at the White House (www.youtube.com/watch?v=WPEr_FYh7ZA).
ment is still largely homophonic, texturally functioning squarely within the design of
the proposed model. Additionally, specific contrapuntal moments emerge within their
own distinct intermediary layer to provide Baroque reference. A typical, complete Ba-
roque work with its full-scale polyphony would certainly resist parsing as neatly into
this model as “Eleanor Rigby” does. Contemporary Western popular music’s discrete,
stratified textural design facilitates the insertion of such intermediary layers which re-
quire little modification of the surrounding music. Whether adding Baroque-style string
parts or the gospel choir harmonies of Madonna’s “Like a Prayer”, these layers are
often used to color the music’s foundational texture with important stylistic signifiers.

The Layers and Affect

Before proceeding into yet more abstract musical territory, we might pause to
reflect upon the listening effects derived from contemporary Western popular music’s
stratified textural design. Because the narrative and rhythm layers are so clearly parse-
able by ear, include vastly divergent amounts of repetition, and serve different musical
roles, we engage with them differently. The foundational rhythm layer’s extended use
of repetition is described by musicologist David Lidov as “textural repetition”.

Phenomenologically, repetition that reaches this extent has the effect of coer-
cing the repeated material into a mode of background listening. In addition to allow-
ing our foreground listening to focus on the narrative layer\(^\text{30}\), background listening
affects us differently. This mode seems to display a more physical, “direct” effect
than foregrounded listening, as if our guard has been let down. As Lidov describes,
“The hypnotic quality of textural repetition is an essential point, though it may be
very mild and subliminal. In extended repetition we approach a threshold between

\(^{30}\)Textural Repetition “cancels out its own claims on our attention and thereby refers our
attention elsewhere, to another voice or to a changing aspect” (Lidov 35).
systems of signs which convey information (orientation or feelings) and physical stimuli which cause direct changes in the brain” (Lidov 36-37). The dialogue between the rhythm layer’s repetitive, supporting role and the narrative layer’s foregrounded attention creates an important listening dynamic at the heart of Western contemporary popular music.

Lidov theorizes that music becomes more overtly somatic the more its rate of pulse is foregrounded (Mind and Body in Music 82). As an examination of this principle, one might compare the effects of a Hindustani classical composition during its free time alap versus its strictly metered gat, or the verse sections in Madonna’s “Like a Prayer” that reduce the arrangement to choir, tinkling bells, and lead vocal, before the drums come dancing back in (at 0:59 through 1:33 and again at 1:50 through 2:24). In contemporary Western popular music, the clean nesting of textural components throughout its design reinforces their metrical movement together. This movement is grounded by the music’s textural common denominator: the rhythmic cells which nest beneath all other layers as a bedrock. Composed of neatly tiled cells that reinforce metrical groupings at various levels, the very structure of this layering model reinforces a hierarchy of somatic “beats” while varying degrees of repetition curate in what mode of attention we engage with these layers.

For contemporary Western popular music’s originating genres like rock where musical parts are played by live performers, listeners can also form direct, empathic connections to discrete textural elements through their owners. Indeed, most contemporary genres provide at a minimum a live singer to offer listeners exactly this effect for the narrative layer. To this end, even when the music isn’t actually being performed live we find performers evoking the music in other ways — e.g. lip-syncing and dancing — a frequent occurrence in contemporary practice31. Because audience members can put

31The majority of “Pop” artists — the Justin Biebers, Britney Spears, and Avril Lavignes of the
themselves inside this music at a truly bodily, functional level (think “air guitar”), the musical components themselves become much more tangible and easier to grasp.

But it is the narrative layer, with its foregrounded vocal quality that enables the critical human connection so many listeners identify with and indeed require of their music. These ideas relate to the work of musicologists like Marc Leman and Rolf Inge Godøy and their research describing how listeners conceptualize musical gestures bodily through empathic acts of mimesis. Godøy’s cognitive research (and through him, Berthoz) frames the “action” within musical cognition as the act of simulation, leading to the suggestion “that we replace the term ‘representation’ with the term ‘simulation’ to denote what is going on in our minds” (Godøy, 318).

In terms of the textural model, the narrative layer’s mechanism for embodiment is most often a vocalist, easily satisfying the empathic goal. Yet it is also possible for instrumental music to use narrative melodies that serve as proxy for a vocalist (e.g. Booker T and the M.G.’s 1962 song “Green Onions”), satisfying this human connection in metaphor, or through the cognitive simulation Leman et al. investigate. Indeed, in “Superstition” and “Eleanor Rigby,” we have already seen the seeds of this idea in the antiphonal role of lead instruments. Such instrumental songs often marry both clear, catchy melodies with danceable grooves, e.g. Average White Band’s “Pick Up the Piece…"

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world have ubiquitous online examples getting caught in the act of lip syncing. For some, like Michael Jackson, this facilitated elaborate choreography. But as per Ashlee Simpson’s recent missteps on Saturday Night Live, fans don’t take dispensing the illusion well. Such pantomimes extend beyond vocalists of course. String players are not infrequently hired to play along with pre-recorded orchestral arrangements at large venues where the sound of their loosely rehearsed visual gestures are well-covered by pre-recorded tracks.

32 This amateur pantomime of “the pros” has now itself gone pro, more or less, and it’s not just restricted to guitar — full “air bands” also compete. See the Air Guitar World Championships (www.youtube.com/watch?v=7IFu-yt8NLc)
es” (1975) or the 1960s surf rock instrumentals of Lebanese guitarist Dick Dale.\footnote{33}{e.g. Misirlou (1962) (www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZIU0RMV_II8).}

**Beyond Worldly Reference: Squarepusher**

There is much contemporary practice that does not rely on sound in reference to a literal instrumental gesture at all. Musician, multi-media artist, and author David Byrne describes this phenomenon in much contemporary hip-hop:

“This music floats free of worldly reference. Most other pop genres retain some link to simulated live performance, or at least to the instruments used in one, but a song put together from finger snaps, super-compressed or auto-tuned vocals, squiggly synths, and an impossibly fat and unidentifiable bass sound doesn’t resemble any existing live band at all.”

While, as I later discuss, audience members certainly find ways to empathically connect to these gestures, we might acknowledge this type of dereferencing as one of source. A recording of a violin has a direct reference to the literal mechanism of the sound’s production, someone playing the violin. As Byrne points out, a “squiggly synth” sound has no such literal, referent analogue. Such dereferencing is even more at home in the world of EDM (electronic dance music) where entirely synthetic sounds, often without vocals, are commonplace. Because no literal, corresponding gestural imagery may exist, EDM asks listeners to engage more viscerally with their own embodiment of these sounds, facilitating audience engagement, often (but not exclusively) through the holistic experience of dancing at these elaborately stylized concerts.
Crossover musician Ben Neil points out that the materials of EDM have even found parity with those experimental practices associated with Western electronic art music. Here he reports on the wealth of artists who employ such abstract sound techniques, pushing the genre:

“Squarepusher’s music and the work of others, including Thomas Brinkmann, Aphex Twin, Richie Hawtin, Richard Devine and the Future Sound of London (to name a few) prove that it is possible for rhythmic electronic-music composers to work with the most abstract sound processes, experimental textures and techniques, as well as rhythmic materials that make reference to, but do not fit within, specific pre-existing dance music genres.” (Neil 4)

How does the proposed textural model operate amidst such abstract materials? EDM represents an incredibly wide range of aesthetics, from the moody, dance-hostile sample wrangling of Autechre’s “Dropp” to the hooky progressive-house anthems of Deadmau5’s “Some Chords”. Using a specific example from one artist at the center of Neil’s article, I now examine a video of Squarepusher’s (Tom Jenkinson) performance of “303 Scopem Hard” (from the album *Ufabulum*) in London, October 2012.

The opening of the performance (0:03) introduces what might be described as the single theme or hook of the work, in a phrygian mode: a slow, metallic, compressed pitch-bending gesture descending from C# through bright feedback into an arrival at B before bending its way back up to the C# tonic. Shortly after (0:15), the beat is introduced by an uptempo 4/4 drum machine breakbeat (~160 BPM) using

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34 Multi-instrumentalist, producer, and composer Tom Jenkinson whose work has been variously associated with the subgenres drum and bass, IDM, dubstep, and acid house, among others.

35 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XyUSykPVIYc
what are likely Boss DR-660 drum machine samples: a resounding sub-friendly, sine-wave derived kick syncopating with a dry, noise-enveloped snare. Ghosted snare hits snap against the kicks in a loose, breakneck stagger. At 0:28, these layers are removed (amidst sound effects) and replaced by an uptempo, electronically generated bass part undoubtedly produced using the canonical Roland TB-303 bass synthesizer (as per the track’s title). The repeating riff here, moving upwards from C# to A# to B, is often modulated from pitch to noise and its rhythms aggressively dismantled — rapid-fire hocketing and color transformations are its key devices. Its pulsing rhythm is twice as subdivided as the previously introduced drum layer, upping the ante for an audience ready to move.

A key aspect of this bass part is how its constituent gestures — a couple notes or more — are freely permuted to create almost constant variety. Bite-sized pieces are either obsessively repeated (0:38-0:41), briefly de-syncopated (0:45-0:46), crushed and spectrally flattened (0:48-0:51), rung out into feedback (1:58-2:01) or subjected to numerous other transformations or replacements — seemingly on the fly (but who can know). These effects happen irregularly, mining our sense of surprise while propelling the musical narrative forward. In Jenkinson’s own words,

“I started work on a particular bit of sound processing software. The idea was to make a synth sound as if it was in someone’s throat and then as if the neck and head were being moved around in various planes at very high speed, with accordingly nauseating effect.”

These vocal-inspired textural transformations are in constant motion as Jenkinson assembles, disassembles, and sonically permutes the synth bass phrases, com-
manding our attention through the part’s wild narrative. In an upheaval of standard instrumental roles, here it is the bass which conducts the narrative, its audibly separable, teleological twists and turns capturing our foreground attention. Though there is an important departure from clear melody, we do find gestures and phrases not unlike those from fast, technical rap genres, e.g. Eminem’s “Rap God” or the verses of Tech N9ne’s “Worldwide Choppers”. Such songs also present a stream of rapid fire rhythms of dynamically filtered sound — syllables that are likewise assembled into often irregular phrases. Of course, MCs benefit from language (where discernible) and easy empathy with the human voice. This narrative part dares us to find new ways to empathically embody what might be heard as a silicon lifeform’s anguished howling, gleefully pushing the listening expectations described thus far. The guiding hand of melody and language has been replaced with a focus on “riffs” and their mechanized palette of sonic transformation.

At 0:51 all three layers play together, the reconstructed, dense mix now fully present as rhythmic variations and textural transformations continue. The language of development is again one of textural permutation; adding and subtracting layers. Throughout the work we detect the subtle harmonic setting via repeating drones derived from the opening metallic gesture, alternating between a low D and C# (e.g. starting at 1:22), harmonic cells again stretching out beyond the drum machine’s nested, underlying rhythmic cells.

Despite the extensive use of effects, during most of the work our sense of 4/4 time remains strong, the constant backbeat snare easily found in the mix. There are, however, important moments where even this rhythmic framework is challenged. Drum breaks occurring at 1:12 and elsewhere also remove the pulsing bass part, lending focus to the remaining dark, textural wash. These are the moments where the wheels of the bike leave the ground and we float briefly against gravity, dramatizing
the inevitable return to pavement, pedals spinning again full force as if the beat had never stopped. Other drum breaks, e.g. at 1:38, leave focus on the pulsing bass riff, pulling us into the downbeat where drums re-enter, celebrating our sense of 4/4 as we anticipate these decorated arrivals.

Longer dismissals of the beat such as those at 3:15 more aggressively dismantle the metrical framework. Like an arms race where our sense of time is the weapon, these ambient sections occur later in the work after we’ve already absorbed several shorter breaks. Here we float freely in Squarepusher’s sea of hot metal. These intervals set up a new beginning for the returning elements; at 3:27 the bass part re-enters, soon followed by the drums. This begins the work’s most sonically and rhythmically wild section — the big finish. All the stops are pulled out as the artist abstracts our sense of beat with dense effects, finally dismantling the framework altogether at 4:16. Squarepusher ends the track as a rock band might with a veritable EDM version of a feedback solo that also evokes the dying of the machine.

We can use the proposed textural model as a perspective from two angles. By noticing what is normative about this music at the most general level, we acknowledge that despite its abstract materials, commonalities in listening perspective can be found for fans raised on more normative genres. At least as valuable, however, is the opportunity to see how the music challenges the model, claiming more interesting territory for itself as it pulls away from canonical genres, delighting listeners with the surprise of the unexpected. I begin with the former vantage.

I have already discussed the teleological role of the TB-303 part and the familiar temporal nesting of audibly separable textural components; the drum cells repeat per bar, with harmonic, metallic drone cells longer in duration, above which the synth bass displays the most variation and longest phrasing in the narrative layer. Assisted by time-stretching software to help discern these rapid parts, I have provided a
transcription of two such phrases below, beginning at 2:03. Measure numbers begin here at one for convenience.

Figure 1.14: "303 Scopem Hard": 2:03 - 2:15 transcription and layers
The effects processing, labeled as “Noise”, and the TB-303 synthesizer are presented together at the top in order to highlight their active, attention-directing relationships. The synth part repeats a slippery phrase consisting of two motifs, labeled a and b, until the end of the first phrase at measure four. Motif a contains a gesturally poignant glissandi up to F# answered by a chromatic descent in the rapid-fire bass register. At measure four, the closing motif c further makes use of upper register octave glissandi, highlighting the tonic as it closes the phrase. Throughout, the TB-303 extends its register well above the typical range reserved for the bass. Jenkinson assembles key, slippery gestures within the vocal register while his custom software provides a dynamic filtering that makes the bass rhythms feel like syllables. While it may be challenging to hear the specific pitches amidst all the glissandi and percussive voicings, it is the up and down melodic inflections of this “speaking” part that guide us.

The collaborating noise part is also an active contributor to the musical narrative. Taken together, the TB-303 and noise processing are the loudest and brightest elements in the mix. In measure 1, bright distortion holds for half the bar. In the consequent phrase, these aggressive effects more boldly re-envision the bass narrative, with the feedback returning at measure 5 for the full bar. Beneath this lies the stuttering of bass notes — looped, filtered, and repeating. At bars 7 and 8 we hear what sounds like a sample and hold\textsuperscript{37} filter effect begin processing the bass track. Quantized to eighth notes, this slows the pacing to a muscular half time. By measure 8, the TB-303 is fully submerged. Aggressive transformation of recurring ostinati is at the foundation of this narrative layer.

\textsuperscript{37}A sample and hold audio circuit takes periodic snapshots of an incoming control signal, often a simple waveform like a sine wave, and sustains each value between snapshots as its output. For a filter effect like the one described here, this dynamic output is used to set a filter frequency, enabling it to rapidly dance around, highlighting various frequencies from the signal being filtered, e.g. here a bass part.
Beneath these electronic gymnastics, metallic drones underpin with dark, repeating, half-steps resolving back into the tonic every four bars. While this voice is the most melodic here, its literal repeats and long, two-note gestures do not offer the kind of attention directing content in the green narrative layer. Akin to the descending violin line in the pre-chorus of “Eleanor Rigby”, this part helps color the simple harmonic landscape (here falling perpetually back into the tonic) while above, a more dynamic part steers the narrative over longer grouped phrases extending over 8 bars.

The drum machine’s up-tempo, staggering breakbeat defines the rhythmic framework. Syncopated ghost snare hits early in each bar are indicated by an \textit{x} note-head. The cymbal sounds seem to swell and wash up against the rest of this metallic texture. Low and high sustained tones emanating from these samples seem to divide each bar.

But while “303 Scopem Hard” may in general obey this textural design, it also gleefully wrestles against the neat parsing of layers embraced by earlier examples. Though the TB-303’s frequent variation transcends the backgrounded grid of the rhythm layer, its oscillating pulse helps connect these layers. Indeed, in several moments where the drums are absent (e.g. 0:28-0:50), it is this part’s pulse that sustains our sense of beat, taking on a more traditional bass role. This dual role of the bass, acquiring a lead focus, is typical of the genre as per its name, “drum ‘n’ bass”. Further, the drum parts themselves, while clearly evoking rock with a 4/4 backbeat, often seem subservient in the mix to the bass part, a reversal of the standard hierarchy where drums lay the bedrock. Indeed from 3:51 onward, during the work’s concluding pandemonium, their 4/4 grid is almost completely dissolved by the bass part’s wild display.

Blurring the boundaries between popular music’s expected layering is part of the manic fun of this work. Indeed, while the repeating beat sustains a high-energy
state of excitement, Squarepusher plays with textural expectations throughout. After first establishing the basic forces and their textural roles, he progressively begins stretching, and finally dismantling the very framework he constructed.

In tandem with these iconoclastic tendencies, the abstracted, dehumanized palette of this type of EDM facilitates several key cultural objectives — a progressive, if not futurist, attitude among them. Perhaps most important is these sounds’ way of freeing a listener’s focus from the natural empathic connection to an onstage, human performer. Without this focus, it becomes easier to see the musical content as a communal environment, facilitating the ritualistic, collective consciousness that such concerts strive toward. While in many ways static (tempos, harmony), Squarepusher’s performance carefully executes frequent and dynamic shifts in arrangement and spectrum to create specific states of attention from moment to moment.

But the electronic artist isn’t really the focus of this attention as much as they are an icon of the performance. Their elaborately lit DJ booths and surrounding light show claim the visual focus. Indeed, electronic artists have a habit of wearing various anonymizing, theatrical disguises to this effect, sometimes persisting in this anonymity even offstage. Will Bevan, forcibly unmasked by the press as dubstep artist Burial after being nominated in 2008 for a Mercury Prize commented, “I love that with old jungle and garage tunes, when you didn’t know anything about them, and nothing was between you and the tunes” (Hancox). The live performer has been negated so that the crowd can keep the focus on one another, themselves, and the connective experience facilitated by “the tunes”.

In this light we can view contemporary Western popular music on a continuum based upon the strength of the music’s ability to facilitate narrative. Popular listeners

38 Deadmau5, Daft Punk, and occasionally Squarepusher come to mind, all with technically elaborate headgear that covers their faces.
encountering music with few narrative elements search for this connection elsewhere, e.g. by constructing their own narrative through dance. If unable to facilitate some narrative effect, the music slides along the continuum toward the ambient, away from our musical domain, embracing non-teleological modes of listening.

We’ve seen how popular music is divided into audible textural layers, their structural relationships, and how these layers perform different roles during appreciation. Together, these layers’ roles define a set of listening goals specific to popular music’s textural design; the rhythm layer’s cyclic, sub-meta effects acting in concert with the narrative layer’s teleological listening strategy. We’ve also seen how these narrative requirements can extend beyond the intra-musical through communal dance as we extend the technical model of this music toward methods of engendering meaning. We will now continue with these foundational principles, extending laterally from texture into the topic of form.
Chapter 2: Formal Aspects

“Music is, by nature, the most amorphous of the arts; it is continually in danger of falling apart.”

—Aaron Copland, *Music and Imagination* (63)

In this chapter we will highlight several important features of contemporary Western popular music’s formal organization. As we will see, the individual sections that comprise these forms are quite discrete. We will examine how this music signifies transitions between these sections by varying the instrumental and production arrangements, as well as through melodic phrasing, discrete harmonic shifts, and lyrical content. The sections that comprise these forms, e.g. a chorus, assume specific musical roles that I examine in various musical contexts. The sequencing of these self-contained sections creates popular music’s relatively simple, but easily perceptible formal arcs. Benefiting from subtle, genre-specific listening expectations, artists also use these formal tools to express specific stylistic agendas.

As stated, sections within a piece of popular music are particularly discrete, loosely coupled from one another, and modular in nature. Adjacent sections rarely develop toward the next, except maybe in their last concatenating moments — for example via a drum fill or a melodic lift upon a final chord. Such concatenating devices, at the edges of sections, are either brief or absent altogether. Grounded in the repetitive textural designs described in chapter 1, the progressions of these independent sections typically end near their beginnings, facilitating looping and creating a sense of internal stasis. Likewise, there are extremely few “transitional sections”
consisting of musical passages with a clear goal away from themselves. The exception to this is the bridge, a section providing the alternating verse/chorus format with a refreshing intermission. But this device is itself so conventional as to have its own telltale sound, unsettled and searching, typically emphasizing a new harmonic area, typified by angular motion that dramatizes its process toward a clear goal, often a revitalized chorus. As I discuss in an examination of Weezer below, bridges often lean forward, away from stasis, eschewing the looping harmonic progressions ubiquitous elsewhere.

Internally, most sections are formally static; forward motion is achieved by juxtaposing each section’s discrete dramatic profile, creating the work’s ebb and flow. The proper arrangement of these dramatic images helps listeners follow these formal arcs. Repeating sections are reinvigorated with subtle variations to keep the narrative fresh. Furthermore, a single formal pattern of repeating sections can often serve different dramatic goals from one song to the next. This is due to the variation in the dramatic intensity of specific sectional types (e.g. the bridge), creating different developmental arcs from the same formal template.

Because contemporary Western popular music’s sections are relatively short and because similar sections repeat within close proximity, formal arcs become perceivable experiences listeners rely on, not hidden productional architecture. Speaking about an unfinished draft of her 1998 hit “Believe”, created by multiple songwriting teams over nine years, Cher complained, “The second verse was pitiful. It was a repeat of the same idea from the first line. And I thought, ‘Fuck that, you can be sad for one verse, but you can’t be sad for two’” (Strauss 317). Indeed, in a landscape of discrete sectional design, moving beyond isolated impressions toward more global notions of development is part of the challenge of creating convincing music.

Contemporary Western popular music maintains several codified sectional types with distinct qualities that inform developmental expectations. While many songs proceed
strophically, chaining together a series of uniform verses, the contemporary verse/chorus dynamic often exhibits contrasting sections with specific profiles. Choruses sound like choruses — they’re the big, often louder sections with broad, melodically poignant hooks. The lead melodic component is often more clearly directed and elevated in register than in the verses which can favor lower, more motivic melodies that haven’t yet taken flight.

With respect to literal lyrical narrative, verses typically contain more topical content, with the archetypical chorus centering around a single central idea — “Last night a DJ saved my life” (Indeep), “Wild horses couldn’t drag me away” (The Rolling Stones), “With or without you, I can’t live” (U2), “Helpless, helpless, helpless” (Young), “They don’t love you like I love you” (Yeah Yeah Yeahs). Commonly, this lyrical refrain remains the same (or nearly the same) for every chorus while verses advance the narrative. Simply put, the verse is for building tension and plot, the chorus for release. In the verse/chorus dynamic, other sections serve to prepare (the intro), to delay (the pre-chorus), or to sustain (the guitar solo following the chorus) this back and forth effect. The arcs created by the verse/chorus dynamic thus extend forms across a longer range than in simpler, flatter, strophic songs; the arcs of the verse/chorus form engender more musical memory.

A particularly common trope defines the introductory sections in many works: constructing the rhythm layer one instrumental component at a time, often beginning with the rhythmic component. We’ve already seen this in “Disintegration”, “Superstition”, “Helpless”, and “303 Scopem Hard”, and we will encounter it again in the examples from this chapter. The technique lets listeners focus on the construction of the rhythm layer before it recedes into the background, typically at the moment a narrative component arrives. This is yet another example of popular music making its product-

39 examples include “1979” by Smashing Pumpkins and “Take on Me” by A-ha.
tional design transparent to listeners.

The typical characteristics of the major section types are as follows. Sections often fulfill some but not all of these functions as they bend shared conventions toward specific compositional or narrative goals.

- **Intro**
  - Occurs first
  - An iterative construction of the rhythm layer, often building “bottom-up” as per our earlier textural design from rhythm to harmony
  - No narrative layer
  - Low dramatic intensity; the point of dramatic departure

- **Verse**
  - Occurs before the chorus
  - Less musical drama
  - Lower volume/pitch register, particularly of narrative layer
  - Thinner accompanying arrangements
  - Varying lyrical content between verses that evolve the narrative

- **Chorus**
  - Occurs following the verse
  - Elevated musical drama; the release
  - Higher volume/pitch register, particularly of narrative layer
  - Often in harmonic contrast to the verse
  - Thicker accompanying arrangements
  - Repeated lyrical content between (and often within) choruses — a SINGLE idea expressing denouement

- **Bridge**
  - Occurs once following a chorus
  - Often occurs in harmonic contrast to the chorus
  - Dramatic intensity stemming from chorus but will vary depending on formal role
  - Arrives back at either a verse or chorus
○ More angular, searching melodies with unique lyrical content

Contemporary practice contains numerous exceptions to these stereotypes. For example, “Eleanor Rigby” uses a BVCVCBVC form, unusual for its placement of the bridge at the opening. Perhaps even more important is the unique dramatic role of the sections in this arrangement: here the choruses do not provide the intense, cathartic release described above; instead, this effect is reserved for the two bridge sections with their repeating lyrical denouements. From a dramatic perspective one might reasonably hear these bridges as the most “chorus-like” sections of the song and the formal choruses as more akin to “verse extensions” that give way to the climax that opens the song. Such songs highlight the earlier point that the same formal design may artfully implement varying dramatic goals.

As I will explore later, the verse/chorus dynamic itself has been weakened or even abandoned in subgenres that feature flatter forms. Our earlier instrumental example from Squarepusher exhibits a relatively flat architecture focused on textural variation, typical of its genre. In many other genres these designs harken back to the blues, pre-existing Appalachian music, or other folk sources. It is a goal of this chapter to show how formal designs can support such important subcultural associations.

Methods of Signification

Of particular interest are the various methods of juxtaposition which occur at sectional transition points, as well as those devices that give each section its unique profile. Formal signification in contemporary Western popular music might be divided into three key areas:

40 Beginning with the chorus (often following a brief intro) is a fairly common, attention-grabbing formal gesture. Examples include The Beatles’ “She Loves You” (1963), Eurythmics’ “Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This)” (1983), and countless others.
• **Arrangement/Production dynamics**
  Because we have already seen how texture depends on nested repetition, the varying arrangements of these static elements becomes critical in signifying formal transitions. Indeed, because the textural components described by our model are so decoupled, it is easy, for example, to modify the arrangement of the harmonic and rhythmic components accompanying an unmodified vocal melody. This important intersection between stratified textural design and methods of formal signification will recur in examples throughout this chapter.

• **Melodic phrasing and harmonic shifts**
  The construction of vocal or lead instrumental melodies often play a critical role in signifying the pacing and unique character of a song’s different sections. A shift in harmonic progression often occurs abruptly at sectional boundaries, establishing a sequence of moods throughout these forms.

• **Lyrical content**
  The words are often critical in defining the contrasting function of adjacent sections. For listeners who attend to lyrics, literary and musical narrative often evolve together.

Through examples across genres, I will show how these three devices allow listeners to hear forms at work. By understanding the tropes that signify sectional transition and the roles of different sections within various subgenres, listeners become prepared to follow each song’s unique journey. In this chapter, I examine both these factors within explicit musical contexts.

The link between texture and formal affect is important. As discussed above, listeners actively participate in the unfolding of these forms. In Godøy’s motor-mimetic model “we mentally imitate sound-producing actions when we listen attentively to music … we may imagine actively tracing or drawing the contours of the music
as it unfolds” (318). Likewise, we also participate imaginatively in creating forms comprised of these individual, embodied gestures. Musicologists like Jerrold Levinson have investigated such associations between musical understanding, imaginative participation, and musical form. Quoting Roger Sessions in his epigraph, Levinson writes,

“In the primary sense, the listener’s real and ultimate response to music consists not merely in hearing it, but in inwardly reproducing it, and his understanding of music consists in the ability to do this in his imagination” (22).

But unlike the textural domain, formal affect is inherently bound to musical memory, requiring an ongoing consideration of moments beyond the immediate. Thus these effects are more abstract, and often subordinate to more immediate textural devices. Nonetheless, even the simple formal devices described here act as important contributors to meaning, working hand-in-hand with the music’s textural design to facilitate its expressive effects.

**Lyrics and Form: “Helpless”**

Lyrics often play a significant role in establishing form. This is particularly true of strophic forms where there is little pre-existing structural support from accompanying instrumental forces. The fundamentally different nature of literary and musical narrative makes their synergetic effect all the more impressive. Highlighting this contrast, Levinson points out the necessarily propositional nature of narrative meaning as found in the novel:
“One cannot be said to understand a novel, on any level, if one has no conception of the manner in which successive parts conspire to form an overall structure, no inkling of the relations between incidents and characters across large spans of the narrative, no sense of the implications of the tale told as a whole” (167-168).

But song lyrics are generally not semantically self-contained entities like a novel. As with much poetry, the nature of their meaning is often more obscure, as the sentiments behind discrete stanzas are incorporated into the mood and flow of the music. Unlike the novel, the sense-making of popular music’s independent sections facilitate a song lyrics’ ability to work less propositionally and more as a series of discrete impressions. They are collaborators with the musical meaning that surrounds them, not its director. Typically, we need not follow along precisely with the lyrical plot to catch the major emotional signposts that direct its key affective contributions. In this sense, song lyrics often act more as a bridge between the emotional effect behind literary and musical meaning. Thus, lyrical plot does not dictate musical form but as we will see, specific literary impressions and lyrical phrasing are often valuable in signifying formal design.

As an example of this in practice, let us revisit Neil Young’s live, solo performance of “Helpless” in 1971 at Massey Hall in Toronto\(^\text{41}\). This simple work repeats the progression (I => V) => (IV) in D major throughout where parenthetical groups here indicate one bar in common time at quarter note = 58. In this performance the repeating two-bar progressions are played solely by Young’s acoustic guitar chords, accenting the quarter note pulse with occasional embellishments on the upper strings. The vocal work structures itself over these simple, repeating harmonic cells. Below, we outline the form in terms of the number of these chord progressions.

\(^{41}\) Video of this performance can be found at pbs.org (www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/neil-young-live-at-massey-hall-1971/1156/).
• Introduction: x2
• Verse 1: x4
• Interlude: x1
• Verse 2: x4
• Chorus 1: x4
• Interlude: x2
• Verse 3: x4
• Chorus 2: x4
• Outro: x1 + resolve to D Major chord.

The first verse serves as a good representation of the work’s simple, rhythmically free, melodic phrasing, always wandering down from 3 to 1, with a consistent return to the initial 3 in the middle of each two-bar phrase:

These four phrases play off of the beat demarcated by the percussive strokes of the acoustic guitar. This further decouples the rhythm and narrative layers, allowing the vocals to stand out clearly. One senses that the syllabic structure of the lyrics determines the free phrasing within each two-bar harmonic cell.

In examining the vocal work of the chorus, we might immediately notice that it too makes use of the same melodic movement from 3 to 1. With such similar rhythm-
mic, harmonic, and melodic materials, how then does the chorus sound so distinct from the surrounding verses?

The mechanism lies in the details. The first verse was clearly separated from the second by an interlude of one full instrumental progression, a feature absent in the full band version of this song where cadential riffs on the part of the electric guitar, and a generally thicker ensemble texture, suffice to define the work’s flow. Here, at the end of the second verse’s last phrase, instead of continuing instrumentally for the rest of the bar into an interlude, for the first time we have vocal material on the last beat of the phrase, leading us stepwise into the beginning of the chorus. Never before has the vocal part so clearly set up the downbeat, always weaving in and out of the rhythmic pulse, avoiding the upbeat following each phrase group: this is a new, rhythmically solid signifier.

The guitar playing likewise crescendos into the downbeat. Like the first two verses, we don’t expect Young to sing on this downbeat (he doesn’t), entering again on beat two. But now this vocal hole takes on a profound new weight, filled by the heavily accented attack of the held guitar quarter note. Lyrically, this hole is further charged with longing as for the first time a single statement is broken across a harmonic progression: Young’s emotional “leave us…” from the up-beat into the chorus concludes only after this stark instrumental downbeat with his “Helpless” at beat two.

The lyrical phrasing of the verse is also distinct from the chorus. In the verse, each pair of phrases forms its own group: in the first couplet the sentence continues from the first to the second phrase. The pickup to the entrance in beat two (“with”) helps assist this sense of continuation. In the third phrase, we note the final melisma over “go” that turns the phrase upward toward its continuation two beats later. Further, the first phrase in each group also divides its two motifs by use of a pause following the first descending gesture, e.g. “There is a town” and “And in my mind” respectively. This asymmetry — derived from the lyrics and phrasing — helps articulate these 8 similar bars into two
concise phrase groups. Within such a simple musical landscape, details are magnified and can be central to the music’s shape.

Similarly, the title lyric of the chorus, strongly prepared by the vocal upbeat, is perhaps the most rhythmically transparent phrasing in the song. Its single word reiteration is powerful and new, declaring itself. The lyrics also articulate each two-bar group as an independent phrase, doubling the pacing of the verses. The second phrase, like the first, now starts solidly on beat two. Lastly, the second and fourth phrase both call out to the same person (“Baby can you…” and “Baby sing with…” respectively), distinguishing themselves from preceding phrases as it binds them in a rhyme of semantics as well as sound, pairing these heartfelt phrases through personalization, and creating an ABAB structure that contrasts with the verse’s AABB form.

\[\text{Figure 2.2: “Helpless”: Chorus vocal}\]

The remaining verse and final chorus use the same devices with one important change: the final chorus uses “Helpless, helpless, helpless” for all four phrases. This further reinforces those aesthetics that diverge from the verse already established — clear metrical structuring of the melody and shorter, more frequent, concise phrases. In this final verse, the narrative shrinks to a single word; its solitary expression of yearning.

The lyrical semantics further assist in partitioning verse from chorus. The elusive narrative imagery of the verse, evoking nostalgia and sorrow is in part “explained” by the chorus where it becomes clear that the protagonist is singing to someone loved,
now gone — likely deceased (“can you hear me now … sing with me somehow”).

While the literary content of lyrics can be quite transformative, we often make use of the sonic variations intrinsic to speech alone without needing to understand the semantics. This occurs with lyrics we cannot make out or those from another language (including Sigur Rós’ made-up language⁴²), e.g. you don’t need to know what “Para bailar la bamba” means to recognize it as the repeating strophic hook of “La Bamba”. Nonetheless, much music uses lyrical content and vocal delivery to help frame the music’s trajectory. Comparable songs include Bob Dylan’s electrified folk classic “Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door” (1973, later re-popularized by Guns N’ Roses in 1991), The Velvet Underground’s combination of repeating lyrical tropes with runaway tempos and sonic density in their art-rock classic “Heroin” (1967), The White Stripes’ modern take on strophic blues in “We’re Going to be Friends” (2001), and numerous others.

Young’s own work harkens back to old-world Ulster-Scots traditions that eventually made their way into Appalachia where they met the blues. Indeed, such storytelling reaches back even further, to medieval bards touring about the countryside, using musical accompaniment to sweeten their tales of valor, satire, and romance. In “Helpless” we see these strophic, lyrically driven forms now colored by country’s more modern sense of the chorus, all mediated through Young’s vocal work.

As backdrops for storytelling, apart from the lyrics, these older strophic forms often do not acknowledge the global formal development present in more contemporary verse/chorus forms (e.g. Weezer’s “Say It Ain’t So”, analyzed below). Even songs sympathetic with this ethos (ala America’s folk music revival) that did employ verse/chorus arcs, like Bob Dylan’s 11-minute “Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands” (1966), defeat much sense of global development through a largely uniform series of sectional

⁴² “Hopelandic” has no fixed syntax, e.g. as in “untitled #1” from their 2002 album (http://vimeo.com/3977534).
arcs. Here, Dylan’s almost identical arrangement for each verse and chorus, varied only by lyrical content, seesaws back and forth five times in a slow circle, inevitably drawing our attention into the lyrics’ ever-evolving portrait of the song’s elusive subject.

Young’s more modern country sensibilities, even here in the solo performance, meet these sensibilities halfway. By reserving the first chorus until the second verse is complete, Young positions its bolder, soaring vocal declarations as an achievement earned, not the foregone conclusion completing each cycle heard in “Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands”. The interlude following Young’s chorus likewise accentuates its nature as a special event, giving us time to absorb it before continuing the narrative in a final verse/chorus cycle. But this final chorus itself displays clear development in its reduction to the single title word. The brevity of the form helps us internalize these simple, yet carefully defined arcs as these variations and structural asymmetries provide us with a simple sense of formal location, priming our ears for what comes next.

**Form as Cultural Context: "N.Y. State of Mind"**

The relation of lyrics and form is particularly relevant to one of contemporary Western popular music’s more recent genres, rap music. Without a traditional melody, our attention is further directed to the rhythm, rhymes, and lyrical content delivered by emcees. Further, hip-hop culture was highly influential in its early adoption of sampling as a direct method of song construction. By simply doubling up on the same technology used by listeners — two turntables — DJ’s were able to mine their record collections to create brief but continuous grooves. This practice would give birth to listening expectations focused on loops and textural layering that continue into the present.

An important phenomenon in the development of hip-hop was the cypher. These impromptu public gatherings featured participants drawn tightly into a circle, taking

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43 As documented in *Freestyle: The Art of Rhyme*, in the 1980s, the corner of West 4th St. and Washington Square Park was a common location for cyphers in New York City. The police
turns rapping either a cappella or over improvised beatboxing by another member of the cypher. These stripped-down performances showcased emcees that typically worked improvisationally, “freestyling” by constructing verses off the top of their heads.

The cypher provided a critical context for the development of rap. At its foundation it was a social gathering of peers, coming together to be creative. Taking turns within the circle, members of the cypher openly celebrate each other’s victories of wit and technical rhyming prowess. Toni Blackman of the pioneering collective Freestyle Union commented, “It’s about completion of thought and the circle of unity” (Freestyle). Though gatherings of onlookers were common, cyphers face inward, directing their often personal commentary to fellow participants.

The phenomenon of battling also played a big role in this context. Battles feature emcees trading lyrical blows, taking turns disparaging one another with improvisational verses designed to ridicule their opponents as they boasted about their own talents. Whatever the lyrical agenda, the cypher defines its own enclosed domain of empowerment where improvised cleverness and self-confidence are chief currencies, often in stark contrast with the everyday realities in the poor urban communities surrounding the circle. Freestyle pioneer Medusa described battling as “a healthy form of an emotional outlet. It’s better than fighting and it’s better than shooting and stabbing each other” (Freestyle).

With open-ended verses that were accompaniment-free or supported by only a beatbox, this context engendered a freely structured style that eventually made its way off the streets and into recording studios — with drum machines and samples filling out the arrangement. Artists like Biggie Smalls, Gang Starr, and A Tribe Called Quest created seminal albums in this style. Stripped down instrumentals supporting emcee-battle lyricism characterized an aggressive New York school that subsequent-
ly incorporated the violence of inner-city living into its lyrical content. One of this genre’s most celebrated albums is *Illmatic* (1994) by artist Nas (Nasir Jones). The album’s second track, “N.Y. State of Mind”, is a stark portrayal of the artist’s struggles growing up in New York’s violent and impoverished Queensbridge housing projects.

This work features only a handful of components in its static rhythm layer: a breakbeat at quarter note = 85, and a jazz piano sample containing a syncopated C# phrygian piano bass line and an upper register piano roll reaching upward in fourths at the final eighth note of each measure. This dark, angular setting provides the perfect backdrop for Nas’ hard-edged lyrical narrative:

![Figure 2.3: “N.Y. State of Mind”: Piano loop](image)

The opening and the choruses feature another one-bar jazz sample including the white noise of an airplane and evenly paced staccato trumpet hits. The original song was expertly slowed down such that five of these trumpet hits would fit into a single bar of the above piano loop while also fitting the scale. In combination with the drums, this creates a syncopated rhythmic landscape full of tension, tugging and pulling within the measure, a perfect backdrop for Nas’ own dynamic vocal rhythms. Below, this trumpet part is presented with the drum machine part. For clarity, the closed hi-hat stomps appearing every eighth note have been omitted:

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44 From Joe Chambers’ “Mind Rain” (1:21).
45 From the opening of Donald Byrd’s “Flight Time”.

75
The overall musical form of the work is:

- **Intro**: 8 bars
- **Verse 1**: 40 bars
- **Chorus 1**: 8 bars
- **Verse 2**: 36 bars
- **Chorus 2 / Outro**: 16 bars

The work brings in its instrumental layers during the 8-bar introduction, starting with the breakbeat and adding the bass four bars later. The emcee then briefly helps introduce the track before beginning the narrative. Revealing his freestyle roots, Nas encounters a false start underscored by a poignant hesitation before the entrance of the third line:

> “Straight out the fucking dungeons of rap /
Where fake niggas don’t make it back /
I don’t know how to start this shit, yo.”

The piano roll enters at the pickup to measure 9, which begins the first verse. This fully constructed rhythm layer remains unchanged through the first verse. Note how much textural space is left for the vocal between the low and high piano parts over the mid-tempo breakbeat. It’s also important to recognize that the simple one-bar instrumental loop doesn’t facilitate formal development via variation. Even the subtle support offered by the more metrically picked chords in the chorus of “Helpless” will
not be found here. This flat, stark landscape again brings us back to the context of the cypher, where improvisation over a static beatbox (or solo) is the norm and instrumental development isn’t possible.

The verse concludes with a reference to the theme of the work and includes a lyrical trope signalling the upcoming chorus:

“I never sleep, cause sleep is the cousin of death /
Beyond the walls of intelligence, life is defined /
I think of crime when I’m in a New York state of mind.”

The chilling first line becomes a signature of the work, making use of the old adage depicting New York as the “city that never sleeps” — with sleep here used metaphorically as inattention to one’s situation. This reuse of the same line at the end of verses, creating a small chorus-like effect, is an older trope seen in many strophic songs — e.g. Johnny Cash’s “I Walk the Line” (1956), Burt Bacharach’s “I’ll Never Fall in Love Again” (1968), and the Ramones’ retro-looking punk classic “Blitzkrieg Bop” (1976). Here it makes for a powerful pivot into the chorus.

The choruses function as a break for the emcee. Here a sample from rap legend Rakim’s “Mahogany” repeats the refrain “(New) York state of a mind” while Nas lays out and the trumpet loop re-enters. The chorus is thus texturally signified by all loop components at once.
Figure 2.5: “N.Y. State of Mind”: Chorus loop

Critic Steve Juon stated that for fans in the know, the message was clear: “Nas was the NEW Rakim on the block” (Juon). This is the central insight offered by the choruses — the struggles depicted in the verses have only made Nas stronger. The choruses function as a celebration of his rite of passage, giving us space to reflect in Nas’ absence.

Following the chorus, the arrangement reduces to the breakbeat for four bars over which Nas begins his second verse. Another two-bar beat break arrives near the end and Nas’ lyrics acknowledge this breakdown: “The smooth criminal on beat breaks / Never put me in your box if your shit eats tapes.” Again, the end of the verse is signified by the only repeated line and a closing reference to the song’s hook:

“I never sleep, cause sleep is the cousin of death /
I lay puzzle as I backtrack to earlier times /
Nothing’s equivalent to the New York state of mind.”
Another example of wordplay, in addition to describing the confusion associated with life in such a violent environment, the second line also acknowledges the singular repetition of the first line as Nas “backtracks to earlier times”. The second chorus returns to the Rakim vocal sample for the hook. Four bars later producer DJ Premiere begins scratching a sample of Nas declaring himself “Nasty Nas” from a previously released track before the song fades out.

We can see here that formally, the music is a relatively static, textural vehicle that supports its free-flowing verses, a direct link back to the cypher. This form flips the power relationship between verse and chorus where verses typically give way to a series of choruses. In this style, the narrative development of the verse is king and the chorus becomes more of an interlude (while still delivering the work’s important hook). Here it’s the verses that gain more share in the song, increasing in length. As a result, the sonic image derived from the alternation of balanced verses and choruses is now flattened into an extended strophic design. Here the image is more akin to an “on/off” switch: these longer verses stretch out against their wandering narratives until they are temporarily relieved by the chorus and its rejuvenating, static hook. Without consistent verse durations and signified only by a final lyrical trope, the move from verse to chorus does not have the feel of an impending “arc” as in “Helpless”. Our ability to locate globally is gone; like the protagonist, we listen on guard for the unexpected.

But simple textural variation is important to the flow of the work at various points. As with the songs earlier examined, we see the canonical introduction which assembles the rhythm layer before our eyes, layering in first the drum and trumpet loop and then the piano loop. Stripping down the texture during in-verse beat breaks refreshes the ears as it further highlights the emcee, adding just enough variation to

46 From “Live at the Barbeque” off the Main Source album *Breaking Atoms.*
Nas’ lyrical phrasing plays an important role in these freely structured, highly syncopated verses, keeping us interested despite the flattening of the verse/chorus arc. Each line stretches itself freely over a single repetition of the one-bar loop, accentuating the underlying textural design. Downbeats are recognized as the hard, rhythmic identifiers for the emcee. In the notation below, we can see Nas playing off of these downbeats, variously closing phrases on them and surgically avoiding them. At measure 12, following a pause, he leans into the underlying track’s syncopation, joining the pickup piano roll with the continuing adverb “Now”, pulling us across the barline into his next phrase. Bars 11 and 12 also inject a swung sixteenth note feel which tightens back up as the lyrical swagger of these lines shifts focus to the violent, urban landscape at bar 13.

Further, the freely alternating rhyme scheme often defeats the most common grouping of couplets making incredible use of not only tail rhyme but also internal rhyme (including much off-centered usage) and rhymes eliding multiple words (e.g. “peepholes with “street clothes”) all of which can be seen even in the first six lines presented below. Nas’ freely structured arrivals on the downbeat and syncopated entrances play a crucial role in this effect. Below, note that many of these notated, straight 16th note passages (e.g. mm. 13, “sniffin’ cocaine”) are heavily swung, in keeping with the jazz context evoked by the instrumental support:
Figure 2.6: “N.Y. State of Mind”: Vocal mm.9 - mm.14

Such rhythmic and lyrical devices contract and expand the pacing of the narrative motion in inventive, often surprising ways. Notice how measure 11 temporarily defeats the couplet pairing, pivoting on the cross half-rhyme of “cocaine” with “M-16”. Nas then continues again in perfect rhyme (“extreme”) but only recovers the couplet form at the end of line 6, obliquely matching “foes” with “clothes” after a barrage of internal rhymes using identical assonance. These devices destabilize the pattern throughout the verses, yielding a free-flowing style that defeats a predictable series of cadences that might signal a move to the chorus.

Likewise, between measures 10 and 11 we see one of several instances where Nas conjoins couplets, expanding sentences across the bar line to form “inflictin’ com-position / Of pain”. These devices resist the sort of highly structured verse sub-struc-
tures we saw in “Helpless” while the extended length of these verses runs contrary to the balanced see-sawing effect of the verse/chorus dynamic. Though these lyrics were written down (on the same day as the recording of the vocal part\(^{47}\)), it comes as no surprise that these “freestyled” constructions share an affinity with jazz. Like DJ Premiere here, many 1990s hip-hop producers listened extensively to jazz, which they sampled for their arrangements.

We previously mentioned the role of choruses as interlude, with focus on the verses and its narrative. However these choruses also deliver the main hook of the work, pivoting off of Nas’ own recurring last sentiments in the verses. This idiom, where the emcee does not himself deliver the hook, is a trope seen throughout much rap music: Public Enemy’s “Don’t Believe the Hype” (1988), A Tribe Called Quest’s “Electric Relaxation” (1993), GZA’s “Shadowboxin’” (1995), and many others. In such works, the hook is delivered either by singers or samples (often from significant sources, as above). The recorded medium creates an interesting aesthetic dilemma where samples are used. It becomes important in this context that they are heard to be samples — that this is not a duo between Nas and Rakim. To this effect, hard-edged cuts into the sample, scratching, and frequent literal loops disassociate the sound of the human voice from its recorded origin, helping the listener reserve their empathic human connection for the emcee.

But we can yet go further, hearing these moments through the DJ/emcee dynamic common in this era. In disassociating these samples, the DJ claims them as his own — the choruses are where the DJ emerges, getting to “speak”, establishing the song’s takeaway mnemonic while responding antiphonally to the emcee.

Of course, there are many songs that do not negate the chorus seen here, including Public Enemy’s “911 is a Joke” (1990), Wu-Tang’s “C.R.E.A.M.” (1993), and

\(^{47}\) As told to Jaeki Cho by DJ Premiere from an interview in the website complex.com.
Gang Starr’s “Mostly Tha Voice” (1994). Nonetheless, as I explore below, the emcee-free chorus, with verses emphasizing a star performer, remains a common idiom in rap to this day. We can also hear a direct link between these forms and the extended, harmonically static structures embraced by funk music. Indeed, DJs often sampled from this genre, for example deriving an extremely popular drum break from James Brown’s “Funky Drummer”. James Brown’s “Superbad” (1970), uses 48 bars on the verse’s tonic chord before the shift to the subdominant bridge (as called out by James Brown). The last section’s subdominant vamp lasts for 108 bars, signalling the end of the song with a single dominant chord (Brackett 145). Hip-hop DJ’s latched onto these static, dance-friendly forms, extracting the grooves to create their own deeply referential beat tracks for their emcees.

**Verse/Chorus Arranging: “Say It Ain’t So”**

LA power-pop band Weezer formed in 1992 and were signed to Geffen the next year. The early hit “Undone – The Sweater Song”, off their eponymous 1994 debut, featured tight, anthemic harmonies with whimsical but impassioned vocals. This track launched them to stardom, pushing Spike Jones’ video into heavy rotation. The song that remains their most popular single however is their debut’s seventh track, “Say It Ain’t So”, a midtempo ballad (quarter note = 76) which I discuss now. It’s important to note for these examples that the band tunes all guitars down a half-step.

This song reveals several formal principles useful for understanding contemporary Western popular musical practice. A solid example of verse/chorus form, the role of the various sections here is indicative of contemporary treatments of the form. The soft/loud realization underlying its internal arcs was seen in many guitar rock songs of this era including The Pixies’ “Gigantic” (1988), Radiohead’s “Creep” (1993), and Nirvana’s “Smells Like Teen Spirit” (1991). Adopted by 1990s artists
such as Slint\textsuperscript{48}, these soft/loud designs became a staple of post-rock bands like Sigur Rós\textsuperscript{49} and Mono\textsuperscript{50}.

Unlike “N.Y. State of Mind”, “Say It Ain’t So” trades on the ebb and flow of these formal arcs. A sense of global development allows listeners to locate themselves within the song’s bigger picture. Here, perhaps the most significant formal signifiers come from variations occurring at local transitions. Once again, formal design centers around juxtaposed permutations of the same, recurring textural components, a stark difference from music that typically introduces new harmonies, melodies, and rhythmic tropes to create development (e.g. classical music).

First let’s outline the song’s basic textural components. The rhythm layer is chiefly constructed around several guitar parts. An arpeggiated guitar riff (guitar α), played solo at the song’s introduction, outro, and also appearing in the verses, outlines the work’s syncopated C minor - G Major - A♭ Major - E♭ Major progression:

![Figure 2.7: “Say It Ain’t So”: Guitar α](image)

We might take a moment to note the ambiguous tonal nature of this progression, see-sawing between C minor and E♭ Major as it does. Due to our extended exposure

\textsuperscript{48} e.g. “Good Morning, Captain” from Spiderland (1991).
\textsuperscript{49} e.g. “Untitled 8” from ( ) (2002).
\textsuperscript{50} e.g. “The Battle to Heaven” from Hymn to the Immortal Wind (2009).
to this progression throughout the song (everything except the 8-bar bridge), our ears become accustomed to this mode maneuvering. This is characteristic of Western popular music, which often uses such textural components as phenomenologically atomic objects, made coherent through repetition.

There are key moments where breaking the repetition helps establish the formal role of the sections. The bridge, which I will discuss below, offers an abrupt harmonic shift that forces the original harmonic ambiguity to the forefront. Likewise, the end of the song is the only instance where the E♭ Major chord is not followed by its relative minor. Held under a fermata it leaves us with a firm impression of an E♭ Major tonic closure. This is true to a lesser degree of the held E♭ Major chord at the end of each verse, as I soon discuss.

The verses introduce an off-beat reggae style guitar pattern (guitar β), more simply outlining the original progression:

\[ \text{Figure 2.8: “Say It Ain’t So”: Guitar β} \]

Finally, the choruses realize the progression using heavily distorted power chords (guitar γ) with dramatic backbeat rests (punctured by the snare) as the volume level ascends:

\[ \text{Figure 2.9: “Say It Ain’t So”: Guitar γ} \]
The second and third choruses include a poignant variation that uses high-energy guitar bends on the first-measure backbeat rests:

![Figure 2.10: “Say It Ain’t So”: Guitar γ’](image1)

The bass guitar outlines the roots of the chords throughout, in the choruses playing the exact rhythm of the guitars. The bass part for the intro, outro, and verse is equally simple, articulating a syncopated harmonic rhythm symmetric about both halves:

![Figure 2.11: “Say It Ain’t So”: Bass verse](image2)

The drums provide a reserved backbeat arrangement, mirroring the syncopated arrivals in the rest of the band. The 2-bar rhythmic cell thus accents beat 2.5, either every measure (verses, interludes), or just in the second measure (in the choruses). As seen above, the harmonic cell, using the same progression with varying textural arrangements by the guitars and bass, is consistently two measures long.

Let’s now examine how the work identifies its formal changes. Amidst a static harmonic progression (bridge aside), the song exhibits a concise language of arrangement shifts and melodic vocal phrasings that prepare and solidify sectional transition. The form is:
• **Introduction**: measures 1-4
  
• **Interlude 1**: measures 5-8
  
• **Verse 1**: measures 9-14
  
• **Interlude 2**: measures 15-18
  
• **Verse 2**: measures 19-24
  
• **Chorus 1**: measures 25-32
  
• **Interlude 3**: measures 33-36
  
• **Verse 3**: measures 37-44
  
• **Chorus 2**: measures 45-52
  
• **Bridge**: measures 53-60
  
• **Chorus Guitar Solo**: measures 61-68
  
• **Chorus 3**: measures 69-76
  
• **Outro**: measures 77-80

Below I highlight several representative transitions that show the main formal signifiers at work.

**Introduction**: Guitar α plays solo until bass joins at measure 3. Likely one of the most common expositional tropes in contemporary Western popular music, the basic elements of the rhythm layer are established prior to the entrance of the narrative. This further supports our ability to hear the narrative as architecturally laid “on top” of the rhythm layer’s foundational framework.

**Transition to Interlude 1**: The music stops at beat 2.5 in the last bar, holding the last chord. These “holes” in the texture characterize formal change throughout the work. The octave vocal entrance here, dramatized by the preceding pause, still only foreshadows the beginning of the narrative. Here the vocals simply introduce the character of the vocalist, adding a tangible human connection in advance of the narrative — a metaphorical walk onstage.
Interlude 1: Motivic vocals, guitar β, and drums enter over the continuing guitar α and bass parts. The motivic vocals outline simple descents from E♭ Major’s 3 to 1, arriving every other down beat. These sparse, repeated gestures will refresh the ears when later used as an interlude between the verses’ developing narrative.

Transition to Verse 1: Music stops again in the last bar at beat 2.5, holding the last chord and punching a hole in the texture to signify formal transition. As before, this occurs in advance of a vocal change, here shifting roles into the start of the narrative.

Verse 1: The vocal melody enters while guitar α is removed as bass and drums continue. Again, section boundaries coincide with discreet changes in arrangement over the same harmonic/rhythmic pattern, i.e. different realizations of the same rhythm layer. Like the interludes, verse 1 uses backup vocals to double the main line an octave up in falsetto.

The verse sections consist of three vocal phrases over 6 bars, the first two in
two-bar consequent/antecedent pairs followed by a one-bar tag phrase before a single instrumental bar. Examining the vocal’s melodic structure reveals how its well-directed arcs create narrative activity while the interlude’s simple descending tropes suggest a contrasting stasis. Further, we can see the C minor tonality more heavily outlined by the vocal part in the verses while the interludes shift the ambiguously keyed progression toward E♭ Major. The key target pitches in the verse’s vocal part are identified using hollow, square noteheads below.

![Figure 2.14: “Say It Ain’t So”: Verse 1 vocal](image)

It’s interesting to note that the collection of target pitches (aside from the passing B natural) include all members of the C minor and E♭ major triads that root the ambiguous underlying progression. The first measure vocal motif strongly supports the chromatic move into C minor’s dominant chord. It is followed by a descent which targets tonic triad chord tones. The second vocal phrase follows the same ascent/descent pattern, rising a fifth to arrive on the dominant, leaning back onto the fourth scale degree with an expressive bluesy bend toward the flatted 5th. The phrase closes by falling a perfect fourth to B♭. The tag resolves this tone with a simple one-bar arpeggio outlining the tonic triad.
In contrast, the simple, repeating E♭ Major 3 -> 2 -> 1 vocal gestures of the interludes offer repose and stasis, contrasting with the narrative, melodic trajectories of the verses. While doing so, they exhibit enough vocal presence to sustain our empathic connection to the vocal character. While these pitches are shared by the C Minor chord, their trajectory toward E♭ creates a subtle, yet important color shift for the repeating progression.

**Transition into Interlude 2:** The vocal phrase ends in the fifth bar, leaving the last measure to instruments alone. Eliminating the narrative layer in this last bar is its own signifier of formal transition — the narrative has concluded a chapter, thus the work is now ready to proceed:

Figure 2.15: “Say It Ain’t So”: Interlude 2 transition

**Transition into Verse 2:** A narrative guitar lead emerges during the last two measures, cadencing into the hold over the last chord in beat 2.5. As with the violin countermelodies of “Eleanor Rigby” or the horns in “Superstition”, this gesture claims a brief narrative role within this predominantly instrumental section. At the same time, it helps underline the already established signifier of closure at the section’s final beat 2.5, reinforcing this arrival:

Figure 2.16: “Say It Ain’t So”: Verse 2 transition
Verse 2: The vocal melody embellishes the pattern of verse 1 with some more energetic extensions. These include the upper register transposition in the second measure (second half of phrase 1) and the elongated melisma in the first half of phrase two. The one-bar tag also extends its triadic arpeggiation up a full octave.

![Figure 2.17: “Say It Ain’t So”: Verse 2 vocal](image)

Transition to Chorus 1: The melody concludes across the bar line into the downbeat of the last bar, again leaving most of the measure to the instruments; this helps signal the upcoming transition. Additionally, guitar feedback wells up toward the barline as guitarists turn on their distortion pedals in preparation for the chorus. This idiomatic trope creates a powerful impression. For experienced listeners, the feedback crescendo, though not particularly loud, creates the looming expectation of a tidal wave of guitars. Formally this can only foreshadow a move into the chorus — fulfilling guitar rock’s common soft/loud realization of verse/chorus form.

Chorus 1: Guitar γ is supported by an identical bass rhythm of chord roots with drums adding crashes to support increased intensity. The two vocal phrases act as an antecedent/consequent pair with each phrase beginning after the guitar power chords. Here, the vocal melody skews the progression toward E♭ Major featuring sustained, yearning, non-chord tones, particularly the D natural leading tone. There is a slight but purposeful asymmetry here, with the vocal antecedent skewing more C minor in
its last descending two bars and the consequent resolving upward into the held closure of E♭ Major.

The earlier phrases descend toward chord tones, while the final iteration signifies closure with a variant step upward. These last two bars simply raise the E♭ Major leading tone prolonged from the G Major chord a half step to arrive at the final E♭ Major chord on beat 2.5. The shift to such broad melodies is common in chorus sections, creating a more anthemic quality. As above, target tones below are indicated using hollow, rectangular noteheads.

Lyrically, as is typical of choruses, we see reiteration of a strong, declaratory statement. Unlike the verses and bridge, this suggests out-of-time reflection, external to the verse’s developmental trajectory. These emotive statements reflect upon the narrative condition of the song’s protagonist whose story is outlined in the verses. Here, it helps reveal that the protagonist’s anger stems from knowledge that his new stepfather may be, like his biological father, an alcoholic, a literary conceit that doesn’t come into full focus until the bridge. The melisma over “so” only adds to the angst of this simple, powerful hook.

Transition into Verse 3: Another, longer guitar lead emerges in the second bar, concluding at beat 2.5 in the last bar, once again reinforcing this closing formal signifier:
Verse 3: This verse continues to develop by changing the phrase structure, here articulating two longer four-bar phrases. The narrative layer is now melodically expanding the boundaries of the verse’s original structure. Melodically, the first phrase is nearly identical to the first four bars of verse one. The reprise of this earlier gesture, still lingering in memory, serves to highlight the developmental achievements. The second phrase here is an elevated elaboration moving quickly between C minor’s 5 and 3. During this upper register, sixteenth note cascade, we can feel the anticipated energy of the chorus leaking into the verse. It ends again with a falling sixteenth note arpeggio, now elevated a sixth, signifying narrative closure and impending formal transition.

Transition into Chorus 2: In addition to an increased vocal register and faster rhythm in the second phrase, the song anticipates the chorus with a textural colli-
tion of tropes from the upcoming section: clean power chords enter, in time with the
syncopated bass rhythm, foreshadowing these chords’ upcoming application. The
arrangement reifies our formal expectations, allowing us to “hear” these elements
approaching.

**Chorus 2:** Chorus 2 makes use of guitar γ’, accenting the backbeat with guitar bends,
a potently gestural idiom that helps us embody this section’s kinetic release. Other-
wise, it is nearly identical to the first chorus with the exception of vocal harmony
over the last two syllables. It is interesting to note this relatively common asymmetry
between verse and chorus development: verses are developmentally dynamic while
choruses tend to develop relatively little, already complete. This follows an earlier
stated perspective on the form — that verses tend to propel narrative while choruses
offer recurring, reflective conclusions. One imagines that such choruses are written
from a voice in hindsight which has already emerged with insight resulting from the
tale unfolding in the verses.

**Bridge:** The bridge operates over 8 bars, shifting down into a progression of power
chords leading from B♭ to E♭ to G♭, repeating every two bars. The bass plays roots
below.

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\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{bridge_guitar_progression.png}
\caption{“Say it Ain’t So”: Bridge guitar progression}
\end{figure}
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The vocal melody harmonically contextualizes these bare power chords, mining the
tonal ambiguities of the original chord progression.
In the first four bars, the $B_b$ minor sonority is clearly established through outlining of the triad. This abrupt, unprepared transition can be heard in multiple ways.

Following so much repetition of the original progression, the added shift down by a whole step might be heard as a variant of the idiomatic “pump-up” modulation (the chorus following the guitar solo in The Ramones’ “I Wanna Be Sedated” offers a good example), here “pumping down”. This move may originate in the physical gesture of simply sliding one’s hand up or down the guitar neck by a step. At the beginning of the bridge, one might hear the expected key area of C minor as “pumped down” into $B_b$ minor, with the vocal A naturals as leading tones amidst the diatonic $i \Rightarrow iv \Rightarrow vi$ chord progression. At bar five, the ascending vocal part describes a parallel modulation into $B_b$ major with a now borrowed $bVI$ chord.

Neighbor notes repeat in the seventh bar, now decorating the fifth of the tonic triad and preparing the final chromatic ascent in the next bar toward G natural. Like the chromatic vocal transition from bar 4 into 5 moving from minor to major, this move likewise ascends toward the $B_b$ major scale degree $6$ but does so while recovering the song’s original progression, “pumping” back up into C minor, an effect that
catches us by delightful surprise. Such effects are natural to popular music’s textural design of repeating progressions beneath evolving narrative leads. Like an illusionist, our attention is held captive by smooth vocal voice-leading while the repeating chord progressions in our background attention discreetly (and discretely) slip away to be replaced by something new.

There is another way to understand this passage as well. The E♭ major key area is well established both by the vocal melody and the held final chord at the end of each chorus. For this reason, we might hear the opening of the bridge as a move to the dominant, with A natural neighbor notes, a mode mixing D♭, and a final flattened III chord. The fifth bar recovers the true major dominant chord. In this hearing, the chromatic vocal ascent in the bridge’s last two bars takes on greater weight, seeking to recover the key’s critical G natural. Once succeeding across the bar line, two exuberant “Yeah Yeah’s” celebrate the repaired E♭ major area at the VI chord in 3-2-1 descent. From this perspective one hears the bridge as an extended elaboration on the dominant that finally resolves into a deceptive cadence.

It’s important to note that the two viewpoints are not completely at odds. Whether we hear the initial transition into the bridge as a modulation down or simply a move to the dominant may well depend on how strongly we hear the original progression’s returning C minor chord as the tonic triad. The move to B♭ minor becomes a shift down if we expect a C minor tonic, tattooed onto our background attention from constant repetition. The chromatic, ascending movement of the vocal melody plays a similar role in either perspective, turning minor chords major as energy builds toward the harmonic recapitulation and guitar solo. This vocal ascent accelerates — after the first four bars we shift up a third in register. The next leap up by third occurs twice as fast, one harmonic cell later.

This sort of truly transitional, goal-oriented music is particular to bridge sec-
tions, here sustaining the kinetic energy unleashed by the previous chorus and funneling it into the guitar solo. In this instance, the dramatic intensity of the bridge remains roughly on par with that of the chorus sections that surround it (though it has a more searching character). Here, the bridge serves the song’s overarching crescendo of intensity. It is somewhat reminiscent of Radiohead’s “Creep”, where the dramatic intensity of the bridge again exceeds the chorus, offering the song’s soaring vocal release as lead singer Thom Yorke climbs upward, repeating “run, run, run, run….”

**Chorus 3:** At this stage in the work’s form, the declaratory insight of the choruses have overrun the narrative explorations of the verses. Indeed we saw the final verse already giving way to the chorus in a collision of tropes within its second phrase. The conclusions of the chorus seem to declare further narrative explorations now irrelevant. Thus the verses simply stop happening; we’ve outgrown them. The back and forth dynamic of the verse/chorus form begins to demand some sort of structural variation, at risk of becoming stale.

**Outro:** As per the introduction, *guitar a* plays solo. The other guitars help signify the ending by ringing out feedback. Note that due to our understanding of its formal location within the whole, this effect has nearly antithetical gestural implications from its use before the chorus, here akin to leftover ripples in the wake of energy cast back from the chorus.

The transitional devices seen above can be grouped into several classes that help clarify the language of formal signifiers used throughout the work.

1. **Arrangement interruption preceding transition**
   - At the end of the introduction, all three interludes, and the first and last chorus, playing stops at the arrival of the final Eb chord in the measure
preceding the section change. At the end of interludes two and three, melodic guitar leads emerge directing attention toward these held arrivals.

- The melodic construction of the verse melody is designed to leave one measure of instrumental music before each section change. This break in the vocals signifies a clear end to the section. Likewise, the chorus melody ends at this final chord, highlighted with newfound vocal harmony.

2. **Arrangement and production modification at transition**

- The changes between the introduction, interludes, and verse sections can be described by the addition or removal of the three guitar components or vocal parts outlined at the beginning of this section. From the perspective of the rhythm layer they are variations of the same underlying music, shuffling textural components across boundaries.

- The second verse drops the vocal octave doubling, giving the verse a newer, slightly more focused vocal character.

- The third verse section adds clean versions of the power chords used in the chorus half-way through, helping push toward the chorus.

- The swelling feedback preceding each chorus grabs our attention as it heralds the impending textural change to loud, distorted guitar work.

- Vocal harmonies arrive in the last two syllables of the choruses to highlight the section’s closure.

3. **Vocal harmonic “leaning” and voice leading into arrivals**

- Vocals are used to “lean” the ambiguous harmonic progression toward C minor in the verses and E♭ major in the interludes and choruses, giving these sections a distinct mood that mirrors their soft/loud arrangement, reinforcing the see-sawing effect of the verse/chorus arcs.

- The bridge melody moves chromatically up to facilitate the recovery of the original progression beginning with the C minor chord.
4. Unprepared transition

○ Pivoting into the bridge and its new progression is done without prior preparation.

We can see that the first two classes — arrangement and productional details — constitute the lion’s share of the transitional style; simply stopping musical motion to signify the end of a section and adding or subtracting layers to the arrangement of this static texture. These are among the chief signifiers of form in contemporary Western popular music, and listeners can easily hone in on them. Other works we’ve seen where the harmonic progression remains completely unchanged for long periods of time — “Disintegration”, “Superstition”, “Helpless” (full band version), and many others — also tend to push narrative (often vocal) and arrangement choices to the forefront to signify formal development, adding and subtracting parts as they go. Indeed, for genres including much instrumental EDM, textural layer modification is often the sole structural device.

Harmonic and voice leading devices also contribute. We’ve seen how the vocal part helps “lean” the repeating harmonies toward modes suitable to the mood of each section. Likewise, the harmonic departure of the bridge fulfills its role as searching and singular. Such bridges openly recognize their interruption of the verse/chorus dynamic as they provide an arc from their initial harmonic shift back into that cycle’s return. As the original harmonic cell is recovered, we cannot help but hear it anew — it is, for at least a moment, not subject to Lidov’s textural repetition. Memory and literal repetition soon pull it back below the surface as the guitar solo claims the narrative.

Beyond simply signifying adjacent transitions, we’ve also seen several instances where this form reinforces our sense of location within the whole:

- Each subsequent verse demonstrates development. Not undirected variation,
these developments add more and more energy into these recurring sections, first through extended vocal range, more elaborate phrasing, and extensive rhythmic diminution.

- While the form dictates that the choruses remain relatively consistent, we do see some instrumental development, also adding energy: the move to γ’, with its gesturally powerful guitar bends and addition of backup harmonies. This is an important move as the choruses “compete” with the increasingly energetic verses, striving to maintain their higher energy level.

- The cessation of verses in favor of the choruses. We “outgrow” the introspective verse sections by the end of the second chorus. The higher energy bridge is substituted in to refresh the arc, returning us to the guitar solo, which transitions smoothly into the final chorus.

**Changing Forms for Changing Styles: “Empire State of Mind”**

In 2009 another native New York rapper, Jay-Z, released the single “Empire State of Mind” from his album *The Blueprint 3*. Originally composed as a sung anthem by songwriting team Angela Hunte and Jane’t Sewell-Ulepic, Jay-Z reworked the verses with his own lyrics and brought in pop singer Alicia Keys to perform the chorus. Arrangement/production details and lyrical phrasing are key to the work’s formal structure, pushing this rap ballad decidedly into the world of pop. In this sense, we can see Jay-Z building off the commercially successful tradition of rap ballads (e.g. The Roots’ 1998 hit “You Got Me”), while exploiting the resurgence of rap and rock fusion that fell out of fashion in the 1990s.

While the title is a clear nod to Nas’ earlier track, the work’s formal structure shows just how much hip-hop has changed over this 15 year span. The song makes use of sampled piano chords\(^{51}\) in F# major, supported by synthetic bass roots and

\(^{51}\) from the 1970 soul ballad “Love on a Two-Way Street” by The Moments.
surrounded by elaborate production — including synthetic string pads, background vocals, electric guitars, and elaborate drum programming. The work is in 4/4 at quarter note = 87; the harmonic and sectional structure is outlined below:

- **Introduction**: 4 measures (drums alone with a single F# sub-bass hit on the first beat)
- **Verse 1 - 16 measures**: (I - I - IV - IV) x3 (I - I - III - III) x1
- **Chorus 1 - 8 measures + 2 bar tag**: (IV⁷ - IV⁷ - I - V) x2 (IV⁷ - IV⁷) x1
- **Verse 2**: as above
- **Chorus 2**: as above
- **Verse 3**: as above
- **Chorus 3**: as above
- **Bridge - 6 measures**: IV⁷ - IV⁷ - I - vi - III - III
- **Chorus 4**: as above + resolve to I.

Jay-Z’s rapping occupies the verses while Alicia Keys singing provides both the chorus’ soaring, anthemic melody and the climactic build during the bridge. As in “Say It Ain’t So”, a final chorus replaces the verse. Clearly, this song more closely resembles “Say It Ain’t So” than “N.Y. State of Mind”. The focus on the chorus is back, enabling a true verse/chorus release, not just an emcee interlude with a hook. Indeed the form is even more chorus-heavy than “Say It Ain’t So”, eschewing Weezer’s interludes and outro. Behind Keys’ anthemic melodies, Jay-Z plays the common rap role of “hype man”, charging up these sections of the song with antiphonal interjections, e.g. “A ha, Yeah!” (0:58-1:00), “New!” (1:13), “Come’on” (1:16).

The chord changes and their pop rock instrumentation contrast strongly with Nas’ track; together with the verse/chorus dynamic they help suggest a strong pop feel. Unlike the piano in “N.Y. State of Mind”, there’s nothing particularly funky
about these eighth note pop chord hits. While the verses are very slightly longer than
the choruses, allowing Jay-Z to spread out some, the binary form remains fairly well
balanced. Further, as opposed to Nas’ otherwise simpler form, there is no variation
in the durations between sections; structurally they are clones. This further simplifies
our listening expectations by allowing us to anticipate the change between sections.
Finally, the pop-style bridge, with its harmonically driven climax, is totally alien to
Nas’ loop-driven hip-hop, but quite natural for pop and rock music.

Like Nas, Jay-Z’s lyrical phrasing expertly contributes to his song. Each lyr-
ical line is a self-contained statement which constitutes half a bar; there are very
few instances where statements elide over multiple lines. The two exceptions where
statements require a completion across lines are during measures 19 and 20 and,
more importantly, the final two lines that change up the delivery over the single III
chord that precedes the chorus. Every quatrain presents its own image that likewise
operates over one chord, reinforcing the back and forth harmonic motion of the piano
hook. The last word or phrase of every line is delivered so that it always arrives at
(or is slightly behind) either the downbeat or the backbeat, reinforcing the square,
pop rhythmic cells. Each line approaches these beats with sixteenth notes, pulling
the music ever forward. These final sixteenth notes are underscored by keyboard and
guitar hits that walk stepwise toward the next chord root, accentuating these harmony
changes. In the following transcription of the first verse these arrivals are bolded.
Figure 2.23: “Empire State of Mind”: Verse 1 vocal
Both the rhythms and the use of rhyme are highly regular, with all backbeats rhymed. In general, the quatrain uses the rhyme scheme ABCB with more rhyme in measures 9-12 (ABBB) and measures 29-32 (AAAA). This structuring further reinforces the harmonic cycle mirrored by the quatrain. Jay-Z liberally uses oblique rhyme (“Dominicanos” with “McDonald's”) and near rhyme (“boy Biggie” with “boys with me”), expertly underscored with pronunciation and timing. However, there are very few internal rhymes to distract from these structured arrivals, allowing them to support the verse’s forward motion toward the chorus.

In all of these ways this song is much closer to “Say It Ain’t So” then “N.Y. State of Mind”, a testament to rap’s dramatic integration into the mainstream. Indeed, The Blueprint 3 sold 476,000 copies in its first week and allowed Jay-Z to break Elvis Presley’s record as the solo artist with the most number one albums (Jay-Z’s 11th). By 2009 much rap had effectively absorbed pop, rock, EDM, and other genres, creating an all-encompassing language quite far from the cypher.

Let’s take stock of contemporary Western popular music’s formal devices. We’ve seen meaningful variation in the implementation of strophic, verse/chorus, and hybrid forms, with works tailoring these general archetypes for specific aesthetic goals. We’ve seen how formal designs can specifically evoke traditions of style, whether it be a modernized take on Appalachian strophic storytelling as in “Helpless”,

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52 As documented in Rap-up magazine (www.rap-up.com/).
53 Rap/Rock crossover efforts were popular even earlier, during rap’s commercially successful “Golden Era” during the 1980s featuring numerous wildly popular collaborations, e.g. Run DMC/Aerosmith’s “Walk This Way” and Public Enemy/Anthrax’s “Bring The Noise”. Particularly transparent on this issue is The Beastie Boys’ video for one of their own contributions, “No Sleep till Brooklyn”, featuring the rap group having to pose as a hair metal band to be allowed to play in a Rock only venue (www.youtube.com/watch?v=07Y0cy-nvAg).
54 A good sampling of EDM/Rap collaborations can be found in the article “15 Rap And EDM Collaborations That You Gotta Hear” in XXL magazine.
or a fusion of rap and pop as in “Empire State of Mind”. Our global sense of location and development may be strongly outlined as in “Say It Ain’t So” or neutralized as in the freestyle-rooted “N.Y. State of Mind”.

As I have demonstrated, formal transitions in popular music are articulated by variations in arrangement and production that occur at the boundaries of these discrete sections. Even the simple overlay of one new part might signify a sectional change. We’ve also seen that the narrative layer can play an important role in structuring form, typically with vocals, but also as in “Say It Ain’t So” with instrumental melodies that lead to clear cadences. Both melodic phrasing and lyrical content can signify sectional transitions to listeners, as in “Helpless”. Further, we’ve seen how the sonic images of strophic and verse/chorus forms operate alongside functional images of the narrative protagonist, refining narrative interpretation — for example, the chorus can be a dominating, reflective conclusion (“Empire State of Mind”) or a more dehumanized interlude (“N.Y. State of Mind”). The shared language of these formal effects offers a means of comparing music both within and between genres, allowing us to observe important trajectories of style (e.g. “Empire State of Mind”’s appropriation of pop forms).
Chapter 3: Filling the Model with Topics

I now turn from contemporary Western popular music’s textural and formal structures and toward the question of musical meaning. Popular music relies heavily on musical signifiers that define its style, reference other music, and evoke extra-musical concepts which help songs speak through society’s shared knowledge. As close analysis will reveal, these concepts form networks which can either support or conflict with one another, affording the listener a rich interplay of ideas which contribute to the song’s overall impression. Listeners with different levels of pre-existing knowledge may perceive different portions of these semantic networks, facilitating different interpretations. These networks offer a functional understanding of a song’s conceptual dynamics, defining where a song might lead us, and which path it takes to get there.

Further, the structural design of contemporary western popular music facilitates this process of signification and these concepts’ evolving relations throughout a song. Discrete textural layering and sectional formal designs provide ideal frameworks for connecting this music with signified meaning. These transparent, palpable, and recurring formal and textural designs allow for a clear delivery of these semantics, akin to the leitmotif in classical opera. In popular music however, such design principles are at the music’s very core, allowing for an explosion of global, intertextual signification that binds this music to us, and us to it, as it speaks through (and to) our shared condition.

In this chapter, I build upon musicologist V. Kofi Agawu’s application of topic theory to “Classic” music (roughly 1770-1830), redirecting these techniques toward contemporary Western popular music. Like Agawu, I will choose several works, annotating their musical elements with semantic labels that describe the “topics” these
elements signify. Agawu cites musicologist Leonard Ratner’s definition of a topic:

“From its contacts with worship, poetry, drama, entertainment, dance, ceremony, the military, the hunt, and the life of the lower classes, music in the early 18th century developed a thesaurus of characteristic figures, which formed a rich legacy for classical composers. Some of these figures were associated with various feelings and affections; others had a picturesque flavor. They are designated here as topics — subjects for musical discourse.” (Agawu 42)

Thus topics may include standard types of music (power pop anthems, folk songs, etc.), musical styles (funk, hair metal, etc.), or any other subject relevant to the audience, including the extra-musical (teen angst, sexual androgyny, etc.). Signifiers are the tangible musical acts used to support these topics, including for example, a drum beat characteristic of a certain genre (e.g. Reggae’s “One-Drop”), a guitar riff, or lyrics. Topics thus help us locate meaning through specific musical acts while establishing expectations for what comes next. Formal sections like a “chorus” are also important topics in that when we recognize them as a result of characteristic musical devices, our expectations for how choruses sound inform expectations as earlier discussed. Topics like these, referring to structural musical elements, are known as introversive as opposed to extroversive topics like “transgender” (e.g. Bowie’s Ziggy Stardust persona) which reach beyond musical structure.

Agawu’s topics, which range from musical styles (“learned style”) to modes of characterization (“Sturm und Drang”), are all culled from those prevalent in the musical practice of the day. Agawu offers illustrative examples describing the role of these topics within their historical context, for example using letters from Mozart to his father. Agawu also makes much use of Schenker’s layered analytic method in order to
reveal how topics reveal themselves. Likewise, the layered designs of popular musical texture and its discrete formal structure described earlier will assist my efforts to tease apart and clarify the use of musical signifiers.

Given both the classical and popular musical spheres’ role as “decidedly listener-oriented music” (Agawu 4), the reapplication of these techniques seems natural: both musical disciplines benefit from a mature musical vernacular with extensive, codified musical devices charged with important extramusical connotations for their audiences. Authors like Gracyk even suggest that grasping these extramusical connotations, natural to the immersed listener, are critical to understanding Western popular music. In his analysis of Led Zeppelin he observes:

“My sympathetic response to ‘D’yer Mak’er’ draws upon Caribbean rhythms that originally derive from Africa. It also draws upon the musical and lyrical conventions of popular love songs of the 1950s. (An additional dimension to the humor of ‘D’yer Mak’er’ is that Led Zeppelin reminds us that reggae partially derives from Jamaican appropriations of American rock and roll of the 1950s.) My response also requires an ear for European harmony ... One cannot grasp the meanings of this music if one is deaf to the voices of the past ... This music is rich in cross-reference and allusion. Its riches have nothing to do with its unworldly character or its harmonic organization and complexity.” (Gracyk 167)

All the musical topics above are critical to Gracyk’s experience. It is precisely this “worldly” process of assembling meaning that we formalize using Agawu’s approach to topic theory.

55 Here, Agawu references the works of several other scholars (Rosen, Ratner, Blume, et al.) in this assessment after opening with a look at a revealing letter from Mozart to his father.
The perception of topics is bound to “listener-competence” (Agawu 49). This is to say that a listener must be “schooled in the idiom” (49) of the music under analysis to perceive them and acknowledge any extramusical connotations. Thus we can imagine different levels of competence particular to different genres for different listeners. For example, being familiar with the style of ska music may alert one to critical topics in songs by the punk band Operation Ivy that are not available to the uninitiated. In this respect, it’s important to note that identified topics may sometimes be “latent” for some listeners — imperceptible though still present — an aspect I later revisit. There I discuss how latent topics can support other non-latent topics, allowing less immersed listeners to appreciate part of a bigger picture.

In applying topical analysis to contemporary Western popular music, I hope to realize two major goals. First, the structural musical perspective described in previous chapters provides a clear framework through which topics can surface. Likewise, the application of topics supports these formal and textural effects. Agawu describes this as the interaction between the Universe of Topics and the Universe of Structure for a given piece of music. Each “Universe” offers a process through which to make sense of the work from opposite semiotic directions (extramusical and intramusical), working together toward an integrated understanding. “A semiotic theory aims to integrate the two processes, not necessarily to effect a reconciliation between them.” (133)

My second goal is to demonstrate how one might approach the more fundamental question “How does this piece mean?” (5) through an identification of topics and the dynamics of their juxtaposition. The approach here might be seen as a hybrid

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56 Agawu describes here that the hard distinction between elements of UT that engage in extroversive semiosis and US that engage in introversive semiosis is at its core a “false dichotomy”, elements form either requiring both modes of signification.
of Agawu’s two designs for topical interpretation, the extraction of a “plot” and the derivation of a “structural rhythm” from a sequence of topics. I will acknowledge numerous extra-musical topics that fuel these works and present a structurally informed interpretation as to how they relate.

When different sets of topics surface during different sections, topical sequences can create a “guiding idea” and a “fluidly defined sense of movement” (130), as Agawu puts it, akin to a rhythm of musical affect, e.g. describing elements of semantic tension and release. As popular music is predominantly vocal music, lyrics often provide a rich source of topical signifiers. My second analysis extends further into music video, where visuals also become a first-order, “intramusical” phenomenon, offering a new, rich source of topical signifiers. Throughout, I will highlight some general notions of topical interplay particularly common to contemporary Western popular music at large.

**Make-Up and the Textural Inside Joke**

I begin by examining the 1990s “Gospel Punk” band Make-Up. The Washington D.C. quartet formed in 1995 following the dissolution of three of the members’ seminal D.C. hardcore band Nation of Ulysses, adding punk bassist Michelle Mae from Olympia, Washington. Though Make-Up’s music was a huge aesthetic departure from the wild, cacophonic stage war of Nation, Nation’s impact within this tight-knit music community positioned Make-Up as coming from and speaking to the punk audience.

Though Make-Up’s musical aesthetic is overwhelmingly at odds with that of hardcore music, this context remains important. Lead singer Ian Svenonius’ shrill screams, often subversively political (Marxist-inspired) lyrical rhetoric, and wild on-stage showmanship continued to play a major role in Make-Up. Likewise, the low-fi production and loose instrumental performances that pervades these records is punk
by design. Of course, the audiences remained more or less the same as ever: the dominantly white, middle-class youth that typified the 90s U.S. punk/hardcore scene.

Yet, instead of hardcore’s distorted wall of guitar and bass and the assault of rapid-fire snares and crash cymbals, Make-Up work largely with musical idioms from soul and funk, with James Brown and Prince among the most palpable influences (Richards). Using these grooves as the unwavering foundation for their songs, Make-Up essentially turned the aesthetic values of the punk community on its head. Organs and syncopated, dance-friendly bass lines over funky beats now provide the palette for Svenonius’ still abrasive, but now ubiquitously falsetto vocals, all hallmarks of soul and anathema to punk. Describing their music as “Gospel Yé-yé”, the band fuses black American music with the innocence of the 1960s French bubblegum pop. These aesthetic principles couldn’t have been farther from those punk audiences had come to revere and yet, for precisely these reasons, audiences were transfixed while attempting to decipher precisely what was happening with this band.

Mastermind and frontman Ian Svenonius has forged a career as a punk provocateur, defining a unique brand of chic fueled by the semantically ambiguous. As an author of essays on topics ranging from Rock and Roll’s role as a tool for exporting capitalism to Seinfeld’s role in driving white gentrification in New York (“The Seinfeld Syndrome”)57, Svenonius always keeps his audience guessing where the satire ends and the literal begins. As Washington, D.C. punk reviewer Jonathan Fischer put it: “He is, of course, fucking with us. Or at least I think he is.”

For Svenonius, the authenticity-obsessed hardcore community was the perfect playground for performances evoking native punk ideology while simultaneously

57 the central thesis of the article is that “Seinfeld was designed expressly to rehabilitate the blighted American city, not only as a place desirable for white people to live … But as an amoral upper class playground, where no one need act responsibly or nicely – an anti-community.”
subverting those same social mores. This began pre-Make-Up with Nation of Ulysses’ stage attire, including suits and slicked-back hair. In the photo below note the stark contrast between the band’s look and the typical club they’re about to play.

![Image](image.jpg)

**Figure 3.1: Nation of Ulysses inner sleeve photo from Plays Pretty for Baby CD, Dischord Records, 1992**

As Svenonius acknowledged in an interview with *The Washington Post*, Make-Up’s musical community adhered to vastly different aesthetic and ideological agendas in this regard:

“I think American hardcore starts as a rejection of punk camp and the homosexual affectations of early punk, and saying, ‘We’re not something to be laundered by the fashion industry. We’re authentic.’ Minor Threat and Black Flag don’t dress up. They’re gritty and desperate.”
It’s precisely this aesthetic conflict and its associated ideological dissonance within the punk community that became the chief currency for Make-Up’s expressive agenda, as led by Svenonius. With Make-Up, the band pushed these subversive values beyond their look, squarely into musical terrain.

“Q: Was The Make-Up trying to reject the supposed sincerity of punk music at that time?

A: We were always castigated for being fashion hounds so we just wanted to embrace our own inauthenticity. We were very inauthentic, but we were influenced by black music and revolutionary politics and other things we were genuinely attracted to. It required total dedication on our part, so it wasn’t fake in that sense.” (Richards)
Like Svenonius’ essays, Make-Up’s music can dizzy listeners trying to unpack what is and is not “authentic”. The very name of the band alludes to such artifice. This music’s stylistically confident subversion, particularly within a subculture already established as countercultural, is what makes the work so edgy, subverting even the subversive, indeed reaching a new pinnacle of “cool”.

Topical analysis can help us uncover precisely how this music facilitates its semantically salacious sense of “cool”. The first track off the band’s 1997 LP *Sound Verite* is “If They Come in the Morning”. The simple form of the song alternates between an extended verse for 16 bars and a bridge for 8, lead by a 4/4 drum and bass groove in a C dorian scale at 116 bpm. Freely styled organ interjections (including a leading tone 7 above the tonic at the song’s start), are laid improvisationally on top of this ostinato.

It’s important to note that before the song starts, we have 30 seconds of performers discussing their parts, essentially putting the song together right before getting ready to record. This DIY statement establishes a distinctly punk listening context for the track (and as the opener, the record), diminishing that boundary between musician and audience.

The opening and verses dig into the bluesy groove while bridges, also in blues style, move up to IV, arriving at a V at the pickup to their final bar before falling back down into the verse again. As per James Brown’s “Get Up (I Feel Like Being a) Sex Machine” (1970), where he famously asks “Can I take ’em to the bridge?”, bridges here serve as a relatively brief interlude characterized by a chord change (here also to subdominant) between extended, harmonically static verse sections built over a single groove. In Make-Up’s stripped-down style, there is relatively little textual change between sections, marked most clearly by the change in harmony and sudden rests in the bass. Two verse-bridge cycles in the middle of the song are
instrumental where more freely chosen riffs in the bass and organ parts occur though with little change to this general design. Clave appears during these instrumental sections as well as at the end at measure 134 (5:21), following the return of the vocals, adding energy to the groove for the song’s finale.

- **Introduction**: mm. 1-8 bars (0:00)
- **Verse 1**: mm. 9-24 bars (0:59)
- **Bridge 1**: mm. 25-32 bars (1:32)
- **Verse 2**: mm. 33-48 (1:49)
- **Bridge 2**: mm. 49-56 (2:23)
- **Verse 3**: mm. 57-72 (2:39, largely instrumental, vocal screams)
- **Bridge 3**: mm. 73-80 (3:13, instrumental)
- **Verse 4**: mm. 81-96 (3:30, instrumental)
- **Bridge 4**: mm. 97-104 (4:03, instrumental)
- **Verse 5**: mm. 105-120 (4:20)
- **Bridge 5**: mm. 121-128 (4:53)
- **Verse 6**: mm. 129-144 (5:10)
- **Coda**: mm. 145-148 (5:43, held C/G organ fifth and vocal phrase)

The opening through the first bridge presents the themes that repeat throughout the song:
117

Vox.

If they are coming for you, ______ Yeah! you better leave.

Org.

Now if they come in the night-time, (indiscernible) ______ true.

Bass

Yeah baby, don't wait for the sirens. They are coming for you.

D. S.
This music’s texture resembles funk in several obvious ways. The dance-friendly syncopated, off-beat, repetitive dorian bass groove and likewise syncopated drum parts that carry the song immediately sound like funk. The drum groove uses side sticks in place of snare hits with syncopated open hi-hat accents while tightly tuned snare drums are reserved for fills at the end of phrases — all features of funk. Further, note how in mm. 1-11 the drums accent the downbeat with open high-hat arrivals that align with the two repeated eighth notes of the bass groove, a classic funk trope. We also find funk’s syncopated, additive rhythms within the drum part’s two-bar rhythmic cell, e.g. with kicks in measures 1-2 grouped into a 4+3+2+3+4 eighth note palindrome.
Likewise, the improvisational Farfisa organ elaborations, played through the canonical rotating Leslie cabinet, evokes soul. This loosely improvised organ part often suggests temporary chord changes above the harmonically static bass ostinato, another feature characteristic of much soul music. In funk style, the emphasis here is on texture, with long, repetitive verse sections separated by shorter bridges modulating up to the subdominant.

The organ’s open D/A intervals at measures 4, 6, 12, and elsewhere articulate a progression that emphasizes the downbeat, an emphasis that helped define funk as early as James Brown. But the impact of this figure varies greatly depending on where and for how long these chords are used; for example, as opposed to the earlier playful interjections, the ii is sustained across the entirety of mm. 17 and 18, boldly underlining its resolution at mm. 19. Indeed, much later in the work at measure 81 (3:30), at the return from the bridge into another instrumental verse, the organ arrives with the D/A chord on the down beat, again holding for two bars before resolving. This chord occurs after the dominant while the bass resolves to the expected tonic, creating a strange moment of ambiguous tension. Effects like these audibly highlight how uniquely decoupled these parts can be from one another in this genre. The highly regular, composed rhythm layer, presented by the bass and drum parts, becomes a backdrop for the free elaborations of vocalists and occasionally, instrumentalists who come forward within an instrumental section such as this. Indeed, the organ’s very first chord includes a tonic major 7th chord never heard again. In contrast, nothing like this really occurs in hardcore music where instruments almost always present a cohesive root driven wall of guitar and bass. Improvisation is, in general, anathema to the punk style (even guitar solos are eschewed) where tightly choreographed starts and stops and ballistic riffs throb in unison to propel the music ever forward\(^{58}\).

\(^{58}\) For an example of this, see Svenonius’ earlier work with Nation of Ulysses, e.g. the song
Further funk signifiers here include Svenonius’ use of falsetto (albeit with his uniquely punk tone, discussed later) and Afro-Cuban percussion (clave and, heard mostly before the song begins, vibraslap), reminiscent together of Curtis Mayfield’s 1972 hit “Pusherman” from the *Super Fly* movie soundtrack.

![Clave pattern](image)

*Figure 3.4: Make-Up. “If They Come in the Morning”: Clave pattern, mm. 57*

Svenonius also evokes funk while lyrically sexualizing even this paranoid, fascist-noir drama with outbursts like “Yeah, baby, yeah”, as well as his high-pitched squeals and other flamboyant interjections that immediately recall James Brown’s work.

In order to track the relevant topics and their signifiers, we can construct simple graphs that link such musical acts to their topics, while also grouping related topics together. For example, in collecting the musical elements that signify funk, we might start with:

![Graph](image)

*Figure 3.6: Make-Up. “If They Come in the Morning”: Initial signifiers.*

The funk characteristics we mentioned earlier describing the bass groove’s syncopated rhythm, accent on the downbeats at the end of its two-bar harmonic cell, and unwavering ostinato until bridge sections refer it to our “funk” topic. Likewise, the syncopated side-stick and open high-hat design of the drum groove and its own emphasis on certain downbeats also palpably evoke “funk” for listeners. We use boxes for these signifiers and dotted arrows for their referential relationship to our chosen topics.

This music’s funk-styled focus on texture with a simple, static, formal design makes it possible for us to construct a single topical model for the song as a whole. Topical relations and signifiers don’t change between sections (as they do in the next song we examine). Proceeding, I add in the other funk signifiers mined from the score. Indeed, every instrument here participates in performing the funk topic:

![Figure 3.7: Make-Up. “If They Come in the Morning”: Funk signifiers.](image)

But while this music strongly evokes funk, it also exhibits numerous qualities that are antithetical to funk aesthetics, strongly presenting the punk/hardcore aspects at the root of these players’ background. A closer examination of the bass and drum groove that anchors the song reveals our first such indicators. While these parts are clearly syncopated, they do not swing at all. This is very atypical for the early era funk and its lineage (e.g. James Brown, Sly and the Family Stone, funkier Prince) ubiquitously cited as Make-Up’s source music.

Further inspection of the drum part reveals that there is much variation where
open high-hat accents occur. As earlier mentioned, the downbeat, canonical to funk, is accented at two-bar harmonic cells during the introduction and also the first phrase of verse 1 (mm. 1-11). But immediately after this, these open hi-hats move to off-beats with closed hi-hat eighth notes playing straight through the downbeat that previously had a bold quarter note arrival. These downbeat, quarter-note open hi-hats do not return until the bridge. Further, we can find variation in the use of side-stick accents throughout the performance. For example, comparing measures 18 and 19 against measures 22 and 23 we can see the accents have shifted from beats 3.5 to beat 4.

Measure 22 has an additional side-stick at beat 4.5. In most Brown-influenced funk the rhythm section is locked tightly into patterns together with little variation, as in the unwavering, clockwork grooves of James Brown’s “Get on the Good Foot” (1972).

An immersed listener can attribute the relative looseness and improvisational inflections of the drum and organ parts here directly to the DIY punk ethos. A *Washington Post* review of the album called this “an intentionally disheveled vibe ... At its most scrappy, the album sounds like an intentionally amateurish British punk band (early Alternative Television, say) trying to be (the artist formerly known as) Prince” (Jenkins). Though this characterization accurately differentiates the sound of Make-Up from funk, I think its rather caustic reading dismisses the well-crafted nature of this music. While certainly of a different character than funk, the performances here are not sloppy but highly musical, and the ensemble dynamic compelling throughout. In short, the band expertly wields a very specific aesthetic — the product of four veterans within a community with aesthetic values that favor impassioned performances that audibly claim sincerity by sounding fresh and not over-rehearsed. In this vein, the opening 30 seconds of the record where the band explains the grooves to their auxiliary percussionists (likely friends Dub Narcotic Sound System, recording at their studio) pins a badge of punk authenticity to the proceedings in a manner similar to Nas’
inclusion of his mistaken, ad-libbed entrance during the introduction to “N.Y. State of Mind”. Here Make-Up reminds us, right at the beginning of the record, this isn’t “bad funk”, it’s punk rock, before aggressively challenging those expectations. Sound Vert-ite’s record label, punk stalwart K Records, continues to tout the fact that these songs were raw: “All songs were made up on the spot; the band found a groove and singer Ian Svenonius took flight.” Svenonius sheds further light on the approach, being sure to clearly differentiate what they do from “jamming”, an idea abhorrent to punk:

“It’s actually all spontaneously written. That’s why the songs don’t sound so tight, because they’re just grooves we’re working on. It was all ad-libbed lyrically which is how we play a lot of our shows. We’re very against jamming but into improvisation in the name of less rigidity.” (Weaver)

To see the difference with traditional funk, one need only compare this DIY attitude with the high discipline enforced by “the hardest working man in show business”, James Brown, over endless hours in the studio refining songs that he insisted be played precisely the same way live, at risk of being fined (Wesley). The funk culture is grounded in professionalism, with rotating sidemen that have spent their lives immersed in soul music with numerous ensembles performing constantly, paid by their bandleaders. Though Brown’s meticulously perfected vocal interjections offer an exciting spontaneity, there was nothing DIY, let alone “disheveled”, about the music of these canonical, mainstream funk acts. In contrast to Svenonius, Brown’s vocalisations display highly refined instincts, presented as a masterful expression of sexuality.

Svenonius’ vocals provide an even more demonstrative reference to punk. The
timbre of his voice is much closer to a falsetto version of a punk scream than the smooth, sensual quality of Mayfield’s tenor in “Pusherman”. Likewise, his aggressive interjections are punk in their assertion and often sustained as long howls, resisting the rhythmic precision and erotic flavor of James Brown’s vocalizations:

Figure 3.8: Make-Up. “If They Come in the Morning”: mm. 57-64. 2:39-2:55
Indeed, without the use of falsetto, Svenonius’ delivery here is very much the same as his earlier work with Nation of Ulysses\(^{60}\), right down to the lyrical content, filled with leftist political imagery. Here we have a warning to a friend that the secret police are looking for them — with dire consequences: the song ends with Svenonius alone with a sustained organ fifth, “If they come in the morning for you / Yeah baby, you’re through.” Live, Svenonius also expresses a punk take on soul through wild body language, entering into the crowd, jump kicking, flailing out dance gestures, and tossing the mic between hands while working the crowd with improvised banter between songs over extended grooves from the band\(^{61}\).

Thus, the same instrumental parts that evoke funk also carry other details that reveal a decidedly punk/hardcore nature. I add these into our evolving topical diagram below, color-coding signifiers for the rhythm section and vocal parts similarly to underscore their simultaneous support of both funk and punk topics. I have done the same for the two signifiers representing the band’s physical appearance, “body language” and “fashion”. Note I have also added topics for the band’s prior work within Nation of Ulysses and the leftist politics suggested by Svenonius’ lyrics (and prior work). Here these topics support the “punk” topic, indicated by solid lateral arrows; before the performance even begins, immersed learners already carry strong punk expectations derived from the players’ renowned prior work and the association between leftist ideologies and the punk tradition. The signifier for the Nation topic is thus the presence of these players, omitted below for clarity.

\(^{60}\) e.g. “Shakedown” from the 1992 album *Plays Pretty for Baby* (www.youtube.com/watch?v=aYaSFFnVFc).

\(^{61}\) A reunion performance in Baltimore from 2013 shows the fire has not gone out in Svenonius: (www.youtube.com/watch?v=nkVPvueziwU).
This tense dialogue between punk and funk aesthetics was a cornerstone of the bands vitality, evoking other higher-order, politically charged topics, for example those of authenticity. Svenonius addressed this head on:

“In America and in England there’s different problems that we have in disseminating our ideas. In America people are so hung-up on this idea of truth and reality — like how something pertains to the truth — that there’s a prevailing idea in America that you can’t make blues-inspired music or that the music of black-origin should only be for black people and there’s this kind of hung-up idea that you’re appropriating culture. That’s been levied especially at Jon Spencer and at us to a lesser degree. But to me it’s absurd because it’s like, number one, we don’t sound like any black or gospel group” (Weaver).

Nineties hardcore music constantly measured its artists against a requirement of authenticity defined by rejection of numerous mainstream musical ideals. From a songwriting and production perspective, this included stripping out the artifice they perceived in music like The Beatles’ later, often-elaborate, studio albums. Performatively, hardcore rejected the sophisticated theater of arena rock acts like Queen and Boston. Cutting holistically across both songwriting and performance, punk/hardcore
rejected the large-scale, flamboyant sexuality that ‘60s/’70s artists like Led Zeppelin and David Bowie espoused. As social scientist Dr. Nabeel Zuberi puts it:

“Punk ideology also proved appropriate for the sublimation of sex since its style was predominantly asexual or antisexual. In a host of songs and press interviews with punk rockers of the late ‘70s, sexual intercourse is represented as messy, masochistic, and sadistic, but almost always as short lived as the duration of the average two-and-a-half minute punk single. Punk’s musical jerkiness and the pogo dance seemed to simulate frenzied masturbation.” (111)

By contrast, funk’s claim to authenticity stemmed from wholly different avenues. Its simple forms and persistent, tight grooves eschewed the standard songwriter narrative, allowing the music to work its way into the listener through prolonged rhythmic exposure, and of course, dancing. These grooves offered a stage for the undeniable talent of the showmen that fronted these bands, often acting as MC to the dance party. Funk embraced theater and sexuality with often elaborate choreography and costumes. Psychedelic funk act Funkadelic is a notable example with their elaborate, startlingly bizarre stage shows and sexual explicitness, e.g. the famed opening line off their eponymous 1970 LP: “If you will suck my soul / I will lick your Funky emotions”, in the same year we have James Brown’s hit, “Sex Machine”.

Note, it would be wrong to suggest that the mosh pit dramatics and stage antics of hardcore are not their own theatrical gestures. But this form of theater is theater of a completely different kind. First, it is spontaneous. Second, it resists the notion of the performance as an opportunity to fashion oneself uniquely for the event, implying artifice. Fans and performers here exhibit the same fashion as one another, both inside and outside performances. Punk is about eliminating the boundary between audience

62 e.g. James Brown’s “Doing it to Death” (1973) as a B-side to the 7” “Everybody Got Soul”. 
and performer, often quite literally. In order to see just how far this ideal is from mainstream musical norms, we can go all the way to the top of pop with a particularly revealing interview with artist Lady Gaga:

“I guess what I’m trying to say is, this is showbiz for me. It might not be showbiz for the rest of you, but for me, this is showbiz. If I were to ever, God forbid, get hurt onstage and my fans were screaming outside the hospital, waiting for me to come out, I’d come out as Gaga. I wouldn’t come out in sweatpants because I busted my leg or whatever.

And that’s what Michael [Jackson] did. Michael got burned and he lifted that glittered glove so damn high so his fans could see him because he was in the art of show business. That’s what we do. Some people don’t. They want to relate in a different way. I don’t want people to see I’m a human being. I don’t even drink water onstage in front of anybody because I want them to focus on the fantasy of the music and be transported from where they are to somewhere else. People can’t do that if you’re just on earth. We need to go to heaven.” (Strauss 63)

Likewise, for 1960s and 1970s era funk, this is also “showbiz”. Highly choreographed stagework, including props and costuming, were a means to elaborate on the sexual and racial liberation that was in the air during this time — indeed as a way to be more authentic in celebrating the pivotal changes of this era.

I add these opposing claims toward authenticity, theatricality, and sexuality to the topical diagram below as aggregate topics composed of directly signified topics. Agawu calls these conjunctive “secondary topics” (Agawu 129): To facilitate subsequent interpretation, I use ≠ symbols to indicate topics in direct conflict. As I soon

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63 A fantastic example is the seminal 1980s D.C. hardcore band Minor Threat (www.youtube.com/watch?v=zk_vQuulubE).
discuss, it is this conflict that is central to the power of this music:

Figure 3.10: Make-Up. “If They Come in the Morning”: Punk and funk initial second order topics.

There is a final, important secondary topic derived from this music’s punk ethos and the use of funk here: cultural subversion. Punk/hardcore music subverts mainstream cultural attitudes through the application of aggressive aesthetic choices. But within the hardcore community, funk’s theatricality and overt sexuality goes further by subverting the social mores of the subculture itself.

Make-Up was certainly not the first punk act to turn punk subversion on its own culture, challenging the genre’s aesthetic expectations while expanding its ideological scope. The lush, orchestra-backed opening to Sid Vicious’ famous 1978 cover of “My Way” (Sinatra) is a clear lark setting up the song’s inevitable plunge into punk (the orchestra remains, folded into the aesthetic). Yet the real power of this cover lies not in its parody but in the appropriation of this 1969 Sinatra (loathed by punk) classic’s original message as a natively punk statement of rebellion. As Paul Anka, the English lyricist, admitted, “It was kind of curious, but I felt he was sincere about it.” (Mccormick) More recently, LA punk band NOFX constantly peppered their albums with “joke songs”, including ironic, hyperbolically obscene lyrics sung over a decidedly
uncool and incongruous style of music, including reggae or in the case of “Together On The Sand” (1991) a groovy guitar riff that would be at home on adult contemporary radio. Make-Up pushed these ideas even further, making such musical exceptions the rule, asking audiences to embrace this music’s incongruous sets of aesthetic values.

This dichotomy is critical to this music’s effect for its audience; it gives the music its status as both provocateur and cultural insider. Indeed the power to provoke dissolves when audiences decide an artist is not speaking from their same cultural departure point:

![Figure 3.11: Make-Up. “If They Come in the Morning”: Complete topical graph.](image)

The veracity of this music can be attributed to the bifurcated design of the semantics above and the conflict between the two distinct topical branches. From bottom to top there exists only a single path from the music’s signifiers to topics within either the funk or punk camp. Specific signifiers thus support either the punk or funk camps but not both. This makes these signifiers particularly clear references. However the same musical part, e.g. the vocals, often simultaneously expresses features from both camps through punk and funk signifiers. For example, Svenonius’ vocals have distinct punk and funk aspects but are never a “blend” of funk and punk; like the rest of this music — they thrive off provocative dichotomy.
One effect of this design is the often reported impression that we have a punk band “playing funk”, albeit in their own “disheveled” manner. This effect becomes one akin to instantiation, or perhaps appropriation of funk. Yet there is no immersed listener that believes Make-Up’s music might be confused with their acknowledged funk influences or that they are a real funk band. Certainly the context surrounding the band’s work plays a key role in this effect. This all-white band of punk veterans, in a classic rock format playing likewise to overwhelmingly white, punk audiences offers a specific cultural setting worlds away from the environment of black soul music. For immersed listeners, Make-Up’s musical context critically sharpens the punk elements earlier discussed.

Compare this effect with the first (of three) bridges in Led Zeppelin’s “Kashmir” (1975) for example. Below the guitar is tuned to DADGAD, facilitating pitch doublings:
The iconic ascending Dorian #4 string parts here (a mellotron, used throughout the song, likely doubles) with their augmented seconds and chromatic flourishes provide an exotic flavor meant to support Robert Plant’s slippery vocal lines. While numerous musical cultures support this mode (e.g. Klezmer), the Arabic Hijaz is the most salient reference given the song’s title and lyrics. The decorative, scalar lines, winding snake-like in a free rhythmic style mixing various durations together also evokes the modal explorations of Arabic music as does their arcing quality, embellishing up and down toward single held tones (from G to E natural in bar 3, to A in bar 4, to G in bar 5, to E).

Not to mention the numerous times Page and Plant have reinvented the work live with Arabic musicians featuring extended improvised solos by these musicians, e.g. with the Egyptian Orchestra at the Glastonbury Music Festival, UK, 1995 (www.youtube.com/watch?v=qHU3uPcMh2o).
Beyond evoking the Arabic explicitly (little-known to most Zeppelin listeners), the music presents an image of the exotic and dislocated in concert with the lyrics, written by singer Robert Plant while on holiday in Morocco (Lewis): “All I see turns to brown / as the sun burns the ground / And my eyes / fill with sand / as I scan this wasted land / Trying to find, trying to find / where I’ve been.” Here the sunburned, sandy, Arabic landscape is used as a metaphor to express the dislocation of not knowing “where I’ve been” in a “wasted land”. Musicologist Susan Fast surveys listener responses to these elements:

“All of the comments made by fans indicate that they hear the sounds as signs of radical otherness, which they characterize in fairly stereotypical ways; they have indeed, internalized the exoticism of othering. They make, for example, a general association between the East and spirituality, including mysticism. They perceive a kind of continuity found in these cultures (“timeless”) absent from the West. I would suggest that this has to do with romantic notions of the rural (pastoral) and a perceived absence of the alienation of industrialization and modernity; perhaps this is what makes these cultures “utopian.” That the Eastern elements suggest something “otherworldly” to several of the fans indicates perhaps the continued perception that these cultures are extremely remote from them.” (Fast 90)

These middle-eastern borrowings and lyrics support the “progressive-rock” topic associated with the band. It’s important to note that the repeating verse section at the beginning of the song presents one of progressive rock’s more famous passages, pitting 4 bars of Jimmy Page’s 6/8 guitar motif against John Bonham’s 4/4 drum
groove. The circling solution to this modular puzzle, repeating several times before the appearance of this bridge, clearly stamps the music as “progressive”. Audiences attuned to this genre expect such extra-cultural references, pioneered by The Beatles’ association with Ravi Shankar. Likewise, these more exotic harmonies and new instruments (mellotron, string and horn sections) were at home within this rock genre (though outside instrumentalists were unusual for Led Zeppelin at this time). Grounding audiences in more native terrain, Bonham’s heavy hitting drum beats are decidedly rock, as are the dramatic, guitar-soaked tonal resolutions we get from the end of the bridge back into the D minor verses.

Below in the topical graph of this bridge section, the solid arrow between these topics again indicates directional support. Numerous other signifiers refer to “progressive rock” here as well, including the backbeat drum part processed through a phaser, and loosely doubled vocal parts. To complete this example, graphing only these topics and signifiers (numerous others exist in this rich work), we have:

![Topical Graph of Led Zeppelin's "Kashmir" Bridge](image)

**Figure 3.13: Led Zeppelin. “Kashmir”: Bridge 1, topical graph.**

In stark contrast with the design of Make-Up’s “If They Come in the Morning”, here signifiers reference multiple topics. We no longer have the bifurcated design of Make-Up’s work. Topics support one another laterally (“progressive rock” → “exoticism”) and are supported by multiple, topically overlapping in-work signifiers. The
semantic opposition that makes Make-Up’s music so controversial within the punk community is gone in favor of mutual topical support both at the level of signifiers (supporting multiple topics) and between topics themselves. Technically, the semantic graph here is simply more interconnected.

As a result, and in contrast to Make-Up, there is no suggestion here that Led Zeppelin is playing Arabic Music. The integrated design makes it clear that this music is its own original expressive property. The incorporation of exotic elements is an expected part of the progressive context of this music. The exotic signifiers here live neatly in their place as references to “other” music. Meanwhile, in Make-Up’s bifurcated topical design, we have a stark semantic structure, particularly captivating for listeners in the know. Svenonius offers the key to understanding this design himself: “I think that good Rock and Roll is funny, and it’s also provocative”.65

One of the leading theories of humor is known as the Incongruity Theory, or often, the Incongruity-Resolution Theory. It was first introduced by 18th century philosophers including James Beattie and Immanuel Kant and subsequently adopted and refined by numerous modern thinkers including Arthur Koestler and Robert Latta. In Beattie’s words, it derives humor from “two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage, as acquiring a sort of mutual relation from the peculiar manner in which the mind takes notice of them.”66

Kant recognized that the effect of humor is caused by a shift in semantics within the mind. His example:

65 Drone Magazine interview with Ian Svenonius (www.youtube.com/watch?v=rGKCuhkW-0wo)
66 This is taken from John Morreall’s 2012 paper entitled ”Philosophy of Humor”, which references Beattie’s “Essay on Laughter and Ludicrous Composition".
“The heir of a rich relative wished to arrange for an imposing funeral, but he lamented that he could not properly succeed; ‘for’ (said he) ‘the more money I give my mourners to look sad, the more cheerful they look!’”

Kant attributes the pleasure derived from this semantic shift from the expected to the presented, as a “changing free play of sensations” due to “the play of thought” not unlike music’s “play of tone” that both give rise to pleasurable physical stimulation. In such examples our expectations are violated.

A modern theory related to Incongruity Theory is Benign Violation Theory, developed by researchers A. Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren, which suggests the following conditions for humor: “A situation must be appraised as a [moral] violation, a situation must be appraised as benign, and these two appraisals must occur simultaneously.” Their study elicited reactions from university students to many scenarios which wouldn’t necessarily be classified traditionally as jokes including the following:

“Jenny’s family made some poor investments. Then her father lost his job. She wanted to help out, and so she decided to sell her virginity on eBay® to earn money to help pay off family debt.”

of which 45% of the participants laughed, 78% felt the behavior was wrong, and 35% experienced both conditions (McGraw and Warren).

It’s striking how similar the topical design of Make-Up’s work is to the formulation these theories propose for humor. The bifurcated design with topics that laterally conflict allows for concepts that can shift freely in a “play of thoughts” back and forth between incongruous interpretations of the music. This also explains why “Kashmir”
isn’t humorous. Its topical graph isn’t bifurcated, being far more interconnected as Led Zeppelin’s achieves a coherent congruity among disparate topics, in stark contrast with Make-up’s defiant topical oppositions. Is the sexuality and theater presented by this punk outfit a send-up? Is the band making fun of this flamboyant posturing, playing the fool (and remaining authentic as punk satirists), or is it punk culture’s own prudishness that the band seeks to lampoon? For the immersed audience, benign moral violations abound. Listening to the band is like being able to sustain an experience perceiving both the setup and punchline of a joke at once. Our minds shift back and forth between these poles, unclear what the order of semantic progression should be.

But if this is a joke it is one without clear resolution, or perhaps a resolution that can shift from moment to moment for each listener. In this sense, the act is much closer to contemporary, post-modern humor, ala the work of Andy Kaufman or, more recently, Gregg Turkington, whose stand-up character Neil Hamburger presents a “bad”, antiquated stand-up (in clothing and joke design, delivering an endless series of one-liners) so vile that it eventually defeats our ability to read the act as satire; also the one-liners are often actually funny. As with these comedians, Make-Up works best when one stops seeking a neat resolution to this inside joke and starts enjoying the benign incongruity for its own sake. The music asks us to stop trying to resolve these topical relationships and appreciate its stew of provocatively incongruous ideas on their own terms. As L.A. Times critic Randall Roberts is attributed as saying regarding Svenonius’ work, “determining just what’s a joke and what’s not probably isn’t worth the effort.” The funk grooves and organ stabs are undeniably sexy and

67 Neil Hamburger on Jimmy Kimmel Live, 2015, intentionally closed with a crowd-silencing, dud joke on national television (www.youtube.com/watch?v=wT0iyuhGBek).
68 This quote is from an excellent article which can be accessed here (tropicsofmeta.wordpress.com/2013/01/24/inauthentic-authenticity-ian-svenonius-and-the-challenge-of-indie-rock-satire-in-an-mp3-world/).
fun, Svenonius’ impassioned vocals, cryptic narratives, and stage antics are provocative and exciting, and the looseness and low-fidelity of the whole operation makes it all that much more accessible. Shouldn’t that be enough?

**Formal Topical Dynamics: “Once in a Lifetime”**

In many works, topics shift with formal sections, allowing for semantic transitions that support, and are supported by, formal transitions. A particularly evocative example comes from the work of art-rock band Talking Heads. The 1970s were a time of musical upheaval in many genres of Western popular music, rock included. Musician, multimedia artist, and author David Byrne describes how the band deliberately stripped away trends they considered passé:

“It was like looking at an architectural drawing and being asked to imagine where the walls and sink might go. This was all intentional. The range of pre-existing performative models from which to draw on was overwhelming — and artistically invalid, as I’ve argued, because those tropes were already taken ... The Ramones didn’t allow guitar solos for example, but we took reductionism pretty damn far. It was a performance style defined by negatives — no show-offy solos, no rock moves or poses, no pomp or drama, no rock hair...” (39)

The “architectural drawing” without walls metaphor is a useful vantage on the codified forms and textural designs of popular music itself. Artists then populate these blueprints with their own reference-charged musical devices.

Soon veering away from the reactionary dead-end of simply being “defined by negatives”, Talking Heads began to fill in this template with references they could believe in. As with Nation of Ulysses, this often begins with the band’s look. Here
too, Byrne was actively thinking in terms of cultural and historical allusions: “The retro suits and skinny black ties that became associated with the downtown music scene — those I just couldn’t figure out. What was that supposed to reference?” (44)

The band’s language of references also extended into their music. Like many popular musicians, Byrne describes how he and his bandmates used “the shorthand of referring to other recordings” (187) to communicate and develop musical ideas.

“Though we may have combined those influences in a skewed and mangled manner, we could hear bits of the music that had preceded us all over our material. In the absence of any formal training, this mostly outspoken set of references was how we communicated. It’s probably what made communication and collaboration possible in the first place.” (186)

Inspired by musical traditions from non-Western folk cultures, Byrne and his band enthusiastically absorbed this music and made it their own. Collaborating producer and ambient minimalism pioneer Brian Eno, a former member of the well known art-rock group Roxy Music, introduced the band to West African music before work on their fourth album, Remain in Light (1980).

“The first time I ever met Talking Heads I played them a record by Fela Kuti, the African, Nigerian musician who’d invented that thing called afrobeat. I thought that was just the most exciting music going on at the time ... I said to the band this is what I thought was the future of music, actually.” (“Once in a Lifetime”)

Byrne also populated the band’s music videos and live shows with references
to other musics and cultures. During the rocketship-rise of MTV, videos became one of the most prolific, impactful vehicles for music, setting the stage for today’s ubiquitous YouTube listening practice. The video for the Talking Heads’ song “Once in a Lifetime”\(^{69}\), the fourth track off *Remain in Light*, is a particularly good example.

The song is a compositional collaboration between the band and producer Brian Eno (among other contributions, Eno wrote the track’s vocal melody)\(^{70}\). Employing a verse/chorus form in D major, all sections have an eight-bar duration with the exception of the opening verse, final chorus, and outro. The repeating two-bar chord progressions (where multiple chords are present) for each section are indicated parenthetically below.

- **Intro**: mm. 1-8 (I)
- **Verse 1**: mm. 9-20 (I)
- **Chorus 1**: mm. 21-28 (I - IV)
- **Verse 2**: mm. 29-36 (I)
- **Chorus 2**: mm. 37-44 (I - IV)
- **Bridge**: mm. 45-52 (I)
- **Chorus 3**: mm. 53-60 (I - IV)
- **Verse 3**: mm. 61-68 (I)
- **Chorus 4**: mm. 69-82 (I - IV)
- **Outro**: mm. 83-98 (I - [♭VII - IV]); fade-out starting at measure 91

Musically, the song is built by layering a few simple components, over which Byrne narrates in spoken-word style. A funk-fueled drum-and-bass pattern that alternates between A and F# is constant throughout the work. This two-bar ostinato defines

\(^{69}\) This video was on MTV’s debut video line-up, August 1st, 1981.

\(^{70}\) By this time Eno had already released seminal ambient albums *Discreet Music* and *Music for Airports* among others.
the harmonic cell length throughout, even as the specific progression changes (the rhythmic cell length is again half this duration). Atypically, here we have a bass part which avoids chord roots, helping to give the intro and verses their floating feeling. Also contributing to this dreamy harmonic stasis is the sustained fourth organ chord. The high and low toms at the end of each bar are hard panned, helping spin us around. Not until the first chorus, where the organ is buried in volume, does Byrne’s added guitar and vocal melody clearly present D Major, fulfilling this section’s typical dramatic intensity. As per many previously discussed works, the addition and subtraction of recurring textural components defines the work’s formal changes.

In collaboration with Brian Eno, on top of this groove, keyboardist Jerry Harrison added a polyrhythmic ambient synthesizer texture, creating a swirling, dissociating effect that is present in all non-chorus sections and the outro (subsequently indicated as $D-F#-G$ ambient polyrhythms).

In a 2000 interview, Eno describes how he always heard the downbeat in the foundational groove notated above at beat three, a perspective he attributed to reggae. In reggae, the downbeat is often de-emphasized in order to accent the upbeat — particularly in the “One-Drop” drumbeat where the kick and bass both rest on the downbeat71.

71 A canonical example is Bob Marley and the Wailers’ song “One Drop” (1979).
Here, shifting the downbeat two beats later has a comparable effect (though much less dramatic without dropped kicks). Employing techniques borrowed from Nigerian musician and afrobeat pioneer Fela Kuti, Eno encouraged band members to adopt both perspectives in order to achieve the track’s polyrhythmic sensibilities. In this vein, West African-inspired parts are also used elsewhere: a syncopated, looping organ part joining Byrne’s vocals during the bridge and again halfway through the final chorus.

In the chorus, Byrne employs clean guitar chords to establish the I - IV₆ progression with one chord per bar. Following finger-muted, double-picked rhythms, these chords arrive loosely at beat three, providing funky, rhythmic arrivals while avoiding a clash between the G major chord and the bass’ second measure F#. The vocal consequent ascends from 5 to 6 here as well, supporting this important, rock signifying move to IV. If we adopt Eno’s perspective and shift the downbeat ahead two beats, these parts would arrive on the downbeat, with bass parts echoing between.

As an extension of the chorus, the rock sound also returns during the outro where overdriven organ parts populate the harmonic cell with a I - bVII - IV progression, the last two chords splitting the second bar. When recalling this final Hammond organ part, drummer Chris Franz confessed it was a “rip from the Velvet Underground”, specifically the organ part from “What Goes On” (1969). (“Once in a Lifetime”)

There is a peculiar harmonic occurrence in the outro here; the F# in the bass part is “wrong” beneath the texturally dominant C Major organ chord. The texture during this outro section is now dense enough, and the bass part low enough (in both pitch and volume) that our ear can correct the F#2 to the required G2. Indeed, live performances of the work deviate from the original bass loop, resolving this dissonance via a wide variety of rewrites depending on the bassist⁷². For our purposes, I

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⁷² e.g. Live on the German show Rockpop. Dortmund, Germany, on December 20th, 1980, (www.youtube.com/watch?v=-vgfeLat3RI), and BBC Sessions, Live at The Union Chapel
concede, as Eno seemed to, that given the mix our (corrected) perception of this part doesn’t effectively distract from the harmonic progression.

A possible explanation for this wayward riff — one that also highlights the band’s culturally omnivorous approach — is found in their then relatively novel production strategy. Drawing inspiration from hip-hop sampling practices, Eno recorded band members looping short repeating textures for several minutes at a time, turning the band into “human samplers” (“Once in a Lifetime”). These parts were then layered and juxtaposed during post-production. At this point the bass part was a fixed, concrète component. This production technique directly informs the formal logic as arriving and departing textures demarcate the song’s sections.

In creating the music video for the work, Byrne describes his use of non-Western dance gestures in collaboration with choreographer Toni Basil:

“I worked out an elaborate dance routine that borrowed from Japanese street dance, gospel trance, and some of my own improvisations... We added little film snippets during the editing that revealed the source material for some of the moves: a few seconds of a kid dancing in Yoyogi Park in Tokyo... and a few frames from an anthropological film about African dance, with the dancers crouching near the ground. I wanted to show my sources, not claim I invented everything…” (Byrne 53)

The “charismatic” movement TV preacher is the image Byrne most embodies during the verses through his short, proselytizing delivery of spoken lyrics in suit and bowtie (162)⁷³. Antic, shaking choreography in the style of Pentecostal “charismat-

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⁷³ Byrne states this character came from radio sermons he’d taped.
ic” preachers under the influence of the Holy Spirit further add to this imagery, e.g. during the bridge where Byrne emphatically repeats, “Same as it ever was.” There is additional water imagery, with Byrne floating in it, accompanying his lyrics in the chorus and outro — “let the water hold me down” — which could suggest Southern Baptist rituals in an amalgamation of adjacent Southern Christian cultures.

**The Topics**

For topical analysis, I make use of the following primary topics within the “Once in a Lifetime” video:

- Funk
- Rock
- Minimalism
- West African music
- African dance
- Japanese street dance
- Charismatic Pentecostalism
- Southern Baptism
- Talking Heads
- Brian Eno
- Verse
- Chorus
- Intro
- Outro

In Agawu’s terms, the last four of these topics are introversive, describing constructions of the music itself, the rest extroversive, in reference to extra-musical or ___________

74 This relationship is palpably demonstrated in a Channel 4 documentary about the song that overlays Byrne’s own description of incorporating these influences over a back and forth juxtaposition between his movements in the video and those of native religious practitioners (www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZRILLqV0l58).
stylistic concepts. The two topics for *Talking Heads* and *Brian Eno* are unique in that they are supported by knowledge a priori of the work. As with most music videos, the band’s image is a critical component (as represented through Byrne) but in the case of Brian Eno there are no corresponding signifiers derived from the video itself. However, an artist like Eno becomes an important topic when an audience’s expectations for the work are meaningfully affected by knowledge of their involvement. Brian Eno’s role as a member of Roxy Music turned pioneering electronic minimalist\(^7^5\) offers listeners a referential anchor for the art-pop imagery and minimalist synth textures heard here. Immersed listeners immediately place these expressions within the continuity of style and culture stemming from such artists’ prior work, curating what listeners listen for and how they interpret the music. Again, for many, topics such as *Brian Eno* may be latent. Nonetheless, for fans of this type of music, these topics are readily available through the holistic experience of coming to, and experiencing the work.

This choice of topics reflects a specific, cohesive perspective that accounts for the work’s various modes of expression. Other readings might employ a different set. These topics are both generally accessible to an immersed audience and support my forthcoming interpretation of “how the work means”.

In examining how these sectional topics work together, a set of hierarchical, aggregate topics (Agawu’s conjunctive “secondary topics”) (Agawu 129) surface:

- Art pop
- Religious ritual
- Exoticism
- Southern Christianity

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\(^7^5\) Following Roxy Music, by 1980 Eno had seven releases under his own name, including the seminal *Discreet Music* (1975) and *Ambient 1: Music for Airports* (1978), where, in the liner notes, he first defined the term “Ambient Music”.

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One can imagine this process repeating as needed, deriving higher-order topics increasingly distant from concrete signifiers. I stop here, for now, but revisit the effect of such hierarchies during the final interpretation of the work.

The texturally driven, formal design of this work catalyzes topical interaction. Indeed, this is true for contemporary Western popular music at large. The repetitive, discrete, and relatively static nature of short, individual sections allow listeners to group included topics together. As song sections present distinct dramatic images, the exact order of topical presentation within a section is of less importance than their co-occurrence within the section itself. Largely, topics combine freely within sections, creating their own atomic impressions signified by recurring textural devices.

Note, this is a unique difference from the classical music Agawu examines which does not move in short, static blocks, relying on relatively fluid transitions from phrase to phrase. There, sectional boundaries typically occur at larger intervals than that of popular music.

A graphical topical analysis of the work’s individual sections follows. Again, dashed line arrows connect in-work signifiers to their signified topic. Lateral solid arrows indicate support from one topic to another, e.g. the presence of *Talking Heads* supports both *funk* and *rock* based on the band’s previous oeuvre. Dashed line arrows connect the mnemonic for a signifier to the signified topic. Because this is a video analysis, referenced imagery is annotated by time from the original video, often along with relevant, simultaneous lyrics. Second-order topics are indicated with grouping brackets, enclosing their primary topics. Note that several primary topics are shared by multiple secondary topics. As the diagrams below are sectional, the corresponding introversive topics (*verse, chorus, intro,* and *outro*) have been omitted for clarity though they will factor into the subsequent interpretation. Also omitted for clarity are the ubiquitous in-work signifiers for the *Talking Heads* topic, most-notably Byrne’s
own image. A table summarizing topical presence throughout the entire work follows the sectional diagrams.

**Analysis**

*Figure 3.15: Topical Analysis, intro mm. 1-8*

*Figure 3.16: Topical Analysis, verse 1+2, mm. 9-20, mm. 29-36*
Figure 3.17: Topical Analysis, choruses, mm. 21-28, mm. 37-44, mm. 53-60, mm. 69-74 (part 1)

Figure 3.18: Topical Analysis, bridge + verse 3. mm. 45-62, mm. 61-68
Figure 3.19: Topical Analysis, chorus 4, part 2 + outro. mm. 75-82, mm. 83-98

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Figure 3.20: “Once in a Lifetime”: Topical Summary
Interpretation

The topical analysis above reveals several key mechanisms through which our extroversive signifiers align themselves with the song’s formal dynamics. The introduction of a song is already charged with expectations based on the artist’s prior work. Music videos are typically even more focused on the topic of the artist by including their images directly. Here, pervasive tropes are introduced that further confirm the Brian Eno and Talking Heads topics — the ambient polyrhythms associated with Eno and Byrne’s idiosyncratic image respectively. Knowledge of these artist’s previous work supports the art pop topic, also supported by numerous in-work musical devices. As previously seen, the intro anticipates the verse, establishing its rhythm layer with funk, minimalism, and West African music topics that likewise occur during the verse. Byrne’s charismatic preacher character is introduced visually here, establishing our empathic connection in anticipation of his vocal entrance, signifying the verse’s arrival.

Topically, the verses are defined by the distinct presence of non-Western ritual, most notably West African music, African dance, and Japanese street dance. Though these topics may be latent for most listeners, they extend the exoticism Byrne introduced through his charismatic preacher persona into even more exotic cultural locales. When Byrne first reveals (and then mimics) the African dance footage we find ourselves “in another part of the world” (0:26). Equally, during his subsequent mimicking of Japanese street dance (“this is not my beautiful house ... this is not my beautiful wife.”) the direction is transportational. This amalgamated exotic location of structured ritual is the place that defines the verses. It is from this pulpit that Byrne preaches to question our surroundings, existential reflection being a powerful catalyst toward the transportational. As diagrammed, other musical elements laterally support these non-Western, increasingly exotic topics — Harrison’s minimalist synthesizer.
polyrhythms and the underlying funk drum and bass groove both have palpable West African ties. As mentioned earlier, afrobeat music played a key role in their conception.

As seen with Led Zeppelin, Byrne’s montage of various non-Western cultures generalizes toward what Fast calls an “exoticism of othering”, underlining the dichotomy between the non-Western pastoral settings presented on video (“in another part of the world” @ 0:26) and our modern, industrialized homefront with our “large automobile”, “beautiful house”, and “beautiful wife”, while asking us to question, “Well, how did I get here?”. An unsettling tension characterizes these verses as Byrne asks us these pointed, reflective questions amidst dislocating minimalist grooves and disjointed choreography. As Fast notes, these exotic elements closely relate to topics of mysticism and spirituality which Byrne employs here, releasing this tension into the chorus. But unlike Led Zeppelin, Byrne’s post-modern style, in both fashion and his stripped down approach to musical arrangement, serves to “domesticate” these exotic references. Byrne’s carefully curated, at times erudite image contributes to his success in incorporating such a diverse range of influences.

Pivoting into the choruses redefines these topical relations by reshuffling musical textural elements. Gone are the more exotic, non-Western cultural references. The minimalist synthesizer texture is replaced with instrumentation bound to rock: now sung, ascending, highly melodic vocals call and answer. These new components define the tonic/subdominant chord alternation native to rock. As opposed to the literal imagery and pointed questions of the verse, the lyrics in the chorus become metaphorical, even mystical. The dramatic release of the chorus is further pronounced using reference to southern baptism as Byrne floats along, asking, “let the water hold me down” (1:22). This reference is supported by its close relation to the pentecostal topic already presented and both topics’ close proximity within Southern Christian
tradition. The call and answer vocals also support the secondary topic *religious ritual* as if sanctifying the chorus’ musical release.

Thus, the song’s structural rhythm creates a powerful dynamic of difference between the chorus topics and those in the verse. While facilitating the dramatic role of the chorus, the presumed Western listener is returned “home”, the sense of otherness from the verse’s exotic topics momentarily suspended. The spell of the ambient, swirling synthesizer part has been broken, replaced by Western harmonic and melodic movement attributed to our native rock and roll. The harmonized, ascending vocals here, in lockstep with the lyrics, puts us “into the blue again”. Like Byrne in the video, we now float along these rivers; our efforts in decoding the verse’s mysteries now rewarded with release.

This topical dichotomy between verse and chorus also helps explain the different effect exotic, mystical symbolism evokes here versus the gravitas these references added to Led Zeppelin’s “Kashmir”. Here Byrne achieves a more light-hearted, even humorous effect. In addition to Byrne’s stylistic differences mentioned above, this is largely due to the bright, major, upbeat pop setting of this work versus Led Zeppelin’s slower, minor, heavier approach. The context Byrne creates is far more benign, an important ingredient for humor. Earlier I described how Make-Up used texture to establish topical incongruity for a powerful, often ambiguous, “inside humor” effect. Here topical incongruity is achieved most pointedly between formal sections, leading to different results. The alternation between the exotic verses and native choruses enacts its own shift in semantics — as Kant described, a “changing free play of sensations”. Of course the resolution of this incongruity never becomes quite clear: we soon return back to the verse, repeating this transition several times. This colors the humor here with a sense of the absurd, a frequent hallmark of Byrne’s work.

The bridge also benefits from topical support as it refreshes the verse/cho-
rus dichotomy. Though previous images still ring in our ears (and eyes), the topical signifiers here return to the nascent state of the introduction. Gone are the religious call-and-answer vocals, charismatic preaching, and non-Western visual references. Though Byrne’s preacher character remains in the throes of trance, he now stutters along “same as it ever was” (1:48), briefly suspending the work’s dramatic forward motion until the return of the final chorus.

The final verse continues with this group of topics. Characteristically, the formal and topical dichotomy gives way to the last chorus, signifying the beginning of the song’s closing arc.

In the verse/chorus dynamic, the outro is typically an extension of the chorus or a bookending reprise of the introductory state. Here we have the former. Also common, the ending presents ideas from the verse in collision with those from the chorus, giving the listener an opportunity to reflect back on all the ideas presented via one summary image. Here we can see how this topical collision acts as a signifier for the work’s conclusion. Opening with a new, overdriven organ part that outlines a standard three-chord-progression, the rock topic is pushed strongly forward as Byrne’s vocals return to the “same as it ever was” refrain. Simultaneously we see the return of the minimalist synthesizer part, previously restricted to the verses and bridge. Byrne soon re-introduces the Japanese dance gesture (3:05) as his lyrics expand into new, wistful content (“time isn’t after us…”). The eight-bar continuation of this music into its densest terrain — both musically and topically — signals the end. As the music has clearly established its process as textural re-composition, with all these layers together, the music suggests maximum occupancy. The development is complete and thus, after eight bars of this collage the fade out begins.

Simultaneously, we see an overdubbed reprise of Byrne’s chorus vocals followed soon after by the return of him floating in our water imagery. Given prior
southern Christian imagery one might connect this to the *southern Baptist* topic (he finally gets his wish to “let the water hold [him] down”, slipping beneath the surface in the work’s final moments). Perhaps most interesting about the video’s final fade to black is this novel introduction of Byrne, now unadorned and otherwise gesturally unaffected, calmly singing the final parts. After the work’s thorough exploration of its own unique character, the focus shifts back to the *Talking Heads* topic, wiping the slate clean for next time. This assists in closing the form as the musical structure and visual topical signifiers together find cadence.

Earlier I discussed the different referential functions in “If They Come in the Morning” versus “Kashmir”. “Once in a Lifetime” presents a new effect yet further along the continuum of referential interconnectivity and clarity. We recall “If They Come in the Morning” had a very linear (and very polarized) semantic network. So much so, that for some the question arises as to whether Make-Up’s music is indeed *actual* funk, as opposed to merely music mimicking funk or with funk qualities, a grey area that fueled the work’s provocative power. “Kashmir”, with a more integrated referential topology, presented a cohesive integration of topics clearly recognizable as progressive rock, its exotic “other” references an expected aspect of the genre.

In this work by Talking Heads however, the density and quantity of references has increased further — dramatically so. An explosion of referential density like this may weaken our ability to incorporate all these disparate elements together. Beyond the previous works examined, here Byrne must “show his sources” to make these references explicit, mimicking ethnomusicological dances before their documentary footage. There’s a pedantic aspect to such acts, or perhaps a “play” at pedantry, given the light-hearted setting and dizzying velocity of presentation.

Beyond “Kashmir”, there’s a cavalcade of disparate *exotic* topics in “Once in a Lifetime”. They come and go, establishing a dichotomy between verse and chorus.
In a sense, the bifurcated topical design of Make-Up’s unchanging texture has been turned sideways into a bifurcated formal topical layout. Such strong formal topical effects and their shifting dynamics challenge audiences more, seeking to make sense of the work’s shifting, referentially rich impressions. Here, the resulting effect might reasonably take on a Dada sensibility that has indeed become a hallmark of much of Byrne’s work.

The higher-order secondary topics play a key role in understanding this video’s aggregate dynamics (e.g. the dialogue between the exotic and non-exotic topics). One might even conceive that the perception of topics occurs first through these upper-level, more general topics, then arriving at more specific topics should they be non-latent for the listener. As an example, we might conduct another interpretation, entering through the video’s more general topic of ritual.

Ritual in general, and particularly religious ritual plays a key role close to the work’s surface. One can imagine that even if viewers cannot make the connection to the specific African, Japanese, or Christian sources for these musical and visual images, the more general topics of ritual and exoticism will remain palpable. A reading of the visual imagery on this higher level might key in on Byrne’s manic gestures, as if trying to relent physical control to some supernatural power, pulled about like a marionette. In contrast, his participatory gestures where non-Western images are shown are reverential. Thus, with or without attributing sources, a viewer might find themselves tugged back and forth between these different aspects of ritual and spiritualism — the meditative and the overwhelming. In this light, the choruses still function as our break from this modernist challenge of cultural incorporation and montage. Like Byrne in the video, we now float along these rivers; our efforts in the verses having successfully rewarded us.

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76 I am reminded of Byrne’s brilliant 1986 movie True Stories in this regard and its celebratory festival of "special-ness", particularly the parade and fashion show.
with release. As with “Say It Ain’t So”, the choruses gain more share in the song as it progresses; after the first chorus the verses become shorter. The release of the now-anticipated chorus arrives after less effort — we’re getting better at it. Before long we’ve overcome these more exotic images completely (from the bridge onwards), with a brief gestural recap in the outro (3:05). Here, pop song as transcendent ritual becomes a particularly apt perspective for listening.

The capacity for multiple such interpretations facilitates meaning across variously immersed audiences. Topical generalization is key for this process. As with “Once in a Lifetime”, art that employs signifiers which combinatorially support such high level topics assists its longevity as successfully “listener oriented”. Even latent topics meaningfully contribute as building blocks to more general, accessible secondary topics, much as individual pitches in a chord, critical to its functional effect, may be difficult to discern while their aggregate effect remains palpable.

Well beyond the classical music Agawu investigates, modern music is now able to reference a heretofore unimaginable breadth of topics in terms of content (access to cultures) and style (access to music). This can result in a wealth of available topics from extraordinarily disparate domains. The goal then becomes to create something specific from those generalities, something that unites and directs these topics. It is only when such topical aggregates are made palpable that their signifiers are effective; we must feel them to understand them. Contemporary Western popular music is naturally well-suited to this ambitious enterprise both in its structural design and cultural reach. Its intertwined genres and their sub-languages develop alongside those same techno-cultural advances (Wikipedia, BitTorrent, YouTube, Bandcamp, Spotify, etc.) that continue to flatten our topical/musical landscape.
Chapter 4: In Conclusion

I began this dissertation by questioning those listening expectations associated with contemporary Western popular music, in search of a new perspective that might better describe both this music’s high-level structural characteristics and how these elements catalyze specific empathic effects. Contemporary Western popular music is uniquely composed of interlocking textural cycles, largely discernible by ear. I presented a high-level perspective applied to numerous examples from today’s diverse stylistic spectrum that reveals this “Texture Wheel” at work and how it aids in appreciation. Many of these examples, including The Beatles’ “Eleanor Rigby” and Squarepusher’s “303 Scopem Hard”, demonstrate musical features outside the norms of contemporary Western popular music. Yet from the perspective of my model, even these examples share important commonalities that describe a common set of listening expectations. Grounded in texture and formal aspects, I demonstrated how this model applies across subgenres, providing specific perceptual inroads audiences can use to connect to this music.

Developing from these insights, Chapter 3 redirected Agawu’s framework for topical analysis of classical music toward the popular sphere. Using the structural principles from chapters 1 and 2, I filled this model’s empty “architectural drawing” with topics, revealing how musical signifiers interact using several examples including Talking Heads’ “Once in a Lifetime” video, where a diverse, strongly connected network of topics surfaced. Applying topical analysis, I demonstrated a more precise mechanism for answering the question “how the work means”. Here, I sought to reveal how popular music’s structural design offers a rich musical framework that artists populate with meaning using culturally specific signifiers.

We might take a moment here to reflect on this music’s rich, intertextual land-
scape of shared topical references. Although it slightly predates our contemporary domain, Theodor Adorno’s widely read conclusion on popular music is that its expressive potential is nullified by the lack of unification between details and total structure. However, as discussed, it is precisely this discrete, modular quality which facilitates the fluid, referential exchange that fuels this music. Popular music’s generalized structures serve as the shared architectural drawing awaiting each artist’s custom meaning. As participants across today’s global stage join this dialogue from increasingly disparate cultures, the value of a common, intuitively understood framework becomes ever more apparent — perhaps an anthropological inevitability. Yet, as proposed, any descriptive model must remain high-level enough to acknowledge the wide range of individual, subcultural expression artists offer.

Like classical music, this rich topical interplay is only possible due to an audience’s shared cultural consciousness. The ecstatic affect of Clyde Stubblefield’s snapping, slightly behind snare, pumped up by James Brown’s staccato vocal stop-time during the break of “Funky Drummer” is possible only through Levinson’s “knowing how” of how funk grooves. Through such shared signifiers, this excerpt became one of the most frequently sampled drum breaks in popular music, funk’s voice echoing into future works.

It is because of this mature language that popular music so uniquely facilitates cultural exchange. The Roots drummer Ahmir "Questlove" (stylized as "?uestlove") Thompson describes the incredible impact of his first hearing of Public Enemy’s 1988 album *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* as largely due to the dense

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77 Adorno writes in *On Popular Music*, “It would not affect the musical sense if any detail were taken out of the context; the listener can supply the ‘framework’ automatically, since it is a mere musical automatism itself ... Recognition becomes an end instead of a means.” (19, 33)

78 An interesting analysis of the break and its many sampled uses can be found at The Ethan Hein Blog (www.ethanhein.com/wp/2009/the-natural-history-of-the-funky-drummer-break/).
layering of culturally poignant samples that recontextualized the music of his father’s record collection (Thompson). Today, it is within the popular sphere that such culturally immersed, intersubjective listening is most possible.

Stravinsky once lamented of audiences, “Music is merely something that reminds them of something else.” (Stravinsky 18) Such extreme, referential listening can certainly be a problem in popular music as well, where audiences might substitute a short list of stylistic topics for meaningful interpretation. As Stravinsky noted, this can reduce the music to a mnemonic device — a bag of extroversive pointers — trading the music’s unique expressive contributions for generalizations. It is precisely this thinking that exposes the worst aspects of rock journalism, particularly reserved for descriptions of new bands. Critics scurry for weighty landmarks to anchor readers against, typically moments before dropping them into an ocean of talking points, e.g. this excerpt below from The Guardian’s “New Band of the Day” column, reviewing the English band Telegram and their debut single “Follow”. Musical references have been italicized to illustrate this effect:

“It sounds as though it was created under laboratory conditions to sound utterly thrown together and spontaneous, a haphazard amalgam of krautrock and psych. They’ve got cool kraut credentials, actually – or at least one of them has: guitarist Matt Wood spent 18 months working at Faust’s HQ in Germany, and psych-wise, well, “Follow” was produced by Dan (Toy) Carey, and the band are due to tour next month with Temples.

79 This is mentioned during a forum discussion between Ahmir Thompson and David Byrne presented by The Public Theater. Interestingly, this segment of the conversation also discusses their relationship with classical and popular music (starting at 00:13:00) and Ahmir’s introduction to Le Sacre du printemps.
There’s also an unexpected splash, in their songs, both of whatever it is *Super Furry Animals* and *Gorky’s Zygotic Mynci* do (the frontman is *Welsh*, and you can hear it) and of *glam*. “Good” *glam*, not the more, uh, primitive kind. *Paul Morley* once drew a distinction between *glam* (*Roxy Music*, *Bowie*, *Bolan*) and *glam rock* (the “*Chinnichap*” stuff), and rest assured, there’s nothing on Telegram’s single that sounds like *Suzi Quatro* or *The Sweet*. But there’s a hint of *Brian Eno* — they formed after a night spent by the guitarist and bassist jumping up and down to the quirky art-pop of *Eno’s Here Come the Warm Jets* — and in fact the same two Telegram-ers used to be in a *Roxy Music* tribute band called Proxy Music.” (Lester)

The uninitiated will likely find the above name-dropping blockade near-impenetrable. Note how, aside from the rather vague opening description of “utterly thrown together and spontaneous”, not a single additional mention is given to the music itself. But the real risk here is that those that do grasp some of these references will take them as cliff notes for the band and summarily move on. “Proxy Music” indeed. Interpreting this pastiche of pointers provides nothing more than an opaque substitute for actual listening. Remaining grounded in the music itself, the approach presented in chapter 3 might be seen as a more fruitful alternative to the complex topic of musical meaning.

In conclusion, I would like to share some motivational examples demonstrating the importance of listener-oriented perspectives on music. Alex Ross elicited a surprising concession from Pierre Boulez when he asked why the serial works of the 1950s never became standard repertoire: “Perhaps we didn’t pay enough attention to how people listen.” While I have investigated this issue in the domain of popular mu-

80 Credit for discovering this quote goes to Kyle Gann’s informative blog (www.artsjournal.com/postclassic/2008/04/the_rock_need_not_return_to_ea.html).
sic, such thinking can be applied more generally: as per Copland, “That of course has been the fundamental problem of all composers since Beethoven — the relation of the artist to the outside world.” (74) Yet for many contemporary composers, even popular music’s listening expectations are becoming increasingly relevant as the boundaries between these audiences become increasingly blurred.

An important axiom of listener-oriented musical perspectives is that different musical languages carry different musical values. Audiences across musical cultures may expect vastly different qualities from their music. Identifying the particular aesthetic values of these musical languages is critical if we are to avoid the all-too-common error of a one-aesthetic-fits-all approach to listening. In 1995, Stockhausen, often called the “father of electronic music” (Service), was presented with a collection of work from some of EDM’s leading artists and then interviewed for his reaction and advice for the musicians. In his response, Stockhausen insisted on grafting the musical values of 20th century high modernism onto this music. The results are often akin to a run-through of “Who’s On First?” — comedy born from the absurd frustration of getting perpetually lost in the semantics.

*Advice to Richard James (a.k.a. Aphex Twin):*

“I think it would be very helpful if he listens to my work “Song Of The Youth” [*Gesang der Junglinge*]”, which is electronic music, and a young boy’s voice singing with himself. Because he would then immediately stop with all these post-African repetitions, and he would look for changing tempi and changing rhythms, and he would not allow to repeat any rhythm if it were varied to some extent and if it did not have a direction in its sequence of variations.” (The Wire)
Advice to Richie Hawtin (a.k.a. Plastikman):

“I know that he wants to have a special effect in dancing bars, or wherever it is, on the public who like to dream away with such repetitions, but he should be very careful, because the public will sell him out immediately for something else, if a new kind of musical drug is on the market.” (The Wire)

And so on. Such readings of music are not adequately (ala Stockfelt) informed critique; they’re more akin to calling a “football” match outside of the U.S. according to American football rules: when you’re playing the wrong game, everything’s a penalty. Worse, such failures fan the flames of culture wars where there is a clear hierarchy between the rarefied and learned versus the popular and commercial — Richard James’ equivalent response: “I thought he should listen to a couple of tracks of mine: ‘Didge-doo’, then he’d stop making abstract, random patterns you can’t dance to.”

To reprise the David Byrne quotation which began this dissertation, it’s natural to become frustrated with music “that doesn’t play by its own rules”. But when a music’s “own rules” aren’t obvious, we fall back on those from our conditioned listening practices. For contemporary Western popular music these “rules” are in fact a complex interplay of structural principles in support of rich, ever-evolving extroversive networks of meaning. This practice results in a specific set of skills; ways of conceiving music that extend beyond its superficial qualities: a foundational appreciation for textural cycles, a sensitivity to these cycles’ intersection with language and phrasing, and a powerful appetite for intertextual references that locate expression within one’s broader contemporary world. These are chief among the aptitudes popular audiences bring to the concert hall (or “dancing bar”), what their music has taught them, and the “rules” to which interested composers might appeal, if only to break them.
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