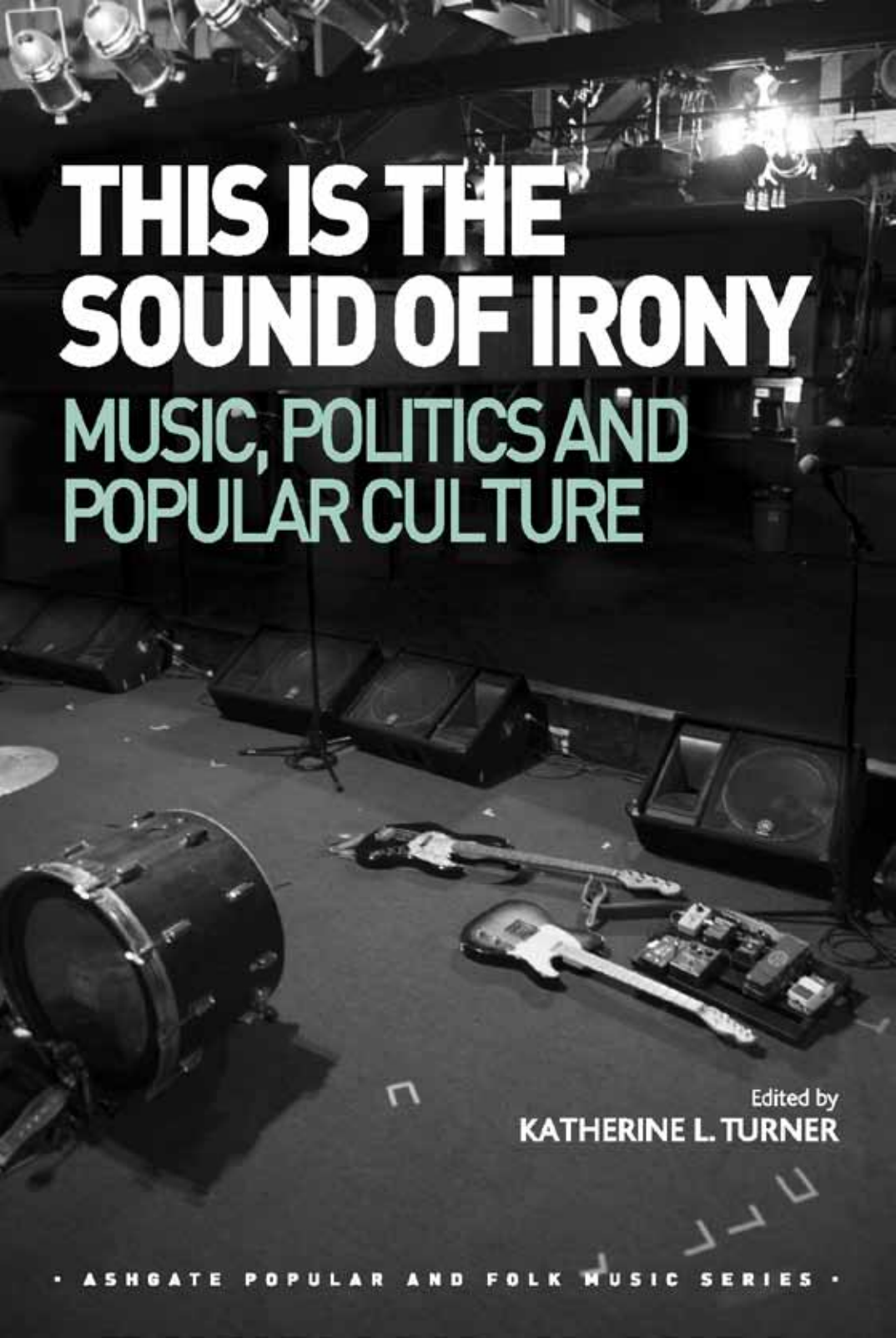
THIS IS THE SOUND OF IRONY
MUSIC, POLITICS AND POPULAR CULTURE
Edited by
KATHERINE L. TURNER
• ASHGATE POPULAR AND FOLK MUSIC SERIES •

THIS IS THE SOUND OF IRONY: MUSIC, POLITICS AND POPULAR CULTURE

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Edited by

KATHERINE L. TURNER

ASHGATE

Published by
Ashgate Publishing Limited
Wey Court East
Union Road
Farnham
Surrey, GU9 7PT
England

Ashgate Publishing Company
110 Cherry Street
Suite 3-1
Burlington, VT 05401-3818
USA

www.ashgate.com

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

The Library of Congress has cataloged the printed edition as follows:
This is the sound of irony : music, politics and popular culture / edited by Katherine L. Turner.
pages cm. – (Ashgate popular and folk music series)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-4724-4259-8 (hardcover) – ISBN 978-1-4724-4260-4 (ebook) – ISBN 978-1-4724-4261-1 (epub) 1. Irony in music. 2. Popular music – History and criticism. I. Turner, Katherine L.
ML3877.T53 2015
781.64'159–dc23

2014045095

ISBN 9781472442598 (hbk)
ISBN 9781472442604 (ebk – PDF)
ISBN 9781472442611 (ebk – ePUB)

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Jeremy Leong received his PhD in Musicology and a Graduate Certificate in Southeast Asian Studies with emphases on cultural studies and Ethnomusicology. His research interests include Jewish studies and music in Asia, East–West encounter, Chinese nationalism and music, and Western instrumental music. His paper on Jewish musical culture in Shanghai was conferred an Honorable Mention, the only prize awarded at the first conference of the ICTM Study Group for Musics of East Asia. In his recent publications, he directed his attention to the correlation between music analysis and performance, and also musical diasporas. Currently, he teaches music and Chinese history at American colleges with campuses in Singapore.

Matthew J. McAllister is a Professor of Humanities at Valencia College in Orlando, Florida. His dissertation from Florida State University, "A Spectacle Worth Attending To: The Ironic Use of Preexisting Art Music in Films," focuses on the intersection of popular and so-called high art music in modern culture. He has given papers and presentations at several international conferences on the topics of music, irony, and film music at NYU, McGill University, and Claremont, California.

Damien McCaffery received his undergraduate degree from Sarah Lawrence College and earned his first Master's degree in musicology at the University of Edinburgh, studying under Simon Frith. He holds a second Master's in information management and preservation from the University of Glasgow's Humanities Advanced Technology and Information Institute, focusing on

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Anna G. Piotrowska studied musicology at Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland and Durham University in the UK. Interested mainly in researching sociological and cultural aspects of musical life, she is a prolific author of books (in English—*Gypsy Music in European Culture*, 2013—and Polish) as well as numerous articles (in Polish, English, German, Slovak and Georgian). She has held many internationally renowned fellowships and awards (for example, Fulbright Fellow in Boston University, Moritz Csaky Preis at Austrian Academy of Sciences, and Mellon Fellowship in Edinburgh University). Currently she is associated with the Institute of Musicology, Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland.

Joseph S. Plazak is currently Assistant Professor at Illinois Wesleyan University where he teaches courses in music theory, music technology, and music cognition. He holds a BA in both music and psychology from Elmhurst College, as well as a Master's and PhD in Music Theory from Ohio State University. His dissertation examined instrumental irony and the perception of musical sarcasm, and his current research interests include the perception of musical sincerity, contextual factors of musical preference, and strong emotional experiences in response to music. He has presented his research at regional, national, and international levels, and his publications can be found in ESCOM's *Musicae Scientae* and *Empirical Musicology Review*.

S. Alexander Reed is author of *Assimilate: A Critical History of Industrial Music* and is co-author of the 33 1/3 book They Might Be Giants' *Flood*. An active pop musician, he is a founder of the Popular Music Study Group of the American Musicological Society. Holding degrees from the College of Wooster and the University of Pittsburgh, Alex has taught at the College of William & Mary, the University of Florida, and NYU. He now works at Ithaca College.

Andrew Shryock is a member of the music history faculty at the Boston Conservatory. His research examines intersections of music, literature, and aesthetics in eighteenth-century England and specifically in the music of George Frideric Handel. This interest in music–text relations extends also to hip hop. Andrew has written on these topics and delivered papers at conferences, including the national meetings of the American Musicological Society, the Handel Institute (UK), the Society for Textual Studies, and the Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies.

Katherine L. Turner (editor) holds a PhD in musicology from the University of Texas with a doctoral portfolio in Women and Gender Studies. She currently

teaches undergraduate and graduate courses on the faculty of the Moores School of Music at the University of Houston. She has presented internationally and published on both early modern and Americanist topics. Her (other) current project is an interdisciplinary song-profile of the anti-lynching song "Strange Fruit" as a sonic resonance of the Long Civil Rights Movement, 1930s to the present.

General Editors' Preface

Popular musicology embraces the field of musicological study that engages with popular forms of music, especially music associated with commerce, entertainment and leisure activities. The *Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series* aims to present the best research in this field. Authors are concerned with criticism and analysis of the music itself, as well as locating musical practices, values and meanings in cultural context. The focus of the series is on popular music of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with a remit to encompass the entirety of the world's popular music.

Critical and analytical tools employed in the study of popular music are being continually developed and refined in the twenty-first century. Perspectives on the transcultural and intercultural uses of popular music have enriched understanding of social context, reception and subject position. Popular genres as distinct as reggae, township, bhangra, and flamenco are features of a shrinking, transnational world. The series recognizes and addresses the emergence of mixed genres and new global fusions, and utilizes a wide range of theoretical models drawn from anthropology, sociology, psychoanalysis, media studies, semiotics, postcolonial studies, feminism, gender studies and queer studies.

Stan Hawkins, Professor of Popular Musicology, University of Oslo and
Derek B. Scott, Professor of Critical Musicology, University of Leeds

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Acknowledgments and Permissions

Acknowledgements

On behalf of the contributing authors, I would like to thank the usual round of friends, family members, colleagues, mentors, librarians, and anyone who has recently asked, "So what are you working on?" My most heartfelt gratitude is extended to the contributing authors; they have been patient, thoughtful, and collegial throughout this process, and I am grateful for the free exchange of ideas, resources, and playlists. I am grateful to the editors and readers at Ashgate for their encouragement, patience and wise suggestions. The intervening years between when I wrote the paper proposal for the McGill University conference that inspired this project and the final proof stages of this collection have witnessed an exponential multiplication of opportunities for "irony" to enrich my reading skills, my outlook, and my listening zone. Thank you, Socrates. It seems that the more one knows about irony, the less one understands it.

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Introduction
The Sound of Irony/The Irony of Sound[1]

Katherine L. Turner

> "This is the Sound of Silence."
>
> Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel

> "Irony is a quality in the eye of the beholder, and, like art itself, this quality may be 'found' everywhere."
>
> Lars Elleström

Irony holds a special place in the long history of literature, conversation, political discourse, and artistic representation as a high-risk/high-reward tactic. When effective, the outcome may range from a gentle humorous prod to a powerful weapon for social commentary, whereas its collapse can lead to confusion, denouncement, and misrepresentation. Historically, literary theory has dominated irony discourse, but in the past few decades listeners and scholars alike have come to recognize music as fertile ground for exploring ironic intentions, expressions, and interpretations impossible in other mediums. Western pop musics and art musics repurposed to popular ends, with their mass appeal, trend-setting potential and aura of popularity—not to mention cultural ubiquity—are collectively rife with layers of ironies that may be deliberate or inadvertent, performed or implied, textual and musical. At once a blithe dalliance and highly symbolic of its time and locality, irony in our sonic space defines contemporary issues, reframes the best and worst of our politics, and highlights what makes us angry, what makes us laugh and the contradictory nature of the human spirit.

Paradoxically, critics note that irony is pervasive, and that there is no such thing as irony.[2] Because there is no set definition of "irony"—or because there are many

[1] The idea for this collection, and some of the articles, began with the April 2012 conference "The Art and Politics of Irony / L'art et la politique de l'ironie," sponsored by the Institute for the Public Life of Arts and Ideas, McGill University, Montréal, Canada. My thanks go to the organizers and participants of that week, also to Matthew Konopacki, Paul Rousse Jr, Mallory Sanchez and Niel Scobie for their assistance, and to the graduate students in the Music and Irony seminar at the University of Houston, Spring 2013, for their insights, tangents, and patience with all things that may or may not have been ironic.

[2] "There is no agreement among critics about what irony is, and many would hold to the romantic claim … that its very spirit and value are violated by the effort to be clear about it." Wayne Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago, IL, 1974), p. ix. Claire Colebrook, commenting on the peculiarities of our postmodern society says that "[w]e live in a world of quotation, pastiche, simulation and cynicism: a general and all-encompassing irony.

definitions—a broad misunderstanding of exactly what qualifies as irony endures, as does interest in its use and misuse. Quoting the figurehead of modern irony studies, Søren Kierkegaard, D.J. Enright's book on irony, *The Alluring Problem*, aptly notes that the ironic figure of speech is "like a riddle and its solution possessed simultaneously."[3] Demonstrating this tantalizing challenge, albeit unintentionally, perhaps the most famous pop music example of irony is Alanis Morissette's 1995 song "Ironic" from *Jagged Little Pill*. Preceding the (rhetorical?) chorus tagline "Isn't it ironic … don't you think?" coincidences abound, but ironies are few. The flagrant semantic misusage, however, is ironic.[4]

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines irony, from the Greek *eironeia* for "dissemble," as "a figure of speech in which the intended meaning is the opposite of that expressed by the words used."[5] This singular, however authoritative, definition of irony clearly derives from a literary or rhetorical stance and leaves no room for music, which must first negotiate the transliteration of "figure of speech" to "musical gesture." After all, how might one go about arguing that an appoggiatura on B♯ is ironic?

> Today, one may find the word *irony* in not a few texts concerning visual art and music, but it is still relatively rare for visual works of art, or specific pieces of

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Irony, then, by the very simplicity of its definition becomes curiously indefinable." See Claire Colebrook, *Irony: The New Critical Idiom* (London and New York, 2004), p. 1. "Irony has been treated as both a very limited trope and the sine qua non of literature." Lars Elleström, *Divine Madness: On Interpreting Literature, Music, and the Visual Arts Ironically* (Lewisburg, PA, 2002), p. 85; Muecke goes a step further: "we might think of it as a *sine qua non* of life." D.C. Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic*, 2nd edn (London and New York, 1982), p. 4.

[3] D.J. Enright, *The Alluring Problem: An Essay on Irony* (Oxford, 1986), p. 3.

[4] Matt Sturges provides an analysis with merit in an interesting blog response: "It is Ironic, Isn't It?" (1996), http://fgk.hanau.net/articles/ironic.html [accessed July 8, 2013]. Critical commentary on the song includes Roger Horberry, *Sounds Good on Paper: How to Bring Business Language to Life* (London, 2010), p. 136: "A common misconception is that 'ironic' is a direct synonym for coincidental. The lyrics of Alanis Morissette's UK top 11 (and US top five) hit *Ironic* describe a number of apparently ironic situations, each verse ending with the refrain 'Isn't it ironic?' To which the answer must be a polite but firm 'no,' as the lyrics are in fact a succinct explanation of what irony *isn't*. How ironic." The popular press took even more notice—see Christina Kelly, "Isn't it Alanis?" *Rolling Stone*, 747 (November 14, 1996): 36: "In the song, she catalogs a list of supposed ironies—'A no-smoking sign on your cigarette break,' for instance—that don't quite fit the dictionary's definition of the term. And recently, her video for the song has been the subject of a slew of parodies." See also Shanda Deziel, "ISN'T IT IRONIC?" *Maclean's*, 118/17 (April 25, 2005): 50–52: "[T]here was something refreshing about the 20-year-old's depth and vocabulary (excusing her misunderstanding of the word 'ironic')."

[5] "Irony," OED Online, Oxford University Press (March 2013), http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.uh.edu/view/Entry/99565?rskey=wKcrT5&result=1&isAdvanced=false [accessed March 21, 2013].

> music, to be described as ironic in a more concise manner. It is not hard to see why: as the concept of irony is basically connected to the use of words and literary meaning, it is easy to hesitate before trying to say where the irony is to be found if nothing is really said in the work of art. If nothing is "stated," there can be no implied opposite "meaning"—or can there?[6]

Here, Lars Elleström is combating decades—centuries—of theory and usage. D.C. Muecke has noted that:

> There seem to be no ways of being ironical that are specific to music … Non-representative art can be ironical in perhaps only two ways: incongruities of formal properties and parodies of the clichés, mannerisms, styles, conventions, ideologies and theories of earlier artists, schools or periods.[7]

Even amongst scholars of music, there is some doubt as to how, or whether, music can be ironic. Julian Johnson notes:

> When someone speaks ironically … [a] gap opens up between what is said (the words) and how it is said (the tone). While this is well understood in relation to language and literature, it is problematic in relation to music because what music says is already more a matter of tone than material and because that material resists the specific meaning of words. This by no means precludes musical irony, but it underlines why it is generally constructed in relation to highly conventional materials with a fixed and immediately recognized semantic reference. As Mahler demonstrates, musical irony is therefore inseparable from the use of "borrowed" and familiar materials.[8]

Mary Cicora (and Carolyn Abbate by citation) state quite clearly that music, the notes themselves, have the power "*to lie"* and deceive the listener; in Wagner's *Ring*, Cicora demonstrates ways in which

> … the music does not really mean what it is saying … the music is an extra layer that can diverge from the words to create meaning. Words and music often work not only with each other, but against each other. Furthermore, each medium can be in itself contradictory, that is, ironic.[9]

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[6] Elleström, *Divine Madness*, p. 26.

[7] Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic*, pp. 2–3.

[8] Julian Johnson, *Mahler's Voices: Expression and Irony in the Songs and Symphonies* (Oxford, 2009), p. 134.

[9] Although she does not directly address musical irony (for example, it does not appear in the index), the concept permeates many of Carolyn Abbate's analyses and discussions. See Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth*

Stephen Zank mediates somewhere between these two positions, noting the permeating presence of *sound*.

> At the very least, one may observe that for a good two millennia irony has been conveyed chiefly by sound, by the sound of words spoken, whether written down or not. But it has been conveyed, too, by other means such as gesture or visual representation, and one may therefore observe, too—with little glee, given the complications—that irony and a variety of perceptual modalities including sound, and musical sound, are promisingly conjoined … [M]usic may constitute a bridge between the different domains of irony. The irony "of notes," as it were, is cast amidst, across, and beyond ironies of words and/or life or "things."[10]

This collection seeks to (further) disprove traditional negations and strengthen the notion that music is capable of irony by illuminating an ever-expanding arena for discourse about the relationship between music and irony.[11] If "irony" is a rhetorical device—that is, a *figure of speech*—then "musical irony," as a sonic device, is a *figure of sound*.[12] The contributing authors are interested not only in how irony functions in a musical milieu, but also in what music can tell us about the nature of irony as a compelling tool, an intellectual conquest, and a cultural phenomenon.

The full-length, in-depth scholarship on music and irony has primarily focused on art music: humor in classical symphonies and string quartets, narrative distance in opera and art songs in the Romantic era, and sarcasm and exaggeration in modernist works.[13] In the past few years jazz, pop and film music have notably begun to enter the field.[14] Popular music, perhaps, utilizes irony (and satire,

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Century (Princeton, NJ, 1996) cited in Mary A. Cicora, *Mythology as Metaphor: Romantic Irony, Critical Theory, and Wagner's Ring* (Westport, CT, 1998), pp. 20–21.

[10] Stephen Zank, *Irony and Sound: The Music of Maurice Ravel* (Rochester, NY, 2009), pp. 2–3.

[11] Cutting across many subfields of music and sonic studies, the history of [ironic] listening is paramount to every chapter here and an avenue ripe for further exploration. Andy Bennett has proposed ironic listeners (and post-ironic bands) in connection to humorous or pleasurable listening to something otherwise odious or contemptible (how one might enjoy the renderings of the Portsmouth Sinfonia or any number of slick teen-pop head-boppers, for example). See Andy Bennett, "Cheesy Listening: Popular Music and Ironic Listening Practices," in Sarah Baker, Andy Bennett and Jodie Taylor (eds), *Redefining Mainstream Popular Music* (New York, 2013), pp. 202–13. However, ironic listening need not be comical, especially when used to make a serious point.

[12] In Chapter 13 of this collection, Andrew Shryock uses "figure of sound" to denote "a sonic cue that signals contradiction despite the semantic imprecision of the medium."

[13] Although it is not exhaustive, see the Bibliography for scholarship by Balter, Cicora, Diener, Garvin, Hatten, Johnson, Malloy, Sheinberg, and Zank.

[14] See the Bibliography for scholarship by Atchison, Bailey, Biddle, Cateforis, Ching and Fox, Covach, Dettmar, Diner, Ellis, Jarman-Ivens, Kutnowski, Maus, McAllister,

sarcasm, pun, parody …) more naturally and with less academic artifice than art music. Searching to define research in pop music, many scholars have remarked on the rifeness of irreverence and ambiguity as a foundational marker of popular music. As Stan Hawkins notes, popular music is based on playfulness and pleasure:

> One of the most widespread forms of representation in pop music certainly occurs through the details that define pleasure. Of course, pleasure occurs in many guises: satire, empathy, sarcasm, irony, eroticism, sexual explicitness, parody.[15]

While "irony" is included in a list of useful guises, he later posits that it is not just a device of text but fundamental to understanding pop music in its time and place.

> There is hardly any need to expand on the ironic nature of post-1980s pop music than to state that this period in pop history has signified an era of vivid representation, panning across a wealth of genres … We know that fun in musical enjoyment is a vital factor in laying down the prerequisite of playfulness on the part of the pop artist. And this is how parody is enticed into the discourse of pop—through its remarkable power it brings musical performance into close range by making the performer appear "authentic." We might then consider the familiarisation of the pop identity through parody and fun as an indispensable step in actualising the creativity of genre.[16]

Just as Hawkins casually glances over irony, this developing subfield has struggled to define a methodology. Approaches have ranged from glossing over the problem by assuming reader familiarity with, and understanding of, irony (often applying only vague notions of the concept) to wholesale application of mid-century literary discourse[17] to bending and refashioning existing models.[18]

Monson, Pedelty, Peters, Serazio and Whiteley. Edited collections, especially those by Moore and by Hawkins, are also notable for broader, if not fully explored, themes of irony in popular music often related to gender roles, race–class boundaries, youthful angst, genre splicing, textual elements and/or social function.

[15] Stan Hawkins, "Musicological Quagmires in Popular Music: Seeds of Detailed Conflict," *Popular Musicology Online* (2001), http://www.popular-musicology-online.com/issues/01/hawkins.html [accessed May 1, 2014].

[16] Ibid.

[17] Booth, *Rhetoric of Irony*; Norman Knox, *The Word Irony and Its Context, 1500–1750* (Durham, NC, 1961); D.C. Muecke, *The Compass of Irony* (London, 1969); D.C. Muecke, *Irony* (London, 1970); Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic*.

[18] Michael Klein, "Ironic Narrative, Ironic Reading," *Journal of Music Theory*, 53/1 (Spring 2009): 95–136; Derek B. Scott, "Mimesis, Gesture, and Parody in Musical Word-Setting," in John Williamson (ed.), *Words and Music, Liverpool Music Symposium* (Liverpool, 2005), pp. 10–28; Eddy Zemach and Tamara Balter, "The Structure of Irony and How it Functions in Music," in Kathleen Stock (ed.), *Philosophers on Music: Experience, Meaning, and Work* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 178–206.

Returning to art music, Esti Sheinberg's book on Shostakovich lays down the most thorough discussion of irony in a musical context to date; she seeks to separate branches of irony so that music can mitigate its place.[19]

> There are two possible ways to interpret musical incongruities. One is to resolve them into new congruences by modifying their correlations so that they accommodate each other. Such a procedure would lead either to further hierarchical subsets of correlations or to the creation of musical metaphors. The second is to acknowledge the structures of incongruities as semantically significant in themselves and interpret them as irony.[20]

One might argue that there are several paths to reconcile sonic opposition. In this collection, musical irony is not a unified theory but a web of overlapping ideas, disciplines, and treatments of dissemblage occurring within a musical framework that investigates the "sound of irony" and its inevitable companion, the "irony of sound."[21] We collectively seek to understand the plurality of meanings and interpretations while examining musical irony's political uses in popular culture. Each chapter is a unique application of one or more irony theories gleaned from fields as varied as rhetoric, cognitive/pragmatic studies, literature, media, philosophy, sociology, and theater. Some theories are applied by multiple authors but with different implications and results—a telling complication of musical irony's diversity. While there are some fundamental terms common to irony as a field of study (described below), I leave in-depth discussion of discrete theories to individual authors.

Although most of irony theory refers to some modicum of verbal communication, two broad theories of irony with easy tangency to music have recently emerged. Linda Hutcheon's book *Irony's Edge* presents irony as a sociopolitical construct of context—a "scene"—wherein irony "happens" within existing "discursive communities" and ironic meaning falls precariously on the edge between expression and comprehension, among other sharply divided boundaries.[22] Although she limits musical irony to formal properties—even as she tries to expand notions of irony beyond the verbal and situational—her argument is sensitive to music, at least conceptually.[23] She presents irony as inherently political:

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[19] Esti Sheinberg, *Irony, Satire, Parody, and the Grotesque in the Music of Shostakovich: A Theory of Musical Incongruities* (Aldershot, 2000), pp. 33–68.

[20] Ibid., p. 57.

[21] Elleström's notion that "the rules of irony are not really rules" seems especially apt in non-representational art. See Elleström, *Divine Madness*, p. 59.

[22] Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London, 1994), pp. 2–4, 17, 86–7.

[23] "My particular interest in the transideological politics of irony is what suggested to me the need for an approach to irony that would treat it not as a limited rhetorical trope or as an extended attitude to life, but a discursive strategy operating at the level of language

> [T]he politics of irony are never simple and never single. Unlike most other discursive strategies, irony explicitly sets up (and exists within) a relationship between ironist and audiences (the one being intentionally addressed, the one that actually makes the irony happen, and the one being excluded) that is political in nature.[24]

This portends a relationship of power that must be maintained or overturned. In music, who holds this power—the artist with the microphone, or the listener who can tune in or out?[25]

Hutcheon's focus on irony as a communicative process between the creator and receiver is significant because it correlates so closely to the performer/listener dichotomy. Unlike the written or spoken word, music—even when it has lyrics or a title for guidance—is cloaked in additional musical (and often non-musical) layers to complicate or clarify an irony that often requires a certain cultural enmeshment on the part of the listener.

> Irony rarely involves a simple decoding of a single inverted message … it is more often a semantically complex process of relating, differentiating, and combining said and unsaid meanings—and doing so with some evaluative edge. It is also, however, a culturally shaped process.[26]

Here, the author argues that pre-existing *communities enable irony* as a means of communication, rather than irony creating the community. This certainly presents a better model for music: fans of a genre, style or band successfully interpret irony in music on the basis of a shared understanding of the music itself as well as knowledge about the *modus operandi* of the group, rather than a musical irony bringing together disparate listeners.

Lars Elleström's book *Divine Madness* focuses on the act of interpretation rather than authorial intention as the key to understanding irony deployed in the arts because "the hermeneutics of intentionalism is problematic, and sometimes even fallacious. When it comes to interpreting irony in artistic texts, it is, I believe, almost always reductive."[27] He emphasizes irony as an interpretive strategy for understanding a particular text, artwork or piece of music:

(verbal) or form (musical, visual, textual)": ibid., p. 10. Chapter 6 opens with a discussion of the frailty of instrumental music, intertextual signals and the importance of context.

[24] Ibid., p. 16.

[25] This is a particularly interesting question because most of the chapters in this collection (like most musicological inquiry) assume that "a listener" is a passive recipient rather than a participating contributor, and that he or she is indeed actively listening. There are notable exceptions to the "passive listener" rule in this collection.

[26] Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, p. 85.

[27] Elleström, *Divine Madness*, p. 44.

> What is of interest for us here is that the postmodern view is often identified as an ironic view, and that the "open sign" theories of music hence might be inscribed in the line of thought that also includes irony. It is of course the double status of music that might be interpreted as ironic: it has no meaning, and yet it has; and this meaning may very well differ so radically from one person to another, or from one occasion to another, that it can be said to be inherently inconsistent. The meaning of music hovers, and there is nothing one can do about it. If one carries this line of reasoning to its extremes one has to deduce that all music, if interpreted in the Romantic and post-Romanic way, is in itself ironic.[28]

Musical irony necessarily negotiates this "hover" with two (or more) possibilities for either (and often for both) songwriters'/performers' intended meanings, and the interpretations of listeners/consumers who individually approach a musical piece with different experiences, information, and expectations. The notion of "double status" is a common thread both in irony studies and in music (especially work on sonic expression).[29] The two fields are so independently rich in diversity of expression and cultural signification that it is an exciting collision to disassemble, investigate, and revaluate.

Irony Terminology

In part because of the interdisciplinary nature of irony nomenclature and the great deal of overlap, razor-thin differentiation and ambiguity, the following is a brief overview of common terms and categories used throughout this collection.

1. Irony studies often speak of *ironic intention*—that is, a creation or performance purposely designed to be understood as pointedly ironic. In contrast, *ironic interpretation* is the cognitive determination by the receptor of a statement/action/musical gesture as ironic whether or not the creator/enactor so intended.
2. Irony has a *victim* or *target*, someone or something—creator, addressee or a third party—that is (negatively) postured as the subject of the criticism.

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[28] Ibid., p. 170.

[29] Mikhail Bakhtin's classic 1935 essay "Discourse in the Novel" has long provided a basis for discussing "double voicing" in literature; many such opportunities, including the use of irony as a means of communication, exist for music and sound studies. See Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson (Austin, TX, 1981), pp. 259–422. A short list of sonic studies includes Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis, MN, 1985); Lawrence Grossberg, *Dancing in Spite of Myself: Essays on Popular Culture* (Durham, NC, 1997); Charles Keil and Steven Feld, *Music Grooves: Essays and Dialogues* (Chicago, IL, 1994); and John Shepherd and Peter Wicke, *Music and Cultural Theory* (Cambridge, 1997).

3. *Stable irony*, as seminally defined by Wayne Booth,[30] requires a shared understanding of the situation and applicable cultural norms; the ironic statement is one that disrupts those mores, but meaning is never truly lost because both parties comprehend the unlikelihood of the utterance's literal meaning.
4. Although irony may be completely unprompted, an *irony marker* is a coded preparatory sign or gesture.[31] Quintilian observed that irony might be indicated by a shift in "the delivery, the character of the speaker or the nature of the subject. For if any one of these three is out of keeping with the words, it at once becomes clear that the intention of the speaker is other than what he actually says."[32]
5. In a musical context then, it follows that a shift towards irony might be marked by a change in "the performance, the stylistic character of the music or the nature of the genre," any of which can serve to elucidate a listener.
6. One of the most crucial aspects of successful irony is that there is an *in-crowd* who "gets" the irony. Otherwise, the objective fails and the proponent or creator may come across as inept, which has the same practical effect as explaining a joke.

Broadly speaking there are three sites for irony. The first relates to words: spoken, sung or written. This is perhaps the easiest to comprehend and the most narrowly defined (as well as the most commonly misconstrued)—for example, saying "What a beautiful day!" during a sleet storm. The second site is physical, gestural or performative—for example, taking a step back to avoid the splash from a passing bus only to stumble into a puddle. The third broad site of irony is construed within a "text," a secondary or even tertiary locus. This removed site is totally or partly a created scenario, if the above episode with the puddle occurred in a musical for example.

More specific categories of irony fall within and across these three sites. *Verbal irony* is a figure of speech that creates a contrast between the literal and interpreted meaning. As the most common and accessible form of irony, it only requires the attention of only two people. Sarcasm is often mistaken wholesale as irony when in fact it is a concept for humor or degradation that frequently makes use of irony. To be effective, verbal irony in any form requires a shared understanding of the reality of the situation, the correct tone of delivery (humorous, sarcastic, mean-spirited), apt timing (on the right beat, as it were), and the intellectual and contextual capacity to appreciate the disjunction. As popular music relies heavily on text, it will come as no surprise that many of the chapters in this collection focus in part on irony in spoken, printed or sung words.

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30 Booth, *Rhetoric of Irony*, Part I: "Stable Irony."
31 Ibid., pp. 53–76; Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, pp. 149–52.
32 Quintilian, *Institutio*, VIII, vi, pp. 54–8, quoted in Knox, *The Word Irony*, p. 147.

Dramatic irony can be differentiated from verbal irony in two distinct ways. First, whereas two interacting parties can accomplish verbal irony, dramatic irony requires a third party, such as an audience; often, the audience knows something unknown to one or more characters. The second connected point is that in verbal irony the speaker usually intends a meaning different from what is said; in dramatic irony the speaker means what is said, but it is interpreted as ironic in the larger context by the omniscient third party. This kind of irony is "tragic" if a series of ironies lead to a final event with terrible consequences. Dramatic irony's foundation is miscommunication, disguising or hiding information, and misunderstandings that are revealed only to some. The standard illustration is Oedipus Rex who unknowingly (but recognized by the audience) kills his father, marries his mother, and vows to punish his father's murderer. Pop music provides many opportunities for comic—as well as tragic—ironies of this sort, often through staged or recorded performance.

If dramatic irony is a ploy that lives in the moment—what the speaker knows as he speaks is in contrast to what others know at that same moment—then *situational irony* is more like a long con—a ruse taking place over time. Participants and onlookers do not recognize the irony because its revelation comes at a later moment in time, the unexpected "twist." In situational irony, the anticipated outcome contrasts with the end result. The short stories of O. Henry are familiar literary examples, but real-world examples are part and parcel of life.[33] Sometimes, music does this in rather obvious ways: a deceptive cadence, a not quite rhymed line, a genre miscue, or an uncharacteristic syncopation. Music may also employ a subtle undertone, requiring the listener to recontextualize an irony as part of a larger act or album.

Socratic irony is a broad category simplified as the feigning of ignorance despite in-depth knowledge of a subject or scenario. It is named after the Socratic method in which the teacher asks questions of the student (which would seem to indicate unfamiliarity with the subject on the part of the teacher) with the objective of coaxing a participant to the information or realization already understood by the questioner. Musical applications come in the form of a textual question or leading the audience/listener to a new understanding of a genre, musical instrument or performance concept. Socratic irony may also imply a use of the negative (if *a* is true, then *b* cannot be true). Many consider Socrates to be the father of irony for his use of the technique in defining truth, exposing human failures, and for establishing irony as an essential quality in Western thought.[34]

Based in worded expression, *classical irony* presents a clear and stable opposition of stated and intended meanings. *Romantic irony*, on the other hand, delights in ambiguity and paradox, which invites multiple interpretations and may

[33] A particular subcategory variously called cosmic irony or irony of fate or fortune implies an external force manipulating an ironic manifestation.

[34] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony, with Constant Reference to Socrates*, trans. Lee M. Capel (London, 1966).

even ask whether irony is actually being deployed.[35] These are not necessarily restricted to their respective historical epochs; rather, they are descriptive of practical construction and usage. The customary summation is that romantic irony relies on a *both/and* interpretive formula as opposed to the *either/or* of classical irony.[36]

About this Book

Throughout this collection authors variously reappropriate, disrupt, and negotiate these traditional literary categories because music can neither ignore the long history and cultural capital of "irony discourse" nor adopt wholesale theories that do not consider the particular nature of notes, rhythms, singing, and playing instruments. Musical irony at its most elemental is an incongruity of opposition created, informed or enhanced by the interaction of sound, performance, words, and musical gestures.

This collection begins with Meredith Eliassen's chapter "The Meat in a Humbug Sandwich: The Irony of Want in California Gold Rush Music." At the height of vaudeville and minstrelsy, one performer by the name of Mart Taylor took his bag of popular songs, razor-sharp wit, and keen observational skills out West to a land of hard-working miners, greedy capitalists, foreigners, and a whole cast of characters out to make a quick buck. His song "California Humbugs" (1856) demonstrated musically how anybody could be the meat in someone else's sandwich by describing the irony of want. In situations large and small, everyone took advantage of someone less fortunate, and everyone was in turn a victim. Taylor's songs and clever lyrics relied not only on verbal irony, but also on situational irony wrapped in entertainment.

Chapter 2, G. Yvonne Kendall's "'I ain't got long to stay here': Double Audience, Double Irony in US Slave Songs and Spirituals" invites readers to consider spirituals both as irony-infused examples of American antebellum culture and as predecessors of modern ironies at the intersection of race, culture, and politics. Slave songs hid messages of faith, forewarning, and condemnation for those initiated to their coded meanings, turning a more superficially acceptable face to others; an additional layer of musical irony is drawn between restrictive chordal hymns of the slave masters and the freer format of the slave spirituals. Metaphors in songs and narratives referencing robes, maps, and signals demonstrate the ironic

[35] The early nineteenth-century writer Friedrich Schlegel is most closely associated with romantic irony.

[36] Two fine examples of "classical" and "romantic" irony in music respectively are Mark Evan Bonds, "Haydn, Laurence Sterne, and the Origins of Musical Irony," *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 44/1 (1991): 57–91; and Rey M. Longyear, "Beethoven and Romantic Irony," *The Musical Quarterly*, 56/4 (October 1970): 647–64.

wit of those whose survival relied on multiple meanings for multiple audiences, passing black messages in white envelopes.

Chapter 3, Katherine L. Turner's "'Strange Fruit': Cognitive Linguistics and Pragmatics of Ironic Comprehension" analyses textual, musical, and performative ironies in this 1939 anti-lynching song by applying Francisco Yus's theory of the seven contextual sources involved in ironic comprehension. The fields of linguistics and pragmatics strive to explain the mechanics of how and why a particular phenomenon communicates meaning through context; Yus's theory charts the path by which words, gestures, memories and images contribute to ironic recognition and comprehension. This chapter uses Billie Holiday's 1959 live video-recorded performance of "Strange Fruit" as a case study applying ironic cognition theory first to the lyrics and then grafting it onto the musical and performative aspects of the performance as a means of revealing and demonstrating musical irony.

Jeremy Leong's "Musical Irony and Identity Politics: Jewish Refugees in Republican China" (Chapter 4) turns to a collision of musical and cultural forces underrepresented in scholarship to find distinct ironies in the politics of popular music. Jewish refugees who landed in Shanghai c.1940 brought with them their talents, knowledge, appreciation, and middle-class desires for a vibrant musical life fulfilling social, economic, and spiritual needs. Focusing on Austro-German Jews entering a community of pre-existing Jewish diaspora, Chinese residents and Japanese imperialists, the ironies of daily existence are explored through four broad contextual areas: sacred music as a site of conflict and unity amongst Jewish subcultures, cabaret music's ironic humor as a survival technique, operetta as popular entertainment reviving a middle-class existence, and Jewish musicians' participation in Chinese cultural–political events.

The fifth chapter, Timothy Koozin's "Irony, Myth, and Temporal Organization in the Early Songs of Bob Dylan," addresses one of the foremost musi-political ironists of the past century. Through both their lyrical and purely musical incongruities, four Dylan songs demonstrate the multifaceted ironic layering that is unique to musical performance. These ironies target the media, Dylan's listeners, the detached artist/poet, and even himself as a character unfolding through a Brechtian drama. This chapter brings to the forefront ironies that are at times romantic and at times classical in construction. The trans-historical examples presented here are self-consciously ironic and demonstrate the depth of Dylan's literary foundation and intellectual prowess as well as his acute understanding of musical conventions and the consequences of transgressing rhythmic, harmonic, and formal hierarchies.

S. Alexander Reed's "Burning Down Freedom's Road: The Strange Life of 'Brown Baby'" (Chapter 6) stretches the concept of incompatible genres to trace the fascinating and ironic transformation of one song. What began as a civil rights lullaby then became a hymn of Jim Jones's cult, the People's Temple, then a neo-folk ballad by England's Death in June, and then a track by the über-hip electropop band Ladytron. As the song changed hands, it also changed title and some lyrics. The result is an increasingly white and decreasingly corporeal song

(with one last twist at the end) raising questions about covers, genre, authenticity, postmodernism, and the sound of irony. As the artistic thematics of the song recast and resignify for new audiences, this chapter looks especially at absence as an ironic marker.

Chapter 7, Sabatino DiBernardo's "God, Flag, and Country: Ironic Variations on a Metaphysical Theme," investigates three songs representing this quintessential American triptych; Randy Newman's "God's Song," "Sail Away," and Jimi Hendrix's iconic Woodstock performance of "The Star Spangled Banner" serve as "noisy" musical critiques of the shared metaphysical foundations of religio-secular idealisms. The author approaches musical irony as "contrapuntal" and through a performative reading informed by deconstruction locates a self-referential irony that structures the "origins" of self-authorized institutions. Traditional concepts of verbal irony interlace with situational and dramatic ironies found through the disjunctive juxtaposition of musical style and lyrics, and intertextual and intermusical allusions. In some cases, the notes highlight the ironies in the text, while in others the text emphasizes the ironies in the music.

Chapter 8, Chadwick Jenkins' "The View from Below: Early Hip Hop Culture as Ironic Perception" begins with rap philosopher KRS-One's claims that pre-1984 hip hop was a way of viewing the world, not just a series of artistic manifestations. Looking to philosophers as varied as Socrates, Derrida and Attali, Jenkins considers irony through the lenses of negative authority, deconstructionalism, and the politics of pleasure. Cultural constructs from pre-1979 hip hop culture demonstrating this ironic perception include graffiti art, breakdancing, emceeing, and deejaying. These activities voiced an ironic reorganization of elements, including space, time, bodily movement, musical form, rhythm, and rhetoric. This reorganization existed not only for participant-creators, but also for outside observer-critics. Notions of production/consumption and product/process are central to this exploration of irony from above and below.

In her chapter investigating irony in Cold War-era Poland, Anna G. Piotrowska's "'Ironic Consciousness' in Early Polish Punk Music" seeks to define musical irony as created and understood by youth audiences in 1980s Poland. Newly formed bands sought to protest political policies, social patterns, and communism in general through distinctly Polish characteristics, including slang terms and unique cultural referents in combination with punk's established practices. To maximize effect, bands used irony strategically—creating an ironic consciousness through veiled symbolism—rather than a bombardment of constant irony. Arguing for the very nature of musical irony, Piotrowska considers the matter one of recognition. A listener who perceives or interprets a musical moment as ironic—with or without tangential contextual layers—has found musical irony.

An acute example of politically subversive musical irony, David J. Ferrandino's "Irony, Intentionality, and Environmental Politics in the Music of Cake" (Chapter 10) analyzes songs of the late twentieth-century alternative rock band Cake. "Stickshifts and Safetybelts," "Race Car Ya-yas" and "Carbon Monoxide" glorify and demonize American car culture. The songs, individually

and collectively, encourage listeners to form divergent interpretations, one based on lyrical narrative, and the other informed by sonic narrative. As irony blends with sarcasm, Cake musically demonstrates a self-conscious awareness of the complex nature of America's relationship with luxury, capitalism, and the politics of environmentalism. By blending genres and relying on a variety of "registers"—sonic markers understood by listeners as imbued with meaning or cultural associations—Cake gives its listeners multiple interpretations for strategically sounded ironies.

Chapter 11, Mimi Haddon's "Paul Anka Sings 'Smells Like Teen Spirit'" offers an eye-rolling, toothy-grin moment: an aged 1960s teen idol-turned-lounge-singer covers an anthem of generation X's discontentment. Haddon argues that an ironic reading re-establishes the work's intelligibility, which is otherwise lost in the sheer absurdity of its existence. Beginning with the connection between popular music genres and their social and musical significance, the author makes a case for irony marked by incompatibility through Anka's performance of specific musical and physical gestures. To broaden the range of possible ironic interpretations, Anka is alternatively posited as an unwitting victim and a complacent rabble-rouser, in effect highlighting Nirvana's social critique. Finally, the transformative action of performance demonstrates the potency of musical irony.

Branching beyond pop music to art music deployed for popular ends, Matthew McAllister's "Wagner, Nazism, and Evil in *Apt Pupil*" investigates intentional and found ironies. An all-American boy discovers a former Nazi living in suburbia; their relationship sparks/reignites a blood-lust highlighted by an ironic use of Wagner's "Liebestod" from *Tristan und Isolde*. Drawing on film-score studies and irony as a means of establishing value and judgment, Wagner's music connects the Nazi's past to his present deeds. The ironies exist in layers: for characters who can hear it with varying levels of understanding and for audiences who again assimilate the irony of the music based on their knowledge of Wagner, Nazi Germany, *Tristan und Isolde*, and the precise leitmotifs heard in selected scenes.

Chapter 13, Andrew Shryock's "Authority of Irony: Literary and Technological Devices in the Rap of T-Pain" investigates irony as antiphrasis at the meeting point of American rap culture and the pitch-altering technology Auto-Tune. Rap artist T-Pain uses Auto-Tune far beyond its usual pitch-correcting application to the extent that it has become normative in his music. Having been extensively criticized for this, his response was the song "Karaoke" in which the unaltered voice advocates for the altered one. Shryock considers the implications on multiple registers of the negation of his trademark sound, the use of more traditional musical structures, including a sample from Handel's *Messiah*, the importance of Signifyin(g) in detecting and appreciating irony, and the repurposing of technology for a specifically black cultural mode of expression.

In the case presented in Chapter 14, irony does not enhance a beloved piece or bring about some noble truth; rather, parody becomes the weapon and the music itself is the victim. Joseph Plazak's "Listener-Senders, Musical Irony, and the Most "Disliked" YouTube Videos" considers musical irony as a post-production mode

of communication. Adapting Akira Utsumi's "unified theory of irony" for musical purposes, Rebecca Black's teen-pop anti-hit "Friday" becomes the means of ironic communication. Listeners become listener-senders when they post YouTube video responses that alter the song using audio/visual manipulation software. This may be in response to the breakage of listener expectations; the structural incongruities of the new video are then used to detect listener-sender implicit displays of ironic musical environments.

The final chapter in this collection, although its focus is more than 150 years later than the opening chapter, has the unique attribute that it could apply to every single song presented here. Damien McCaffery's "The Narrowing Gyre of Music Recommendation" delves into the ironies of a practice that we, as modern listeners of a variety of styles, genres and eras, might take for granted. When we use Pandora or Spotify, or Amazon for that matter, we ask it to recommend new music according to what we have previously "liked," purchased, visited, or reviewed. This chapter breaks down the peculiar function of an algorithm doing what we once entrusted to our favorite record snobs; ironically, however, the various program models invariably fail by recommending music that is too similar, and never succeeds in actually broadening our horizons.

Music challenges the traditional construction of irony through the unique properties of its semantic indeterminacy, performance practices, and reappropriation for new ends. Although musical irony is a relatively new field for definition and critique, it has been used, implied and decried by composers, performers, listeners, and critics for centuries. To this end, it is perhaps nowhere more effective than when it is/was employed in popular culture as a means of destabilizing the powerful or creating dissent. The sheer variety of theories, interpretations—and most significantly, the musical applications—presented here are the strength of this collection. They are individually complex and nuanced as they cross barriers and boundaries, and seek out both overarching and niche models that meld to musical constructs. Many present a case study that may be adapted to other (musical) situations; others strive to explain a unique situation and define its sonic and social or political contributions. Taken as a whole, the chapters express a fundamental truth: both irony and music are vital to encoding and decoding what we say about our culture, our politics, and ourselves.[37]

The "irony of sound" is that it is capable of being "specific to music," and the "sound of irony" is the audible ramification—a gasp, a cringe, a chord, a sound of surprise or disdain, a syncopation—following the sting that catches our ear and causes us to question what we've heard, to think deeper, and to consider the implications. As D.C. Muecke observed, "An ironist … is an artist."[38]

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[37] Muecke, *Compass of Irony*. In his preface, he notes the significance we place on irony in defining our very civilization.

[38] Ibid., p. 15.

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Chapter 1
The Meat in a Humbug Sandwich: The Irony of Want in California Gold Rush Music

Meredith Eliassen

Sharp irony thrived within minstrel songs that entertained hard-working miners during the California gold rush (1848–1855) in a demanding, hazardous environment that inspired a dream but offered real prosperity to few. Wandering from camp to camp in the Sierras during the boom and in urban centers in its waning, Mart Taylor (1824–1894) traveled with his "Original Company" whistling popular minstrel tunes and then embellishing them with his own words. The former tavern owner with a gift for rhymed improvisation came out West as a strolling player in 1853 or 1854 and earned his keep by performing music for the working class at a time when a national third party called the "Know Nothings" held sway in California.[1] When the amenable showman announced his company's arrival, beating a drum, the miners gathered to hear new songs and see a local girl, Charlotte "Lotta" Crabtree (1847–1924), dance jigs. Taylor's savvy act launched the career of this American comedic superstar as he wielded a sword of righteous incongruity about the harsh realities of life in the mining camps, communicated with trendy music that cut through the romanticized malarkey found in minstrel music of the era.[2]

Amidst a recently pristine, breathtakingly beautiful and abundant land, the belief in *want* became the most toxic contagion in the camps and cities that bent men to plunder the earth and each other. Taylor's role as an ironist was intentional. Immersed in a working man's world in remote mining camps, he appeared to be detached from the miner's inherent economic and cultural prejudices when in fact he was deeply enmeshed in the cultures of both. His physical style was direct—Taylor altered his appearance only to destabilize stereotypes relating to miners of color—while his poetic style was fashionable in the Victorian tradition of literary embellishment; his vivid verses punctuated with the slang of the day deconstructed established hierarchies. Taylor's transient audiences seemed to

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[1] The Know Nothing Party was a xenophobic political party in the United States during the 1850s that sought to prevent immigrants and Roman Catholics from obtaining power. See David Harry Bennett, *The Party of Fear: From Nativist Movements to the New Right in American History* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1988).

[2] Constance Rourke, *Troupers of the Gold Coast, or, The Rise of Lotta Crabtree* (New York, 1928).

accept the implicit difference between his situational irony (the capacity to discern deliberate contrasts between implicit meanings based on explicit shared values) and the vulgarity (crudeness that offended propriety) so often exhibited by other performers. City-dwelling humbugs were the "victims" of his ironic jabs; Taylor, along with his audiences—the long-suffering, ever-toiling miners in the boondocks—condemned their greed by accepting his rough rhetorical aesthetic of irony culled from newspapers and present in the camps.

Although seemingly transient, provincial, and possibly embodying dissimulation in the remote mining camps, Taylor demonstrated musically how *anybody could be the meat in somebody's sandwich* by describing a variety of situations in which men plundered others for profit—consuming everything they had. Taylor dedicated his first anthology of songs, *The Gold Digger's Song Book* (1856), to his audience—the "Miners of California."[3] In this collection he included a song called "California Humbugs" which captured the essence of ordinary men caught in boom-time entrapments. This chapter will consider ironies embedded in Taylor's performance style and lyrics, demonstrating the cultural milieu of gold-rush camps and the irony of want embedded in miners' daily experiences of living in abject poverty even as they extracted abundant wealth from the earth.

Miners carried Taylor's ephemeral lyrics in their pockets and saddlebags. "California Humbugs" lingered within the collective consciousness just long enough to enter folk-music repertoires. The collection featured fashionable call-and-response songs and Chinese melodies utilizing the popular pentatonic scale. Taylor also crafted clever puns and embellished well-known tunes by Stephen Foster (1826–1864) and Daniel Decatur "Dan" Emmett (1815–1904) with contrafactum, appropriating the hopes and struggles of his particular audience. Minstrel music, carrying political messages to working-class communities, was the vector for spreading gold fever to Europe, Latin America, and Australia. The genre's great international success during the gold rush was in fact tied to the fates of those very communities.

As the world's jettisoned poor flooded into California seeking quick riches, they surveyed each other and found that their similarities—despite racial, cultural, and religious diversity—outweighed their differences. They all wanted economic prosperity. Taylor's lyrics differed from stereotypical minstrel parodies in part because he personalized his rhetoric to suit small, educated and politically engaged African-American communities found in the urban areas of San Francisco and Sacramento, who most likely would not attend his performances but would hear about them from black miners.[4] Taylor exploited minstrel music's popularity and

[3] Mart Taylor, *The Gold Digger's Song Book containing the Most Popular, Humorous & Sentimental Songs* (San Francisco, CA, 1975), front matter.

[4] To learn more about the African-American community in San Francisco, see Meredith Eliassen, "A 'Colored' Mosaic: The Vibrant African American Community in Antebellum San Francisco," *California State Library Bulletin*, 84 (2006): 11–16.

inherent prejudices to toy with miners' perceptions and undermine their perceived oppressors, the California humbugs.[5]

Even before he opened his mouth to perform, Taylor non-verbally advertised his affinity with ethnic "others" in the mining camps.[6] So tall and imposing that he often had to crouch during indoor performances, Taylor would dress in the Chinese tradition and wear a long single braid down his back to sing his signature song about the plight of Chinese miners in the camps.[7] Exploitation, corruption, deception, and contemporary political nonsense provided rich fodder for Taylor to ply white male audiences with mindless tunes revamped with his edgy words.

As the gold boom ebbed, Taylor's primary audience moved from the rural camps to urban areas. Taylor soon followed and adapted his rhetoric to interject dissenting sarcasm with a second anthology of songs called *Local Lyrics and Miscellaneous Poems* (1858). In his preface, Taylor demarcated a local lexicon of seasoned sarcasm understood by urban audiences that included more self-deprecation; he sold himself by claiming not to be any good at what he did best, asserting, "The Local Lyrics contained in this volume, although sung by myself at the Melodeon and Lyceum in San Francisco, as well to the only tune I ever knew, and in a style I have never heard recommended … "[8] Through irony, Taylor set up his audiences to address their pervasive double-dealing and double-crossing by employing double entendre. Here, Taylor's form of irony suggests a double audience: the first hears but does not comprehend the bite of the double meaning because he is perhaps too much of a humbug. The second hears and is aware of the ironist's double meaning more because he hears it within Taylor's cultural construct of the miner as "other" (or enlightened common man) justified in toiling in the humbug's world in order to seek a fortune for the family back home.

> Humbug is certainly the go,
> It seems to me surprising
> That some new humbug every day
> Some one is advertising;

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[5] An example of a Taylor pun based on his name can be found in the second stanza of "No. VIII" where he writes, "I caught my muse to-night, and now / If courage does not fail her, / I'll stitch you up a little song / To prove that I am a *tailor.*" See Mart Taylor, *Local Lyrics and Miscellaneous Poems* (San Francisco, 1858), p. 68.

[6] "Advertise" here derives from the poker term when a player uses deception to call public attention to a style of play to demonstrate weakness when strong or strength when weak as part of a bluff. In this case, Taylor displays low risk aversion by aligning himself with the most marginalized group reflecting minority cultures in the mining camps.

[7] See Sister Mary Dominic Ray, O P, "Introduction," in Taylor, *Gold Digger's Song Book*, p. xii.

[8] The Melodeon featured a reed instrument called a melodeon and catered to a largely Mexican and African-American clientele. Ibid., p. vi. For an additional example of self-deprecation as irony, see Timothy Koozin's "Irony, Myth, and Temporal Organization in the Early Songs of Bob Dylan," Chapter 5 in this collection.

'Tis sadly true, I'll prove to you,
La bagatelle is courted,
The greater now the humbug is
The better it is supported.[9]

Webster defines a humbug as "a person who usually willfully deceives or misleads others as to his true condition, qualities, or attitudes … " or "something empty of sense or meaning: drivel, nonsense."[10] Here, humbug means double-dealers of worthless products taking advantage of would-be gamblers. As the pun in the last line asserts: the greater the humbug, the more elaborate his support mechanisms become. Poker was more than the "credit game" described in the verse below; it was analogous to humbug tactics designed to ensnare, entrap, and addict miners—poker's strategies of "tight" (conservative betting) and "loose" (risk-taking) could be applied respectively to politics and finance in San Francisco. The player (whether cheating or honest) utilized a poker bluff (a wagered bet with a losing hand) to predict the level of his opponent's aversion to risk and bets to take the pot regardless of the quality of his hand. The humbug's game depended on having miners surrender hard-earned wealth—for *la bagatelle*, or small trifles—and thus, the humbug entangled the working man in an economic interdependence in which the player (the miner) always lost to the (humbug) house.

A humbug could come in many guises: the shop-owner, the landlord, and politician, even the seemingly innocuous immigrant. The *Daily Alta California* on November 11, 1851 chronicled an exotic female humbug offering temptation in exchange for gold dust, advertising "a number of valuable Chinese curiosities which caused a crowd … which necessarily causes a row, so that the neighborhood is [*sic*] disturbed." When Chinese sex icon Madame Ah Toy (1829–1928) set up "house" across from the post office in San Francisco, miners picking up their mail were enticed to see her "curiosities," or private parts, to compare with those of American women. The tall and beautiful Ah Toy was likely advertising the more expensive services of prostitutes under her control, "courting" the miners so that she might be "better supported."[11] The plethora of humbuggery was reflected everywhere through inflated prices, cheap merchandise, jerry-rigged services, and certain risky entertainments—all subjects rife for a song-wordsmith. Taylor

[9] In poker, as in humbug strategy, the less information provided with questionable schemes, the longer lasting the deception. "Advertising" is when a player makes a purposeful move or exposes his cards in a manner to give an impression of a "loose" or "aggressive" play style to an opponent. See "No. X," in Taylor, *Local Lyrics*, p. 50.

[10] *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged*, ed. Philip Babcock Gove (Springfield, MA, 1971), p. 1101.

[11] Ah Toy operated several bordellos offering the services of enslaved Chinese prostitutes in San Francisco over a 40-year period. When she was in her sixties, she was ordered to serve prison time and pay a fine. See *In re Ah Toy*, 45 F 795 (Cir. ND Calif. 1891).

loaded lyrics with meaning—even verbal doodles used like improvised scatting in jazz.[12] But he was also a humbug of sorts, selling deceptively simple rhymes to earn his keep.

> The credit game is quite played out,
> And landlords don't feel able,[13]
> In these hard times, to have a lot
> Of "dead heads" at the table,
> But bless my stars, we needn't starve,
> If we are but half-witted
> We've got "free lunches" through the town,
> Where *dead heads are admitted*.[14]

Here, Taylor commented on the lure of gambling establishments offering free spreads of oysters and crab to hungry miners with gold dust to spill at the tables. It could be argued that the ever-toiling gold producers needed to blow off steam on weekends so that they could continue harsh production processes during the week. But how could working men with gold dust in their pockets be "dead heads"? The phrase referred to debtors who did not honor credit arrangements, the most dire form of want.

> The ladies, I am glad to say,
> God bless their lovely features,
> Cannot with much consistency,
> Be called humbuging [*sic*] creatures,
> For any girl's a fortune now,
> And worthy our caresses,
> For if you are deceived in her,
> She'll make it up in dresses.[15]

In the absence of *good* women, men were easily seduced by their counterfeits—prostitutes who had the same outward body parts as wives but ingrained cultural

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[12] There is a certain undisclosed irony in a seemingly free improvisatory or nonsense bit that is actually exquisitely planned.

[13] The vast majority of single men in San Francisco could not afford to rent so they boarded with families in private boarding houses. To learn more about humbugs in San Francisco's cosmopolitan lifestyle, see Meredith Eliassen, "Our Intangible Home—Part 2: A Spectrum of Women Operating Boardinghouses," *The Argonaut: Journal of the San Francisco Museum and Historical Society*, 16/2 (Winter 2005): 66–91.

[14] Taylor, *Local Lyrics*, p. 50. All subsequent verses are from the same source. Italics in original throughout.

[15] Only prostitutes used deception to get dresses, or to barter for services. See stanza 10, "No. IX," Taylor, *Local Lyrics*, p. 73.

mindsets that were diametrically different. "Ladies" did not overtly appear in Taylor's spectrum of humbuggery (apart from exceptions like Madam Toy); when a respectable woman entered a public gathering place, vulgar language and raucous behavior immediately ceased. Although many families were reunited when wives and children made it out West, divorce rates skyrocketed which clogged the legislature and courts. Communities established clinics to care for wives infected with sexually transmitted diseases from wayward husbands, and, in order to attend services on Sundays, churchgoing families navigated bustling "red light" districts where prostitutes openly advertised their wares.[16] On May 25, 1855 the California legislature attempted to curb more dangerous and obnoxious entertainments, including cock, bear, bull, and prize fighting, horse racing, gambling parlors, and bars, by passing a law banning "all noisy and barbarous amusements" on Sundays.[17] Although it was intended to keep down the behaviors chided in Taylor's lyrics, this law also applied to family entertainment, classical music concerts and opera productions, so Taylor likely bristled at the restriction that meant his company could not perform on Sundays, the only day when miners were unlikely to be working.

Taylor toured and performed during a time of incredible change in American politics, demography, and geography. He saw an opportunity to reach, attract, and inform his audiences across four major developments. First, he spoke to a generation of men with intense nativist prejudices desperate to break out of the nation's most significant long-term industrial depression up to that time; they in turn buttressed the far-right "Know Nothing" movement, which targeted non-whites and immigrants. Second, at the same time he sought to change stereotypes about slaves in the Southern plantation system in the "Free" State of California (as of 1850) where freemen were an important and growing part of both the prospecting community and Taylor's audience. Third, the exploitative "bust up" and "set up" economics, a slick political slogan used to justify American expansion fostered by Manifest Destiny, encouraged adventuring to the ends of the continent in an attempt to strike it rich by exploiting the earth and other men while bringing American-style government and capitalism to an bountiful yet isolated area. In California, where specie and paper currency could be scarce, a system of credit allowed many to become the meat in a debt-holder's sandwich. Finally, widespread international poverty and political unrest fueled the gold boom alongside the emergence of an "irony of want" (and wanting beyond one's means) in an American politics that excluded the participation of the nation's most vulnerable citizens and foreigners.

The song "California Humbugs" served as a cautionary tale to every fortune-seeker of the California gold rush. Penned to the quick-tempo tune "Over Jordan" by Dan Emmett, each verse/chorus contained eight lines; the seventh included a

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[16] Maiden Lane and many alleyways in San Francisco were named after prominent madams.

[17] Cal. Stat. C. (1855), p. 50.

descending melody and climatic upward sweep to a fermata on the last note before a long descent in the final phrase.[18] The following is the chorus, making up lines four through eight:

> Haul off the jacket, and roll up the sleeve,
> For mining is a hard kind of labor.
> Haul off the jacket, and roll up the sleeve,
> For mining is a hard kind of labor I believe.[19]

Oral histories, like folk stories and ballads as well as written accounts in newspapers and letters, chronicled true stories of man's mortality: some miners profited from mining for gold, but the costs were great and many died too young. The knee-slapping, toe-tapping chorus to "California Humbugs" addresses the humbugs, prodding them to emulate the miner and take off their coat (part of any humbug's attire) and roll up their sleeves to work, because mining (a process for extracting wealth from the land) is hard. The notion of toil that Taylor projects became synonymous with "entrapment" and "snare." Taylor repeats, "For mining is a hard kind of labor … " and then concludes and *qualifies*: "I believe." Here, Taylor presents an intriguing dichotomy for posterity: did contemporary listeners accept that Taylor truly believed that a "humbug" differed much in motive from a toiling miner? This nuance is not immediately recognizable. "I believe" is an important rhetorical qualifier; to trust too much in this fluid environment would place one, like a pendulum swaying between boom and bust cycles, at the mercy of humbug machinations. The listener is never quite sure what Taylor truly believed.

The most flagrant California humbugs were opportunists who found ways of manipulating the marketplace in order to extract riches; this often meant changing one's self-declared name, occupation, intentions, and perceived resources to suit the occasion or customer. The pervasive practice of changing one's identity as needed amongst men vying for individual wealth became an all-consuming occupation in rural camps and boomtown cities alike; no one could be considered trustworthy. Since the vast majority of miners were recent arrivals, all were considered "immigrants." This caused a conundrum in which every new arrival was an outsider threatening the stability of the insiders' position, but at the same time outsiders were a necessary component (meat) in the political and commercial machine. Alternative identities abounded in order to obtain, control, and manipulate wealth while avoiding becoming someone else's lunch.

"California Humbugs" contains a litany of characters brought to life straight from the headlines. Deciphering the series of enigmatic humbugs described in the song, a reader today gains insight into a brutal high-risk cultural hearth where

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[18] Taylor, *Gold Digger's Song Book*, p. ix. A stylistic interpretation of music based on a performance by Debby McClatchy, *'Til the Good Times Come*, CD (Roaring Springs, PA, 1998), track 4.

[19] Taylor, *Gold Digger's Song Book*, pp. 18–19.

fierce competition and corruption, untested ideas, rapid dissipation of wealth, and little regard for human life was red-hot:[20]

[1] This California is a humbug State,
'Tis out of the world, in the bushes,
Where, to meet with a poor man's fate,
Many a poor devil pushes.
[Haul off the jacket, &c.]

Taylor directed his irony towards hard truths; the ideal of California was in reality only a patch of ensnaring bushes. His dramatic use of the phrase "poor devil" in relation to California miners invokes an image of a disparaged wretch, but can also be interpreted as miners who have yet to master playing the Devil—but would if given the opportunity.[21] In the following stanzas Taylor creates a disparaging picture of California as a deceptive "Know Nothing" state where miners get busted for debts, squeezed by medical quacks, sued for all manner of things, shanghaied with opium-laced cigars, or even die. Far from civilization, many a wretch labors for the privilege of experiencing a poor man's death.

[2] Merchants hope to accumulate a pile,
By selling goods to the miners,
They will trust them out, and in a little while,
"Bust up" for the want of shiners.
[Haul off the jacket, &c.]

Taylor projected a humbug end-game. Once the merchant has easily sold shabby merchandise and services on credit, he must collect payment. The second stanza spotlights the underlying violence of California's merchant princes, who were simply common carriers and exchange dealers exploiting the original producer—the working man—in order to profit.[22] Commission merchants gambled on maritime futures and manipulated the marketplace to establish monopolies for services or products.[23] They advertised easy credit, and then after a while sent "dead head"

[20] On April 17, 1855, as gold production waned, the *Daily Alta California* reported that nearly all of the real estate speculators operating in 1852 and 1953 were bankrupt and "the mass of smaller men are utterly ruined."

[21] For a definition of devil and deceiver, see KJV Bible, John 8:44, and for devil as one who ensnares, see 2 Timothy 2:26.

[22] Transcendentalist Orestes Brownson (1803–1876) was the first to offer a labor-oriented philosophy picked up by politicians during the California gold rush to sway the vote with miners. See David A. Hollinger and Charles Capper, *The American Intellectual Tradition*, 2 vols (New York 2001), vol. 1, p. 296.

[23] Commission merchants in cahoots with shanghai fraternities along the Pacific Coast manipulated maritime trade for profit in an unregulated financial marketplace. For a contemporary description of the shanghai industry operating along the Pacific Coast, see

consumers into the bankruptcy court for want of payment in gold nugget, dust, or specie.

> [3] Each druggist clerk, who comes from the States,
> "Sets up" in the bleeding profession,
> If he kills a man, that he's called too late,
> Is excuse for the quackish transgression.
> [Haul off the jacket, &c.]

Taylor's emphasis on "bust up" and "set up" in consecutive stanzas illuminates a correlation between how humbugs violently disrupted established structures in order to reconstruct haphazard schemes for personal profit. Taylor's contempt of the parasitic blood-sucking schemers narrative on California humbugs is self-evident. In this third stanza he insinuates that anyone with some medical knowledge from the States can establish himself in the bloodletting profession of medicine, and if the patient dies from neglect, then that individual would claim to know nothing or that he was called too late rather than face a charge of malpractice. Here, the listener might assume that Taylor referred to a physician (or one purporting to be a physician) setting up a practice or setting a broken bone, but perhaps he put into play the double-meaning slang term "set up," meaning a deception or trick carried out in order to compromise a situation to one's own advantage.

An historic sequence of events dramatically unfolded in booming San Francisco, wherein physician Dr Peter Smith tricked merchant civic leaders who "set up" a scrip-warrant system to juggle municipal debts.[24] Smith managed the City Hospital, which cared for huge influxes of indigent sick, effectively *setting up* a medical monopoly.[25] By early 1851 Smith's fees amounted to $64,431, and interest accumulated rapidly. The City's Common Council panicked, and asked the California legislature to fund and convert the floating debt into stock bearing an annual interest rate of 10 percent. Utilizing a brilliant bluff, Smith sued for priority treatment, and won. The painful irony of this episode involving politicians, their conflicts of interest, and a humbug physician expands Taylor's semantics of humbuggery to include "bleeding" (meaning to forcefully extract blood *or* money, energy, time, or gold), and listeners could then adjust their perceptions to see another dimension of California humbugs.

Rev. William Taylor, *Seven Years Street Preaching in San Francisco, California* (New York, 1856), pp. 219–42.

[24] Scrip was handled like money to pay for basic social services. See *Hyatt v. Argenti*, 3 Cal. Sup. Ct. 151 (1853); *Argenti v. Samuel Brannan*, 5 Cal. Sup. Ct. 351 (1855); and *Argenti v. San Francisco*, 6 Cal. Sup. Ct. 677 (1856).

[25] Frank *Soulé*, John H. Gihon, and James Nisbet, *The Annals of San Francisco* (New York, 1854), pp. 570–77.

[4] If you have a case to refer to the law,
And a lawyer for you shall begin it,
Your dust will somehow slip his paw,
And you're broke if you happen to win it.
[Haul off the jacket, &c.]

California was a litigious state.[26] Working-class politics did not unfold in the diggings; they played out at the bar (association), around poker tables, and in the back rooms of men's fraternal organizations.[27] Taylor capitalized on this contradiction; in the fourth stanza, he asserts that if a miner seeks legal counsel to extricate himself from humbug snares, any lawyer would gladly assist and further squeeze him for every penny. The client's money would somehow slip through the lawyer's hands, perhaps as a kickback to someone, and even if the case was resolved and the client won, he would still likely wind up broke.[28] Examples are so numerous that the scenario became stereotypically iconic of California itself.

Debt ate up humbug and miner alike. Given his panoply of historic targets, it seems strange that Taylor overlooked the stealth immigrant banker and loan shark Felice Argenti (1802–1861) who swallowed up big humbug land sharks as the meat in his own humbug sandwich. Argenti likely financed political intrigues related to Italian unity, *il Risorgimento*—whose revolutions coincided with the early gold rush—with California gold.[29] In order to settle the Dr Smith case, public lands were sold in auctions for a fraction of their actual worth, and titles purchased in collusion ended up in Argenti's hands. Given the choice between actually dealing with greedy medical malpractitioners and corrupt lawyers, Taylor provided pithy word images that led listeners to tolerate the ubiquitous barristers with their conflicts of interest over and above bloodsucking physicians.

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[26] See *A "Pile," or, A Glance at the Wealth of Monied Men of San Francisco and Sacramento City: Also an Accurate List of Lawyers, their Former Places of Residence, and Date of their Arrival in San Francisco* (San Francisco, CA, 1851), pp. 1–7.

[27] Lawyers boarded and had offices on the upper floors of Parker House, which offered a bar and gambling tables on the ground floor. Advertisements for law offices located at Parker House appeared in the *Daily Alta California* beginning in April 1849.

[28] The San Francisco law firm of Halleck, Peachy & Billings was one of the largest antebellum law firms in the United States and presented over one-half the cases decided by the US Land Commission. The Commission was established to adjudicate disputes over land grants and claims, and heard more than 800 cases during the mid-1850s with the average case lasting 17 years, and plunging many Californian families into bankruptcy.

[29] Argenti associated with secret *carbonari* and was deported to America in perpetual exile, arriving in New York on the *Hussar* on October 16, 1839. Argenti engaged political contacts in London and Paris to support *il Risorgimento*, and became a naturalized American citizen on November 1, 1841. Within five years he was leading the Italian Benevolent Society in New York. A banking firm in the port of Colon in Panama called Browns Brothers dispatched Argenti as their agent in California in 1849. See *Soulé*, Gihon, and Nisbet, *Annals*, p. 513.

[5] The priest will preach one day in the week,
And cause the sinners to tremble,
Read the Bible all day, and when it is dark,
With the rogues he's bound to assemble.
[Haul off the jacket, &c.]

US social conventions were cast aside in California as men grappled for individual continuous wealth. In the fifth stanza of "California Humbugs" the narrator addresses clergy who preached one day a week, instilling fear in their flocks. Taylor observed that the sinner might temporarily repent and read the Bible during the day, but then at night rejoin unprincipled associates; he may also have been asserting that the preacher was the one who sinned after dark. Taylor was justified in drawing attention to the hypocrisy of some professed "Christian" miners who failed to practice religious virtues in the mining camps. His song "John Chinaman's Appeal" chronicled the marginalization of Chinese in camps; many would wind up as vagabonds or were denied proper burials when they died at the diggings, and some American miners with families back home chose female Chinese slaves [prostitutes] as occasional sex partners. Taylor's song of the "other" concludes: "For Christians all have treated me as men should be treated never."[30]

[6] The miner works hard with the shovel and the pick,
Till his body is feeble and tender,
He goes into town at the end of the week,
And spends all his dust on a bender.
[Haul off the jacket, &c.]

The humbugs and miners enabled each other. When Taylor returns to his beloved miners in the sixth stanza, he states that in the hill country, the working man toils hard with crude instruments to extract gold from the earth until "his body is feeble and tender." But at weekends he would be squeezed dry of his gold while letting off steam on a drinking spree in town. However, the word "bender" carries a more sinister connotation with this location shift from gold field to urban center, suggesting one who bends, takes a new direction, or even coercively influences or subdues. True, miners with pockets lined with gold dust were the ripe targets of humbugs of every sort, but they were also influential and integral in creating temptation for humbuggery within already predatory ecologies. In this sense, miners became a subsequent vector of stereotypes presented in minstrel music when they carried unconscionable conversations, uncivilized behavior, and uncontrolled disease fostered in lawless rural camps and transmitted them into urban areas ill-prepared for the influxes of indigent poor.

30 Taylor, *Gold Digger's Song Book*, p. 34.

[7] The gambler deals from the bottom all day,
And loiters about the Diana,
He raises the devil, when he gets broke,
He raises the stake from a miner.
[Haul off the jacket, &c.]

Perhaps the most opaque humbug—the gambler—was key to understanding Taylor's humbug cast. It is impossible to extrapolate the extent of wealth dissipated in gambling and boisterous entertainments during the gold rush. Whatever motivated men to risk everything in seeking gold in California, once they found it and went to the gambling tables, their labor was for naught—the gold evaporated as quickly as the San Francisco fog under the noonday sun.

In the seventh stanza, Taylor reflects upon professional gamblers who regularly dealt from the bottom of the deck and honed gambling tricks at the Diana Gambling House in San Francisco. When the miner sat at the gambling table with his hard-earned gold, the card shark used all his guile to extract it. Taylor shows the crooked gambler raising the devil with the house when on a losing streak, and recuperating losses by raising his stakes against less experienced miners. "Raises the devil" can also mean playing the devil—that is, trying to outsmart or outwit a cheat at his own game—rousing annoying behavior, or telling lies to ensnare.

[8] The miner lays himself down to sleep,
The fleas are jumping around him,
Or overgrown bed bugs over him creep,
And leave him *less* than they found him.
[Haul off the jacket, &c.]

Taylor's concluding stanza offers no respite—his irony's full impact, with no light humor, literally bites. In one sense, the miner's body is so ravaged that it degrades before the bugs' eyes; finding nothing to bite, they leave him having less than once they began. In another sense, the *virtuous* miner appears to be at the mercy of humbuggery even as he lays down to rest. But how truly virtuous is Taylor's miner? He establishes the miner as a smaller humbug entrapped by the irony of want—mesmerized by an ongoing nightmare that was a once glorious dream of prosperity—and caught in the humbug cycle of debt. More powerful humbugs circle, parasitic fleas jump around him, and overgrown bloodsucking bedbugs crawl over him to take more of his life's blood while he sleeps. Until the gold fever has run its course, the miner's desire for riches places him at the mercy of this parasitic ecology. His once noble desire to provide opportunity for an impoverished family back home becomes buried under debt, making him a junkie to toil. Moreover, his diminished rank and self-identity enables the stronger humbugs to eat well.

Taylor's working man will likely die in poverty—his grave, music, and culture unmarked. Whereas posterity concealed the real "dog eat dog" practices

of humbugs, this song most clearly chronicles how bloodsucking greed was the juggernaut to California's prosperity where every resource was exploited to gain the illusion of continuous wealth.

Singing in a style "never heard recommended …,"[31] Taylor seemed detached from the working man's prejudices, but he could not extricate himself from their music. If elements of historic memory are tied to music trends, when a genre becomes obsolete its timely relevance and voice die off. The cultural outcome of Taylor as a raconteur was a searing reforming of popular minstrel music. "California Humbugs" contains easy lyrics to a familiar tune that, like rye whiskey, enters the ear smoothly like the Devil and then burns slowly into the consciousness, but Taylor's irony points to the ugly hypocrisy of American miners and humbugs alike. A scathing editorial in the *Daily Alta California* on June 5, 1850, describing the unbending American sensibility of entitlement, observed that the city's wealthiest merchants were "chuckling behind their bags of gold dust, and thinking what a 'great country' this is, where they expect their lives and property to be protected and yet do not have to pay for it." By the time Taylor began to tour the mining camps, the gold producers could no longer easily pluck gold from the surface; they had to adapt and utilize newer and more invasive hydraulic processes for extracting the precious material, or get it from miners who rolled up their sleeves to pry it from the earth.

Ultimately, Taylor's life and music reflected the irony of want in California. A consummate improviser with an active mind and quick ironic wit, he toiled longer than any miner to express the hard truths of bigotry and amoral behavior among California's old and new Americans, yet he never hit pay dirt.[32] Taylor was nobody's fool; keenly aware of the foibles of fashionable citizens who oppressed feebler and tenderer men if they thought they could get away with it, he was rarely sandwich meat. But once minstrel music had lost its popularity and the successful miners had moved on to new enterprises, Taylor was unable or unwilling to relinquish his former wares. By the 1870s, weary from travels, the troubadour settled into school-teaching: his imposing presence became weathered and his voice hoarse. Having lived much of his life as an itinerate entertainer—his audience now gone and his songs having long since passed their relevance and prime popularity—Taylor died destitute.[33] His musical legacy from the California gold rush chronicles the situational irony of the dissipation of spectacular wealth in a land of abundance during a period of international and American economic convulsion. Posterity only needs to glance back to Taylor's songbook to see how his long-silenced voice remains relevant today.

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[31] Taylor, *Local Lyrics*, Preface.

[32] Crabtree evolved her Western persona and adapted to changes in the entertainment industry to garner the title "the Nation's Darling." See David K. Dempsey and Raymond P. Baldwin, *The Triumphs and Trials of Lotta Crabtree* (New York, 1968).

[33] Taylor, *Gold Digger's Song Book*, pp. v–vi.

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Chapter 2

"I ain't got long to stay here": Double Audience, Double Irony in US Slave Songs and Spirituals

G. Yvonne Kendall

The sting in irony's tail always relies on coded language. The most potent stings come from the bifurcated tail enabling some listeners to decrypt the code where others cannot. Rebecca Clift terms this concept "double audience" in her *Language in Society* article, "Irony in Conversation."[1] "Double audience" is defined as two sets of listeners: one that understands both the surface and the deeper levels of meaning, and one that is only aware of the superficial layer. The functioning of irony in social discourse between racial minorities and the dominant white culture in the United States continues throughout the nation's history and is still in active use. This irony sparks particular interest in the role played by subversive messages, crouching unseen amid the lyrics of slave songs, protecting their messages of deep importance to the slave community while outwardly displaying the protective coloring of faith and hope.

In his 2011 piece "Semantic Reactions to Irony," Terry L. West chronicles the case of Nick Espinosa who, having donned the Nordic name "Robert Erickson," set the stage for his successful employment of irony to dupe an anti-immigration Tea Party audience into believing that he supported their political views.[2] In fact, some in the crowd had already joined him in shouting "Columbus, Go Home!" by the time they realized that the immigrants Espinosa was so roundly berating were Europeans from the beginning of American history. His double-edged use of the language common to his opponents had stung them before they became aware of its presence. This is a contemporary example, but the roots of this type of direct and immediate use of irony to further societal equality are planted in an earlier era.

The strategic political use of irony in slave spirituals tills fertile soil for cultivating a unique understanding of linguistic coding in the texts of this iconic American music. Subcategories of spirituals, such as robe, map, and signal spirituals, threaded together with slave narratives and secular songs, will serve as the base of operations for these linguistic explorations. Focusing primarily

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[1] Rebecca Clift, "Irony in Conversation," *Language in Society*, 28/4 (1999): 523–53.

[2] Terry L. West, "Semantic Reactions to Irony," *ETC.: A Review of General Semantics*, 68/2 (2011): 178–86.

on the lyrics, this chapter examines irony as an often humor-infused musical code among nineteenth-century slaves who exhibited an ostensible acceptance of their captivity, while simultaneously plotting freedom.[3] In addition, the irony of the homogeneous chordal singing that bound together the voices of the slave masters vertically, coexisting on a parallel plane with the much freer linear call and response of those they had enslaved, also merits attention. As the plantation owners were captives of only the notes in the hymn books, slaves were liberated through overlapping lines and improvisation.

Dan Shen has addressed some of these hidden aspects of irony as they appear in fiction writing, specifically in "Implied Author, Overall Consideration, and Subtext of 'Desirée's Baby,'" his essay in *Poetics Today*, but the same technique found in the words of mostly illiterate enslaved Africans situates spirituals as one foundation stone of the American-born irony edifice composed of combined political and artistic expression.[4] Shen posits that "to obtain a full and balanced picture, it is necessary to take into account both the process of encoding and that of decoding."[5] Although he is analyzing the layers of race as found in the well-known Kate Chopin short story mentioned in the title of his essay, our understanding of slave texts—whether in narrative or song form—can benefit from this same analytical attention. To quote Henry Louis Gates and Nellie McKay in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*'s "Slavery and Freedom" section: "The antebellum slave narrative carried a black message inside a white envelope."[6] Spirituals, also known as Negro spirituals or sorrow songs, used tonal elements combining melodic patterns from both Africa and the European hymns heard in the slave owners' churches.[7] The scale patterns with what are now known as "blue notes," originate in the pentatonic scales of West African music. These minor pentatonic structures evolved into the blues scales that govern most US popular music, whether blues, jazz, rock, or even bluegrass. The irony of disguising an African tradition in the plain aural view of a European Christian message may have been unintentional, but the longstanding effects of West African melodic patterns on American music clearly indicate its success. The messages sung to

[3] These designations refer to either content or function. "Robe" spirituals use robes and other clothing ("I got shoes") to signify gifts that heaven will impart to the worthy. Map and signal spirituals served as guides for escape routes ("Follow the drinking gourd") or preliminary planning ("Swing low, sweet chariot").

[4] Dan Shen, "Implied Author, Overall Consideration and Subtext of 'Desirée's Baby,'" *Poetics Today*, 13/2 (2010): 285–311.

[5] Ibid., p. 286.

[6] Henry Louis Gates and Nellie Y. McKay (eds), *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (New York, 1997), p. 158.

[7] The texts for spirituals discussed in this essay come from: Bruno Chenu, *The Trouble I've Seen: The Big Book of Negro Spirituals* (Valley Forge, PA, 2003); James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson, *The Books of American Negro Spirituals*, Books 1 and 2 (New York, 1925 and 1926; paperback New York, 1985); John W. Work, *American Negro Songs* (New York, 1998).

these tunes were addressed to the masters and fellow slaves concurrently, using the same words to deliver two meanings to two distinct audiences while using music from two traditions. Clift's "double audience" increases exponentially when the music is factored in as part of the message.[8]

A study of this messaging format requires an examination of its historic forebears. In the traditions of African minstrels, known as *griots*, *halam*, or *jali*, depending on the culture, there is no distinct dividing line between speech and song. Both recitation of poems accompanied by music and orations of a culture's history were often sung or chanted rhythmically. This tradition continues in the smooth transitions black preachers in America still make between speaking the text of the sermon, adding rhythm as the sermon reaches its emotional apex and the instrumentalists ease into the texture, transforming the text into call and response with the congregation, and then winding down into speech once more.[9] The tradition continues in the combinations of stylized recitation and song exhibited by more recent musical genres like new jack swing, in which rap and R&B vocals coexist. Because of the historical interconnections between rhetoric and song, but also because of contemporary events of African-American life, slave narratives published by abolitionists at the time or collected by writers in the postwar period serve as a proper starting place for our journey through irony in the era of slavery.

Spirituals are vernacular songs based in religious content. Normally performed a cappella, they could be sung as part of work in the home or in the fields, or as part of church services, when such gatherings were allowed. One reason for the necessity to code the texts of these songs through irony may come from the practice reported by Silas Jackson on the basis of his experience as a slave in Virginia:

> On Sunday the slaves who wanted to worship would gather at one of the large cabins with one of the overseers present … When communion was given the overseer was paid for staying there with half of the collection taken up.[10]

This means that a representative of the slave master could always monitor what the slaves were singing. According to Frederick Douglass, himself a former slave, this practice allowed the master to give:

> … his bloodstained gold to support the pulpit and the pulpit, in return, covers his infernal business with the garb of Christianity. Here we have religion and

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[8] See also Andrew Shryock, "Irony of Absence: Literary and Technological Devices in the Rap of T-Pain," Chapter 13 of this collection.

[9] Geoff Alexander, "An Introduction to Black Preaching Styles," *Academic Film Archive of North America* (n.d.), http://www.afana.org/preaching.htm [accessed August 1, 2013]. This website provides a useful summary of the interaction of singing and speech in a traditional preaching style of the black church.

[10] See the account of Silas Jackson, in Norman R. Yetman (ed.), *Voices from Slavery: 100 Authentic Slave Narratives* (Mineola, NY, 2000), p. 177.

> robbery, the allies of each other—devils dressed in angels' robes, and hell presenting the semblance of paradise.[11]

The spiritual "Walk All Over God's Heaven," also known as "I Got Shoes," is one of several "robe" spirituals that confirms the unconsciously ironic display of white Christians requiring a fee from worshippers in order to allow the free will of Christian worship.

> I got a robe, you got a robe
> All God's chillun got robes
> When I get to heaven, gonna put on my robe
> I'm gonna shout all over God's heaven.[12]
> Everybody talking 'bout heaven ain't going there, heaven, heaven.

The adroit handling of hypocrisy found in the final line is a hallmark of this genre. Christianity was the religious foundation of slave owners, yet the slaves made a distinction between those who "talked" about heaven and those who would actually see it in the sweet by and by. In performing this song, the rhythm gentles the sting of the irony by moving from the joke right to "heaven" without a pause, while at the same time moving ever upward melodically with each repetition of the word "heaven."

This spiritual—alongside others like "Good News," "Wish I was in Heaven Sitting Down," "Wade in the Water," and "The Old Ark's A-moving"—represents a common theme of robes that will only be available to the righteous in heaven. Generally, the reference cites a "long white robe," as in "Good News" and "Wish I was in Heaven," where a chariot would take the righteous up to heaven to don the robe, and once the robe is donned, the righteous can sit at the feet of Jesus.

"Wade in the Water," on the other hand, sees help ahead in the form of a "host all dressed in white … leader looks like the Israelite" and "see that band all dressed in red … must be the band that Moses led." Both references apply to escape narratives in the Bible, particularly in the Book of Exodus. The content of this book is particularly apt since the Israelites had been enslaved with orders given to kill their male children.

The double-themed "Wade in the Water" encompasses both robes and maps through its connections with Moses and the use of water for escape. Because Moses' mother had made a basket of bullrushes to spirit him away from certain death to freedom by means of floating him on the water, and because slaves often used water for successful escapes, the ubiquity of Moses and water references in

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[11] Fredrick Douglass, "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself, (1845)," as cited in Gates and McKay, *Norton Anthology*, p. 166.

[12] The shout is a religious group dance of the era, based on African dance traditions, moving with knees and back slightly bent while shuffling in a circle.

spirituals is as clear as a mountain stream. The traditionally low pitch for "Wade in the Water" also plays an aural role in modeling the water's depth through musical means.

The lesser known "The Old Ark's A-moving" returns to the humor of "Walk All Over God's Heaven," stating:

> See that sister dressed so fine?
> She ain't got religion on her mind.
> See that brother dressed so gay?
> Satan gonna come and carry him away.

These lines could refer to the occasional divide between house slaves and field slaves, and also to the better clothes and robes of their masters—triple audience messaging. The references to robes would have been especially acute with the birth of the Ku Klux Klan who wore their signature steepling hats and loose white robes while burning crosses and ignoring the biblical injunctions "Love thy neighbor" and "Thou shalt not kill."

In a startling contemporary twist on the robe theme that informs so many spirituals, Claudia Brodsky Lacour notes a twentieth century use of irony concerning US Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas. As part of Toni Morrison's collection of essays on race and gender, this piece comments on the Senate hearings prior to Thomas's eventual confirmation. According to Lacour, his use of "high-tech lynching" and other phrases "used words to say what they could not have meant literally, not in order to imitate but to mask reality, and for this he was kept, clothed in robes, in the heart of the city."[13] Another irony here lies in the fact that references to robes in spirituals are couched in terms of rewards in heaven for suffering proven injustices on earth. In a continuation of ironic allusions, Judge Thomas was rewarded with robes on earth, allowing him to deny the injustices of which he was accused.

The book of essays in which Lacour's work is found focuses on Anita Hill's reality, masked by Justice Thomas's robes. The fact that nineteenth-century slaves also used words to mask the reality of their plans through Christian metaphors raises disturbing images of who would be slave and who would be slave master in the Thomas scenario. In other words, who is the "brother" in "See that brother dressed so gay? / Satan gonna come and carry him away."?

Previously unnoticed among the oeuvre of sorrow songs are spirituals that may well refer to the overseers present at the church services. "Let the Church Roll On" and My Way's Cloudy" are just two examples.

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[13] Claudia Brodsky Lacour, "Doing Things with Words: 'Racism' as Speech Act and the Undoing of Justice," in Toni Morrison (ed.), *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality* (New York, 1992), pp. 127–55.

If there's sinners in the church, my Lord
And they're not living right, my Lord
You can put the liars out, my Lord
And let the church roll on.

Other verses insert "liars" and "preachers" for "sinners" in "Let the Church Roll On." The sinners and liars could apply to wrongdoers in the congregation, yet they could also apply simultaneously, and with a more powerful authority, to the overseers. In the normal course of human affairs, an enslaved person, like any other individual, might tell lies or covet a neighbor's goods, but the entire slave-owning population could be indicted as liars and sinners for refusing to love their neighbors, for refusing to act charitably as a Good Samaritan, or any of a plethora of other Christian duties. Slave masters most likely heard the song as delivered in the acceptable white envelope of blacks chastising their own.

Current performances often unveil the ongoing interweaving of worldliness and spirituality common to African-American music. In their 2008 rendition of "Let the Church Roll On" a quartet from the historically black-male college Morehouse enjoys good-natured fun with this tradition.[14] They act out parts of the song, like kicking a sinful preacher out of the church, and drinking the liquor of a sinful drunkard so he can't get at it.

In spirituals, earthly sinners or evildoers are often known as "Satan." In the case of "My Way's Cloudy," however, Satan takes on his traditional role of gathering their souls:

Old Satan is mad and I'm so glad,
Send them angels down,
He missed the soul he thought he had,
Oh, send them angels down.

The double message is that Satan can be not only the original manifestation of evil trying to capture the souls of God's people, but also the slave masters who take on Satan's role in trying to capture God's people. The idea of Satan hunting those who hunted runaway slaves paints a vibrant image supported by the spiritual "No Hiding Place":

The sinner man gambled,
He gambled and fell,
He wanted to go to heaven,
But he had to go to hell.

[14] Morehouse University Quartet, "Let the Church Roll On," Morehouse Quartet at Branson School, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NQvw3quYcq8 [accessed November 23, 2013].

The difference between this type of messaging and the performative act, such as that achieved by Justice Thomas, is that slaves were trying to hide their true thoughts from the overseers by means of terminology that, on its surface, appeared benign. By referring only obliquely to white sinfulness by means of language that could also apply to blacks, the slaves could seal their messages in an innocent package. The runaway black messages, in their plain white envelopes, commented less on slave masters and overseers, and more on more specific tools for escape. Following Lacour's logic it is easy, however, to see Justice Thomas's aim as an attempt to speak overtly to the subconscious guilt of Senate overseers, offering an easy way out through confirmation. By referring directly to America's racist past, he could frame himself as the victim, while erasing any sins he himself may have committed. This, however, flies in the face of the noble traditions of slave songs that represented solidarity among the oppressed.

Frederick Douglass was one of the earliest writers to decode openly the language of spirituals, also known as "sorrow songs." In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass noted the following:

> A keen observer might have detected in our repeated singing of "O Canaan, sweet Canaan, I am bound for the land of Canaan," something more than a hope of reaching heaven. We meant to reach the north—and the north was our Canaan.
>
> "I thought I heard them say,
> There were lions in the way,
> I don't expect to stay
> Much longer here.
> Run to Jesus—shun the danger—
> I don't expect to stay
> Much longer here"
>
> was a favorite air, and had a double meaning. In the lips of some, it meant the expectation of a speedy summons to a world of spirits; but in the lips of our company, it simply meant a speedy pilgrimage toward a free state, and deliverance from all the evils and dangers of slavery.[15]

This excerpt from "The Run-Away Plot" chapter is one of the earliest published accounts of coding in spirituals with the identification of the double audience. The irony in "I don't expect to stay much longer here" in the context of a voyage to a biblical kingdom, but actually referring to prosaic escape plans, was certainly courageous; overseers could think the message was metaphorical, when it was, in reality, practical. This is expressly the case since, as Douglass asserts in a later chapter, "Keen is the scent of the slaveholder; like the fangs of the rattlesnake,

[15] Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, ed. William L. Andrews (Urbana and Chicago, IL, 1987), p. 170.

his malice retains its poison long."[16] Any slave caught making plans or caught in the act of running away received severe punishments. Confirming the need for coded language in contemporary music, the threat and reality of violence certainly continues into contemporary American life. In the more recent case of Nick Espinosa and the Tea Party, several of the shocked Tea Party members, fooled by his strategic use of irony, reacted with violence, verbally and physically attacking pro-immigration adherents.[17]

Not all the slave songs with religious references were intended for church services. Lorenzo Ezell, a slave in South Carolina, was interviewed at the age of 87 for the Slave Narrative Collection, which was part of the Federal Writers' Project launched in the 1930s.[18] He remembered quite a few songs from slavery, one of which his relatives created after their owner had fled General Sherman's army.[19]

> Old massa run away
> And us darkies stay at home.
> It must be now dat Kingdom's comin'
> And de year of Jubilee.

Elijah Green, another slave in South Carolina, remembers the same song with slightly different words:

> Master gone away
> But darkies stay at home,
> The year of jubilee is come
> And freedom will begun.[20]

In this case, those long in bondage are freed and can now claim the land on which they have toiled. This slave song conjoins the sacred with the secular to address the past and the future in the present year of "jubilee." The Old Testament book of Leviticus makes several references to "jubilee." Chapter 25:10 cites it as the time when liberty will be proclaimed "throughout the land" and "each of you is to return to your family property and your own clan." Further, the irony deepens in verse 11 with the injunction: "do not sow and do not reap what grows … or harvest the untended vines." Certainly working in the hot fields of the South as captives could confirm the land as belonging to the enslaved, with the absence of the "master" interpreted as the long-awaited freedom. It must have appeared

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16 Ibid., p. 195.

17 West, "Semantic Reactions."

18 "Library of Congress, "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938," *American Memory* (2001), http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/ [accessed September 7, 2013].

19 Lorenzo Ezell, in Yetman, *Voices from Slavery*, pp. 113–14.

20 Elijah Green, in ibid., p. 149.

that justice had finally been done and that this land in the New World, which had been their home for generations, became their Israel, ironically, without requiring them to move. In the case of these slave songs, there was no Red Sea to ford, no pharaohs to outrun. The captors were the ones on the run, the ones who had been driven empty away.

All these songs and their variants had to be maintained by memory, because as Elijah Green reported, "For God's sake don't let a slave be cotch [caught] with pencil and paper. That was a major crime. You might as well had killed your master or missus."[21] Comedian Chris Rock revisited slavery and the concept of literacy as dangerous contraband in his "Never Scared" HBO television special, released in 2005 as a live album, quipping, "The law of the land was, if you read, you die … so you know what that means? The first black drug dealers didn't even sell drugs. They sold books."[22] His voice then drops into an urgent urban whisper: "Yo man, I got two pages, got two pages, man, check it out."

Ironically, Rock recorded this 2004 performance in the same theater where, because of racial segregation, contralto Marian Anderson could not sing in 1939—the Daughters of the American Revolution Constitution Hall in Washington DC.[23] Anderson, described by former *New York Times* music critic Allan Kozinn as known for her "stateliness and inner serenity," joined the tradition of African-American irony by choosing said hall as the first leg of her farewell tour in October 1964.[24] Anderson denied that history played a role in her choice, but that statement might well represent the heritage of keeping the true message sealed, maintaining the adeptness—ingrained by centuries of experience—at hiding disdain through smiles and wit.

By the time Anderson appeared there in 1964, the Hall had been desegregated due, in part, to the efforts of US First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. Curiously, Kozinn did not take note of the irony, despite the fact that Anderson was the earliest opera singer to include Negro spirituals as a regular part of her recital repertoire. Perhaps the quiet demeanor that, as Kozinn states, scorned "hand to hand combat," disguised Anderson's black message in a societally acceptable white envelope.

The social context over 100 years earlier that led to former slave Elijah Green's comments on the necessity of irony can be inferred from his experience with weddings in the slave master's family. The slaves who were allowed to attend were always asked how much they liked the newcomer to the family. Green disliked that practice because it required him to lie by "sayin' nice things about

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21 Ibid., p. 150.

22 Chris Rock, *Never Scared*, HBO, Dreamworks/Geffen 325000 (2005).

23 Max de Schauensee and Alan Blyth, "Anderson, Marian," Grove Music Online (Oxford), http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/00865 [accessed August 4, 2013].

24 Allan Kozinn, "Marian Anderson is Dead at 96: Singer Shattered Racial Barriers," *New York Times* (April 9, 1993), http://www.nytimes.com/1993/04/09/obituaries/marian-anderson-is-dead-at-96-singer-shattered-racial-barriers.html?pagewanted=3&src=pm.

the person and hating the person at the same time."[25] It was exactly this type of societal quagmire from which the spirituals supplied momentary release. It's easy to imagine the joy of these words from "I got-a home in that Rock":

> Poor man Lazarus poor as I,
> When he died, he found a home on high.
> …
> Rich man Dives, he lived so well,
> When he died, he found a home in Hell.

The ancestors of Marian Anderson were, of necessity, adept at hiding their disdain through smiles and wit. In the midst of the civil rights era, Anderson proved an apt pupil of those lessons from long ago.

It would not be surprising if slave owners thought that the musical references to heaven being "home" indicated the happiness of their captives with the state of slavery. Yet the slaves had the intellectual acuity to refer, simultaneously, to heaven after death and heaven here on earth, while easily leaving the impression of being satisfied with the here and now. The multiple levels of messaging served many purposes within and without the black community. The biblical references masked the levels in the language, confirming, at least on the surface, the common opinion of slave owners that their "property" were incapable of sophisticated thinking, as these same references were used, purposely, to mislead the oppressors.

Rebecca Clift's "double audience" applies here. The extent to which the slave-owning community misunderstood the minds of slaves certainly bears reappraisal. In fact, one physician, Samuel A. Cartwright (1793–1863), considered escape attempts by any slave to represent mental illness.[26] He coined the term "drapetomania" from the Greek *drapetes* (runaway) and *mania* (madness) for this supposed malady, the "disease causing Negroes to run away." Since white indentured servants also sought escape at times, physicians north of the Mason–Dixon Line ridiculed the entire notion by suggesting that the condition might be European in origin, passed on by the said Europeans when traveling through Africa. If white medical professionals in the South saw attempts to escape enslavement as representative of severe mental instability, it is clear how the coded messages of spirituals were able to maintain their effectiveness throughout the era. Slave masters would assume that "sane" slaves could not possibly be planning such insanity.

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[25] Green, in Yetman, *Voices from Slavery*, p. 150.

[26] Samuel A. Cartwright, "Diseases and Peculiarities of the Negro Race" (1851), *Africans in America*, Part 4, PBS, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h3106t.html [accessed July 29, 2013]. This was originally given as a paper at the Medical Association of Louisiana. Among Cartwright's "cures" was to "beat the devil" out of the dissatisfied slaves and/or to cut off both big toes so that they could not run away.

During slavery, white self-proclaimed Christians often used the Bible to justify their heinous and, one might say un-Christian, treatment of slaves. From many an American pulpit, slave-owning ministers supported this "peculiar institution." But, using what Harvard literature professor Jeanne Follansbee Quinn termed a "pragmatist aesthetic," the slaves could refute such self-serving rationalization, handing the Bible right back to their captors without slaveholders recognizing the exchange for what it was.[27]

> You going to reap just what you sow,
> Upon the mountain, down in the valley.
> Let the liar lie right on.
> You going to reap just what you sow,
> Upon the mountain, down in the valley.
> Let the preacher preach right on.
> You going to reap just what you sow,
> Upon the mountain, down in the valley.

This text could easily refer to the passage in Luke 19:21 where Zacchaeus, an extremely wealthy man and tax collector, is charged: "You draw out what you never put in and reap what you did not sow." This scene occurs in the city of Jericho, a popular locale in many spirituals because of Joshua's success at knocking down the walls despite staggering odds.

An additional point is that the Israelites conquered Jericho by means of music. They surrounded the city and blew their trumpets so loudly that "the walls came tumbling down." Considering the situational irony that slaves did backbreaking work sowing on massive plantations, only to find the benefits reaped went to the slave owners, the idea of chastising those who reap what they have not sown might prove particularly appealing.

"You going to reap just what you sow," could also refer to Proverbs 22:8: "Whoever sows injustice will reap trouble, and the end of his work will be the rod." The additional verses support the notion of punishments coming to slave masters. A complex society encompassing citizens who profess a commitment to freedom and liberty while selling humans, and preachers who claim a belief in Christian charity while approving beatings and lynchings, are both cleverly dismissed with a few quick lines.

In Quinn's article, "The Work of Art: Irony and Identification in 'Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,'" she analyzes James Agee's book on sharecroppers, explaining the dichotomy of very different interpretations of the same culture. Agee's book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, co-authored with photographer Walker Evans was often used during the civil rights movement as a possible model for speaking *to* the disenfranchised. Spirituals, on the other hand, were used *by*

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[27] Jeanne Follansbee Quinn, "The Work of Art: Irony and Identification in 'Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,'" *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 34/3 (Summer 2001): 338–68.

the disenfranchised to speak among themselves in a protected environment. Since sharecropping—a practice whereby workers lived off the land they worked but the land itself remained in the ownership of the former slave masters—was the next step for many freed slaves, this article and its subject are quite apposite. In Quinn's assessment, "Agee's irony allowed him to remind readers that aesthetic identification is always a response to real and often insurmountable social divisions."[28] Agee derided the useless sentimentalism of prior writers in order to address the hypocrisy unadorned but for its white envelope.

Similar sentiments can be seen in the popular baptism spiritual "Take Me to the Water." The refrain "take me to the water to be baptized" alternates with verses like "none but the righteous shall see God." Although most slaves, like Sojourner Truth, could not read, their prodigious memories—a legacy of African oral traditions—and being allowed to hear white preachers (mostly from the back or balcony of the church) provided access to Bible verses that could then be adapted to the slaves' particular interest.

One consistently recurring theme for irony among the most long-lived spirituals is the use of travel references. Bruno Chenu's collection of 210 spirituals contains over 40 travel songs.[29] "Go in the Wilderness," "Trampin,'" and "We've Come a Long Way" are just a few. Among the more renowned are "Steal Away," Wade in the Water," and "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." On the surface, "Steal Away" urges a secretive escape into the arms of Jesus, repeating the main theme "steal away" five times, each time ascending, before finishing with "I ain't got long to stay here":

> Steal away, steal away
> Steal away to Jesus
> Steal away, steal away home
> I ain't got long to stay here.

"Wade in the Water" suggests an escape route through repetition of the theme three times before the final line, making an oblique reference to the escape of the Israelites from Egypt across the Red Sea—"God's gonna trouble the water." The placement of "water" on the highest and lowest notes in the song appear to "trouble" the water musically, as the slaves hoped it would do in reality when the dogs came after them. And for a potential runaway slave "I ain't got long to stay here" is not a reference to heaven someday, but to the heaven of freedom here on earth right now.

Probably the most famous spiritual of all time calls for transport away from a place that is not home— "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." In this case, the strophic form is expanded by the reiterated "coming for to carry me home" that ends each line of each verse. Supporting this structure the "swing low" melodic line dips

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28 Ibid.

29 Chenu, *Trouble I've Seen.*

downward, mirroring the movement of the chariot descending from the heavens and climbs upward on the first iteration of "carry me home." "Home" is always higher in pitch than the chariot that swings "low." That home could be heaven or the North (or, in some cases, further south into Catholic-ruled Florida), or even the plantation without the master's presence, all at the same time.

Sorrow songs like these with travel references, and others providing signals initiating escape plans and maps for routes, serve as an important subcategory of spirituals. To achieve this function, they were encoded. "Steal away, Lord, I ain't got long to stay here" indicated imminent departure. "Here" could be earth while simultaneously referring to the plantation, with the destination being heaven or the North. "Wade in the water, / God's gonna trouble the water" not only makes the aforementioned reference to the water keeping potential captors away in the biblical story, but can also apply to the fact that slave owners' bloodhounds could not follow the scent of slaves once they had passed through water. "Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home" was noted for its use as a signal that conductors from the Underground Railroad were on their way. Courageous slaves would soon begin their journey.

In the astonishing true story of Solomon Northup, a free-born black violinist from upstate New York was kidnapped in 1841 (ironically, from the US capital city, Washington, DC) and enslaved in the South for 12 years.[30] One interesting aspect of his story was his involvement in the Underground Railroad once he was freed. The enslaved also used signal songs that did not necessarily refer to travel. If, for example, there were plans to meet at a certain spot to leave and not everyone could get there, "I couldn't hear nobody pray" could indicate obstacles. It could be sung by those who arrived to find an empty location or by those who had not been able to come as a rather ironic twist of the absent one singing the role of the one who was present.

> I couldn't hear nobody pray, O Lordy
> Couldn't hear nobody pray, O Lordy
> Way down yonder by myself,
> And I couldn't hear nobody pray.

The review of these texts reveals the fascinating idea that these spirituals were not only of "double audience" intent, but also "double irony." They mean what they say, but, at the same time, they mean something quite different, though

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[30] Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup, a Citizen of New-York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841, and Rescued in 1853, from a Cotton Plantation near the Red River in Louisiana (*Auburn, AL, 1853), in "Documenting the American South," http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/northup/northup.html [accessed November 23, 2013]. As a side note, Northup proved that instrumental music could be as much a release as vocal music when he said, "I was indebted to my violin, my constant companion … and soother of my sorrows during years of servitude" (p. 196).

related in concept. Heaven is a biblical reference for the slave masters, and North toward freedom for the slaves; the water for wading could be the Red Sea for slave masters, or a Southern creek for the slaves; the "sinner-man" who gambled—"he gambled and fell / He wanted to go to heaven, but he had to go to hell"—could well be one of those who cast lots for Jesus' clothes before he was crucified or the slave master who cherry-picked scriptures to excuse abandoning the golden rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

These spirituals carry the double messages in powerful style. As W.E.B. DuBois said about the spiritual in his "Sorrow Songs" chapter: "It has been persistently mistaken and misunderstood; but notwithstanding, it still remains as the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people."[31] Envelope unsealed, singular truth revealed, no decoding required.

[31] W.E.B. DuBois, "XIV, The Sorrow Songs," *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago, IL) as cited in Gates, *Norton Anthology*, p. 732.

Chapter 3
"Strange Fruit": Cognitive Linguistics and Pragmatics of Ironic Comprehension

Katherine L. Turner

At its core, "irony" is a clever twist on reality or badinage. While often used to delight or amuse, it can also inflict guilt, stinging pain or sadness; it is perhaps in this vein that irony is at its most effective. "Strange Fruit" is a song with layers of this latter kind with 12 lines, 91 words and two-and-a-half minutes of excruciating social commentary. Among the many ironies inherent in, or attached to, this piece, the title displays a certain incongruence, previewing the twists awaiting the listener. On its face, the title brings to mind any number of curious delicacies, but the real meaning remains obscure until the third line of the song: the "strange fruit" is an African-American victim of a lynching.

This chapter demonstrates the role of the cognitive process in understanding and interpreting irony in a musical example through the interwoven layers of textual, musical and performative ironies in Billie Holiday's 1959 video-recorded performance of "Strange Fruit." Francisco Yus's seven distinct irony-relevant contextual sources form the framework for analyzing the lyrics and musical elements.[1]

Written and composed by Lewis Allan (the pen name of Abel Meeropol) in the late 1930s "Strange Fruit" was a response to the culture of lynching African-Americans made famous by the 23-year-old singer Billie Holiday.[2] The history of "Strange Fruit" is at times blatant and at times enigmatic, but it is *always* a visceral reminder of human beings' capacity for anger and violence, as well as bravery and strength.

> Southern trees bear a strange fruit
> Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
> Black body swinging in the southern breeze
> Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

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[1] Francisco Yus, "On Reaching the Intended Ironic Interpretation," *International Journal of Communication*, 10/1–2 (2000): 27–78.

[2] David Margolick's two general-readership booklets provide some background on the piece: *Strange Fruit: Billie Holiday, Café Society, and an Early Cry for Civil Rights* (Philadelphia, PA, 2000); and *Strange Fruit: The Biography of a Song* (New York, 2001).

> Pastoral scene of the gallant South
> The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth
> Scent of magnolia, sweet and fresh
> And the sudden smell of burning flesh.
>
> Here is the fruit for the crows to pluck
> For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck
> For the sun to rot, for a tree to drop
> Here is a strange and bitter crop.[3]

Holiday premiered the song in 1939 at Greenwich Village's first racially integrated nightclub, Café Society. Record producer Milt Gabler called it

> … a "liberal" club patronized by "New Dealers," free-thinking people, writers, actors, musicians and educators. It was a "swingin'" place in the days when "to swing" meant music with a capital "M."[4]

Café Society prided itself on irony and sarcasm with a political edge; the club was called "the wrong place for the right people" (or vice versa), the doormen wore rags, irreverent social and political references were ubiquitous, and the walls (and bathrooms!) were covered in clever caricatures and sniping surrealist murals painted with support from the New Deal's Works Progress Administration.[5] High society came to see and hear themselves satirized, and black patrons got the best seats in the house.

"Strange Fruit" was a key piece of Holiday's repertoire; she sang it not every night, but sometimes three times a night there and elsewhere until her death 20 years later in 1959. Writer Leon Forrest notes that:

> Lady Day's singing and phraseology was loaded with skepticism of not only love, men, but of the very words, words, words, she freighted across the landscape of the imagination, with such poignant beauty. There is so often a pity and a bitter irony in her voice.[6]

While he was speaking of her style in general, it certainly applies to the "words, words, words" of "Strange Fruit."

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[3] Lewis Allan, "Strange Fruit" (New York: Edward B. Marks Music Corporation, 1940).

[4] Cited in Leslie Gourse (ed.), *The Billie Holiday Companion: Seven Decades of Commentary* (New York, 1997), pp. 84–5.

[5] Barney Josephson and Terry Trilling-Josephson, *Café Society: The Wrong Place for the Right People* (Urbana, IL, 2009).

[6] Leon Forrest, "A Solo Long-Song: For Lady Day," *Callaloo*, 16/2 (Spring 1993): 332–67.

There are several audio recordings available and we, the viewing public, are fortunate that there is an extant live audio-video recording. Taped by the BBC's *Chelsea at Nine* in London during Holiday's last tour of Europe, it in fact features one of her last performances before her death from cirrhosis only a few months later.[7] Holiday's performance is devastating both for the obvious pain the story renders and for the equally harsh quality of her voice: decades of drugs and alcohol, physical abuse, and exhaustion had rendered her voice grainy with a smaller range and less accuracy.[8] This chapter will take as its point of reference the BBC video because it is representative of the experience of a contemporary live audience member and because its visual medium serves to enhance the ironies: *how* Holiday sings becomes equally important as *what* she sings.[9] For an audience to come away from this performance with the intended sense of indignation and repulsion, listeners must independently interpret what they hear on literal, metaphorical, and subtextual levels, and comprehend her performative cues.

This song is primarily about persuasion (rather than entertainment or relaxation, for example), not an unfamiliar position for a song, but one that tends to be underexamined. The fields of pragmatics and linguistics provide a multidimensional basis for understanding the cognitive process of hearing and comprehending ironies in text.[10] Linguist Francisco Yus has written about the successful and resourceful comprehension of irony as a manifestation of hearing and reinterpreting utterances that display incongruences between what is said and what is meant. In order to "get it" quickly and efficiently, a listener must process the text, compare it to known information and circumstantial clues, and assimilate the rendered (ironic) meaning. Yus considers seven contextual sources

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[7] The PBS Independent Lens documentary includes the video recording: Joel Katz et al., "Strange Fruit,", video recording (San Francisco, CA, 2002). Several users have posted the segment on YouTube. See "Billie Holiday—Strange Fruit," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4ZyuULy9zs [accessed April 3, 2013].

[8] Critics and aficionados continue to debate whether this decline is a sad detraction, or if it serves to highlight "the truth" of her music; nowhere is this more ironic than in "Strange Fruit" where the poor tone quality of her voice emphasizes the tragic nature of the subject but not the strength it took to sing it so many times over so many years.

[9] A recent study demonstrates that songs are better understood when the listener is watching the singer. See Alexandra Jesse and Dominic W. Massaro, "Seeing a Singer Helps Comprehension of the Song's Lyrics," *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, 17/3 (2010): 323–8.

[10] Bruno G. Bara, *Cognitive Pragmatics: The Mental Processes of Communication*, trans. John Douthwaite (Cambridge, MA, 2010), p. 1: "*Cognitive pragmatics* is the study of the mental states of people who are engaged in communication." The author states that "the theme of this book is communication in general, not just communication that comes about through spoken language" and while he does not actively include music, I believe the processes of communication correlate for creating and understanding meaning in context (this is certainly an area where further study is warranted). See also Joseph S. Plazak's "Listener-Senders, Musical Irony, and the Most 'Disliked' YouTube Videos," Chapter 14 in this collection, which considers musical irony as a post-production mode of communication.

that can be sequentially or concurrently engaged by the listener. The quality and quantity of connections made determines the speed of comprehension and the overall impact of the irony. His hypothesis is that the human mind can recognize an incompatibility by comparing the given words to several layers of information simultaneously; the more contextual sources used to assess the nature of the incompatibility, the quicker the recognition of the utterance as ironic.[11] Yus is concerned not just with the brain's ability to comprehend an ironic utterance but in doing so economically—that is, with minimal processing effort. He argues that:

> [H]earers are constantly accessing multiple contextual sources throughout any exchange. Therefore, when a seemingly ironic utterance turns up, often the hearer has already activated, a long time before, many of the *contextual sources* … add[ing] to the overall economy of human comprehension.[12]

The discussion of speed, efficiency and accuracy is significant in the case of music because the lyrics are not just read or recited as speech; they are sung. This adds a layer of complexity that can obscure understanding; factors include varying rhythmic durations within and between words and syllables, elongated vowels and shortened consonants incompatible with modes of speech, and melodic and harmonic intricacies. In addition, because song lyrics are not generally designed to be equal in coherence to the written or spoken word, the listener must work harder to parse out a line. The singing of the words may help the process of understanding (as can be the case with lines in a specific meter or rhyme scheme), but it is more likely to be a distraction to comprehension.[13]

A first-time listener to Holiday's performance of "Strange Fruit" must contend with numerous obstacles before appreciating the ironies that are the foundation of the lyrics. The most significant barrier was that nightclubs typically programmed music for entertainment and this was not an "enjoyable" song. Second, Holiday's starlet torch-singer persona stood in diametric opposition to such substantial solemnity.[14] Unlike most popular/jazz/standard songs, the song's subject matter, like the words and images themselves, require concentrated focus. Moreover, because it was the final song in Holiday's performance set, such an effort might have

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[11] Yus, "Reaching."

[12] Ibid., p. 38. Italics in original.

[13] Rarely are song lyrics the kind of language we would normally choose for effective communication. Consider also mondegreens, the misunderstanding of lyrics through phonetic recalibration that gives a new meaning to a song (Jimi Hendrix's "'Scuse me while I kiss *this guy* [the sky]" from *Purple Haze* is a popular example), and soramimi in which lyrics translated from one language to another lose their original meaning.

[14] Although other singers of the song such as Josh White and Nina Simone had a range of political songs and an activist agenda, Holiday did not—"Strange Fruit" was her only contribution to political or racial issues of the day, albeit a very powerful one. For more on civil rights activism and music, see S. Alex Reed's "Burning Down Freedom's Road: The Strange Life of 'Brown Baby,'" Chapter 6 in this collection.

been a strain on the otherwise jovial and imbibing audience.[15] Third, sophisticated irony as a rhetorical device is atypical of songs of the era (although techniques from oxymoron to sarcasm were common); listeners would have to recognize that irony was even a plausible explanation for the otherwise peculiar lyrics. This is where Yus's "economy of human comprehension" stalls temporarily. The listener approaches the song with no expectation of a political message and without ready mental access to information about lynching or southern cultural values; in fact, everything about the experience up to the beginning of the song rejects any agenda beyond good-natured entertainment. However, once the topic is introduced and the obstacles breached, the listener readily grasps the intended meanings because the images and performative cues focus attention and mental energy on lynching as murder. It also helps that the ironies are progressive—understanding the first irony gives traction to understanding the second, and so forth—until the final stanza, when the ironic turns of phrase end leaving only blatant and harsh conclusions resulting from the truth of the previous ironic utterances.

After an overview of each of the seven categories, an examination of Allan's lyrics for ironic utterances as understood by a listener via these categories will follow.[16] The categories are as follows:

1. *Encyclopedic or factual information*: this is the brain's storage of "go to" or generally accepted information against which new information is efficiently compared and processed. An utterance that contradicts or is incompatible with the shared understanding or knowledge base will "trigger a search for an attitude of dissociation."[17] This category includes social mores, common knowledge, stereotypes, and expectations, and it can be broadly-based or situation-specific. According to Yus, "[o]ften ironists rely on highly rooted cultural norms in order to build up their ironic strategy."[18]
2. *Mutually manifest physical environment*: the setting, what one perceives, is important to situational irony (when the actual outcome of events contradicts the expected result). This usually concerns a concurrent situation on which the ironist bases the utterance (such as proclaiming "There are three dogs, the largest is named Tiny").
3. *Speaker's non-verbal behavior*: this provides contextual (performative) information including physical gestures such as a wink and the use of an ironic tone of voice, which can indicate that an utterance is not meant in a straightforward manner. In a written work, authors may substitute quotation marks, italics, and punctuation like (?!) to separate levels of meaning and establish the necessary dissociation between the literal and intended.

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[15] Certainly a typical audience member needed less focus for "My man don't love me, treats me awful mean" compared to the riddle "Southern trees bear a strange fruit."

[16] Yus, "Reaching."

[17] Ibid., p. 31.

[18] Ibid.

4. *Addressee's background knowledge of addresser's biographical data*: a pre-existing understanding of the speaker of the irony helps the hearer recognize the speaker's dissociative attitude. Such an understanding may be based on physical characteristics, such as race and gender, or the political, cultural and social positions of the ironist. The recipient need only acknowledge the attributes, not share them.
5. *Mutual knowledge*: this category concerns the unstated agreement between parties as to certain facts, assumptions or held beliefs and may be the subject of the ironic utterance. Often, this is implicit information that may or may not be dynamic (that is, evolving with the story). Information learned or confirmed by the hearer *during* the course of the interaction is mutually manifest information which hastens ironic understanding.
6. *Role of previous utterances in the conversation*: here, context derived from preceding overt material lays the groundwork for subsequent ironies. The ironic utterance may be a literal repetition of information which becomes ironic in a new context, an echoic statement (which "simultaneously refer[s] to an attributed thought—or utterance, or assumption—and express[es] an attitude to it"), or rely on emotional reactions or intellectual ideas stemming from the previous statements.[19]
7. *Linguistic cues*: these are the semiotic and semantic choices that serve ironic purposes. Although not usually a sufficient contextual source on their own, these may serve to highlight an ironic intent. Yus refers to "heterogeneous structures and words which share their *alerting* role to the nonliteral, ironic quality of the utterance containing them."[20] For example, in the American South, it is a backhanded insult to comment, "Oh, well, she's *perfectly nice*"—combining an extreme adverb with an underwhelming adjective to cue an implication opposite to its literal meaning.

Each category is a discrete path to realizing the intended meaning of an utterance, but they are most effective when simultaneously accessed by a listener, as suggested by Yus. Allan's first two stanzas contain many ironies of varying levels of intensity while none is found in stanza three where irony is dispensed with in favor of a more direct and graphic supplication. The ensuing analysis is based on the following assumptions: the listener is being attentive, has no previous knowledge of "Strange Fruit," is aware of the culture of racial violence in early twentieth-century America, and is watching Holiday perform it live or on the specified BBC video recording.

The opening words set the physical environment for the story. "Southern trees" clearly describe a familiar locale (B) and pre-establishes a knowledge base

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[19] Ibid., p. 28. The author points to the many works of Dan Sperber and Deidre Wilson as well as K. Seto, "On Non-Echoic Irony," in R. Carston and S. Uchida (eds), *Relevance Theory: Applications and Implications* (Amsterdam, 1998), pp. 239–55.

[20] Yus, "Reaching," p. 36. Italics in original.

of available facts, opinions, stereotypes, and so on (A, E) about the South, its landscapes, and culture from which to compare incoming information. With the common knowledge that fruit trees are prevalent in the South, the conclusion of line 1 "bear a strange fruit" immediately creates a dissociative state and may prompt the listener to consider what kind of fruit does not belong (E). The second line confirms details about the tree—it has leaves and roots but, incongruously, they are covered in blood. Trees, especially fruit-bearing ones, are symbols of life and growth whereas blood is a symbol of sacrifice and death, so blood on a fruit tree is incongruent (A). On the basis of this new information, the listener understands that "strange" is not "odd" or "laughable" but "wrong" or "inappropriate." The third line is the key to decoding the riddle and centers the song on the topic of the politics of race and violence; Holiday's ethnicity then becomes a contributing factor as this is personal to her and the listener would recognize that *she* is also a "black body" (D). As in situational irony, the outcome of the story (singing about lynching) contradicts the expectations (singing typical songs of love) (B), and the fruit is a grim metaphor, so when it is echoed in the fourth line (F), the mutual knowledge has become dynamic (E) as performer and listener both acknowledge that the "strange fruit hanging" is the lynched body of a black person in the South (A, B, E, F). Poplar trees are common in the southeastern United States, especially the white poplar whose flowering fruit pod extends down vertically from the branches (A) but for the purpose of distributing seeds for future growth rather than constricting the black community's growth. The listener cognitively assimilates the literal meanings of the words, finds them dissociative, and recognizes the strange fruit as bitterly ironic, prompting abhorrence of the act which has led to its presence and ultimate demise.

The second stanza drips with irony, assuming a correct interpretation of the preceding stanza. Lines 5 and 7 illustrate a bucolic scene that is clearly false (A, B, E, F). In emphasizing that which is contradictory, lines 6 and 8 disambiguate the irony through multiple (although imagined) senses including sight, smell, hearing, and touch. Perhaps one of the most interesting ironies is the reference to a magnolia—something that does in fact grow on southern trees and whose buds have a fruit-like appearance—but is the exact opposite of a lynched body (A, B, F). Magnolias are white or pinkish, delicate and gradually appreciated, in direct contrast to the abrupt invasiveness of the harsh stench of death and color of charred flesh (A). Alternating between ironic pleasantries and grim realities, there are echoes of the first stanza that listeners could readily access to deepen the intended ironies (F). The "breeze" from line 3, itself a pleasant word in an unpleasant context, also carries the "scent of magnolia," while the "poplar trees" of lines 1 and 4 may provide the tinder for the fire (A, B, E) that burns the body.

The rhyme scheme is AABB couplets with some of the pairings lending to ironic comprehension in an adaptation of the category of linguistic cues (G). The listener feels the "breeze" more clearly and horrifically when it is paired with "trees." This effect is heightened with the contrasting affective images ending with "South" and "mouth" and "fresh" and "flesh," the ironies of which would be

quickly understood based on literal versus figurative meanings already established, and the incompatibility of the images. In another use of literary cues to enhance ironic comprehension, the "pastoral scene" is factual in nature and paired with its complementary image, the "gallant South." Rather like the girl who is "perfectly nice," this extreme positive destabilizes the face value of the line encouraging the substitution of the ironic connotation. These are also examples of "highly rooted cultural norms" (A) familiar, even personal, to the audience, and used to heighten the ironic punch and political impact.

Lewis Allan's words are potent; generations of listeners will attest that their power is not limited to the time when lynchings were common, or to any particular social or racial group.[21] However, Billie Holiday's performance brings to life, and death, the spirit of the poem. Yus's category C, "speaker's non-verbal behavior," provides a foundation for discussing how the performer heightens the ironic effect through her physicality and creates an extratextual irony. Holiday demonstrates a range of non-verbal/physical gestures most clearly connected to the lyrics in line 6 when her lips physically warp with the words "twisted mouth." It was her habit not to move her body when performing this song, so all the physical cues are conveyed by her brow, the shape of her mouth and her eyes.[22]

The astute observer will note the dour appearance, depressed mood, and laconic expression Holiday establishes from the very beginning, all serving to indicate that this is not a cheerful song. In the first line, the word "strange" is accompanied by a pained grimace and furrowed brow cuing a negative inflection, and the word "fruit," like "southern breeze" in line 3—things normally pleasant—are accompanied by a knowing raise of the left eyebrow indicating an ironic falsehood. The word "root," especially the final "t" is overarticulated at the end of line 2, much more so than its preceding rhyme "fruit," an inflection that propels the intensity forward to the revealing third line. "Poplar trees" is also exaggerated through pronunciation and a rare instance of hemiola. She presents the "strange fruit" of line 4 and "bulging eyes" with a distinct growl—a gravely quality to her voice emphasizing the horrific irony of murder against an otherwise pleasant scene. One effect is that the "growled" phrases become inextricably allied, casting the same negative intonation and connecting the first stanza to the second. The technique is also prevalent in the third stanza, which contains no rhetorical ironies but, through this unique timbre, retains continuity like a thread holding the song together: there is no other refrain, the melody and harmony are minimal, and there is almost no intervention from her pianist or band.

As established above, the second stanza's four lines alternate ironic pleasant visages with equal and opposite graphic horrors. Holiday's performance of these four lines reinforces the irony and provides a more subtle performative irony. From the perspective of non-verbal communication, lines 6 and 8 reveal blatant

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[21] *Time* Magazine anointed "Strange Fruit" the "Best Song of the Century." *Time*, 154/27 (December 31, 1999).

[22] Her biographers all report her stage ritual consistently.

disgust: her brow contorts and eyes wince; the shape of her mouth is disfigured and nearly unrecognizable as one that would enable the singing of coherent syllables. In contrast, her performance of line 7's "magnolia sweet and fresh" betrays its figurative meaning with a calmer and more pleasant countenance and an intentionally more mellow vocal inflection. Why, then, does she perform line 5's "pastoral scene" and "gallant South" with almost no expression and no emotive enunciation? There is no ironic inflection or knowing raised eyebrow, not even revolt; rather, she seems to be lamenting. While this distinction is very subtle and could be interpreted as a sense of defeat (a possibility I find unlikely given her performance of the next line) I believe the truth relates to a misunderstanding of vocabulary. When Lewis Allan taught her the song in 1939, she asked what "pastoral" meant, and he gave her a basic definition and explained the irony he intended to convey.[23] Nearly two decades later, poet Maya Angelou's 12-year-old son Guy asked the same question when she sang "Strange Fruit" for him.[24] Holiday belligerently and cruelly responded that "pastoral" meant the act of kidnapping and mutilating a black boy like him.[25] She never assimilated the definition of the word, so she could not truthfully convey the irony, which would require an understanding of both the literal and opposite meanings; she could only lament the action she thought it meant. Her misunderstanding does not diminish the impact of the phrase, but it is, in fact, ironic.

Lewis Allan wrote the poem and then the music for "Strange Fruit" as a stable irony. As a performer, Holiday also intended to convey irony but to a different audience and perhaps for different purposes. The ways in which the composer versus the performer intended for the audience to perceive the ironies plays on the recipients' perceptions and expectations.

Yus states that for every ironic communication there is a leading contextual source, which is the most readily accessible point of entry to ironic interpretation, and supportive contextual sources, which pass through the first like an open floodgate.[26] Allan—as a Harvard-educated English teacher—likely calculated, even planned, for how and when listeners would discover his ploy. He wrote "Strange Fruit" initially for a New York teachers' union publication, a politically left, well-educated and culturally-aware audience. The poem was set to music for an even smaller subset of educated leftists interested in the arts (later given over to Billie Holiday and the nightclub scene).[27] But it was not only *his* expectations of his

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[23] Julia Blackburn, *With Billie* (New York, 2005), pp. 110–11.

[24] Holiday visited Angelou and Guy over the course of several days, growing quite attached to the pair. Each night she sang a song to Guy before he went to bed; she sang "Strange Fruit" on the last night.

[25] Maya Angelou, *The Heart of a Woman* (New York, 1981), pp. 13–15.

[26] Yus, "Reaching," p. 39.

[27] The original version appeared as "Bitter Fruit" in the January 1937 issue of *The New York Teacher*. The published score from 1940, under his pen name, uses the same text, although misprints, misspeaks, and variations are found elsewhere.

audience that mattered; *their* knowledge and expectations of him were paramount. He signed the union publication under his given name, Abel Meeropol, rather than the ethnically ambiguous pen name Lewis Allan, and he was present at early performances of the song by his wife Anne and others at political and socially progressive events.[28] Yus's category D, "addressee's background knowledge of addresser's biographical data," is the lead contextual source because even before the lyrics or the title, an audience member knew that the author was active with the political Left, and Jewish. In the late 1930s the Holocaust was underway, and American Jews were at the forefront of the anti-lynching movement, in part as a response to the hatred and violence long forced upon their community. Yus states that a pre-existing understanding of the speaker's point of view or predilection aids in the listener's ability to recognize a dissociative attitude associated with a biographical element. Of the seven categories, this was the gateway that gave context to all the other incongruences.

It is perhaps ironic, then, that biographical data is not the lead contextual source for Holiday's audience members who had no previous knowledge of the song.[29] As an African-American, she was certainly invested in the struggle for racial equality, but audience members were familiar with black performers as singers of jazz numbers, dancers, sex icons, and instrumentalists, and, as stated above, hers was a fairly standard nightclub/entertainment persona with no political investment. On hearing that the next song is entitled "Strange Fruit," her listeners are more likely to expect something to do with food or perhaps a bawdy sexual reference. Then, on hearing the first line—the riddle—a listener needs to rely primarily upon Yus's category A, "encyclopedic or factual information." The brain's storehouse of knowledge about the South, trees, fruit, and blood tells the listener to look for another, non-literal, explanation for the incongruences. This broad base of knowledge acts as the lead contextual source, especially until the third line reveals the "strange fruit." The supporting contextual sources, including biographical data, are engaged, allowing for a fuller appreciation of the intricate layers of ironies.

For each situation there is what Yus refers to as the "irony trigger"—the point at which enough incongruences have been accumulated to assert an ironic reading as the only suitable conclusion.[30] When does this happen in "Strange Fruit"? When does the relevant leading contextual source combine with the supporting sources to force the inevitable ironic interpretation? It is unlikely that the title alone is enough for an audience member to establish the ironic thread for either Allan's words or Holiday's performance. The progressive, activist audience members Allan sought were already primed for a skeptical reading; they actively anticipated

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[28] Nancy Kovaleff Baker, "Abel Meeropol (a.k.a. Lewis Allan): Political Commentator and Social Conscience," *American Music*, 20/1 (Spring 2002): 25–79.

[29] She was not in the habit of announcing the author or composer, so audiences had no external (verbal) frame of reference.

[30] Yus, "Reaching," p. 40.

a metaphorical reading and perhaps the role of irony in the piece. The "blood" displaced on to the tree in line 2 likely triggered enough contextual sources to promote the notion that the first line must be read ironically, as confirmed by the third line. A typical Holiday listener, on the other hand, might be confused and initially taken aback until the explication of the metaphor in line 3, at which point line 4 and the second stanza could confidently be understood as irony—the only possible explanation.

While Yus has no need to consider musical cues, his theory and categories adapt well to ironic comprehension of a musical experience. The musical listener, like the one listening to a text, "gets it" quickly and efficiently by identifying musical gestures, comparing them to known and unknown entities and assimilating the rendered (ironic) meaning. Yus's "encyclopedic or factual information" (A) equals the basic storehouse of melodies, harmonic progressions, rhythmic patterns, and forms common to a genre's particular musical language. Holiday's melody is made up of familiar musical elements—it outlines a triad and has familiar diatonic leaps, for example—but the harmonic movement is atypical; it does not make an obvious move to modulate or tonicize another key area, for example, conforming to neither common pop song nor jazz progressions, and in this way triggers "an attitude of dissociation."

In terms of "mutually manifest physical environment" (B), the setting, including the location and size of the venue and position of performers relative to the audience are important, but so too is the musical environment, including the number and type of performers, opening measures that establish parameters like meter, mode, dynamics, tempo, and chorus and verse structure. For this, Holiday's final song of the night, the stage went dark with only a pinpoint of light on her face and she did not move her body; this change of atmosphere certainly set up an incongruity, but more telling are the opening bars—block chords with no melodic content, minimal instrumentation reinforcing the melody, and no chorus or 'hook'—elements that define a cabaret number.

The "[singer's] non-verbal behavior" (C) includes strategically emphasized downbeats or accents, conducting gestures, counting off, and tapping or bobbing the head: a disruption of these specifically musical gestures would be an obvious ironic marker. Holiday's physical gestures are discussed above in relation to the lyrics; however, in relation to the music, she does very little to gesticulate tone or tempo to the audience or her musicians. A few small motions stand out. At the opening words "southern trees" and immediately after "southern breeze," she jerks her head to the left in a quick, clipped motion, but it is out of time and inconsistent with her legato phrasing and the decrescendo in the accompaniment, a literal nod of contrast. The sharply syllabically divided "poplar trees" is one of the few prominently in-time rhythmic gestures, which serves to emphasize their strong, clear and upright nature as ironic in the context of an implement of extrajudicial murder.

The "addressee's background knowledge of addresser's biographical data" (D) includes knowledge of the performer's musical training, previous albums,

or affiliation with other musical acts or record labels. Holiday was certainly aware that this song was a musical and political island in her repertoire, as her audience no doubt deduced through musical and performance practices not found elsewhere in her repertoire. "Mutual knowledge" (E) consists of well-known tropes or expectations of a genre or type of musical performance. In this case, the knowledge is dynamic; the audience is given hints that this is no ordinary song before realizing irony on two levels or registers: there is a certain irony to a jazzy, bluesy temptress of a singer taking herself so out of character to sing this song. Second, the song itself contains musical and textual ironies made apparent over the course of the first stanza and reinforced by the second. Falling under category F, "role of previous [utterances] musical elements in the [song]," are (echoic) refrains, repeated or manipulated melodies or rhythms, or instruments, which may have a new ironic role differing from their previously established part. Here, that which is *not previously uttered* contributes to the musical ironies. The absence of a refrain or any repeated melodic material, the minimization of the piano part, and the unprecedented surprise solitary entrance of horns on the last note are all musical markers contrary to nightclub singing in general. In a song with so little vocal melodic contour or harmonic motion, it becomes quite noticeable that the piano is not taking up the slack; in fact, the absence is emphasized with drawn-out chords and punctuation accents.

Lastly, and most opaquely, are "linguistic cues" (G). Significant research exists concerning the codification of semiotic and semantic meaning in (art) music. As with the verbal implications, these gestures best serve to highlight an ironic intent rather than identify one. Holiday employs her hallmark rubato to dissipate or highlight words or affect through triplets and glissandos, for example. The short piano interlude after stanza one has an independent melody and blues-inflected major-mode harmonic motion ironically preceding the dark tone and dissonance of the forthcoming ironies, thus alerting the reader to a non-literal interpretation.

Irrespective of how a listener approaches the song or how much effort is needed to process the textual and musical layers, if the song is successful, the result is political impact: the disjunctive images and bitter ironies created have more impact than an upfront or blatant statement against racial violence because they require a deeper level of thought processing and engaged image assimilation. Solving the riddle, then incorporating the visceral descriptions inevitably stirs physical and emotional responses from sadness to disgust and outrage. The lyrics spark an intellectual response about fairness, power through violence, and human nature; the music establishes melancholy through dissonance, minimal melodic and harmonic motion, and drawn-out rhythmic values contrasted with staccatos; and Holiday's performance elicits anger and revolt towards the culture that upholds such actions. Initially, her audiences were made up primarily of left-leaning, socially engaged northern whites and African-Americans following the awakening of the Harlem Renaissance; these two groups were predisposed to support the growing political, financial, and social battle against racial violence—lynching in particular.

Part of the success of "Strange Fruit" is that it presents echoic irony; Dan Sperber notes that "in order to be successfully ironic, the meaning mentioned must recognizably echo a thought that has been, is being, or might be entertained or expressed by someone."[31] The song comprises familiar musical and verbal components, but their double-edged presentation creates the impact. Mid-twentieth-century listeners would have been familiar with the souvenir postcards, the newspaper reports—the very items that form the foundation for modern listeners' understanding of lynching as a cultural practice—and Allan and Holiday used these pre-existing images as familiar echoes, and then conflated the images to elicit an emotional, intellectual, and social response. The words and images were not necessarily new, nor was the musical language, but the song used irony anew to echo those ingrained sentiments to great effect.

The ironies presented here command attention, more so because the sonic medium is powerful. Together, they can change attitudes and shape actions by forcing the listener to comprehend the literal statement, reject it as false, and assert a more authentic meaning. The ironies that a Jewish schoolteacher from the Bronx wrote and an African-American singer from Harlem performed weave together complicated lessons from history, clever rhetoric, moving musical gestures, and gut-wrenching images. Audience members and first-time listeners must work quickly and efficiently, accessing information, strategizing creatively, and imagining a bitter past becoming a promising future; the pay-off for this effort is a musical/political/social transformation of thought and deed. Billie Holiday could have been lynched just for singing this song. Perhaps the greatest irony is that, in truth, performing such a depressing song night after night was an act of strength and pride.

[31] Dan Sperber, "Verbal Irony: Pretense or Echoic Mention?" *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 113 (1984): 130–36 at 131.

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Chapter 4

Musical Irony and Identity Politics: Austro-German Jewish Refugees in Republican China

Jeremy Leong

When Hitler became chancellor of Germany in 1933, his carefully crafted anti-Semitic policies systematically eroded the social and economic structures Jews depended on for their livelihood. Jews were denied membership in the legal and medical fields as well as print media and education; in schools, Jewish students were banned from extra-curricular activities and segregated from non-Jewish students. The burgeoning fury of the Third Reich swiftly ended the familiarity of the middle-class culture and musical offerings of their native lands. Fleeing their beloved countries, German and Austrian Jews faced a bleak and uncertain future.

The brutality wrought on Jews, from the destruction of their businesses to dehumanizing concentration camps, precariously situated Jews scrambling to seek refuge in foreign lands. From the late 1930s onward, an irony of fate brought nearly 18,000 Austro-German Jews to China. For many, the thought of relocating east had never even crossed their minds, let alone to Shanghai, a treaty port with an infamous reputation for vices. The city, divided between the Japanese and Western powers, was the only place that would accept these impoverished Jews. The International Settlement

> … required neither visas nor police certificates … There were no quotas, and no one demanded that an immigrant be of unblemished moral character … The city was essentially color-blind and tolerant toward all religions and political persuasions. Shanghai was a place to which any refugee could go.[1]

Among the newcomers were some of the most talented musicians and music scholars of their native countries. The arrival of so many well-trained musical talents not only transformed the music scenes of the metropolis, but also raised the level of music appreciation in both serious and popular entertainments for many native Shanghai residents. Their passage financed by overseas friends and relatives, and without money of their own, securing housing, food, and employment

[1] Renata Berg-Pan, "Shanghai Chronicle: Nazi Refugees in China," in Jarrell Jackman and Carla Borden (eds), *The Muses Flee Hitler* (Washington, DC, 1983), p. 284.

remained their top priority.[2] However, music played a vital role in fulfilling the spiritual, moral, and social needs of Jewish refugees because it mirrored a sense (albeit somewhat illusionary) of social normalcy for many Jewish newcomers who desired an affirmation of their cultural heritage and middle-class status, even in a foreign environment.

This chapter argues that musical activities, including the secular songs, cabaret numbers and operettas of Shanghai's Austro-German Jewish community were predicated on activism to fulfill social, economic, and spiritual needs. Adopting a sociological approach to examine music's vital role in the expressions of irony in the Austro-German Jewish community, four broad contextual areas will be explored: "Jewish Politics: Music for the Sacred and the Profane," "Jewish Secular Music and the Politics of Environment," "Operettas and the Politics of Social Status," and "The Concept of Politicizing the 'Apolitical.'"

Western Powers and Jewish Immigrants in Shanghai

Westerners saw Shanghai's great potential for international trade as an open gate to the vast Chinese domestic markets. After losing the First Opium War (1839–42), Shanghai and other ports were pressed into new trade relations, gradually transforming the city into self-governing foreign concessions—the International Settlement and French Concession—as part of the agreement. However, the Sino area surrounding these concessions, known as Greater Shanghai, and part of the International Settlement called Hongkew (or Hongkou) came under Japanese rule in 1937; this included two popular Jewish service and concert venues, the Broadway and Eastern Theaters.[3]

When the Pacific War broke out, Nazi-allied Japan established Hongkew as the designated area for stateless refugees in 1943. Although the terms "Jew" and "ghetto" were never used by the state, Jewish scholar David Kranzler notes that Jewish refugees retrospectively referred to their experience there as the "ghetto period."[4] In what D.C. Muecke would call tragic irony, refugees from German anti-Semitism were again under the control of the same ideological forces they had just fled.[5]

Previous waves of Jewish immigrants to Shanghai included Sephardic Jews from Baghdad via Britain and Ashkenazi Jews from Russia who came as political refugees in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. From 1938 to

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[2] See Hermann Dicker, *Wanderers and Settlers in the Far East* (New York, 1962), pp. 99–100; and David Kranzler, *Japanese, Nazis & Jews: The Jewish Refugee Community of Shanghai, 1938–1945* (New York, 1976), p. 86ff.

[3] Yating Tang, "Musical Life in the Jewish Refugee Community in Shanghai: Popular and Art Music," *Journal of Music in China*, 4 (2002): 167–86.

[4] Kranzler, *Japanese, Nazis & Jews*, p. 477.

[5] D.C. Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic*, 2nd edn (London and New York, 1982), p. 22.

1941, Austro-German refugees, along with some Poles and Eastern Europeans, became the last group of Jews to arrive in the city.[6] With diversity underscoring the Shanghai Jewish community, relationships and self-identification among the various groups differed. Compared to their devout Polish counterparts, many Austro-German Jews were far less religious. The elite class of Sephardic Jews, who were themselves naturalized British citizens, saw the Austro-German Jews as their social equals because many of them were successful professionals from highly cultured backgrounds. With their exceptional religious training in Talmud centers and strict adherence to Jewish laws, Orthodox Polish Jews considered themselves the bearers of "authentic Judaism," and their profound religious devotion garnered great respect from the Russian Jewish community.[7]

Jewish Politics: Music for the Sacred and the Profane

The social status of different Jewish groups was as much linked to religious and social practices as their economic conditions. Wealthy Baghdadi Jews were attracted to Shanghai because of new business opportunities; they established many trading companies in the city, and some founded or supported charitable organizations. Though not as rich as the Baghdadi Jews, the Russian Jews in Shanghai were established and quite prosperous as many were small business owners.[8] Lastly, the Austro-German Jews and other Eastern Europeans were poor and homeless. Coming from different cultures, languages, economic backgrounds and Judaic traditions, conflicts among the groups were inevitable.

Situational irony emerged when the established Jewish communities demonstrated a high degree of unity with the new refugees. Jewish scholar M. Avrum Ehrlich stated that "the principle of Jewish diaspora identity was bound up in the welfare of the host country [that is, China] . . . in this environment Jewish law [Torah] alone became the most dominant arbiter of Jewish life."[9] Irving Zeitlin claims that Jews around the world with diverse Jewish religious experiences are nonetheless united under the "principles of Judaism, [defined as the observing of] the Law (Torah) and pious practices."[10] For Jews, "there is a general sense of shared responsibility with the welfare of Jews wherever they may be."[11] With the influx of Austro-German Jewish refugees, the Baghdadi and Russian Jewish communities came together in affirming the "principles of Judaism" by putting aside their differences and donating generously towards the housing needs of

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6 Marcia Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort* (Stanford, CA, 2001), p. 21ff.

7 Ibid., pp. 80–81, 144–5.

8 Ibid., pp. 21–22, 277.

9 M. Avrum Ehrlich, *Jews and Judaism in Modern China* (New York, 2010), p. 193.

10 Irving Zeitlin, *Jews: The Making of a Diaspora People* (Boston, MA, 2012), pp. 30–31.

11 Ehrlich, *Jews and Judaism*, p. 194.

these new arrivals. The irony was that they could have emphasized their inherent differences and remained divided as they were outside of the East, but instead, they displayed great solidarity to address the diverse needs of the least fortunate members of the growing community.

In Shanghai, the Ashkenazi Russian Jews were Orthodox while the Ashkenazi Austro-German Jews belonged to either Reform or Conservative Judaism. The latter considered themselves secular, cultural Jews compared to the former's religious identification. Yet a considerable number of Austro-German refugees wished to retain links with their Jewish congregations. Without a place of worship, Russian Orthodox Jews graciously allowed those Austro-German Jews to make use of their synagogue for services. However, the religious alliance between these two groups was short-lived. Soon, the Orthodox Jews complained about the utility of more laical, German ritual in their synagogue.[12] They firmly believed that the only acceptable form of sacred music that appealed to God was men singing a cappella. Ironically, women were welcome to join in Orthodox services but "men [were] forbidden to listen to a woman's singing voice" as it caused sexual arousal.[13] Clearly, the ban on female singing was directly associated with earthly pleasure and considered too secular for the lofty Orthodox rituals. So why was German ritual so accepting of secular elements? After all, the main purpose of German religious music was to reflect the sanctity of God and not secular entertainment.

The Reform movement that started in Germany during the nineteenth century set out to distinguish itself from the Orthodox tradition by examining different means of modernizing Judaism. Its roots could be traced to the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment) movement, which in part encouraged the Jewish diaspora to cultivate a sense of belonging to their host country (that is, Germany) and to forge closer ties with the non-Jews in their community.[14] Gradually, the new form of Judaism took shape as reformers began to revise the philosophy, moral codes, and rituals of Judaism.

> Ancient Jewish ritual practices stood in pale contrast to the enlightened modern [Christian] church. The church offered participatory rites punctuated by the singing of moving hymns by the congregation … The [Orthodox] synagogue offered unaccompanied Eastern chants … recited in an antique, literally backward and virtually incomprehensible language. How could Judaism hope to compete on such a stage? The only possible answer was to reformulate Judaism to suit the sensibilities of the modern era.[15]

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[12] James Ross, *Escape to Shanghai* (New York, 1994), p. 131.

[13] Baruch Schreiber, "The Woman's Voice in the Synagogue," *Journal of Jewish Music and Liturgy*, 7 (1984–85): 27–32 at 27.

[14] Michael Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (New York, 1988), pp. 18–25.

[15] Marsha Edelman, *Discovering Jewish Music* (Philadelphia, PA, 2003), p. 54.

Reform Jews preferred to refashion their synagogal music along the lines of Christian hymn-singing by both men and women with organ accompaniment. By accepting this model they recognized the contributions of female voices in their services as a sign of Reform Judaism's openness to the "sensibilities of the modern era." By the mid-nineteenth century, hymns in German had gradually supplanted piyutim (liturgical poems for Orthodox services) in Reform Jewish services across Germany; Reformation chorales known to contain tunes adapted from secular sources heavily influenced such reformed hymns.[16]

Musical irony that manifests itself in the Reform Jewish rituals may seem peculiar. On the one hand, Orthodox Jews found it distasteful that Austro-German Jews were so accepting of secular elements in their synagogal music because such elements matched neither their traditional practices nor the cultural patterns of the host country. On the other hand, Austro-German Jews believed that their form of synagogal music was entirely compatible with the principles that had allowed them to adapt and survive as a respectable practice.[17] In the minds of Reformed Jews, the secular "layer" perceived in their synagogal music was the result of their diasporic encounter with non-Jews and an indelible mark of their musical identity. The acceptance and promotion of this form of religious music did not mean that their rituals were somehow "less authentic" than the rituals of Orthodox Jews; it merely proposed that there was more than one way to express musical religiosity in Judaism while remaining true to the doctrines of the Torah.

In November, 1939 the Shanghai Jewish collective established the Jüdische Gemeinde (Jewish community). Its main mission was to "maintain a good moral, spiritual, and religious standard among its members."[18] As an independent entity, it oversaw the affairs of Central European Jews, including their spiritual needs, and was called upon to settle the growing musical dispute between the Russian and Austro-German Jews. Thus, in the spring of 1940, a separate Jewish Liberal congregation offered services more familiar to many Austro-German Jews.[19] Without a synagogue, the new congregation met at the Eastern Theater for their first services during Passover; newly appointed cantor Heinz Wartenberger introduced a mixed choir and organ.[20]

Division in the Shanghai Jewish community, however, was never permanent. During the most challenging times of the Hongkew ghetto period (1943–1945),

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[16] Erwin Felber, "Vom Wesen der Synagogalgesänge' ["Concerning the Character of Synagogal Songs"], *Shanghai Jewish Chronicle* (September 29, 1943).

[17] Meyer, *Response to Modernity*, pp. 13–16.

[18] Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort*, p. 134.

[19] The Conservative Judaic movement grew out of disputes in the early German Reform movement. However, the rituals of Conservative and Reform Jews were more liberal than those of the Orthodox Jews. Therefore, they had no problem in sharing facilities, and agreed to unite under one liberal congregation.

[20] Ross, *Escape to Shanghai*, pp. 131–2.

the different factions would quickly come to the aid of those in need.[21] Social coherence, accentuated by a common thread in Judaism, remained firm in the Shanghai Jewish community despite their differences, even in musical taste, that threatened to create a schism among them.

Jewish Secular Music and the Politics of Environment

Popular entertainments such as cabaret and comedy were very much a part of the lives of Austro-German refugees in Shanghai.[22] The variety in cabaret shows was naturally a significant draw, but, according to an insightful article, humor was clearly a quintessential component:

> All the "Laugh-Sanatories" and hours of humor, artistic evenings in coffeehouses, all the colorful evenings in the homes somewhere approach the border of full fledged comedies. Whether Gottschalk feeds his "Six Persons a Tin Corned Beef" or his "Ten in One" … [they cause] storms of applause, the air of cabaret is always present somewhere.[23]

Cabaret stars included the male septet Gottschalk, Günther, Löschner, Kurt, Lewin, Wolff, and Katznol-Cardo. As a group, they were hailed as the guardians of Jewish art whereby true Jewish feeling of melancholy and skillful display of wit permeated performances of Old-World favorites like "Old Ersig Goes A-Dancing." The humor in these cabaret numbers underscored stereotypical traits of Jews, such as their concerns with money (for example, "Inheritance from Canada"), frugality (for example, "Six Persons a Tin Corned Beef"), and status within their community (for example, "Aunt Sally Got Divorced.") Such songs were filled with ironic humor, at once admonishing and buttressing social mores and cultural patterns of both the Old World and their new community. Although some bordered on the unflattering, they were more than mere entertainment. The collective ironies manifested an endorsement of Jewish "sociocultural characteristics" emphasizing that Jewish identity was fixed and part of one's personality that could not "voluntarily be discarded."[24] Furthermore, irony in humor assisted in the formation

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[21] Jeremy Leong, "A Study of German Perspectives: Musical Contributions of Three Chinese Scholars and Jewish Immigrants in Republican China," PhD dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2009), pp. 234–5.

[22] Ludwig Schäfer, "Aufblühendes Kunstleben im Distrikt" ["Flourishing Artistic Life in our District"], *Shanghai Jewish Chronicle* (October 17, 1943); and Erwin Felber, "Cultural Life and Emigration," in Ossie Lewin (ed.), *Shanghai Almanac 1946–47* (Shanghai, 1947), p. 65.

[23] Felber, "Cultural Life."

[24] Mahadev Apte, *Humor and Laughter: An Anthropological Approach* (Ithaca, NY, 1985), p. 143.

of "amiable communities" where the Jewish audience felt deep gratification in "joining, of finding, and communing with kindred spirits."[25] Despite their religious, social and economic differences, their "Jewishness"—highlighted by the ironies of entertainment—served to unify slightly different groups against a backdrop of the extremely different Chinese and Japanese populations.

Certain types of ironic humor, such as those represented by "harrowing" laughter, could very well serve as a "survival skill … an art for affirming life in the face of objective troubles."[26] This sort of irony permeated the concerts of Yiddish music and comedy for refugees living in the six *Heime*—the barren Hongkew district refugee camps of converted schools, barracks, and warehouses—that lacked the comforts of a home. Sanitary conditions in the camps were deplorable, leading one refugee to describe it as "something out of a bad dream."[27]

Despite the poor living conditions, dejected refugees found spiritual renewal in the works of Jewish artists. Raya Zomina was an Eastern European artist popular with the German refugees. She frequently appeared with Herbert Zernik, who started his career as a bar singer in the French Concession in 1939. A famous comedian in Shanghai, he was known for his asperity and his ability to quell hecklers with sharp rejoinders even when intoxicated. True to the Jewish tradition of comedy, he drew inspiration from the sadness around him.[28] His jokes about the filthy conditions and the lives of Jews at the camps promptly elicited disquieting laughter from the refugees living in those conditions while laughing at them.[29] The telling of Jewish protest jokes served to mask an ironic intent to relieve the "suppressed aggression" directed at Hitler's anti-Semitism and to affirm their Jewish identity.[30]

While Zomina was known for her artistry in Eastern Jewish music, Zernik had great charisma and a keen sense of humor. A sold-out evening performance on December 12, 1943 showcased the two rare talents at the Alcock *Heim*. To lend contrast to the whole performance, Zomina performed a set of songs from around the world in Yiddish, followed by Zernik's solo rendition of "Jeschiwebochers."[31] The Two "Z" Productions, as they called themselves, owed much of their success to a twofold strategy. Zernik's carefully planned and well-articulated jokes provided levity by poking fun of all things Jewish, including the differences amongst

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[25] Wayne Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago, IL, 1974), p. 28.

[26] Michael Fischer, "Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory," in James Clifford and George Marcus (eds), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley, CA, 1986), p. 224.

[27] Kranzler, *Japanese, Nazis & Jews*, p. 133.

[28] Ross, *Escape to Shanghai*, p. 86. For a discussion of Jewish comedy and anti-Semitism, see Apte, *Humor and Laughter*, pp. 122–4.

[29] Ross, *Escape to Shanghai*, p. 86.

[30] Apte, *Humor and Laughter*, p. 141.

[31] Leo Schoenbach, "Zomina-Zernik—Veranstaltung im Alcock-Theatersaal" ["Zomina-Zernik—Performance in the Alcock Theater"], *Shanghai Jewish Chronicle* (December 14, 1943).

subcommunities and the conditions of their (Shanghai and Jewish) existence. He used irony to highlight the divisive and the unfortunate, provoking laughter and cynicism. In contrast, Zomina's stellar musicianship and authentic musical voice reinforced the genuine emotional connection amongst audience members through songs like "E Müllers Träre" and by exhibiting strong dramatic intensity in the Ganew songs.[32] Her contribution certainly helped to bridge the great divide between devout Eastern European and the less religious German refugees via sentimentality and self-identification through a distinctly diasporic Jewish sound.[33]

Operetta and the Politics of Social Status

With the few resources they had, Austro-German refugees in Shanghai were determined to reclaim their lives as middle-class citizens and duplicate their cultural environment recently abandoned to the Nazis. Through creative thinking and perseverance, they managed to adapt and rebuild in the Far East, significantly by reconnecting with their musical heritage. Operetta became highly popular among the Austro-German Jewish community, far more so than opera or vocal and instrumental concerts, largely because of casting conditions. Operetta, like the cabaret performances of the Two "Zs," alleviated some of the stress of living in Shanghai, especially in the Hongkew ghetto period; it served as a welcome escape from the repressive Japanese rule and daily struggle to survive.

In 1943 Adolf Breuer managed to form a permanent operetta ensemble that included a choir and an orchestra, hiring 45 refugees. Fritz Frieser, the brother of the operetta tenor Erwin Frieser, became the director of the ensemble while Leo Schoenbach took the position of conductor. The operetta ensemble began the season with the Hungarian–Viennese styled *Die Csardasfürstin* (1915) by the lesser-known Jewish composer Imre Kálmán (1882–1953) who lived in Vienna from 1908 to 1938 and spent the war years in the United States.[34]

Other operetta ensembles, independent from Breuer's, were also formed on an ad hoc basis. One such ensemble presented Lehár's *Die lustige Witwe* in the Broadway Theater and another produced Oscar Straus's *Ein Walzertraum*; both ensembles had more or less similar membership. The former, better known as *The Merry Widow*, however, was far more popular with the Jewish community. It premiered in 1944 with a cast of vocalists that included Rosl Albach-Gerstel, a Viennese operetta star who had performed in numerous operettas such as Lehár's *Der Graf von Luxemburg* and Strauss's *Die Fledermaus*, and won the hearts of many in the Jewish community. Other notable performers included tenors Erwin Frieser, Adolf Feuereisen, and Leopold Brodmann, and soprano Miss

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[32] Ibid.

[33] Kranzler, *Japanese, Nazis & Jews*, p. 374.

[34] See Schäfer, "Aufblühendes Kunstleben im Distrikt," p. 5. *Die Csardasfürstin* is better known in English as the *Gipsy Princess*.

Beatrice. Those who could not attend the premiere were treated to two repeat performances because of its sensational success.[35] *The Merry Widow* very likely drew in Austro-German audiences because of the politico-economic irony audience members saw between the plot and their situation. In the operetta, Baron Mirko Zeta designs a convoluted plan to keep the widow Hanna Glawari and her wealth within the country. It was a stark reminder that Austro-German Jewish refugees, too, were compelled to leave their relative wealth and comfortable middle-class lifestyle back in their home country.

Despite this harsh reminder, the overwhelming response to Lehár's operetta was very much expected. Four days before the opening of *The Merry Widow*, Felber, a music critic of the widely read newspaper, the *Shanghai Jewish Chronicle*, talked about the operetta in acclamatory terms. He noted the overwhelming success of the operetta in Germany, Austria, and all over the world; Vienna alone staged 600 successful performances between 1905 and 1919.[36] Ironically, for the musically uninitiated, Felber's piece, by supporting *The Merry Widow*, may very well have provided the motivation necessary to embrace an idea of novelty, perhaps out of a desperate need to connect with something familiar from home.

Austro-German Jews felt an affinity towards operetta because it rekindled the feeling of nostalgia connected to a familiar middle-class lifestyle that was still very much a part of their emotional and intellectual self-identity. The imaginary world of operetta afforded them emotional comfort through which they could temporarily forget about the grimy *Heime*, or the difficulty in making ends meet in Shanghai. Performances of *The Merry Widow*, for example, might propend some of the attending Austro-German couples to fantasize about being the two main characters, the wealthy widow Glawari and Count Danilo, whose love affair eventually leads to a happy marriage and the enjoyment of abundance. Situational irony emerged in the use of operettas such as *The Merry Widow* as a social marker because Austro-German Jews failed to recognize the dialectical difference between their former lives and their new lowly status as refugees in a foreign city. By late 1938 temporary lodgings to accommodate the influx of European refugees were past capacity. Many poor Austro-German Jewish refugees who were still homeless had to swallow their pride and rely on the charity of local Jewish communities for living expenses and alternative accommodation.[37]

Unlike in the operetta, the expression of irony in the musical film version of *The Merry Widow* was intricately linked to Austro-German refugees' strong desire

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[35] "Operette im Broadway Theater: Das Meisterwerk von Franz Lehár 'Die lustige Witwe'" ["Operetta in the Broadway Theater: The Masterwork of Franz Lehár, 'The Merry Widow'"], *Shanghai Jewish Chronicle* (February 13, 1944). Also see "Die lustige Witwe," in ibid. (March 4, 1944), p. 2 and "Operette im Broadway Theater, 'Die lustige Witwe,'" in ibid. (March 18, 1944), p. 4.

[36] Erwin Felber, 'Franz Lehár und 'Die lustige Witwe'" ["Franz Lehár and 'The Merry Widow'"], *Shanghai Jewish Chronicle* (February 20, 1944).

[37] Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort*, pp. 104, 129.

for financial security. In 1933 there were 37 movie theaters in Shanghai, of which 19 showed mainly American films. The movie business prospered, and by the late 1930s Shanghai had more than 50 movie theaters. Of all the American films shown in Shanghai, *The Merry Widow*, starring Jeanette MacDonald and Maurice Chevalier was, without a doubt, the absolute favorite of the refugees for many of the same reasons they loved the operetta, but a few new reasons as well.[38] In order to succeed economically, Austro-German refugees needed to learn English, the language of commerce in Shanghai.[39] Language classes offered by local Jewish organizations were not successful in teaching the mostly over-40 population.[40] While there might be a variety of reasons why many failed to acquire the language skill in classes, the popularity of American films, and especially of the musical version of *The Merry Widow*, indicates that perhaps these Austro-German refugees preferred to learn English while being entertained. By watching *The Merry Widow* and other American movies, Austro-German Jewish refugees could improve their English and compete for better job opportunities.

The Concept of Politicizing the "Apolitical"

Erwin Felber was perhaps among the most prolific contributors to the *Shanghai Jewish Chronicle*, the only German-language daily newspaper that the Japanese authorities allowed to continue publication through the ghetto period.[41] He was a trained musicologist and an educator who wrote critiques that were well received by the Jewish community.[42] His musical commentaries and reviews of cultural events emphasized that despite hardships such as the arduous and capricious nature of work passes, the Jewish community believed in the importance of music events in daily life.

Compounding the misery of life as an "other" in a Chinese port city, the Japanese saw control of Shanghai as an opportunity to harness the power of music as propaganda justifying military ambitions in the Far East. This included placing Jewish refugees in interdiction and censoring Jewish artistic expression per the policy of Nazi Germany.[43] In response to Japanese hegemony, Chinese and Austro-German Jewish community members demonstrated political solidarity through music, with ironic implications.

On August 1, 1943 Chinese dignitaries attended one of the most important musical events of the year, a celebration of the restoration of the Concession held

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38 Ibid., p. 126.

39 Kranzler, *Japanese, Nazis & Jews*, p. 397.

40 Ibid., pp. 284–5.

41 Ibid., pp. 364–6.

42 Henri Margolinski, "Musical Characters in Shanghai Commissions," in Ossie Lewin (ed.), *Shanghai Almanac 1946–47* (Shanghai, 1947), p. 68.

43 Leong, "Study of German Perspectives," pp. 232–9.

at the Race Course.[44] In order to pass the Japanese censors, Felber wrote his review with shrewdness and a certain inventive quality. In so doing, he has given modern researchers an insight into the cooperative efforts of Jewish musicians and Chinese artists who, through their performance, helped the audience, even if only for a moment, rekindle a sense of hopefulness once obliterated by the political turmoil in the city. He also indicated to anyone reading between the lines that this was not a typical community event. Several questions stem from this performance. Why choose the Race Course for a performance venue rather than a major theater in Shanghai? More intriguingly, why was the *Shanghai Jewish Chronicle* interested in the coverage of a primarily non-Jewish event?

The Chinese, usually uninterested in European cultural matters, had a fondness for horse racing, beginning in 1848.[45] Thereafter, wealthy Chinese and foreigners gathered at the Race Course to share a passion for gambling; it became the perfect place to display wealth, compete for prestige, and discuss politics.[46] The Japanese authority viewed it simply as a harmless pastime rather than a *locus in quo* for political resistance among otherwise disparate groups. Therefore, such meetings were an "ironic" force destabilizing the dominant discourse by "operating almost as a form of guerrilla warfare."[47] In the 1940s Jewish refugees often cooperated with allied forces, including native Chinese guerillas, to foil Japanese military missions; the Race Course became their secret meeting space.[48] Unlike the Shanghai theaters with their limited seating capacity, the Course could accommodate large masses of people, a fact the Chinese harnessed through the transforming power of music as part of a potent political agenda.[49]

Two weeks before the performance, the Jewish newspaper reported the establishment of a new news agency as part of the municipality of Greater Shanghai with Lang Sieu Yu (whose loyalties were questionable) as the director. In order to celebrate the restoration of the Concession, the news agency invited Chen Kung Po, the mayor of Shanghai, to compose the text for *The Great Shanghai March* performed at the celebration.[50] These seemingly innocent events were in fact

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[44] Ordering Austro-German and other European Jews to move into the already crowded Hongkew sector, Japanese authorities gave no assistance. Many others resorted to rebuilding or refurbishing old or run-down buildings themselves before they were safe to move in. The Race Course event was to celebrate the restoration of Hongkew.

[45] Austin Coates, *Chinese Races* (Oxford, 1994), p. 27.

[46] Harriet Sergeant, *Shanghai* (London, 1991), pp. 106–7.

[47] Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (New York, 1994), p. 32.

[48] Kranzler, *Japanese, Nazis & Jews*, pp. 530–31.

[49] For example, in Shanghai, the theater at the city hall could seat only 600 people, while the Lyceum Theater only accommodated 700 people. See Chunzen Huang, "Traveling Opera Troupes in Shanghai: 1842–1949," PhD dissertation (The Catholic University of America, 1997), pp. 13, 242.

[50] "Der Grosshanhaier Marsch" ["The Great Shanghai March"], *Shanghai Jewish Chronicle* (July 16, 1943). An unnamed composer wrote the music.

efforts by the Japanese government to control the dissemination of information in the Sino Greater Shanghai.

Published reports in the *Shanghai Jewish Chronicle* act as a "counter-discourse," reveling in the irony of otherwise uncooperative musicians facing a common enemy, a puppet government promoting civic pride, and a Chinese news agency run by a suspected Japanese spy. The text and the tenor point to an atmosphere rife with incongruities, double-speak, and a sarcastic edge. Linda Hutcheon noted:

> … irony's intimacy with the dominant discourses it contests—it uses their very language as its said—is its strength, for it allows ironic discourses both to buy time (to be permitted and even listened to, even if not understood) [and also to] "relativize the [dominant] authority and stability."[51]

As the only German-language newspaper allowed by the Japanese, the *Chronicle* wanted to make sure it demonstrated, at least superficially, not only an official recognition of the news agency but also its resistance to the communication blockade. The two weeks between the announcement of the news agency's formation and the closely connected Race Course's music event allowed the Jewish community to ponder the possible political implications of Lang's power, formulate a strategy to combat Japanese hegemony, and arrange for a musical protest.

As an astute reviewer, Felber was mindful to make cursory mention of the two Japanese artists, xylophonist Sadao Iwai and singer Kimiko Yoshida, who also performed at the concert. However, it was clear that the focus of his review was on the music and performances of Chinese artists. While the Jewish community may not have known the Chinese artists well, the *Shanghai Jewish Chronicle*'s earlier announcement of the concert on July 16 subtly highlighted the shifting political climate in Shanghai. In addition, the commissioning of the new piece, *The Great Shanghai March*, was likely meant to urge the Jewish community to show their support for the Chinese at the event since both groups suffered immensely under Japanese rule.

Dominating the second part of the event was the appearance of Chinese movie stars, which attracted many eager to see their idols, especially female stars "praised for [their] courtesan-like talent, virtue, innocence, and sincerity."[52] In solo, duet, and quartet, women sang in a series of popular Chinese songs that included "Spring and Love" and "Night in Soo-chow" (the Japanese singer Kimiko

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[51] Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, p. 30. She quotes Richard Terdiman, *Discourse/Counter-Discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, NY, 1985), p. 15.

[52] Michael Chang, "The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful: Movie Actresses and Public Discourse in Shanghai, 1920s–1930s," in Yingjin Zhang (ed.), *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922–1943* (Stanford, 1999), pp. 128–59 at 129.

Yoshida's performance was often obscured by the plethora of Chinese stars).[53] As Felber noted, the five female stars were charming and poised in fulfilling their public role. Endowed with delicate voices, they mesmerized the audience with their beautiful singing and their uncanny ability to conform to popular notions of Chinese beauty and grace. Interestingly, while Felber was trying to demonstrate the cordial relationship between the Chinese and the Japanese in this event, his review highlighted an ironic intent in that the Japanese singer's performance was subsumed within the Chinese performances, indicating a politico-musical "counter-discourse" against Japan's military dominance through musical performance and stagecraft. In addition, Felber's passing mention of the participation of Austro-German Jewish musicians in this event was, ironically, more than just an afterthought. It revealed the forging of a united front with the Chinese artists. Although they had lived separately under Japan's brutality, they felt vindicated and "victorious" over the Japanese via the musical protest, especially with the last piece of music in the concert.

The finale of the concert was the much anticipated new work *The Great Shanghai March.* Movie stars joined the chorus and band conducted by Liang Lo Yin, and Austro-German musicians played in the small band of mostly Western wind instruments. As the sounds of the timpani and trumpets filled the Race Course, the audience joined as one with the performers as a sign of unity through the *March*. The concert concluded with a feel of splendor and jubilation.[54] Political irony colored this musical event during which Chinese and Jewish refugees stood in united musical protest against Japanese hegemony and Japanese artists, unsuspectingly, celebrated along with the repressed groups.

The political overtones of this ostensibly non-political concert were palpable. While the songs of the movie stars were not overtly political, their allure had drawn a much larger crowd than usual, especially impressionable young people. In one united voice full of gusto, Chinese (with the supportive presence of the Jews and unsuspecting Japanese) sang *The Great Shanghai March* which Felber so guilefully compared to the entrance march of Verdi's *Aida*. No doubt he meant the famous "Triumphal March" of Act II, scene 2 of that opera, but it would have been politically too sensitive to put that in print.[55] It is entirely plausible that the Chinese organizing committee of the municipality of Greater Shanghai had hoped that residents, especially the youth, would be empowered by the program and inspired toward political engagement in the hope of marching to a true triumphal tune in the near future.

Through Felber's review it is appropriate to think that the political agenda of the Race Course concert was shared by Chinese and Jews alike since both groups

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[53] Erwin Felber, "Konzert am Race Course" ["Concert at the Race Course"], *Shanghai Jewish Chronicle* (August 4, 1943).

[54] Ibid.

[55] Verdi composed *Aida* under political circumstances that were similar to Japanese hegemony over China, with a plot that reverberated with similar sentiments.

endured afflictions administered by the Japanese. The concert was an affirmation of unity as Austro-German musicians stood in musical solidarity with Chinese performers in protest against Japanese domination.

Although it would be easy to dismiss the emergence of a multi-subcultural Jewish music within a Sinitic environment, it was an inescapable facet of this high-refugee city. The musical activities of many outstanding musicians, music scholars, and artists enriched the music scene in Shanghai and contributed to the musical and cultural life of Jewish refugees, which ironically flourished during those hardship years in the Hongkew ghetto.[56] As Nancy Walker argues, irony emerges in "the recognition of the socially constructed self as arbitrary, and that demands revision of values and conventions."[57] Jewish artists and musicians conscientiously worked to adapt to their new musical culture in order to preserve their old musical culture.[58] While this adaptation succeeded on the popular front, it failed in terms of religious music. Ironically, Austro-German Jews were better able to assimilate their Western European popular musical tastes with those of the Chinese than they were able to find compromise with the established Jewish community.

The "Politics of Environment" created ironic contexts in which Austro-German and Eastern European Jews honored life in Shanghai through the performances of different secular musical genres. By using operetta as a social marker of their middle-class identity, Austro-German Jews failed to recognize the irony in the incompatibility of society operetta and their status as "others." Lastly, the important Race Course concert in 1943 witnessed the cooperation of the Jews and the Chinese. Different layers of political irony colored the initial announcement, the event's locale, and Felber's review of the concert. The Chinese artists and their "apolitical" songs became a political ploy to encourage increased youth attendance. To witness the transforming power of music at the concert, all performers and audience united in the singing of *The Great Shanghai March*, a piece wrought with covert political meanings and ironies for a people under edict and a city under despised foreign rule.

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[56] Felber, "Cultural Life."

[57] Nancy Walker, *Feminist Alternatives: Irony and Fantasy in the Contemporary Novel by Women* (Jackson, MS, and London, 1990), p. 4.

[58] Felber, "Cultural Life."

Chapter 5
Irony, Myth, and Temporal Organization in the Early Songs of Bob Dylan

Timothy Koozin

Throughout Bob Dylan's long career, he has been known for songwriting, lyrics, and approaches to performance that resist established conventions. This study explores musical irony in several early Bob Dylan songs, showing how Dylan enlists irony to mediate between the romantic inner world of the artist and an oppressive societal world. Bob Dylan's songs invite interpretations that acknowledge different types of irony operating at different levels. Dylan plays with time through a web of transhistorical connections linking different styles, songs, and mythical references. Through the creative blending and juxtaposition of styles and historical *topoi*, the listener hears Dylan playing *with* style, with detached self-awareness, rupturing the illusion of being *in* a style. While deploying and combining musical styles with ironic detachment, he ironically resists the rhythmic, harmonic, and formal implications he creates within songs. At times, this may actually make it more difficult for the listener to slip into a passive state of enjoyment because it draws the listener into a detached critical stance comparable to Bertolt Brecht's approach to dramatic characterization. This provides a transgressive tension in Dylan's music that aligns with his lyrics and his unique approaches to vocalization. Through the embodied musical expression so evident in his singing, guitar work, and harmonica playing, these tensions are enacted in Dylan's performances at a very visceral level, as Dylan ironically resists his own musical utterance.

Dylan also projects irony through recurring themes that present an inherently ironic dilemma.[1] The theme of alienation is especially pervasive in Dylan's music, as he explores the fundamental human impulse to seek an ideal state of meaningful connection to others and the impossibility of achieving that ideal. He enacts this sense of alienation as a detached observer, through competing approaches to subject-position and characterization that both assert and subjugate Dylan's "voice" as the poet/artist.

In creatively resisting the artistic illusions he projects, Dylan asserts that a genuine observation of life in the modern world is equivocal and multidimensional.

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[1] This could be understood as *practical irony* or *situational irony,* as it is not dependent on any form of speech. See Lars Elleström, *Divine Madness: On Interpreting Literature, Music, and the Visual Arts Ironically* (Lewisburg, PA, 2002), pp. 21–2.

This parallels the creative stance of the modern novelist as described by Mikhail Bakhtin:

> Irony has penetrated all languages of modern times … Irony is everywhere—from the minimal and imperceptible to the loud, which borders on laughter. Modern man does not proclaim; he speaks. That is, he speaks with reservations.[2]

In Dylan's songs, all truths are qualified, even as he seeks transhistorical truths by evoking myth. The following analyses explore how Dylan undercuts not only through his language, but also through purely musical means. Irony mediates between the idealized world of the artist, manifest in the play of musical structures and the web of intertextual references he evokes, and the alienating experiences of life in the real world.

"Down on Penny's Farm" and Dylan's "Hard Times in New York Town"

Drawing from folk revival and blues musical traditions as well as artistic sources ranging from Christian hymns and old English ballads to Picasso's painting and Brecht's epic theatre, Bob Dylan's music provides transhistorical connections to cultural pasts while establishing contemporary relevance through the projection of irony. Bob Dylan's art as a folklorist is illustrated in his 1961 song "Hard Times in New York Town," a remake of "Down on Penny's Farm," recorded by the Bently Boys in 1929.[3] The older song would have been known to Dylan through the six-album *Anthology of American Folk Music* released by Folkways Records in 1952. Pete Seeger, Dylan's mentor, also recorded "Down on Penny's Farm" in the early 1950s.

> Come you ladies and you gentlemen and listen to my song.
> I'll sing it to you right, but you might think it's wrong.
> It may make you mad, but I mean no harm.
> It's all about the renters on Penny's farm.
>
> CHORUS: Hard times in the country, down on Penny's farm.
>
> Well, you move on out to Penny's farm,
> Plant a little crop o' 'bacco and little crop o' corn.
> He'll come around and he'll plan and plot,
> Till he gets himself a mortgage on everything you got.

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[2] Mikhail Bakhtin, "Extracts from 'Notes' (1970–1971)," in Gary Saul Morson (ed.), *Bakhtin: Essays and Dialogues on His Work* (Chicago, IL, 1981), pp. 179–82 at 179.

[3] Dylan's "Hard Times in New York Town" was recorded on December 22, 1961 and released on *The Bootleg Series 1–3*, Columbia C3K 86572 (1991).

You go to the fields and you work all day,
Till way after dark, but you get no pay.
Promise you meat or a little lard.
It's hard to be a renter on Penny's farm.

Well, here's George Penny coming into town,
With a wagonload of peaches, not one of 'em sound.
He's got to have his money or somebody's check.
You pay him for a bushel and you don't get a peck.

Then George Penny's renters, they come into town,
With their hands in their pockets, and their heads hanging down,
Go in the store and the merchant will say,
"Your mortgage is due and I'm looking for my pay."

Goes down in his pocket with a trembling hand,
"Can't pay you all, but I'll pay you what I can."
Then to the telephone the merchant makes a call,
"They'll put you on the chain gang if you don't pay it all."

In the older song, the upbeat rhythm and playful rhyme scheme ironically contradict the serious message.[4] As shown in the lyrics above, the song begins with a very rhythmic and carnival-like invitation to listen: "Come you ladies and you gentlemen and listen to my song. / I'll sing it to you right, but you might think it's wrong."[5] The pun on right and wrong conflates the singing of the song, as in singing the song correctly or wrong, with the question of social justice, as in being morally right or wrong. This establishes the opposition between the working farmers and the corrupt authority of the landowner, George Penny.[6]

Bob Dylan's ironic reversal relocates the song in New York City: "It's hard times in the country / Livin' down in New York town." Dylan assumes a transhistorical character in his performance. There is little in the vocal quality or double thumb-picking guitar accompaniment to betray that his new rendering is not actually a song from a mythical folkloric past. The rural sound expresses

[4] Recorded by The Bently Boys in 1929 and included in "Volume One: Ballads," *Anthology of American Folk Music*, 1952, Folkways Records, FP 251.

[5] For a similar ironic ploy used in the minstrel songs of the gold rush, see Meredith Eliassen's "The Meat in a Humbug Sandwich: The Irony of Want in California Gold Rush Music," Chapter 1 in this collection.

[6] The influence of "Penny's Farm" is also apparent in Dylan's song, "Maggie's Farm" (1965), which parodies the tale of a greedy farm owner. The name, "Penny's Farm," while actually referring to landowner George Penny, provides opportunity for an ironic gender reversal in Dylan's "Maggie's Farm." Bob Dylan, "Maggie's Farm," *Bringing it All Back Home*, Columbia 9128 (1965).

indifference to New York's urban power, ironically deflating the economic power New York symbolizes. The message that class injustices from preindustrial times have migrated to modern urban life is underscored with contradictory reversals in every verse.

The pentatonic vocal line repeats a melodic motive three times. The effect is frenetic, like a jeering taunt, as the protagonist confronts the powers in the city that would to try to pull him down. Dylan's melodic descent in the fourth line is closer to a spoken vocalization. The cyclic repetition of this structural formula contributes to aesthetic distancing, so that the fourth line can offer more direct and intimate commentary on the three more musically delivered lines depicting the bustle of city life. Following the model of Woody Guthrie, Dylan develops the lyrics through references to American landmarks. In projecting his song of class division and injustice across the geographical breadth of America, he finds the dirt of other places to be "all much cleaner than the New York kind."

Dylan's guitar work features syncopated strums on higher strings over a quick and steady bass line articulated with the thumb. The activity of the picking right hand is contrasted with the grounded chord changes fingered with the left hand, focused on the tonic and subdominant in one position on the fretboard. The rhythmic activity articulated in the guitar picking is a mimetic counterpart to the busy activity depicted in the lyrics, while the physical stance of the fretting arm, grounded in one fretboard location, is like the self-assured protagonist, a distanced observer who will not be pulled down by the city and will be standing on his feet when he leaves New York.

An ironic reversal emerges through Dylan's conflicting representations of New York City affluence in the lyrics—a mocking, topical projection of high style—and Dylan's emphatically determined representation of low style in the musical setting. Robert Hatten explains:

> Let A = high style, followed by B = low style. The listener first interprets B as "A," an *ironic reversal* of A. The paradox or double exposure of A and "A" may then be synthesized as "all-embracing," a trope on the interaction of A and B.[7]

Dylan's enactment of a transhistoric persona inhabiting the world of the song is distanced from the real world of 1961, creating a level of dramatic irony, as the audience perceives connections to the modern world that the enacted character grounded in the past would not. Dylan breaks this illusion with a temporal shift in the final verse, where he challenges and taunts his own critics ("all you newsy people"). Does the song's protagonist issue the challenge, "You c'n step on my name, you c'n try 'n' get me beat," or is it Dylan himself? Either way, we hear the singer take a jab at the public eye that holds him under scrutiny, railing against the consequences of his performance while engaged in the act of creating it.

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[7] Robert Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation* (Bloomington, IN, 1994), pp. 174–5.

Through Dylan's strategy of playfully resisting the musical and social structures he projects, he dislocates the song from its mythical folkloric past, relating the historic cultural grounding of the song to his own time in New York in the early 1960s. The resulting rhetorical shift in the final verse provides closure in returning to the narrator's voice heard in the first verse. By inviting us to perceive this narrator as Dylan himself, he personalizes the narrative and projects it into modern times. He establishes that his song, like its 1929 model, is relevant both as an individualized personal story and as an allegorical tale of resistance to the abuses of economic power.

The confluence of subjectivity, in playfully resisting the characterization Dylan creates in his performance, and objectivity, in representing his detachment from the work, is analogous to qualities of romantic irony described by Rey Longyear in his seminal article on romantic irony in the music of Beethoven. Longyear notes that writers on German romantic literature and music have "considered the destruction of illusion a central element in the theory of romantic irony." Citing Beethoven's contemporary, Friedrich Schlegel, Longyear writes:

> The central paradox of romantic irony is that the artist, as an individual, animates his work and is constantly perceivable in it, yet must detach himself from it and regard it objectively, almost as if it were an illusion. Romantic irony can therefore be both "irresponsible caprice" and "self-restraint and detachment," with the author as sovereign creator.[8]

Dylan's own "irresponsible caprice" in artfully mining the transhistoric sources of inspiration he sought in music, literature, and painting, as well as the detached self-awareness with which he applied his art, reflects both a modernist sensibility and romantic ideals. This is evident in his confrontational rapport with the listener as he disrupts the musical illusions he creates. The paradoxical dynamic of engaging the listener while creating resistance is akin to a Brechtian approach to theatre. Dylan came to know Bertolt Brecht's song lyrics in the early 1960s by way of an off-Broadway theatrical presentation, *Brecht on Brecht*, which featured Brecht's songs with translations by Marc Blitzstein. Dylan commented that listening to Brecht's lyrics transformed his understanding of the dramatic roles of the speaker and audience. In Brecht's lyrics he recognized the possibility of "a song that transcended the information in it."[9] In "Hard Times in New York

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[8] Rey M. Longyear, "Beethoven and Romantic Irony," *The Musical Quarterly*, 56/4 (1970): 647–64. Other studies on romantic irony in music include Mark Evan Bonds, "Haydn, Laurence Sterne, and the Origins of Musical Irony," *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 44 (1991): 57–91; and Heinz J. Dill, "Romantic Irony in the Works of Robert Schumann," *The Musical Quarterly*, 73 (1989): 172–95.

[9] Dylan was introduced to the songs of Bertolt Brecht by his girlfriend from 1961 to 1964, Suze Rotolo, while she was working for the Circle in the Square Theater in New York City. See Daniel Mark Epstein, *The Ballad of Bob Dylan: A Portrait* (New York, 2011),

Town," Dylan's narrating voice impinges on the historicized folk-mythological world the song has evoked, but, in doing so, Dylan shows it to be relevant to modern life. As an archetypal narrative, one could interpret the song as a comedy, with a heroic individual that resists the undesirable hierarchical order represented in oppressive urban power. His transgression in mocking that power through ironic reversal is at least a provisional victory that warns and establishes kinship with the listener. In the terms of James Jakób Liszka, the song *transvalues* its folk mythology as an empowering force in marked opposition to oppressive urban societal power.[10] Dylan's final verse makes explicit the double opposition of victory/defeat and order/transgression Liszka finds to be essential to the structure of a narrative, as Dylan's protagonist defiantly confronts his own "Hard Times in New York Town."

"A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall"

Dylan's confrontational dialogue with the past is evident in one of his longest and most complex songs, "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" (1962). The song takes its poetic format of question-and-answer characterization and some of the actual words from "Lord Randal," an Anglo-Scottish ballad that traces back to the seventeenth century. Daniel Mark Epstein cites Dylan's own comments in *Chronicles*, Vol. 1 in arguing that the song also reflects Dylan's studies of Bertolt Brecht, Civil War newspapers, Rimbaud, and Picasso's *Guernica*.[11] If we regard

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pp. 103–4. During this time, Dylan apparently obtained the off-Broadway cast album of *The Three Penny Opera*, with a new American translation by Marc Blitzstein. See Sean Wilentz, *Bob Dylan in America* (New York, 2010), p. 43. Dylan writes that he was greatly impressed by the Brecht–Weil songs he heard, "whose melodies were like a combination of jazz and opera … They were erratic, unrhythmical and herky-jerky–weird visions": Bob Dylan, *Chronicles*, 2 vols (New York, 2004), vol. 1, p. 272. Dylan specifically credits his hearing of the Brecht–Weil song, "Pirate Jenny" as influential on his songwriting. The most direct reference to "Pirate Jenny" may be in Dylan's 1963 song, "When the Ship Comes In." For more on Blitzstein's mediating role in Brecht's influence on Dylan's artistic development, see Howard Pollack, *Marc Blitzstein: His Life, His Work, His World* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 374–5.

[10] The narrative archetypes of romance, irony, tragedy, and comedy are formulated by Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, NJ, 1957). Frye's archetypes form a basis for Liszka's semiotic study of myth (see James Jakób Liszka, *The Semiotic of Myth: A Critical Study of the Symbol* (Bloomington, IN, 1989)) and the analysis of musical narrative in Byron Almén, *A Theory of Musical Narrative* (Bloomington, IN, 2008). For an overview, see Michael L. Klein, "Ironic Narrative, Ironic Reading," *Journal of Music Theory*, 53/1 (2009): 95–136.

[11] Epstein provides a nuanced reading of the song's lyrics and explains how fellow singer-songwriter Tom Paxton suggested the idea for basing a new song on "Lord Randall." See Epstein, *Ballad of Bob Dylan*, p. 109.

Example 5.1 Bob Dylan, "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall," *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* (1963)

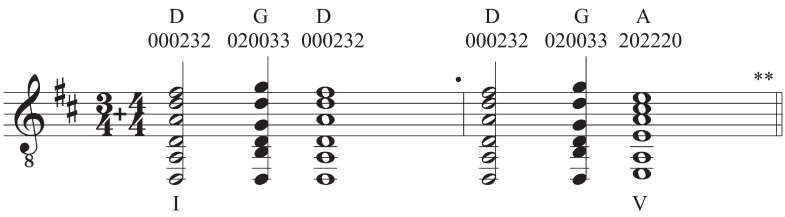
Metric reduction: ♩=𝅗𝅥.

Guitar chords: "drop D" tuning (DADGBE), capo 2nd fret (sounding key: E major)

Initial couplet

The father

Fixed arm position, cross-string fingering

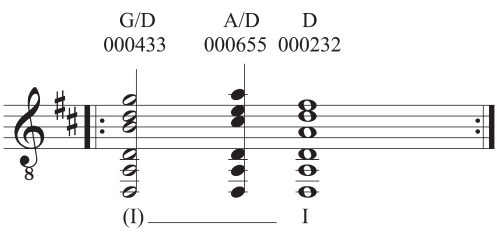


verse 4: * truncated 2 beats
** extended 3 beats

Free narrative (form-destabilizing)

The son, out in the world

Lateral arm movement, fixed hand position

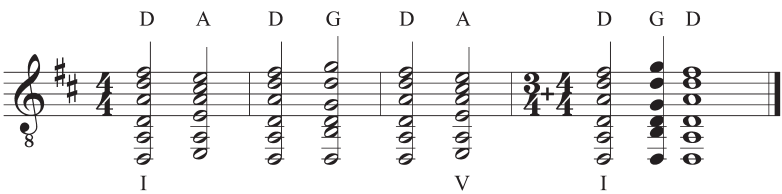


verse 1: 5 times
verse 2: 7 times
ending truncated 2 beats
verse 3: 7 times
ending truncated 2 beats
verse 4: 6 times
ending truncated 2 beats
verse 5: 12 times
ending truncated 2 beats

Final couplet

The son returns

Fixed arm position, cross-string fingering



steadily measured rhythms and phrases as forces of musical "illusion" wielded by the composer to engage the listener, we can then appreciate in "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" how Dylan projects and resists forces of musical illusion on a

grand scale. Since regularity of meter and phrasing is an expected cultural norm in most Western popular music, this amounts to a transgressive act against the implicit authority of structural musical hierarchy that may signify together with other culturally coded implications of resistance to authority in the song. Written just a month before news of the Cuban missile crisis would break, the song of a young person's apocalyptic warning to the parent resonated powerfully with the protest movement.

As shown in Example 5.1, a metrical reduction for the song, an additive process in combining measures and phrases destabilizes any regularity in phrase rhythm.[12] This prevents the listener from settling into the passive enjoyment of hearing broad phrase rhythms. Just as Brecht sought to disrupt stage illusions to provoke a more critical viewing stance, Dylan's irregular rhythms disrupt larger phrase rhythms to more closely attune the listener with the accentuation of word rhythm and the pacing of the singer. A ritualistic quality of cyclic repetition is evident in Dylan's pacing of each line in the text. Three measures with triple division match the natural accentuation of the words. The final word in each line initiates a longer span of four measures. The patterning of three accented beats for the words followed by four accented beats provides the listener with a segment of time to contemplate each line in the text. The irregular combination of 3+4 measures focuses the listener's attention on the triple division within each measure, interfering with the formation of larger regular metrical groupings of "hypermeter," comprising 4, 6, and 16 measures.[13] Dylan destabilizes rhythmic hierarchy, never allowing the listener to settle comfortably into entrainment of broader, evenly paced phrase rhythms. This creates a kind of ritualistic incantation that draws attention to patterns of shorter duration—the domain, the words, and the individual lines of the text. This can be understood as transgressive and distancing in a Brechtian sense, as Dylan disrupts the "illusion" of metrical organization that structures time to create form. The song could have been rendered in even 4/4 time with regular eight-measure groupings, as Leon Russell does in a successful (1971) cover of the song that projects Russell's masterfully funky sentimentality but little irony. In contrast, Dylan's performance employs ironic distancing on a grand scale, as he impedes rhythmic organization in the music in order to make it more emphatic.

Bob Dylan's use of drop-D guitar tuning provides for the resonant ringing of the two lowest strings on D and A throughout the song, invoking performance traditions of blues and folk guitarists Dylan is known to have admired, including Odetta, Pete

[12] All musical examples are renderings by the author based on listening and exploration in singing and playing the songs. The reader is encouraged to consult Dylan's widely available recordings as well as web resources that provide complete lyrics. Useful online sources include the official website, www.BobDylan.com, and www.DylanChords.info created by Eyolf Østrem.

[13] For a thorough discussion of hypermeter and applications of metrical reduction in the analysis of classical and romantic repertoire, see William Rothstein, *Phrase Rhythm in Tonal Music* (New York, 1989).

Seeger, and Blind Willie McTell. In addition to propelling the song's rhythm and harmony, Dylan's manner of voicing the chords projects a musical embodiment of form and characterization in the song.[14] The guitar chords accompanying the father's question to the son in the first two lines of the verse signify stability and warmth, with the tonic and embellishing subdominant played in the lowest hand position on the fretboard while the bass string resonates on the consonant low D.

The father's question in the first two lines of the verse ends on the dominant. In contrast to the guitar chords accompanying the father, which are grounded in one fretboard location, the chords accompanying the son's answer to the father are mobile and dissonant, moving in higher parallel chord voicings with an audible sliding sound over the droning lower strings. The expansive mobility of the guitar chords signifies the formal and dramatic shift to the son's music. The conflict between higher chords and lower ringing open strings dramatizes the son's troubling observations of social inequality, poverty, pollution, and warfare as he ventures away from the safety of home, represented in the consonant chord voicings that accompanied the father's voice. Unlike the evenly recurring couplet of the father's text, the son's responses are extended in varying length and delivered with varied timing. Compression occurs in verse 4 with eight lines of text for the son's response and truncated timing, before the vast unfolding of verse 5, with 14 lines of text for the son in response to the father's question of two lines. This is where the son articulates his commitment to again leave the protection of home before the "rain" starts falling, to "walk to the depths" of society's "black forest," reflecting what he finds for all to see and hear in his "song." This section of the verse quite literally destabilizes musical form in the song. Unless the listener is already familiar with the words, it is not possible to hear when the verse is about to end.

The final two lines of the verse present the son's apocalyptic warning of the coming "hard rain." In returning to the stable chord voicings at the lower fretboard hand position and the regular couplet form of two lines in the text, the son connects with the father's subject-position, acknowledging his father's influence while asserting his own power and knowledge, attained through hard experience.

"Girl from the North Country"

Perhaps Dylan's most popular borrowing from English folklore is "Girl from the North Country" (1963), inspired by the English ballad, "Scarborough Fair." Dylan first heard "Scarborough Fair" in the version by English folk singer Martin Carthy, whom he met during his first trip to England in December 1962.[15] Dylan borrows

[14] For an analytical approach to guitar voicing and text setting in rock songs, see Timothy Koozin, "Guitar Voicing in Pop-Rock Music: A Performance-Based Analytical Approach," *Music Theory Online*, 17/3 (2011), http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.11.17.3/mto.11.17.3.koozin.html [accessed July 30, 2013].

[15] Simon and Garfunkel recorded their well-known version some years later, in 1966.

some of the words, and both songs employ folkloric pastoral topics to engage with a deep yearning for human connection spanning time, space, and reason. The expressive trajectory of Dylan's version is multivalent and complex. It is a romance, but one marked with dysfunction that invokes tragic irony. In describing the romance narrative archetype, Byron Almén writes:

> Romance steers a path between nostalgia for an imaginary past and the potential for engendering a new future. The language of romance may thus engage imagery that evokes the ideal, the mythic-historical, and the imaginary. This is certainly true of musical romances, where extra-musical or topical references connoting the pastoral, mythic, transcendent, or divine are not uncommon.[16]

Integrating tragic–romantic allusions to old English balladic poetry to form his own unique invocation of the pastoral topic, Dylan substitutes his own northern Midwest for the English arcadia of "Scarborough Fair." Since the pastoral represents a timeless and idealized paradise lost, its invocation heightens the protagonist's expression of longing for his lost love as well as the place and time she represents in his memory.

The song implies a dysfunctional state in which the protagonist cannot directly connect with the fondly remembered person and place. Dylan structures his exploration of estrangement from the beloved through enlistment of a surrogate: a confidant that may be able to travel on his behalf to "the north country." His almost chivalric declaration of selfless love resonates with pastoral expression, but the listener can also infer that life's hard experiences in the real world have reduced the protagonist's capacity to act on his own behalf. Grounded in an idealized and romantic past as he confronts the alienating contradictions of modern life, Dylan's unlikely hero possesses qualities he often represents in the ironic depiction of the artist-poet. The unspecified forces separating the protagonist from the loved one constitute an order-imposing hierarchy that he will not be able to overcome. Because of the self-effacing acceptance that makes his character more endearing, we appreciate the pathos in his unrealistic request as he beseeches his confidant to connect with the loved one, as he himself cannot. The request is expressed in a casual way, as if from one traveler to another, and with mannered nostalgic imagery: "If you're travelin' in the north country fair / Where the winds hit heavy on the borderline." There is irony in the dismissive way the protagonist refers to even the possibility that the confidant might actually be able to deliver his message of love. It does not matter if the request is impractical or perhaps even imagined and not real at all, since the mythical dimension of the song suspends realism.[17]

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[16] Almén, *Theory of Musical Narrative*, p. 88.

[17] Dylan uses the same strategy in a later song, "If You See Her," on *Blood on the Tracks*, Columbia PC 33235 (1975). Dylan's "Boots of Spanish Leather" (1964) uses the same chords as "Girl From the North Country" and is similar in melody and narrative design. Bob Dylan, "Boots of Spanish Leather," *The Times They are A-Changin'*, Columbia

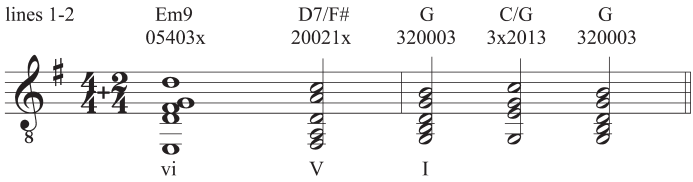
Example 5.2 Bob Dylan, "Girl From the North Country," *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* (1963)

a. Metric reduction: ♩=𝅗𝅥

Guitar chords: standard tuning (EADGBE), capo 3rd fret (sounding key: B flat major)

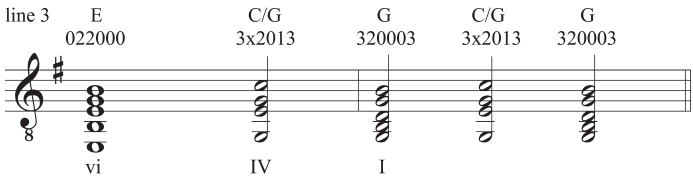
The distant beloved

V → I (authentic)
directed bass line



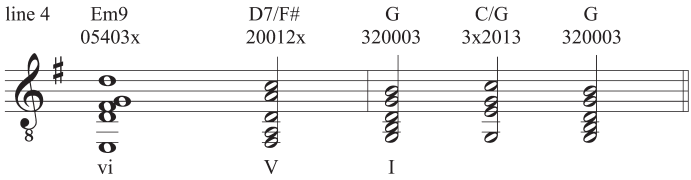
Self

IV → I (plagal)
pedal bass



Memory

V → I (authentic)
directed bass line



b. Large-scale rhythm in lyrics

	couplet 1	couplet 2	
verse 1	If you're travelin'…	Remember me…	
verse 2	Well, if you go…	Please see…	
verse 3	See for me…	Please see…	
verse 4	I'm a-wonderin'…	In the darkness…	(disruption, shift to "I")
verse 5	So if you're travelin'…	Remember me…	(resolution)

8905 (1964); Bob Dylan, "Girl From the North Country," *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, Columbia 8786 (1963).

The cyclic repetition of the verse structure contributes to projection of a mythic ballad. As noted in "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall," Dylan's metrical organization resists the formation of evenly paced groupings of measures, directing attention to the faster-paced rhythms of the words and guitar patterning. In "Girl From the North Country," groupings of four and two measures alternate, as diagrammed in Example 5.2a. Here again, there is a quality of ritualized storytelling in the open segment of time provided to contemplate each line in the text. The verse begins not on the tonic, but on a beautifully dissonant voicing of a minor ninth submediant chord. This evocative chord is marked for attention and associated with the distant beloved in the first two lines of the verse. The third line of the verse shifts to a more self-aware mode, as the protagonist humbles himself to ask the favor ("Remember me to one who lives there"). This is depicted with simpler guitar chords grounded on the tonic and subdominant. The final line of the verse again features the minor ninth chord. As it moves through the dominant toward the musical "home" chord of the tonic, we can infer that the protagonist is united with the beloved girl and northern home in his imagination ("She once was a true love of mine").[18] Clearly employed as a pastoral marker, the acoustic guitar and the use of capo on the third fret renders a sound that is higher and lighter, with timbral color that might allude to a more antiquated instrument.[19]

Dylan's vocalization is introspective and self-effacing. With idealized imagery of a distant place to which he cannot return, he sings of an interior journey. Redemption lies in the vividly constructed memory of time and place, not through extroverted action in the real world. The ironic phase comes in through the emergent connotation that he enacts in the persona of a character that is flawed, world-weary, and, for reasons unknown, not up to the task of overcoming the resistance that keeps him apart from the desired lover. In fact, he doubts whether she is even thinking of him. In the fourth and final verse, before a return to the first verse, he confronts this knowledge, self-reflectively, as a poet, thinking about remembering. He wonders if she remembers him at all. As he reflects on his life, what seems to matter most now is whether perhaps he has been in her thoughts.

Example 5.2b diagrams the unifying rhetorical structure, organized in paired couplets in each of the first three verses, as the protagonist asks the confidant to

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[18] For an analytical perspective on the metaphor of home in art songs based on "incomplete" chord progressions lacking an initial tonic, see Janet Schmalfeldt, "Coming Home," *Music Theory Online*, 10/1 (2004), http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.04.10.1/mto.04.10.1.schmalfeldt.html [accessed July 30, 2013].

[19] Another song that uses acoustic guitar with capo on the third fret to achieve an antiquated coloristic effect is Jethro Tull's "Thick as a Brick" (1972). This pastoral marker contributes to the musical design spanning the entire album. Dylan's duet with Johnny Cash on "Girl from the North Country" (1969) is more sentimental than ironic. It contrasts with the original recording in its steady 4/4 meter, regular eight-measure metrical groupings, reverb electric guitar backbeat accent, and simpler harmony with phrases beginning on the tonic chord.

take action on his behalf ("Remember me … Please see for me … "). The fourth verse disrupts this large-scale rhythmic patterning in the lyrics as the protagonist confesses the depth of his personal crisis, providing a more developed context for appreciating his questioning plea when the first verse recurs at the end.

The protagonist's request establishes kinship, as he communicates to a mediating confidant who might understand his loss and share his values for an idealized connection to family and place in "the north country." The element of kinship, important in establishing the mythical dimension of the song, is also extended to listeners, since we, as listeners, can imagine that he is communicating his deepest feelings *to us*.[20]

The recap of the first verse at the end of the song reaffirms the protagonist's enduring love that connects across distance and time, defying logic. Dylan's "Girl From the North Country" projects a web of potential meanings. The protagonist is presented not as a poet who knowingly engages in creating art, but rather with a touch of dramatic irony, as one who simply lives as a poet, grounded in an inner world of the imagination while viewing the world as a distanced observer. Dylan's vocal inflection implies a working-class identity and we may hear in the song an implied class struggle, as the protagonist grapples with the forces that distance him from the loved one and the place he would wish to be. The protagonist may also be expressing male guilt in his inability to protect the loved one. One can hear in Dylan's voice the protagonist's regret in not being able to offer her more. However, there is also an implied victory in the strength of the protagonist's vision, reminding us that our true connections to places and loved ones are constructions of the mind.

"Rainy Day Women #12 & 35"

If Dylan had wanted to evoke a more contemporary image of being "stoned" in 1966, he might have referenced the psychedelic imagery widely in circulation at that time in music by The Beatles, Cream, Jimi Hendrix, Jefferson Airplane, and many others. Instead, he creates a more startling effect in "Rainy Day Women #12 & 35" through parody of an old-time brass band on parade that might have been appropriate at some bygone Mardi Gras carnival.[21] After beginning the song with a march-like snare drum pattern, tambourine, and a tipsy-sounding slide trombone entrance, Dylan exaggerates the musical vulgarity with a descending chromatic figure shown in Example 5.3a. This chromatic figure really does not fit the 12-bar blues patterning of the song. It references a bygone era, and would be more at home in a barbershop quartet setting of "Sweet Adeline" or the old humorous (and irony-

[20] See Liszka, *Semiotic of Myth*, pp. 123–4 for a discussion of kinship features in the structure of myth.

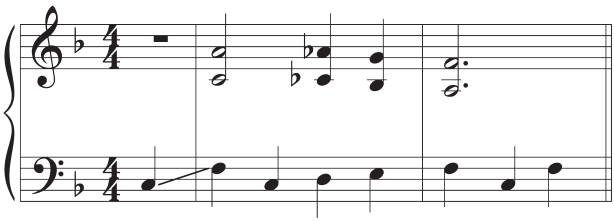
[21] Bob Dylan, "Rainy Day Women #12 & 35," *Blonde on Blonde*, Columbia C2S 841 (1966).

laden) drinking song, "How Dry I Am."[22] Dylan appropriates the figure to form a mimetic representation of sinking into a "stoned" stupor. Dylan's harmonica, a diatonic instrument, clashes against the descending chromatic figure with chaotic abandon. Dylan intensifies this dissonance in his live *Unplugged* version (1994). As shown in Example 5.3b, he harmonizes the descending chromatic figure with parallel diminished triads in his guitar part, forming an independent musical layer that clashes extravagantly against the 12-bar blues changes.

Example 5.3 Bob Dylan, "Rainy Day Women #12 & 35," *Blonde on Blonde* (1966)

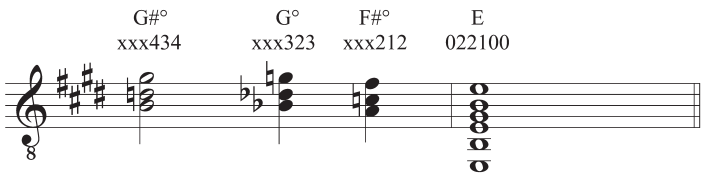
a. *Blonde on Blonde* (1966)

Piano (tremolo chords), trombone, and tuba. Not shown: snare drum, tambourine, and harmonica



b. *Unplugged* (1994)

Guitar chords, standard tuning



Dylan's target in "Rainy Day Women #12 & 35" is the media, along with every other authoritative force in society that oppresses and clouds the individual's mind with untruths. The recurring line, "they'll stone ya," is also a pun on the ancient and barbaric form of capital punishment in which people throw stones at

[22] "How Dry I Am" came to be associated with the depiction of drunkenness in early Warner Bros cartoons, but, ironically, it derived from a comical song of prohibition by Irving Berlin, "The Near Future" (1919). The circus-like parade sound for Dylan's song was apparently a last-minute inspiration. According to Dylan collaborator and organist, Al Kooper, trombone player Wayne "Doc" Butler was called into the studio at 4:30 am when producer Bob Johnston "wanted to do 'Rainy Day Women' in Salvation Army style." See Robert Shelton, *No Direction Home: The Life and Music of Bob Dylan* (London, 1987), p. 320.

a transgressing individual until he/she is dead. The party atmosphere and ragged mix of styles and musical figures that do not quite fit together combine to form a Brechtian mask. The performers do not react to the seriousness of the deeper subject matter. The roughness in the performance forms an ironic projection of feigned incompetence. It is up to the listener to judge that there may be more to the song. This is an enactment of what Bertolt Brecht would describe as *gestic* music.[23] The parodic style contradicts the deeper message of society's mind-numbing repression of the individual, leaving it to the audience to contemplate the irony in how the song mirrors real life. At the moment of greatest tension in the verse, on the dominant chord in the 12-bar blues pattern, Dylan directly references the feeling of alienation that may accompany recognition of having been deceived by life's illusions. He sings with an exaggerated inflection that is more mocking than reassuring: "But I would not feel so all alone / Everybody must get stoned." Ironically projecting the notion of feeling alone while not alone, as if drugged, Dylan's rendering of the song reminds us that we are complicit in accepting the self-delusions society pushes upon us.

Bob Dylan once stated in an interview, "I always try to turn a song on its head. Otherwise, I figure I'm wasting the listener's time."[24] With ironic detachment, Dylan resists and equivocates his own musical utterance, drawing attention to the illusory limitations of musical artifice. This ironic destruction of musical illusion maps on to the sense of personal alienation conveyed in Dylan's music, as he transgressively lifts the veil on authoritative social structures we cling to for comfort. Bob Dylan's creative ruptures in musical illusion provide resistance to passive listening. As the listener accepts responsibility for the kind of listening required, it implies a commitment that resonates with shared values and social commitments that were timely in the early 1960s and continue to be relevant today.

[23] See Derek B. Scott, *Musical Style and Social Meaning: Collected Essays* (Farnham, 2010), p. 37. The possibility of a contradictory relationship between the vocal persona and its instrumental "environment" is explored in Allan Moore, "The Persona-Environment Relation in Recorded Song," *Music Theory Online*, 11/4 (2005), http://mto.societymusictheory.org/issues/mto.05.11.4/toc.11.4.html [accessed July 25, 2013].

[24] Robert Hilburn, "Interview with Bob Dylan," *New York Times* (April 4, 2004), http://articles.latimes.com/print/2004/apr/04/entertainment/ca-dylan04 [accessed August 1, 2013].

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Chapter 6
Burning Down Freedom's Road: The Strange Life of "Brown Baby"

S. Alexander Reed

Oscar "BoBo" Brown III was just one year old when his father wrote the lullaby "Brown Baby" for him, declaring:

> Brown baby, brown baby, as years roll by
> I want you to go with your head high.
> I want you to live by the justice code
> And I want you to walk down the freedom road.

Here, Oscar Brown Jr (1926–2005) wishes upon his son prosperity, peace, and pride—goals toward which he himself had already made significant advances. Before the age of 20, Oscar Brown Jr had written for Studs Terkel's Secret City radio show in Chicago and hosted Negro Newsfront, the country's first African-American radio news program. Soon after, he ran for Illinois state legislature as a Progressive, served in the army, joined the Communist Party, and ran for Congress. With "Brown Baby," he launched a musical career that critiqued and celebrated both a revolutionary streak in African-American politics and the day-to-day lives of African-Americans, always playing with the tensions between the heady and the quotidian. Arguably Oscar Brown Jr's most enduring work, "Brown Baby," carries a bittersweet legacy in light of his son's death at the hands of a drunk driver in 1996, but even beyond this tragedy, the lullaby has signified for many audiences an array of darkness, both intended and inverted.

This chapter first relates the strange story of "Brown Baby" as it passed from Oscar Brown Jr to the choir of Jim Jones's doomed People's Temple, to a folk record by an English band regularly accused of endorsing fascism and then to a "best-of" album by the über-hip European robo act Ladytron. Along the way, the music of "Brown Baby" shifted and twisted, and lyrical substitutions changed the song first to "Black Baby" and then to "Little Black Angel."

Second, "Brown Baby" catalyzes observations about musical irony. In writing about cover versions in rock music, Steve Bailey frames "the semiotic and cultural conditions of possibility that enable the emergence of a rhetorical mode, irony" as a critical postwar moment—specifically what he calls the turn from modernism

into postmodernism.[1] This moment matters in popular music history because postmodernism partially dismantles rock's oft-invoked authenticity effect, allowing for ironic performances of honesty and identity. Moving beyond a focus on postmodernism, though, this chapter generalizes that an artist can present pervasive thematics that center aesthetically on a moment of cultural change, and that such moments can serve as *idiosyncratic pivots* of meanings in considering that artist's work, affording juxtaposed perspectives of before and after, of the old guard and the newly ascendant. These paired interpretive possibilities contribute strongly to the duality of irony.

Third, this chapter observes that while the artistic thematics that some later performers of "Brown Baby" attach to the song radically resignify it, they are thematics defined by absence. As such, they inadvertently point back toward some of the song's important original meanings and contexts that were more easily recognizable as presences. This illustrates that musical meaning can take shape within the negative semiotic spaces that irony surveys.

Oscar Brown Jr (1958)

The original lyrics wish for the titular child to "have things that I never had." Kenning-like word pairings at musical cadences suggest an intertextuality with myth: "plenty cup," "justice code," "freedom road." Despite this mythic sensibility, though, in Brown's own context for the song the child addressee, the means of realizing the lyrics' hopes, and referents for the song's arguably hazy metaphors, were all decidedly real. Brown's son was the "Brown Baby," and the civil rights movement—well underway by 1958—was the dream moving bit by bit into reality. As for the concrete meanings of his lofty language, unpacking one particular kenning will illustrate sufficiently the song's basis within (and not above) the world's flesh.

In African-American nineteenth- and twentieth-century imagination, "freedom('s) road" is connected to specific historical events. An 1886 poem by Thaddeus Kenderdine equates it unambiguously with the Underground Railroad:

> The panting slave on freedom's road
> A ready welcome always found;
> A station was their home upon
> The railroad called the "Underground."[2]

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[1] Steve Bailey, "Faithful or Foolish: The Emergence of the 'Ironic Cover Album' and Rock Culture," *Popular Music and Society*, 26 (2003): 141–59 at 141.

[2] Wilmer Atkinson, *Wilmer Atkinson: An Autobiography, Founder of the Farm Journal* (Philadelphia, PA, 1920), p. 29.

Whether or not this historical linkage is the phrase's origin, in time it became a political, artistic, and spiritual trope, finding its most iconic public use in the 1942 hit record "Freedom Road," by African-American singer Josh White, with lyrics by Langston Hughes and music by Emerson Harper. Brown worked in radio, so his unquestionable familiarity with the song places it firmly in the authorial semiosphere of "Brown Baby."[3]

"Brown Baby" endured among African-American audiences in the 1960s because it envisioned a grander political and social plan on such an individual and intimate a level. "Brown Baby" suggested that its intertextualities of the Harlem Renaissance, mythic abundance, and spiritual song itself all awaited their incipient real-world actualization within one little baby—made most unmistakably corporeal in the song's whispered performances by a father. Indeed, with the unprecedented momentum for justice in the early 1960s, the sense of fulfillment with which "Brown Baby" looked forward resonated among many as both realistic and empowering for an ascendant generation, even as it musically acknowledged the fresh memories of tragedy in its delayed musical resolutions at the ends of periods—"clear and loud" being the most poignant. Between 1958 and 1973, Mahalia Jackson, Nina Simone, Lena Horne, Diana Ross, and Brown himself recorded the song, making it a minor anthem of specifically African-American identity and empowerment.

The People's Temple Choir (1973)

While the song's appeal was wide and immediate within African-American communities, its eventual performance by white musicians was the result of unique circumstances. In 1973 the People's Temple Choir was the well-liked public face of the communist, Christian-based religious movement of Reverend Jim Jones. The ensemble comprised a rotating multigeneration, cross-racial cast of touring musicians. Their album *He's Able*, recorded and released in the space of several weeks that spring, sold a hefty 100,000 copies through mail order and at subsequent performances. It was an appropriately lucrative endeavor for the People's Temple, which had grown from its humble origins in an Indianapolis storefront into a for-profit social mission that sprawled up and down the west coast.

Backed by a band, the choir blended traditional hymns, gospel numbers, and funk rock in a thick, upbeat style. As People's Temple survivor and saxophonist Mike Cartmell recalls, "We came at our audiences like a soulful all-consuming wave of sound, and we swung like (what I imagine would be) Duke Ellington's

[3] Josh White's stardom and civil rights activism is a rich topic in itself. For example, see Chapter 3 of this collection for Katherine L. Turner's account of his performing "Strange Fruit."

own heavenly chorale."[4] The choir was led by white director Jack Arnold Beam, who developed his skills touring as a rock guitarist throughout the 1960s, and was responsible for arranging most of the songs on *He's Able*, writing a few as well. He taught the choir their parts by ear, and though his musical leadership was detail-oriented and exacting, he encouraged improvisation.

Beam produced *He's Able* at the Producers Workshop Studio in Hollywood, a state-of-the-art setup he had connected with through his old rock buddies and a facility that would later help birth records such as Pink Floyd's *The Wall* and Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours*. Unlike many amateur choir records, *He's Able* was multitracked, with many of its upbeat numbers employing complicated overdubs. Given the technology and arrangement expertise available during the making of *He's Able*, the starkness of side B's penultimate track is noteworthy.

Jim Jones's beleaguered wife Marceline sings "Black Baby"—which is "Brown Baby" with the according lyrical change—accompanied only by a Wurlitzer organ, its Leslie rotary speaker oscillating in carefully timed shimmering swells. According to Brian Kevin's creative history of *He's Able*, Marceline Jones had been performing the song in People's Temple services for years. She likely learned it in the early 1960s through the People's Temple's African-American congregation, to whom Nina Simone's recording of "Brown Baby" in particular would have been heavily marketed. Whichever of the song's many versions she heard first, though, none of the Temple survivors has any doubt that Marceline Jones expressly took up the song as a lullaby, both public and private for her own Jim Jr, born 1959, the first African-American child adopted by a white couple in Indiana. He was one of five children the Joneses brought into what they called their "rainbow family," joining siblings of Korean and Native American descent.

Jones claimed he came to the ministry specifically out of hatred for segregation. Equally committed to the teachings of Marx and Christianity, he believed that racism—especially the systemic racism of American culture and law—was both a violation of Christian altruism and an institutional device of economic slavery. He regularly stepped into contested racial territory, claiming for example, "I'm a nigger until everybody is free, until everybody that's treated niggardly is free, I am a nigger. I don't care if you're an Italian nigger or you're Jewish or an Indian, the only people that're getting anything in this country are the people that got the money, baby."[5]

Marceline Jones paces her version of the lullaby at a grave drip, her roundly featureless voice warbling atop bony production with a claustrophobic uneasiness that Brian Kevin calls creepy, bleak, and mechanical.[6] Lacking the lightweight jazz

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[4] Mike Cartmell, "He's Able: Reflections from the 'Hot Brass Section,'" *The Jonestown Report*, 11 (November 2009), http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=30796 [accessed December 10, 2014].

[5] Jonestown Institute, "Q162 Transcript," prepared by Fielding M. McGehee III, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=27350 [accessed December 10, 2014].

[6] Ibid.

of the worship funk elsewhere on *He's Able*, "Black Baby" sounds, not to put too fine a point on it, comparatively white. In the self-conscious performance we hear a woman born a few years before Jim Jones, one whose personal foundation for music may have been sentimental parlor songs rather than blues, and who, as we know, spent less time onstage than in a back room filing taxes, in a hospital treating patients, or otherwise unhappily bending to her husband's overbearing will.

It is certainly true that the musical adoption of "Black Baby" served the Joneses politically within the People's Temple by situating them amongst their congregation: the song's repurposed gentle authority demands and enforces an affirmation of solidarity and, by cynical extension, loyalty from their African-American parishioners. Its effects within a culture of mind control can be read as unambiguously strategic. At the same time, however, Marceline Jones's personal struggles and her role as mother to the rainbow family suggest that the unignorably curious change from "Brown Baby" to "Black Baby" may have functioned as a private refusal to code-switch with blind confidence as her evangelist husband did, and highlighted instead uncomfortable racial categories in a painful recognition that no matter how much kinship and closeness she and her baby might feel, the watching eyes of their world would never let them forget their different colors.[7] Indeed, the clueless self-obsession of her husband—whom she had already tried to leave at least once—risked claiming Jim Jr as a trophy for his mission's racial righteousness, rather than focusing on the realities of attentive parenting. This is why her version lacks the pleading hope of Oscar Brown Jr's recording. This tension is, in part, why "Black Baby" feels like a lament.

Death In June (1992)

While treating the music on *He's Able* with an eye toward its participants' eventual massacre risks a tasteless and unproductive sort of abyss-staring, it is a fact that once the terrors of November 18, 1978 hit the news, global interest in the People's Temple arose with overwhelming and immediate perversity. This was especially the case within the burgeoning industrial subculture, some of whose members (most notably Monte Cazazza) distributed documents from and about Jonestown throughout mail, art and tape-trading networks, including the leaked "suicide tape" itself. Given that industrial music combined techno-obsession with disdain for every conceivable sort of authority, its fans saw these artifacts as technological documents of a grassroots exercise in mass control; Jonestown paraphernalia symbolically provided, on the one hand, a warning against brainwashing, and, on the other, a how-to guide. Among this underground musical community, *He's Able* became valued not as a gospel record or concert souvenir, but as a

[7] A pessimistically vile reading of this change might venture that Marceline Jones already had "brown" babies, and so she chose to emphasize Jim Jr's blackness as another shade in the rainbow.

curious conversation piece, a rare historical document, a cruel joke, and perhaps most of all, a totalizing badge of honor that bespoke both access to secrets and an unflinching intimacy with death. It was thus only a matter of time before *He's Able* was bootlegged on to CD. The addendum of the suicide tape to the 1993 reissue quashes any notion that audiences bought the disc for the music, and it was repackaged with a cover photo of the People's Temple members' piled corpses. (It is worth noting at this point that although prurience is itself an ironic mode of interpretation—an abject thrill masquerading as dispassionate consideration—this and many of the little ironies one may spot hereafter are less the focus of this chapter than the interplay between the contexts of understanding that they suggest.)

It was in the planning of this clandestine release on Grey Matter records that "Brown Baby," now "Black Baby," was reborn.[8] The bootleggers at Grey Matter, perhaps recognizing that *He's Able* and the Jonestown death tape now existed more to be seen than heard, had initially intended a more elaborate package, a multipart release featuring an EP of cover versions of the album's songs as performed by other artists. The result would offer both underground cachet and, they hoped, some music that subcultural buyers might actually pay a few dollars extra for and enjoy. However, the facts of the People's Temple's story place any conceivable "tribute" well beyond the simple categories of adulation, mourning, or mockery.

"I was going to write a three track EP single that I was to put in one of their reissued LPs. I'd thought about it. Then I decided it was a weird thing to do, to get further involved," says Douglas Pearce, singer and songwriter of the English band Death In June, whose style fans usually identify as neofolk or apocalyptic folk, overlapping genres often grouped under the much larger pop categories of gothic and (post-) industrial music.[9] After Death In June pulled out of talks with Grey Matter in 1992, the songs Pearce had assembled for the project appeared on the band's LP of that year, *But, What Ends When the Symbols Shatter?* For the most part, Pearce very loosely reimagines selected fragments from *He's Able*, but his take on "Black Baby"—called "Little Black Angel"—is immediately recognizable and offers wholly new meanings.

Oscar Brown Jr and Marceline Jones had both performed the song in a rhythm that was free and slow enough to risk obscuring its underlying 3/4 time signature altogether. By contrast, the swift guitar strumming, the offbeat tambourines, and the lyrical rhythms of "Little Black Angel" steady the song in a ceaseless 6/8 with

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[8] See Brian Kevin, "*He's Able*: An After Word," *The Jonestown Report*, 11 (November 2009), http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=30826 [accessed December 10, 2014]. Stewart Home, "The K Foundation and Charles Manson," *24 Seven* (March 1, 1994), n.p., strongly insinuates that the masterminds behind Grey Matter were in fact Bill Drummond and James Cauty of the art pop act the KLF. Elsewhere he goes so far as to venture that the KLF's infamous burning of £1 million cash was committed out of guilt (or fear of legal repercussions) over the fortune earned from Grey Matter's unlicensed release. See also Charles Manson, *Charles Manson Live at San Quentin*, Grey Matter GM01CD (1993).

[9] "Death In June," *Fist 5* (1993).

rhythmic syncopations that hint at 12/16. This version's considerable uptick in tempo is part of a larger effect whereby the lyrics are de-emphasized. In addition to repeating whole verses, which "Brown Baby" does not do, "Little Black Angel" uses melody to flatten its text: where the original lullaby operates in alternating antecedent and consequent phrases organized in a larger AABA structure, Death In June recasts it in a basic strophic form with four-measure units of repetition, resolving time and again to a melodic B atop a tonic E minor chord. The verses and repeated refrain—"my little black angel"—are each given the same simple tune, spanning a mere fourth in total range (A to D), hovering always around that B. The melody's unresolving emphasis on the dominant pitch also adds to the sense of openness, air, and flight that the lyrical change and reverberation effects posit. "Little Black Angel" is a glimmering musical homogenate: it softly and attractively eschews any sense of nuance.

The importance of such divergence from "Brown Baby"—specifically in racial and religious dimensions—becomes important to the larger political context of Death In June. Pearce began his musical career as guitarist and songwriter for the UK punk band Crisis, who from 1978 to 1981 branded themselves as radical leftists, supporting the Rock Against Racism organization and penning songs that warned of the dangers in Holocaust denial.[10] As Pearce himself said in 1993, however, "We wanted to change the world," but "[a]t the end of it all, both Tony [Wakefield—the bassist] and I realised that we only wanted to change it because we couldn't stand it."[11] Pearce's motivation for political involvement had less to do with any organizational agenda than with a personal longing to reshape a world whose problem, as he saw it, was not partisan ideology but a degeneracy that manifested in underclass laziness, aristocratic bumbling, and whatever cruelty and uselessness lay in between: "Basically I see humanity as a seething mass of Insanity that has to be kept in check."[12]

On one level Pearce's worldview is plainly and troublingly invested in European ethnicity: in his 1993 interview with the 'zine *Fist* ♯5, he bemoans, "The Two World Wars have culled too many of the good. We are left with the rest, hence the gradual disintegration of the soul of humanity. The useless people have overbred in this century."[13] Pearce tempers his understanding of identity as genetic with mysticism: "I believe that life forces are flying around all the time anyway. Once you're born I believe that something flies into that person."[14] In concert and in publicity photos he bolsters this sense of the arcane, donning a mask that suggests Bronze Age ceremony. His music's bells and drones bloom atop ever-present acoustic guitar strumming, and within the mix, his voice hovers at the border of lyrical intelligibility, offering no declamatory fixity but instead shading depths

10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.

of textual possibility. Always awash in reverberation, Death In June's records sonically connote cavernous, stony spaces. Fittingly, their live performances are often billed as destination events held at ruins and castles. And all this to say nothing of those lyrics that manage to slip comprehensibly through the echoey miasma, repeatedly invoking angels, elementals, and a pastoral premodernity so overripe with mysterious enchantment as to resist earthly conceptions of time's passage. The otherworldly elegance of aestheticized mysticism thus acts as a foil against the ugliness of historically real bigotry. This is important, because it helps us to see the crucial roles that Pearce's partial downplaying of genetic predetermination can play both in his personal worldview and in fans' political understanding of his music, which frequently involves a willful denial that such attitudes are present at all.[15]

Pearce's own ideology is invested in such a differentiation between genetics and "soul implantation." Roger Griffin writes that fascism's "mission is to combat the allegedly degenerative forces of contemporary history,"[16] and Pearce grants a resemblance between his worldview and fascism, unsurprisingly exposing Death In June to perennial boycotts and debates. However, Pearce specifically does not self-identify as fascist for reasons connected to his mystical investment in destiny: he discards the traditional fascist belief in the family as a social foundation, a twist that is relevant to "Brown Baby." Pearce's assertion that "[t]he only thing the family is the nucleus of is unhappiness as far as I am concerned"[17] points to having grown up gay in a midcentury working-class English home in which his parents once allegedly ordered an exorcism performed on him.[18]

"Not intentionally have I ever thought of childhood at all," Pearce snips overcompensatorily when a journalist, hearing Death In June's musical debt to the repetition and the non-syncopation of eighteenth-century English ballads, ventures that such stylistic hallmarks sound "childlike."[19] And so while both Brown and Jones were publicly known to have sung "Brown Baby" to their own children, it is thus fitting that to Pearce—who has never been a father—the song is no lullaby. Perfunctory declamations replace its sweet blue-note caesuras, and his vocal timbre drowns beneath waves of guitars, downplaying for listeners the ostensibly comforting presence of the singer-as-parent.

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15 To be sure, Pearce's racial preferences in other arenas are nonetheless unambiguous. In an interview, he states, "I prefer to suck, white, uncircumcised cocks of a certain age so I suppose that rules out quite a few races and religions in one huge act of sexual discrimination. However, that's natural selection for you. It follows on that, of course race is important to me!" Tracy Twyman, "White, Uncircumcised Cocks: An Interview with Death In June's Douglas Pearce," *Dagobert's Revenge Magazine* (2000), http://web.archive.org/web/20040219144806/http://www.dagobertsrevenge.com/index.html?ae/musick/dij [accessed June 11, 2013].

16 "Death In June."

17 Ibid.

18 Twyman, "White, Uncircumcised Cocks."

19 "Death In June."

All this further differentiates the restrictive insularity of Death In June's musical context and the participatory outreach of both Oscar Brown Jr and the People's Temple. Brown was a writer of children's songs; the track immediately before "Brown Baby" on his debut album is "Dat Dere," whose refrain is "Daddy can I have that big elephant over there?" Similarly, *He's Able* opens with the junior choir singing an original number that begins, "Welcome all of you, glad you are with us!" In contrast, as Anton Shekhovtsov argues, the content and distribution methods of apoliteic music like Death In June's strongly imply a post-adolescent, historically informed, and antisocial mode of listening. Fans—nearly all 20-something in 1992, and none of them incidental or accidental—are offered an introspective "retreat into the forest" (in the words of postwar fascist Enrst Jünger), where the facts of fascist reality can hide beneath a highly personalized fantasy of peace within a mythologized Europe of the past.[20]

"Little Black Angel" is of no apparent use to children or communities invested in any practical future, and so it is unsurprising that its new title and lyrics erase the presence of children and bodies alike. Where "Brown Baby" wishes its subject "to walk with your head held high," here Pearce "wants you to fly with your wings held high." While angels can occupy a mythological status as superhuman, Pearce's use of the diminutive "little" instead suggests variously to listeners a black-clad angelic sweetheart, a child who has died and—as folk Christianity sometimes puts it—become an angel, or a spectral presence, addressed from on high. "Little Black Angel" is not whispered from a rocking chair, but impassively decreed from a godlike throne.

Ladytron: "Little Black Angel" (2011)

"Little Black Angel" managed to become an unironic hit within the European goth scene, which consumed it totally unaware of its origins as "Brown Baby" and with varying degrees of willful ignorance regarding the politics of Death In June, a band never more than peripheral to the mostly leftist subculture (who incidentally, based on sartorial categories and not racial ones, often called themselves "blacks" in 1990s continental Europe). This subcultural context is where the members of the successful international electronic dance quartet Ladytron encountered "Little Black Angel," which they themselves covered as a new cut for their retrospective best-of compilation, released in early 2011.

[20] Anton Shekhovtsov, "Apoliteic Music: Neo-Folk, Martial Industrial and 'Metapolitical Fascism," *Patterns of Prejudice*, 43/5 (2009): 431–57. He defines apoliteic music as "music in which the ideological message contains obvious or veiled references to the core elements of fascism but is simultaneously detached from any practical attempt to implement that message through political activity. Apoliteic music is characterized by highly elitist stances and disdain for "banal petty materialism." Both apoliteic artists and their conscientious fans appear to be self-styled "aristocrats of the soul" (p. 439).

Ladytron appears to have only fully grasped the seriousness of the political debates surrounding Death In June after cutting the track, and even as they chose nonetheless to release the song, they downplayed it promotionally, presumably not wishing to expose their hipster audience to the obdurate thorniness of all things apoliteic. Singer Mira Aroyo gives credence to this reconstruction of events when she notes that "Little Black Angel" had been recorded well before its release. Addressing the two new songs for the collection, she says, "They fit in more with our old material. They were written a while ago … With the compilation we are closing a chapter."[21] But the pre-emptive way in which Ladytron seals off "Little Black Angel" in the past and away from scrutiny is itself suspicious. To probe just one detail of this effort, the song's odd provenance would have been (and presumably was) revealed to the band with a simple internet search, offering Ladytron some history of the song in 2011 that Douglas Pearce may not have had easy access to in 1992. And yet, rather than enter any public fray, the band credits neither Oscar Brown Jr nor Douglas Pearce in their liner notes, using the catch-all "Copyright Control" instead. In doing so, they miss the chance to comment on or reclaim the song's politics.

Ladytron nevertheless reshapes the song's meaning in a new way. In the quote cited above, Aroyo glosses over the song's back story by stating that the band had "written" it, but her choice of words here is hardly insidious; instead, it reflects electronic music's baseline conflation of programming and production with "writing" music; to Ladytron, separating a song from its recording is scarcely thinkable. Their ubiquitous washes of analogue synthesizer and vintage drum-machine rhythms do not aesthetically bolster a presumed vocal mediation of reality as is the norm in pop and rock, but instead the sounds themselves, *being the song*, are in fact that mediation. This condition is appropriately matched both by the band's name and by its singers' voices, so free of glides, vibrato, dynamic variation, microrhythmic syncopation, and dialectic diphthongs as to sound robotic. By imbuing femaleness with cyborg precision, Ladytron in one swoop denies its pop music both emotion and bodiliness, leaving little room for desire. This is one reason why audiences so often hear a cold realism in the band's music.

And so, refitted as a 4/4 dance track, Ladytron's "Little Black Angel" becomes a song *about* dancing. It takes as its basis Death In June's flattening of melody, phrasing, and form, replaces the echoing acoustic guitars of English balladry with compressed kick-snare alternation and saturated synthesizer tones, and suggests loopable cyclicity by eradicating any hint of bass motion to the dominant.

Ladytron emblemizes an ethos of 2011's heavily mixed cosmopolitan indie dance fanbase, which naïvely often brushed aside race's role in constructing identity as optional. Similarly inessential in Ladytron's universe of realism is a concern for the spiritual beyond the aesthetic. These are both important differences

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[21] Chi Ming Lai and Steve Gray, "Ladytron 00–10: An Interview with Mira Aroyo," *The Electricity Club* (March 4, 2011), http://ladytronmusic.blogspot.com/2011/03/electricity-club-interview-2011.html [accessed June 17, 2013].

between their music and that of Death In June. The blackness of the little angel here is not ethnic, or specifically occult, or even part of the hazy romantic-goth fashion of the 1990s. Instead, eyeliner, a miniskirt, nighttime, and fleeting glimpses of mirror-shade retro-sex are the new black. In Ladytron's "Little Black Angel," as with ABBA's "Dancing Queen," the audience—a listening dancer—assumes (and subsumes) the roles of both the narrator and the title character. Any lullaby vestiges of the parental are flattened into a celebration of self, devoid of fantasy, whether individually sexual or collectively utopian. Here there is no walking with "your head held high" and even the "wings held high" are nothing more than swooping arms that cast shadows in the strobelight.

With each rendition, "Brown Baby" appears to have become progressively disembodied both in its performance and in its performers' own referent. It also appears to drift further from an Afrocentric racial context. The sense of the utopian that musicians imbue it with also fades, beginning from Oscar Brown Jr's credulous belief in an improved social reality for African-Americans soon to arrive, moving on to the earnestly attempted but disastrous social experiment of the People's Temple, then to the dreamed-of but futile cause of an unrecoverable premodern Europe in the case of Death In June, and finally, with Ladytron, no consideration of the utopian whatsoever and, instead, a harsh realism. As we will see, however, this progression need not be understood as nihilistic.

Irony and History

Claire Colebrook observes, "Irony, even at its most obvious, is always diagnostic and political: to read the irony you do not just have to know the context; you also have to be committed to specific beliefs and positions *within* that context."[22] In comparing whole texts to one another (as with the aforementioned renditions of "Brown Baby"), one first should acknowledge how their contexts and their positions within those contexts relate to each other.

No ironic context for "Brown Baby" publicly existed until the Jonestown massacre (itself a cosmic irony recast as tragic irony in media). Certainly ironic readings are available for "Little Black Angel," but to whom does the irony speak? Douglas Pearce himself intended a commentary on religious idealism and peacenik dreams of the sort that the People's Temple embraced—"Look what happened to them. That's optimism for you," he says.[23] However, when we consider that upon the release of *But, What Ends When the Symbols Shatter?* he drew no attention to the People's Temple tracks, "finally coming clean" only later, then we can reasonably venture that, at least initially, the community familiar enough with both

[22] Claire Colebrook, *Irony: The New Critical Idiom* (London and New York, 2004), pp. 11–12.

[23] "Death In June."

Death In June and *He's Able* to hear such ironic doubleness was miniscule.[24] And Death In June's audience is already contextually bifurcated between those who hear the band as pleasantly gothic, dismissing or even getting off on whispers of their alleged fascism as mere moral panic, and those to whom the apoliteic mysticism functions as a mutually understood secret political language of neo-ethnic kinship. Any irony within a song so historically racial as "Brown Baby" would signify differently to each of these groups on account of their different presumed contexts for listening.

Individual ironies in Death In June's music (and indeed in a host of apoliteic and industrial musics) tend to collapse by virtue of their number, entwinement, and esotericism. Certainly present is what Charles Affron calls affect, "our ability to see performance as performance." But here it constructs a *semblance* of ironies, each presumably excluding more and more listeners until the audience is overwhelmed by the knowledges, beliefs, and contexts over which the artist exudes (but does not explicitly demonstrate) mastery.[25] This is what Colebrook means when she writes of "free-indirect discourse" in which "complex forms of irony can make the recognition and existence of this distanced authorial position impossible to determine."[26] By presenting an unpinnable panopticon of viewpoints, texts like this attempt a godlike authority above critique—a fitting approach given the previous observation that "Little Black Angel" stages Pearce as divine.

But, as Colebrook reminds us, "[o]ne cannot remain in a naïvely postmodern condition above and beyond any discourse," and when one focuses on Death In June's broadest thematic baseline instead of dissecting semiotic minutiae, one can move beyond paralysis.[27] Not all artists fixate so historically, but as made clear in their interviews, lyrics, and iconography (note their SS Death's Head logo), Death In June designates World War II's conclusion as its *idiosyncratic pivot*, the cultural signifier that most centrally contextualizes their music. As such it is the vertex around which any ironic understanding of the band is predicated. Pearce's self-evidently toxic beliefs cut to the quick: underlying his concern with World War II is the end—mourned as foregone—of European racial uniformity.

Ladytron, through its thematics, also re-enacts a ghost loop of its idiosyncratic pivot—the 1970s to the mid-1980s—trailing Death In June's moment of choice by a few decades and arguably overlapping with the "postmodern turn" that Steve Bailey discusses. Ladytron uses kitsch aesthetics, but, unlike other purveyors of retro-chic, does so with no camp, no parodic winking, and no affection for trash

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[24] Robert, *Misery and Purity: A History and Personal Interpretation of Death In June* (Amersham, 1995), p. 168.

[25] Charles Affron, "Performing Performing: Irony and Affect," *Cinema Journal*, 20/1 (Autumn 1980): 42–52.

[26] Colebrook, *Irony*, p. 157.

[27] Ibid., p. 173.

(as Theo Cateforis argues the B-52s do, for example).[28] Ladytron foregrounds Thatcher-era futurism as a vapid baseline; hence its "coldness." The band attitudinally frames its historical locus as a point after which emotional investment in anything must be limited on account of the frighteningly shallow limits of meaning.

Ladytron differs from Death In June significantly—it is known neither as fascist nor racist—but both musics present a mournful void, and in both cases this void is racially charged. As Griffin Woodworth convincingly demonstrates, electronic instrumentation in the 1970s became a sonic means to

> … enact the alienation and resistance of black communities … articulat[ing] black protest and technological anxiety together by exploiting a dialectic tension … between familiar and foreign sounds.[29]

And the standardized analogue sound palette that consumer-level electronic instruments afforded to both black and white dance musicians during the heyday that Ladytron recasts as retro served to blur the lines between breakdance, hip hop, and Europop. Every nasal bassline they swipe from UK synthpop reverberates its dual origins in Rust Belt house music. In the band's blasé performance of "Little Black Angel," then, we hear a frisson between a technomusical history of racial protest and mixing, on the one hand, and the emphatic whiteness the band's performance on the other. The original robot band Kraftwerk, in sculpting a new German-ness around the unspoken historical void of the Third Reich, managed to become "so stiff, they were funky," according to house pioneer Carl Craig, an appraisal that Simon Reynolds extrapolates to "so white, they were black." In this same way, Ladytron's robot interpretation of emptiness connects back to that strange racialized tension.[30]

And so finally, in response to both Death In June's and Ladytron's recordings of "Little Black Angel," this chapter proposes that non-racist audiences are impelled to a positive assessment of the non-white-exclusivity that the two acts, each in its own way, paint in negative space, and this is done *through* that negative space, which is the forlorn bleakness of their music. What is remarkable in the case of "Little Black Angel" is that when heard alongside "Brown Baby," all the whitening decorporealization that Death In June and Ladytron perform points back toward Oscar Brown Jr's original context of empowerment for the racially subjugated. Douglas Pearce's most striking lyrical change transforms "I want you to walk down freedom's road" to "I want you to burn down freedom's road." Heard in the

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[28] Theo Cateforis, *Are We Not New Wave? Modern Pop at the Turn of the 1980s* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2011), p. 98.

[29] Griffin Woodworth, "Synthesizers as Social Protest in Early 1970s Funk," American Musicological Society Conference, New Orleans, LA (November 3, 2012).

[30] Simon Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy: Into the World of Techno and Rave Culture* (Boston, MA, 1998), p. 14.

context of the history offered in this essay, the image of freedom's road burning serves less as a call for its destruction than a blazing flare to announce its presence and possibilities to all who hear. Claiming this invokes the ability of audiences to seek out supplementary contexts from which to grasp ironic meanings wholly beyond artists' intentions; indeed, this chapter is such an exercise. Furthermore, one can assert that doing so is a valid strategy when confronting texts (like Death In June's) that through an affective semblance of irony, feign critical impenetrability.

Despite the larger theoretical points here concerning irony, idiosyncratic pivots, and negative space, the particular reinforcement of original contexts of meanings that "Brown Baby" effects in its later renditions will likely remain a curiosity of its own circumstance. Rare is the music that has endured such consistently thematic resculpting. But this narrative therefore also affords a refracted glimpse at something in the song resembling a stable meaning, an absolute context: a rare "correct" hearing, reinforced on many sides. This core of "Brown Baby" has endured with curious strength and adaptability throughout the song's strange life, death, and rebirth.

Chapter 7
God, Flag, and Country: Ironic Variations on a Metaphysical Theme

Sabatino DiBernardo

Writing about the sound of irony by means of an ostensibly non-auditory and transparent inscription that attempts to signify and thereby communicate (about) the auditory requires considering irony beyond its familiarity as a rhetorical trope.[1] As Claire Colebrook argues:

> If irony is taken in its broadest sense as a doubleness of meaning, where what is said is limited or undercut by what is implied, then we can start to include ironies that are not rhetorical, that have little to do with speech or language.[2]

Theorizing about the sound of irony requires a certain self-referential reflection concerning a "doubleness of meaning," contrary movements, or counterpoints. Consequently, to be sensitive to a culturally orchestrated sound of irony as a scene or happening—something that can "put people on edge"[3]—one must entertain the possibility of a double-hearing of sound all the more complex given the semantically indeterminate system of sonic signification.[4]

Since this chapter addresses the implications of a public sound of irony, it is important to note that ironic communication is made possible through a *communal*

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[1] Regarding language as a critical theoretical practice, Catherine Belsey argues that "language is not transparent, not merely the *medium* in which autonomous individuals transmit messages to each other about an independently constituted world of things … The transparency of language is an illusion … The effect of this is to alert the reader to the opacity of language, and to avoid the 'tyranny of lucidity.'" Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London, 1980), p. 4.

[2] Claire Colebrook, *Irony* (London and New York, 2004), p. 14.

[3] As Linda Hutcheon states, "the 'scene' of irony is a social and political scene … irony 'happens' … in all kinds of discourses (verbal, visual, aural), in common speech as well as in highly crafted aesthetic form, in so-called high art as well as in popular culture." Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London, 1994), pp. 4–5, 37.

[4] Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Hanover, NH, 1993), p. 31: "[t]here is no essential, foundational way to ground musical meaning beyond the flux of social existence."

process and an "ironic play of difference."[5] As Ingrid Monson suggests with respect to the possibility of the conveyance of irony through instrumental music and "melodic quotation":

> The important point is that a chain of associations may be set off that engage the listener and unite her or him with a community of other individuals who share a similar musical point of view.[6]

Thus, the sound of irony and music in general share a contextualized "contrapuntal" or differential spacing of the gaps in the interval between sound and silence, presence and absence, identity and difference.

Taking its cue from the tripartite title of Francis Duggan's poem "For God, Flag and Country," this chapter suggests a reading for the possible sounds of ironic counterpoint in three musical pieces concerning the religio-metaphysical theme(s) of God, Flag, and Country.[7] From Randy Newman, who, notwithstanding his numerous film scores, is most recognized for his ironic and satirical treatment of religious, political, and sociocultural values and their concomitant prejudices: "God's Song (That's Why I Love Mankind)" and "Sail Away."[8] The third song is the iconic rendition of "The Star-Spangled Banner" by Jimi Hendrix, whose ironic "effecting" of distorted amplification altered and shaped the trajectory of and for rock guitar(ists) and popular music in general.[9] Each piece calls into question a certain metaphysical thinking by means of quotation, citation, grafting, and use of satirical, situational, and/or tragic irony through intertextual and intermusical

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[5] Ingrid Monson, "Doubleness and Jazz Improvisation: Irony, Parody, and Ethnomusicology," *Critical Inquiry*, 20/2 (Winter 1994): 283–313 at 303.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Francis Dugan, "For God, Flag and Country," http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/for-god-flag-and-country/ [accessed August 30, 2013].

[8] Randy Newman, *Guilty: 30 Years of Randy Newman*, Rhino Entertainment Company R2 75567 (1998). Both appeared in the 1972 release, *Sail Away*. Through the lens of deconstruction: the cover "Guilty: 30 Years" is stamped in the style of a penal verdict with an ornately framed title, "Famous Composers and Their Works" placed *sous rature*—"under erasure"—crossed out in commonplace black marker font followed by the subject and signatory of the compilation "of Randy Newman." Thus marks the ironic "outside" cover, calling into question the box set's "inside" by way of a self-effacing, sarcastic, and/or marginal relationship to canonicity. A supplemental X marks (out) the title of/and a life's work, a double signification of both a life and a sentence—the time matches the "crime." See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD, 1997), p. 19; see also Spivak's Preface.

[9] Jimi Hendrix, "The Star-Spangled Banner," *Jimi Hendrix: Live at Woodstock*, Experience Hendrix, LLC, MCA Records, 111987 (1999). Both Hendrix the guitarist and his main guitar, a Fender Stratocaster, have become symbols.

allusion.[10] With the assistance of poststructuralist theorists, philosophers, and musicologists, this chapter theorizes the destabilizing sound of irony as a critique of dogmatic, essentialist, and totalizing beliefs, and the idealist desires that constitute a shared metaphysical theme running through God, Flag, and Country.

God: "God's Song (That's Why I Love Mankind)"

With the opening dirge-like piano line slightly reminiscent of Chopin's "Funeral March" in a subtly swung blues feel and a minor chordal bed, this song resonates with the somber and sobering theme of (and march toward) death. However, this musical form seems slightly odd given that this is ostensibly a song *of* God or God's song *to* humanity for whom he displays, as it is often said, an unconditional love. Perhaps this "requiem" or musical lamentation of the oppressed provides a musical clue to the ironic content and lyrical theme of death that it carries.[11]

Newman wastes no time in the first line of the first verse in relation to the killing of Abel by Cain by questioning the death of the children of Israel given the promise of innumerable descendants. By means of multiple voices/characters and the conflation of different scriptural narratives, Newman establishes an ironic motif in his conversation between God and humanity concerning their relationship vis-à-vis death. The first verse closes with a questioning of the Lord, followed by the "divine" response: a dialogical interrogation, or call and response, maintained throughout the song.

The first religio-metaphysical theme to succumb to Newman's sardonic ironizing is nothing less than divine authorial intent: that is, the ultimate meaning of human existence as authorized by the Wholly Other—the Holy Author. Contrary to traditional monotheistic representations of divine will, God responds in the most theologically unexpected of ways: the meaning of human existence is its meaninglessness to God. Indeed, humanity means less to the divine than the most mundane of all creation. Nevertheless, all is not lost in this nihilistic display, since the human quest for its creator is cited as one of the reasons *why* God loves humanity or, perhaps, just "mankind."

In the subsequent verse, theodicy is at stake. However, rather than a defense of God's pure goodness and justice, Newman reveals the utter disgust, contempt,

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[10] See Monson's distinction between "intertextual" (that is, primarily through words or a musical score) and "intermusical," which she describes as: "a communication process that occurs primarily through musical sound itself rather than through words. The word *intermusical* is best reserved for aurally perceptible musical relationships that are heard in the context of particular musical traditions … The intertextual aspects of music are in this sense more complicated than those in the realm of language." Monson, "Doubleness and Jazz Improvisation," p. 307.

[11] See Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, MD, 1987).

and revulsion instantiated in the divine by humanity. Far from an unconditional love intoned in religious discourses, God's "love" is engendered by a sadistic joy, a divine joke that manifests itself in a bemused love for a pitiable humanity. So foul, filthy, and squalid is humanity that it causes God to "recoil in horror" at this "misery" at which God and his fellow heavenly voyeurs respond in raucous laughter at the prayers nonetheless directed toward the divine. Claire Colebrook's commentary on romantic irony might equally apply here: "Irony must recognise that we can never overcome singular viewpoints and achieve a God-like point of view; we are always subject to a cosmic joke."[12] Indeed, humanity is heaven's tragic-(not-so-divine)-comedy; a site of comic relief or divine self-amusement.[13]

In an attempt to get some answers from the Lord, Newman assembles religious representatives in Job-like, reverential, and pious fashion—some via the latest technologies— petitioning the divine for relief from an absence of freedom upon the earth, the crumbling of religious structures built to honor God, and a humanity no longer able to withstand the absence of assistance from, and assault by, the divine. The petition, however, is not presented as one might expect. Rather, it is a prayer to God *not* to assist them or, rather, a prayer to assist them by no longer "assisting" them in their request for relief from the divine. Even the religious representatives display ironic tendencies.

Unlike the non-responsive reprimand of Job, God actually provides a response to those assembled. With a redoubled lyrical and vocal enunciation on "The Lord said"—emphasized by two (ironic) major chords signaling an expected profundity—they expect a majestic theological resolution and musical dénouement. Newman does not disappoint; or, rather, he does disappoint—profoundly. The theo-musicological tension awaiting release is frustrated in an ironic reversal and musical return of the oppressed to the dirge-like opening of the piece.

Instead of a loving response befitting the divine, and in the conspicuous absence of God's satanic adversary, Newman reverses and subverts the traditional trajectory of divine revelation and theological expectation. The dénouement/not-so-divine revelation is that it is *God* who is responsible for killing their children, for the destruction of their temples, and for the burning of their cities as he laughs in disgusted voyeuristic delight at their "blessed" fideistic insanity. God will neither set them free nor let them be. This holy sadistic amusement highlights a possible ironic response to the question with which the song began: *because* humans are made in the image or verisimilitude of God, "man" kills (Gen. 9:6). On this reading, killing is wrong not because of any intrinsic human worth but, rather, because, in killing, one is desecrating the image of God even as humans kill in imitation and in the image of God—an ironic double bind.

Newman's "resolution" of the ancient trilemma is to contradict God's omnibenevolence, leaving intact God's omnipotence and thus responsibility

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[12] Colebrook, *Irony*, p. 50.

[13] For a similar divine puppet mastery and irony, see Job 1:6–12; 38:1–41 and the "wager" between God and Satan.

for suffering and death. Indeed, Newman goes one step further in his ironic psychoanalytic atheodicy with the following diagnosis: God's sadism is the result of a narcissistic, deep-seated need and desire to be needed and desired, consequently establishing a codependent, master/slave irony of need/desire. Newman weaves a love–hate tale that leaves the listener wondering: who *really* needs whom and why?

Flag: "The Star Spangled Banner"

> Cavett: "When you mention the national anthem and talk about playing it in any unorthodox way …."
>
> Hendrix: "That's not unorthodox; it's not unorthodox."
>
> Cavett: "It isn't unorthodox?"
>
> Hendrix: "No, no. I thought it was beautiful; but—and there you go."

In this 1969 exchange between Jimi Hendrix and Dick Cavett on *The Dick Cavett Show*, Hendrix's controversial variation on the national anthem at the Woodstock Music and Art Fair becomes the site of a repetition and contestation of a common metaphysical privileging of the "orthodox" at the devalued expense of the politically or aesthetically "unorthodox."[14]

If music is understood in a traditional sense as "the art of organizing tones in a coherent sequence so as to produce a unified and continuous composition[,]"[15] then, at the conventionally "stable" level of irony as a rhetorical trope, the sound of irony would proffer an opposing tonality such that a coherent, unified, continuous, and thus orthodox composition can be made ironic by means of an inclusion of sounds not conventionally recognized as music. Hendrix accomplishes this

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[14] For a detailed analysis of "axiologic logic," beauty/taste, and the "pathologizing of the Other" that betrays itself in its moralizing judgment, see Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge, MA, 1988), pp. 54–84. Also, Tex Sample, referencing Pierre Bourdieu, argues that "one's taste is often established by what one cannot stand." Thus, whether it is music, art, or literary style, one might be suspicious of any such condescension that pretends or presumes to stand on some privileged ground. As Sample suggests, "The struggle over music and other forms of art is far more than an aesthetic one. It is permeated with the politics of distinction, with contestation over prestige." Tex Sample, *White Soul: Country Music, the Church and Working Americans* (Nashville TN, 1996), pp. 21, 42.

[15] Basil Cole, *Music and Morals: A Theological Appraisal of the Moral and Psychological Effects of Music* (New York, 1993), p. 15. For a problematizing of the Platonic notion of music as a reified "thing," see Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performance and Listenin*g (Middleton, CT, 1998), pp. 2, 113.

through an incoherent, discontinuous, and polyvalent interruption by means of a noise intervening to decompose without destroying the composition.[16] However, what appears increasingly germane to thinking through the possibility of an ironic sound is an understanding of music that extends beyond the abstracted and reified notion of some essentialist thing called "music." As Christopher Small argues:

> There is no such thing as music.
>
> Music is not a thing at all but an activity, something that people do. The apparent thing "music" is a figment, an abstraction of the action, whose reality vanishes as soon as we examine it at all closely. This habit of thinking in abstractions, of taking from an action what appears to be its essence and of giving that essence a name, is probably as old as language; it is useful in the conceptualizing of our world but it has its dangers … This is the trap of reification, and it has been a besetting fault of Western thinking ever since Plato, who was one of its earliest perpetrators.[17]

By means of this critique of Platonic essentialism, idealism, and metaphysics, Small invites us to consider "organizing sounds into meanings" by articulating music as a verb: "*To music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance*."[18] And thus Small opens up a wider range of musico-ironic possibilities. Given these considerations, the destabilization of a national metaphysical symbol by means of a musically symbolic gesture during the Vietnam War by an African-American expatriate and former paratrooper becomes the public site of a performative ironizing and sociopolitical resistance to dogmatic nationalism and militarism, while concomitantly redefining the social force of popular musicking.[19]

The poem "The Defense of Fort McHenry" was written by Francis Scott Key after the bombardment of Fort McHenry during the War of 1812 and set to a pre-existing quoted melody. In the context of militarism, it engendered a sense of nationalist patriotism. Hendrix's quotation and repetition with a difference—an ironized variation—reverses its signifying trajectory. If Key's "Star-Spangled Banner" invoked patriotic pride by means of identity politics during and after the War of 1812, Hendrix's variation in light of the Vietnam War highlighted the sounds of bombardment, emergency vehicles, and sonic feedback as musically significant noise wrapped in the banner of nationalism. Armed with a material

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[16] See Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN, 1985).

[17] Small, *Musicking*, p. 2. Indeed, by widening "the circle of our attention to take in the entire set of relationships that constitutes a performance, we shall see that music's primary meanings are not individual at all but social" (p. 8).

[18] Ibid., pp. 2 and 9. Italics in original.

[19] The Vietnam War, the ongoing struggles of the Civil Rights Movement, and the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr the previous year provide the backdrop for this performance of peaceful politico-musical dissent.

lever (viz., the whammy, vibrato, or tremolo arm/bar) and an immaterial principle of peace, Hendrix performs a musical transposition and a transformative critique by means of an ironic sound.

Hendrix's various material and sonic tools (for example, tremolo, distortion, high-pitched feedback, bends, legato lines, and trills, among others) permeate the piece.[20] Analyzing the placement of sonic signifiers alongside their lyrical signifiers magnifies Hendrix's effects as disruptive to conventional signifieds. The material flexibility of the vibrato arm, for example, provides the musical possibility of destabilizing the melody and, analogously, highlights the significatory instability of the lyrical signifieds. Certain key terms in the lyrics provide moments of musical emphasis and/or destabilization (for example, "light," "stars," "perilous fight," "ramparts," and "watched"). In each of these cases, there is a melodic embellishment supplemented by means of vibrato and feedback that calls attention to or questions its conventional semantic signification notwithstanding the "absence" of the lyrical signifiers.

The movement from subtle to dramatic musical phrasings begins its crescendo following the line "And the rockets' red glare" with a bombastic interruption of the melody, utilizing high-pitched squeals and dive-bombing before returning to the melody. With the line "the bombs bursting in air" the sonic assault continues with ambulance tones, tortured squeals, rapid whammy manipulations, and multiple dive-bombing effects at which point the melody resumes with an embellished legato line.[21] Hendrix then pauses to retune. This seemingly ancillary or tangential *fermata* reveals another material and situational layer of irony: the tuning required for a return to the melody necessitates a putatively non-musical correction in the midst of the song in order to bring the instrument back "in tune" with "itself." Thus, the detuning effect that makes possible Hendrix's ironic musical commentary by means of a certain musical noise has its own discordant material after-effects for the instrument as well as, analogously, for a society disrupted by conflict and violence.

Next, an intermusical borrowing occurs, providing a further clue to the ironic scene unfolding as Hendrix grafts the opening somber notes of "Taps." After returning to the melody with pronounced vibrato and feedback, the line "O'er the land of the free" is followed by another dive-bomb, concluding the final line with a legato trill and a brief ascending chordal progression resolving to the tonic now awash in effects and feedback. With Hendrix's quotation and its association with funerals and flag ceremonies in the military, Hendrix supplies

[20] Regarding the centrality of guitar timbre, distortion, noise, and so on as aural signifiers, see Walser, *Running with the Devil*, pp. 41–5, 50–56.

[21] A "dive-bombing" effect replicates the sound of bombs dropping and exploding by means of a distorted, high-frequency harmonic followed by a vertical manipulation of a vibrato bar and a radical release of sting tension creating a low-frequency vibration.

the critical stroke of sonic irony.[22] Thus, we have flags and funerals, freedom and death ironizing the ideology of uncritical nationalism and unbridled militarism by means of a dive-bombastic "effecting" of a contrary musical noise as a distorted and transgressive sound of dissent destabilizing and subverting a sacred–secular song about a sacred–secular symbol by virtue of its metonymic association with a sacred-secular nation.[23]

Through Hendrix's use of heretofore "non-musical" effects to effect an ironic sound, he articulates through his improvisation what Monson has described as:

> … [a] cultural commentary with sound itself … [an] aesthetic of interaction [that] embodies very powerfully an ethos that binds its participants into something larger than the individual but less totalizing and ahistorical than "Culture" with a capital C. When improvising, musicians borrow, quote, transform, and invert music from all sorts of repertories in their musical play.[24]

Consequently, Hendrix's performance provides a critical commentary "through manipulation of musical resources that signal matters of cultural significance"[25] that pre-eminently embodies the possibility of sociopolitical critique by means of a sonic irony that seeks to intervene in the public arena.

Country: Come "Sail Away" With Me

The "wistful, yearning quality of the strings' elaboration of the chromatic line counterpoints the gentle, hypnotic allure of the piano ostinato."[26] Given Peter Winkler's apt description of Randy Newman's "Sail Away," it is perhaps surprising that such images serve as the musical bed for the brutal history of slavery in America.[27] Nevertheless, it is through this dislocating "copulation" of opposites that Newman establishes his ironic counterpoint of oppositional forces. Thus, the sound of irony here, as in many of Newman's songs, is a dissonant juxtaposition of musical style and lyrical content.[28] Newman composes a pretty song to convey

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[22] Regarding "iconic resemblance" as a "transformation of the thing resembled," using Peirce's semiotic distinctions, see Monson, "Doubleness and Jazz Improvisation," p. 305.

[23] As Walser aptly suggests, "The oral virtuosity of the blues, nuanced and dialogic, had become in Hendrix a psychedelic wail of transgression and transcendence." Walser, *Running with the Devil*, p. 77.

[24] Monson, "Doubleness and Jazz Improvisation," p. 313.

[25] Ibid., p. 292.

[26] Peter Winkler, "Randy Newman's Americana," *Popular Music Journal*, 7/1 (January 1988): 1–26 at 9.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Winkler describes Newman's lyrics as "simple in vocabulary, terse, and elliptical: what is left unsaid is often more important than what is said. And irony is his most characteristic mode." Ibid., pp. 1–2.

an ugly message via ironic critique. This ugly message, however, is ironized in the language of commercial marketing by playing on the imagined desires of the target audience. The slave salesman must sell the commodity/product (America) to the very commodity/product (Africans) he, in turn, hopes to sell to another target market (slave owners). If his pitch works, he will have reconstructed the commodity as consumed-consumer (Africans as Americans); in other words, humans as both consumers of commodities and commodities to be consumed.

From the opening lines of the first verse, the praises of the plentiful nature of America combined with the daily wine-inebriated praising of Jesus by Americans are placed in contradistinction to the difficulties of life in the "jungle." The second verse, replete with ironic racial slurs and prejudicial stereotypes, elaborates the various difficulties (for example, lions, tigers, and snakes) that a soon-to-be traveler will no longer have to fear as the "little wog" is invited to imagine the wonderful foods and freedom that awaits him. The third verse develops the theme of freedom and familial prosperity, both of which will be denied to the African other. With one last racial slur for good measure, Newman ends the third verse with "You're all gonna' be an American" with all of the ironic sensibilities that such a dénouement might entail.

In critiquing the historical horrors of slavery and racism, Newman manages to indict the nation's sales-oriented colonization and commodification of the subject through the marketing of desire. Consequently, capitalistic desire is complicit in generating desire for another to desire something to be seen as desirable—all toward one's own desired end. Newman recreates the slave trader as a traveling salesman (of men, women, and children) and a travel agent (one that denies agency to the human other in forced travel for the sake of its ironic namesake "free trade"). To change analogical registers only slightly, the prophet of the profit evangelizes by preaching the evangel, the "good" news, of economic exchange at the expense of the exploitation of human bodies for a this-worldly reward or profit. This religious turn, as we will see, is not metaphysically insignificant.

Although not lengthy, what this song conveys in under three minutes is a powerful ironizing of the slave trader's enslavement, dehumanization, and commodification of the foreign other in the name of being "an American," reverberations of which resonate throughout the nation's history. The historical scene ironized through this event of enslavement—both sailing away from and under the banner of freedom—stands as a critique of the metaphysical themes of naïve nationalism, uncritical patriotism, and divine right/favor bestowed upon a certain nation and a certain people by a certain God. In the process of "singing about Jesus" in this great land of freedom, a refrain emerges in this song's recapitulation of the variations on, and dangers of, the metaphysical themes in "God, Flag, and Country." In a similar ironic site of musicking, Small captures the doubleness of meaning powerfully:

> At an outdoor rally, with bodies erect and hands at the salute, fifty thousand men and women thunder out a patriotic song. The sounds they make rise toward

> the God whom they are imploring to make their country great. Others hear the singing and shiver with fear.[29]

The Dogmatic Thread and Threat of Metaphysics

Notwithstanding the conventionally demarcated segments of culture as reified categories (for example, religion, politics, economics, and so on), a common metaphysical thread, which is also, ironically, the site of a potential existential threat, is interwoven throughout the totalizing themes of "God, Flag, and Country." Irony discourse has adopted the theologico-rhetorical "fall" and the resultant "evil" to explore irony's existential functions. Indeed, the "evil" that befalls or is caused by humanity through dogmatic adherence to totalizing metanarratives, whether nationalistic, political, social, or economic, replicate at their extremes a religious fervor that brooks no questioning.

As Colebrook reminds us, the status of irony turns largely on how one imagines the "fall" of the "self" in relation to language and signification (for example, either "as a loss of a pure origin" or as a *felix culpa*), which is an effect of an already differentiated language.[30] Distinguishing between Romantic poetic and theological notions of the fall and thereby its reception, Colebrook states:

> The idea of a fall is, however, essential to irony and life as irony. It is in creating images of a lost paradise that we create ourselves *as fallen*, and thereby create ourselves at all … In contrast with the theological notion of a fall from some divine and eternal origin, the fall of irony embraces rather than mourns its finitude, difference and non-identity … The self is necessarily fallen: not fallen *from* some origin, so much as producing a lost and other past in the very act of falling. It is the fall itself, the creation of oneself as a speaking and finite being, that creates the idea of the unfallen origin.[31]

This fall may be heard as one common metaphysical theme running through the ostensibly disparate themes of "God, Flag, and Country" in a manner analogous to the Trinitarian presence of one God in three persons. Moreover, as a result of this rhetorical "fall" and "evil," religion appears to be the most conspicuous site to explore the common thread/threat that weaves itself throughout the themes. It is in

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29 Small, *Musicking*, p. 1.

30 Colebrook, *Irony*, p. 49.

31 Ibid., p. 49. "The origin or foundation is a created effect of life, not its preceding cause. Far from finite daily life being a fall from an original infinite plenitude, it is only the fragmentary, the finite and the incomplete that can give us a sense of the infinity that lies beyond any closed form. An ironic 'fall' realises, therefore, that there was no paradise before the sense of loss. The idea of an original plenitude is an image created *from life*." Ibid., p. 49.

religion that we find the most explicitly recognized threat of absolute commitment to the otherwise historically and axiologically contingent. The desire to commit oneself unconditionally to the conditional is a central characteristic of the various religious fundamentalisms and is made possible as an after-effect of language. This metaphysical desire is substitutable across various sectors of culture, which is why imbuing an aura of sacrality to flags and countries often yields similar "fundamentalistic" identities through "religious" desires when accompanied by a commitment to invest oneself in the name of one's deity or ideology the fullness of absolute meaning and truth notwithstanding their epistemological absence.

At stake in these three pieces is the metaphysical desire to sacralize and remove from critical scrutiny such sacrosanct regions of culture as inherently, rather than contingently, "foundational." In response to such sacred and sacrosanct representations, irony appears as a relative existential or aesthetic commitment to epistemological non-commitment—a place within language to critique these retrojected representations as phantasmic sites of idealized desire, pure presence, and unconditional commitment to a perceived absolute.

Similarly, the contingently situated and historically contextualized subject positions of humans will, in turn, yield other sites of irony as well as the sound of irony as linguistically mediated constructions. For example, a situational reading of Newman, Hendrix, and their respective musical styles may be read as a result of African/European cultural interaction, influence, and appropriation. Robin Sylvan in *Traces of the Spirit* reconstructs the historical trajectory of West African musicoreligious influence on its colonizing other by means of a "hidden religious sensibility."[32] He describes this musicoreligious influence or "impulse," hidden or not, as genealogically related to West African possession religions by way of the transatlantic slave trade:

> When West Africans were brought to the Americas by force in the devastating horror of the slave trade, they were forbidden to practice this complex of musico-religious ceremonies. So their religious impulse went underground and found expression in other ways … this impulse also found expression in "secular" entertainment musics in the United States. African American musics such as blues and jazz carried within them many of the musicoreligious practices and experiential states of West African possession religions, although these were now transmuted into a form hidden within a different cultural sector.[33]

Although one may question the essentialistic sensibility of this "hidden impulse," the structural influence of musical styles does raise the possibility of music providing a functional "religious" influence within culture. As Jaques Attali argues, "Without a doubt, music is a strategy running parallel to religion. The channeling

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[32] Robin Sylvan, *Traces of the Spirit: The Religious Dimensions of Popular Music* (New York, 2002), pp. 6–7.

[33] Ibid.

power of music, like that of religion, is quite real and quite operative."[34] Notably, the power of music to engender cross-cultural religious experiences is also the power to put those experiences into question by means of an ironic deployment of the cutting double edge.

In this light, Newman's regular use of blues and gospel styles coupled with classical European orchestration recapitulates the mutual "contamination" of ethnomusicological and religious influence in American musical history. This fusion of musical styles makes it possible for a "white boy with the blues"[35] and many other Americans to sing ("about Jesus") in a style made historically possible by the enslaved Africans referenced in "Sail Away." Conversely, Jimi Hendrix's decentering subject position *in media res* grafted between Newman's songs ironizes the marginalized, yet centrally disruptive and generative, role of an African-American expatriate performing the national anthem of the American colonizer by the colonized West African.

Consequently, American popular music may be seen as a situational irony in that it falls "victim" to its own "victimization" by appropriating the religio-musical influences of the historically victimized other, thereby engendering a circular ethnomusicological reinscription as an enslaved, coopted, and commodified sound colonizing and "contaminating" the European–American music of the colonizers. This "contamination," bemoaned and persecuted in the early history of American popular music, traces a return of the repressed/oppressed of sorts in an ironic recolonization.

Bring the Noise

Finally, is the sound of irony simply a bemused "that's ironic" or "how ironic"? I would suggest that what is at stake is a certain aesthetic, axiological, and political desire to disrupt totalizing systems by alerting anyone within earshot to something perceived as alarming.[36] At stake is a musical discourse that grants admission to

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[34] Attali, *Noise*, p. 30.

[35] Winkler states: "Many white singers are attracted to black blues and gospel styles because of the impression of authenticity, of heartfelt soulfulness that such styles can convey. Randy Newman seems to be appropriating black styles for precisely the opposite reason: to intensify a sense of alienation, to emphasize the gap between himself and the characters in his songs. He deliberately exploits the absurdity of a white, Jewish intellectual singing like a black from the deep South, mocking the conventions of 'white boy with the blues' even as he appropriates them. He is laughing at his own blackface act." Winkler, "Randy Newman's Americana," p. 16. Regarding the essentializing of race, ethnicity, music, and the power relations involved in the classification of reified attributions, see Monson, "Doubleness and Jazz Improvisation."

[36] The connection between noise, the public, and the political is explicit in Public Enemy's "Bring the Noise." Also, see Matthew McAllister's "Wagner, Nazism, and Evil in

a noisy interference into one's thinking and transmits that noise as a questioning disposition, leading perhaps to a *metanoia*—a change of mind—a conversion.

To this end, the sound of irony may serve as a sociopolitical critique of metaphysical idealisms in order to alert listeners to some questionable congruity by means of its incongruity, to some constructed stability by means of its instability, and to some official order by its disorder. In this sense, musicians appear as noisy prophets calling into question sacrosanct systems—sacred and secular—that seek to naturalize their constructions and suppress their contingent foundations.

The desire to ground, harmonize, and resolve human meaning in some non-contingent and transcendent order is a musico-metaphysical theme as prevalent as it is ancient in religious, philosophical, and political systems.[37] This thread runs from ancient to contemporary declamations of unorthodox, subversive, unnatural and/or immoral music/noise as a threat to orthodoxy, stability, and the sociopolitical and/or religious order.[38]

Since the status of music/noise is contextual and relative to the axiological and aesthetic perspectives of individuals and communities, an ironic noise has a double edge that is not reserved for one religious, political, or ideological persuasion or purpose over another. It does not have a proper locus.[39] Writing about irony requires a certain self-referential performativity that marks its own relativity and suspension of absolute decidability while orchestrating an ironic sound in its contestation of dogmatic absolutism through an interrogative critique. Thus, it is a sound that runs the risk of being misunderstood, devalued, or denigrated as "mere" noise, stylistic or otherwise, depending on the context from which such a judgment is made. Nevertheless, if one accepts Jacques Attali's contentions that "life is full of noise" and "[n]othing essential happens in the absence of noise[,]" then music becomes "a way of perceiving the world." What is crucial is that music as the "organization of noise" and the sound of irony as a noisy intervention matter in some existential sense.[40]

In closing, one final, although "original," ironic thread connects the variations on a metaphysical theme explored in this chapter and weaves them together

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Apt Pupil," Chapter 12 in this collection, for similar attention to the signifying elements of a "scratchy" sound/noise in the material reproduction of the "Liebestod."

[37] Cole, *Music*, p. 26. Pythagoras' "imitation of the unheard harmony of the spheres"–the transcendent non-auditory auditory—is a musico-metaphysical harmonization that suppresses the dissonant and the cacophonous as a threat to society.

[38] Ibid., p. 60.

[39] See Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*. As Small explains, "Noise is a difficult concept to define, since what is noise to me may well be music to you, and vice versa, but we could make a rough definition of noise as unwanted sounds—sounds, that is, whose meaning we either cannot discern or do not like when we do discern it. Noise in a rock band is thus a different thing from noise in a string quartet, and each of those ensembles produces what would be called noise in the other's world of meaningful sounds." Small, *Musicking*, p. 121. Regarding the status of noise as a desirable sign, see Walser, *Running with the Devil*, p. 42.

[40] Attali, *Noise*, pp. 3–4.

within the very fabric of our American foundations. It is the site of an inaugural irony that "founded" the most sacred of our secular rights to make a noise even about our most cherished secular–sacred "scriptures." At the foundation of a self-authorized "legal" writing of a law about the writing of laws concerning religion, speech, and the press instituted by the scratching of plume to parchment over two centuries ago, the "legal" right to believe, speak, and write freely was made possible in the First Amendment as a supplement to the Constitution by an ironic performativity by the First Congress as it proceeded to *write* and *make a law*. It stated: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press." Consequently, given this structural and situational irony at our foundation, included among the legalization of these freedoms and rights is the freedom and right to make an ironic noise, even if it reverberates as a questioning of its own ironic and metaphysical "foundations" and sounds an alarm against the metaphysical tendencies to dogmatize the perspectival, absolutize the contingent, and sacralize the profane.[41]

[41] See Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" in Gil Anidjar (ed.), *Acts of Religion* (New York, 2002), pp. 230–98.

Chapter 8
The View from Below: Early Hip Hop Culture as Ironic Perception

Chadwick Jenkins

Hip-hop artist KRS-One suggests that the academic view of "Hip Hop" is compromised by the corporate tendency to isolate one aspect of the culture (generally rap—thus hip hop as a genre of music) and treat it as a product to be bought and sold, analyzed and reified. Thus KRS-One distinguishes among what he labels "Hiphop," "Hip Hop," and "hip-hop."[1] There is no *sounding* difference among the three terms and thus they suggest a quasi-Derridean emphasis on écriture, and indeed *différance*.[2] Moreover, KRS-One engages in a deconstructionist reversal of the relationship between the music as product and the culture as its context.

"Hiphop" is "our unique Spirit, our unique collective consciousness; the creative causative force behind Hip Hop's elements. Hiphop is … a perceptual ability that causes one to self-create and raises one's self-worth." KRS-One insists that "Hip Hop" culture is predicated not upon a collection of products or modes of fashion but rather upon a way of seeing the world and a manner of self-fashioning out of the detritus of found culture and objects. For KRS-One, "Hip Hop" consists of the so-called four core elements of the culture (graffiti art, breakdancing, emceeing, and deejaying) while "hip-hop" (marked as subordinate through its lack of capitalization) represents the *fallen* nature of Hip Hop *qua* product, a hypostatization of a set of practices.[3]

Underwriting these products and practices alike is Hiphop, a manner of seeing, a looking askew at the world that is at once (self-)creative and enriching. Although KRS-One posits the notion as a kind of Hegelian bit of metaphysics, I would

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[1] KRS-One, "Temple of Hip Hop: An Introduction to Hip Hop Presented by Master Teacher, KRS-One," *The Official KRS ONE Website*, http://www.krs-one.com/temple-of-hip-hop/ [accessed July 15, 2013]. The later quotations from KRS-One also come from this webpage. Throughout this chapter, I adhere to KRS-One's orthography.

[2] Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy* trans. Alan Bass, (Chicago, IL, 1982), pp. 1–28.

[3] KRS-One's insistence on the four core elements might be read as rather conservative and nostalgic. After all, graffiti and breakdancing are hardly central to Hip Hop any longer, and even the practices of deejaying and emceeing have altered radically from their statuses prior to 1984.

argue that this "perceptual ability" (the Hiphop that underwrites Hip Hop) is anti-metaphysical in precisely the manner that figures such as Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty claim for irony. In its reconfiguration of the products of the recording industry, in its rearticulation of public space, in its reimagining the limits of the body, Hip Hop enacts a creative distance from the mainstream culture of the 1970s that parallels the same skeptical distancing deriving from the advent of postmodernism.[4] This view offers Hip Hop a different kind of critical apparatus than is often applied in academic and popular literature. In this reading, it is not what Hip Hop does that calls into question the dominant culture, but rather its manner of doing it.

This chapter employs KRS-One's view of Hiphop to investigate the earliest manifestations of the culture (roughly from 1972 when DJ Kool Herc developed the "break" to manipulate one's experience of familiar dance tracks, to 1984 when Run-D.M.C. earned the first rap gold album, creating the "new school" of Hip Hop and its emergence into the mainstream), although the emphasis will be on Hip Hop prior to the advent of its first recorded products in 1979. I will argue that the perceptual approach of Hiphop is deeply ironic and enacts a series of deconstructions: products become processes, the found becomes the self-created, consumers become performers, and vandalism becomes a claim to cultural heritage. Hence, I will not attempt to provide examples of this or that piece of "ironic" hip-hop; rather I seek to excavate the perspectival gaze of Hiphop to reveal that gaze as ironic. Moreover, viewing Hip Hop as intrinsically ironic will also address certain misgivings critics have expressed concerning the political efficacy of irony. Indeed, such a discussion may complicate the perception of irony itself.

"Can't Define How I Be Dropping These Mockeries": Socratic Irony and Negativity

The most familiar form of irony is what Wayne Booth refers to as "stable."[5] A shared understanding of a situation is the basis for this type of irony. When another car cuts in front of ours and I say "Nice driving," you are aware that I am saying the opposite of what I mean because we both understand the operator of the other vehicle to have behaved inappropriately. Stable irony takes for granted the world as we see it. Despite its momentary equivocation, stable irony reinforces the sense of a language's solidity and the reliability of communication.

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[4] By destroying the illusion of the hegemonic music culture of the 1970s, this "creative distance" may echo certain elements of Romantic irony. For a similar discussion, see Timothy Koozin's "Irony, Myth, and Temporal Organization in the Early Songs of Bob Dylan," Chapter 5 in this collection.

[5] Wayne C. Booth, *Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago, IL, 1974), pp. 1–20.

Stable irony entails several consequences. First, it strikes a distance between what is said and what is meant; removing the speaker from the immediacy of the speech act causes many authorities on irony to see it as elitist.[6] The speaker stands *above* the fray of meaning and communication. Irony is the rhetoric of the non-committal. Second, irony vouchsafes the security of communication as a sort of "final vocabulary" in Richard Rorty's phrase.[7] A final vocabulary is one in which certain important terms—such as "moral," "ethical," and "just"—are considered unquestionably grounded. Final vocabularies depend on a metaphysical assurance that immutable and eternal ideas underwrite the validity of a given statement. Stable irony reinforces the final vocabulary by calling attention to its inviolability; such irony is not transformative. The rhetorical nonchalance of stable irony belies an underlying assuredness that meaning is secure.

However, the figure of Socrates represents another, far more radical approach to irony. In irony, what I say is not what I mean; what I mean is absent. In stable irony, that absent thing is *understood* and is therefore rendered present through implication. Socrates radicalizes the negativity of the ironic gesture. In *The Republic*, when Socrates systematically dismantles the definition of "justice" offered by Polemarchus through demonstrating that it involves fatal contradictions, he leaves Polemarchus sputtering, "I don't know any more what I did mean."[8] In denouncing what Polemarchus posits as "justice," Socrates refuses to offer another positive definition of the term. Rather, Socrates leaves the breach of negativity open. He refutes the positive definitions on offer (positive here in the sense of "this *means* that"), but in their stead only negative definitions remain ("whatever this means, it *cannot mean* that").

In opposition to stable irony, which relies upon the metaphysical plenitude of meaning to vouchsafe the temporary rhetorical act of negation, Socrates' irony insists upon a renewal of semantic possibility. However, in place of concrete definition, he merely offers a desire for truth that simultaneously relies upon truth's ultimate existence and its impenetrability by human inquiry. Where his interlocutors want firm ground upon which to stand, Socrates only offers a pathway to traverse—not an object that has being, but a process of becoming. Indeed, this is the critical and corrective nature of Socratic irony. The Socratic ironist sees the world as deeply flawed and contradictory, perhaps intolerable, but she does not pretend to envision a workable reconciliation of the world's contradictory impulses. This leads to the ironist's need to negate.

Irony recognizes the ideal while also accepting the impossibility of reconciling that ideal with lived or even livable experience. The ironist insists on an unachievable but felt Utopia that underwrites all political action. Thus, irony

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[6] See, for example, ibid., pp. 264–5.

[7] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 73–8 at p. 73.

[8] Plato, *The Republic*, 334c in *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis, IN 1997), p. 979.

manages to inaugurate a shift in perspective or at the very least to make room for that emergent perspective, thus calling into question the dominant culture's faith in the immutable nature of Being.

Socrates' strategy here is aporetic in both senses of the term. First, it is a rhetorical strategy in which Socrates foils his interlocutors by erasing a clear trajectory for the dialogue; the interlocutors and the reader are left wondering where to go from here. Second, the sense of aporia is existential in that it locates a point of undecidability. Irony forces one to reconsider accepted notions of what is just, appropriate, and real; irony demands an accounting of the terms of meaning. Meaning, for most of the history of Western thought, has been founded upon presence. The general tendency has been to believe that because an idea (the Platonic *eidos*) actually exists as a metaphysical reality, language can develop concepts to represent that idea. We use language properly when it conforms as closely as possible to the real. But the Romantics and later postmodern thinkers such as Derrida and Rorty came to see Socratic irony as being corrosive toward such linguistic self-assurance.

Here, Inspectah Deck's verses from Wu-Tang Clan's "Triumph" (1997), part of which appears as the title for this section, seem appropriate: "Socrates' philosophies and hypotheses / Can't define how I be dropping these mockeries." These lines nicely articulate the aporetic nature of Socratic irony. Insofar as Socrates is ironic (in early and middle Plato), he resists propounding philosophies and hypotheses; moreover, by employing refutation to lead to aporia, Socrates calls into question the very possibility of definition. Insofar as later Plato has Socrates propounding theories, Socrates fails to adhere to his ironic negativity. However, it is precisely in an attempt to construct a positive philosophy that Socrates fails to account for the negative power of his (earlier) ironic stance. *Theoria* (a removed manner of seeing that attempts to account for the whole) cannot explain the useful mockery of Socratic irony. This forces us to question one of the seemingly fundamental assumptions about irony—that it is necessarily a rhetorical trope of distance, a view from above, without involvement.

My reading of these lines from "Triumph" hints at the possibility of an irony of engagement. Perhaps it is not coincidental, then, that just prior to Inspectah Deck's delivery of these lines, Ol Dirty Bastard introduced him by extolling his listeners: "Let's take it back to seventy-nine." The year 1979 witnessed the first recordings of hip-hop, the beginning of the end of the first era of Hip Hop. To invoke a return to that moment—the end of the pre-recording era for Hip Hop, the era before the reification KRS-One implicitly laments—may be read as an attempt to recapture the ironic expression which, I argue, was characteristic of early Hip Hop. Perhaps recorded hip-hop can itself be seen as a hypostatic gesture in line with the philosophy Inspectah Deck decries; his mockeries then return to the negative authenticity of Socratic irony. This return involves realizing a potential for resistance to hip-hop (as object) within Hiphop (as perception); such a realization is *deconstructive*.

Derrida, Deconstruction, and the Politics of Irony

For Derrida, irony's insistence upon aporia forces the structure of language and meaning to "deconstruct" itself. Building on the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, Derrida insists that language depends on oppositions. Saussure famously claimed: "In language there are only differences without positive terms."[9] That is, we know the meaning of "up" because it stands in opposition to the word "down." However, neither "up" nor "down" have a positive meaning in themselves; rather, they only *mean* through that constitutive opposition. Derrida points out that many of the most relied-upon oppositions involve not only a logical structure, but also an axiological structure (a structure of value). Thus the "signified" is valued over and dominates the "signifier," "male" dominates "female," "reason" dominates "feeling," and, in racial terms, "white" dominates "black." However, because these oppositions are "without positive terms," the "greater" term depends on the "lesser" term for its sense. The hierarchy is unstable and can be overturned. Moreover, since language builds meaning over time, the actual meaning of a given term as used is continually under construction. There is no final plenitude of meaning; it is always put off to a later moment that never arrives.

Deconstruction seeks out the irreconcilable differences that occur within a given concept or term—differences that refuse to resolve and thus continually defer any final meaning (the combination of "to differ" and "to defer" is what characterizes Derrida's enigmatic "non-concept," *différance*). Hence, deconstruction attempts to reveal the hidden differences that underlay so much of what we take for granted in our language and our worldviews. Derrida asserts that when deconstruction "intervenes, all the conceptual oppositions of metaphysics … become nonpertinent."[10] Language and metaphysical thought is not destabilized but rather shown to have been always already unstable.

Derrida's approach resists trying to resolve or neutralize oppositions—some sort of opposition is requisite for meaning to occur. Rather, he suggests that one proceed through a "double gesture." This involves, on the one hand, overturning the hierarchy to show that the higher term can also derive from the lesser (despite our typical way of understanding that hierarchy), and, on the other hand, marking "the interval between inversion, which brings low what was high, and the irruptive emergence of a new 'concept,' a concept that can no longer be, and never could be, included in the previous regime."[11]

In a sense, deconstruction is not the act of *doing* anything. The regimes of understanding are always already deconstructed; they always rely on unsustainable logical/axiological hierarchies that are reversible. These reversals

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[9] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin, ed. Perry Meisel and Haun Saussy (New York, 2011), p. 120.

[10] Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, IL, 1981), pp. 28–30 at p. 29.

[11] Ibid., pp. 41–2.

can give rise to new concepts, but these new concepts merely establish new regimes. Deconstruction, therefore, can better be understood as a way of seeing, a manner of viewing the world in which hierarchies are always unstable, meaning is grounded in difference and always deferred, and we are always prepared for the irruptive emergence of new concepts. In this sense, deconstruction is yet another ironic manner of seeing the world.

This returns us to the question of the political nature of irony. Stable irony is inherently conservative, disengaged, and elitist. H.K. Fowler defines irony as:

> … a form of utterance that postulates a double audience, consisting of one party that hearing shall hear and shall not understand, and another party that, when more is meant than meets the ear, is aware both of that more and of the outsiders' incomprehension.[12]

This definition beautifully captures the concern that irony always leaves someone out. But Socratic irony and the deconstructive view seem to offer us a different understanding of irony. Socratic irony is an ethical mode that, in the words of Claire Colebrook, is "linked to Eros because it is not power over others through rhetoric, but dialogue."[13] Socratic irony requires involvement and allows for conflicting, irreconcilable views without forgoing the pursuit of the good. Hence, "Socrates is not a presented object that we might possess but an implied desire, a movement towards truth or a love of truth, rather than a given definition."[14] The Romantics also saw Socrates in this manner, believing that he pointed toward the virtue of the unfixed nature of the self. Socrates eschewed the elitist view of *theoria*, that manner of seeing that takes in all, that "elevated look that could grasp the Ideas themselves." Instead, he presaged the Romantic emphasis on *poiesis*, the process of making or creating something. For the Romantics, "life is not a thing to be known, but a process of creation."[15] There is no *theoria* here, no all-mastering "view from nowhere." Rather, in Socratic irony the familiar is defamiliarized. The game remains afoot. By keeping the process of meaning in play, perhaps Socratic irony and deconstruction represent a politics of play and pleasure. Irony as a *politics of pleasure* informs the following reading of Hip Hop.

"You Never Heard It Like This Before": Hiphop Deconstructions

When discussing the political nature of hip-hop, authors turn their attention to the music produced on recordings following the 1979 release of the Sugar Hill

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[12] H.K. Fowler, "Irony," *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (Oxford, 1926).

[13] Claire Colebrook, *Irony: The New Critical Idiom* (London and New York, 2004), p. 26.

[14] Ibid., p. 27.

[15] Ibid., p. 51.

Gang's "Rapper's Delight." Indeed, for the majority of authors, the politics of hip-hop really begin with the advent of hip-hop's golden age, inaugurated by Run-D.M.C.'s eponymous gold album in 1984 and continuing into the 1990s. The pre-recording era (roughly 1972–1979) and the early recordings featuring mostly party rap (1979–1984) are considered not serious enough (musically, topically, or intellectually) to be political (Grandmaster Flash's 1982 release of "The Message" being an exception). Occasionally, authors misrepresent this period by underemphasizing the pleasures of early Hip Hop in order to reconfigure it as a staunch rejoinder to gang violence.[16] Moreover, critics reduce hip-hop's political force to a set of messages found in the lyrics. This leaves hip-hop's political efficacy open to easy (if well-intentioned) dismissals.[17] To narrow the focus to the conceptual nature of lyrics would undermine the performative elements of Hip Hop culture that make it politically efficacious. When early DJ Kool Herc admonished the crowd with "You never heard it like this before," he was extolling the virtues of pleasure, but the pleasure was political. Hip Hop offered a new way of understanding based on the politics of pleasure and the ironic seeing-anew of the sociopolitical landscape.

Hip Hop's greatest political achievements are inherent in the spirit of Hiphop mentioned by KRS-One, and that ironizing spirit finds its keenest expression in the period *before* hip-hop's golden age. The argument will involve what I term Hip Hop's four "deconstructive moments" where "moment" should be understood not in the sense of temporal instance but more in line with Immanuel Kant's use of the term (for example, in his writing on aesthetics) to account for the various aspects of an object of interest. Although each "deconstructive moment" is articulated by all four of the core elements (graffiti art, breakdancing, emceeing, and deejaying), I believe that each moment is best exemplified by a specific element.

First Moment (Graffiti): The Rearticulation of Public Space

Of the four "core" elements of early Hip Hop, graffiti first became a political issue. It is also the element that most clearly illustrates Hip Hop's rearticulation of public space. Graffiti art, specifically the practice of "tagging," first garnered widespread public attention in the summer of 1971 with an article in the *New York Times* in which a reporter attempted to track down the meaning of the seemingly ubiquitous spray-painted tag, "Taki 183."[18] The tag consists of a short version of the name Demetraki, an alternative for the tagger's given name Demetrius, coupled with the

[16] As an example of this strategy, see Cheryl L. Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana, IL, 2002), pp. 45–9.

[17] See John H. McWhorter, *All About the Beat: Why Hip-Hop Can't Save Black America* (New York, 2008).

[18] Craig Castleman, "The Politics of Graffiti," in Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (eds), *That's the Joint! The Hip-Hop Studies Reader* (New York, 2004), pp. 21–9.

number of the street on which he lived in Washington Heights, Manhattan. Taki did not claim to have originated the notion of coupling name and street address, but rather copied the practice from Julio 204 from the Inwood neighborhood of Manhattan. However, and this is the crucial point, Julio 204 restricted his tagging to his own neighborhood whereas Taki's tag proliferated throughout the boroughs, wherever the subway allowed him access.

Here, we can see one way in which graffiti art rearticulates space and place. Taki's tag locates itself with the street number. However, it was only in its suffusion throughout the city that it caught the attention of the wider public. Once Taki 183 and similar tags began appearing on the subway cars, these emblems of specific locales literally moved throughout the city—markers of a particular territory that *mark* the city writ large. In this sense of negotiated territoriality, the tags operated in a similar fashion to the itinerant DJs who also claimed certain neighborhoods as "theirs" while simultaneously exploring new territories, disseminating their sound throughout the city and beyond through the proliferation of cassette recordings. By proclaiming the place of the tags and then putting those tags in circulation (literally, through the subway system), the graffiti artists deterritorialized urban space, creating what Gilles Deleuze would call a "line of flight."[19] This is not to say that graffiti art eradicated territorial boundaries but rather that it put into question the easy divide between the polis as a whole and the circumscribed, ghettoized neighborhoods it contained (both in the sense of "included" and in the sense of "held in captivity").

The 1971 *Times* article treats the tag as something of an urban curiosity and little more. However, the newspaper coverage seems to have inspired a veritable explosion of tagging among urban youth. Then, less than a year after the original article, the *Times* and other news venues unleashed a slew of negative criticism of graffiti art while Mayor John V. Lindsay made the elimination of graffiti his pet project. Hence, 1972 marks the beginning of the prolonged debate concerning the status of graffiti: artistic practice or mere criminality? On the one hand, books such as Norman Mailer's 1974 *The Faith of Graffiti* celebrated graffiti art as an aesthetic outpouring of an existential insistence for recognition in the racist hegemonic structure represented by corporate architecture.[20] On the other hand, heightened pressure from the public and government led to increasingly exacting measures to combat graffiti, criminalizing the practice. Greater control was exerted over the policing of subway cars, and government officials sought to raise the fines for vandalism and enact other measures to deter the taggers.

The harder the government worked to block vandalism, the more determined the graffiti artists became to continue to make their mark in a public manner. In essence, this impasse brought into question, indeed deconstructs, the seemingly

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[19] On "deterritorialization" and "lines of flight," see Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN, 1987), pp. 156–7, 510.

[20] Norman Mailer and Jon Naar, *The Faith of Graffiti* (New York, 2009).

straightforward distinction between creation and crime and did so by reinscribing the Romantic notion of the artist-hero as the one who defies rules and transgresses perceived limits, the very values upon which many modern museums founded their exhibitions.

Second Moment (Breakdancing): The Body and/as the Image

If graffiti deconstructs the Romantic notion of the artist by demonstrating that the transgression so prized in art depends on an implicit criminality made explicit through graffiti, then breakdancing deconstructs the contradictory status of the black body. On the one hand, in the United States the black body had historically been relegated to the status of a mere commodity. That is, the black was reduced to corporeality understood as the reification of exchange value: the black body as the site of transaction. On the other hand, that same body, particularly in sports and other forms of entertainment, was the site of admiring investment. In both cases, the black body registers the sensual and therefore irrational. Even in complimenting the black body as skillful, athletic, and artistic, the implication was that it occupied the weaker part of the binaries: white/black, mind/body, reason/feeling. Much as is the case with the female body with respect to the male gaze, the black body was instantiated by the white gaze.[21]

Early breaking was less athletic and more formulaic than its post-1980, commercialized incarnations.[22] Early breaking involved the same kinds of taunts and boasts displayed in early emceeing. The activity was participatory, not a performance for an audience, and individual turns were relatively short in duration. Any given dancer would perform for a mere 10 to 30 seconds before ceding the floor to an opponent.[23] There was a basic sequence of events: the entry (an exaggeratedly tentative, seemingly stumbling walk that allowed the dancer to enter into the framework of the beat); footwork (the dancer supports his/her body with the hands while executing a twirling "helicopter" movement in a circle with slashing kicks of the feet); the spin (a variety of head spins, shoulder spins, flips, and so on); the freeze; and the exit (a return to verticality and a move to the periphery). All of the elements were fairly standardized (allowing for some variation) except for the freeze which broke the beat, ceased the motion. Intended as one of the signatures of the dancer it was personalized and emblematic, the equivalent of a graffiti tag. Sally Banes wrote that the freeze should "be as intricate, witty, insulting, or obscene as possible."[24] If the white gaze forced a reduction

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[21] For a fine summary of theories of the gaze, see Margaret Olin, "Gaze," in Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (eds), *Critical Terms for Art History* (Chicago, IL, 2003), pp. 208–19.

[22] Sally Banes, "Breaking," in Forman and Anthony Neal, *That's the Joint!*, pp. 13–20.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid., p. 16.

of the black body to mere image or site of display, the freeze subverted that display by reversing the trajectory. The dancer breaks with the beat of the music, becoming transfixed in an image, but it is an image thrown outwards, taunting the competition. In an ironic reversal, the b-boy accepts the status of image but forces that image to criticize and to deride.

Third Moment (Emceeing): The Found and/as the Created

Early emceeing differs significantly from rap of the golden age, although vestiges of emceeing remain in rap's retention of certain common phrases and in individual rappers' willingness to substitute the rhythmic, idiosyncratic delivery of nonsense syllables for poetic lines invested with concrete meaning. Early emceeing relied on stock locutions ("Everybody clap your hands," "And you don't stop," among others), overt references to the party and its participants (toasts, call-outs), references to the dance at hand or the act of dancing (for example, Kurtis Blow's "The Breaks," which puns on the word "break" and its homonym "brake" to compare mechanical devices to good fortune to the "break," or moment in a track that deejays extend to allow for longer dances), and the rhythmic delivery of non-semantic utterances that border on the machinic (for example, Melle Mel's "ha," and the practice of beatboxing). The emcee's job was twofold: first, to call attention to the activity of the deejay; second, to keep the party flowing by keeping the audience immersed in potentially quite extended performances of the break of a recording. The point was to keep the partygoers involved, not to provide them with a sense of distance that would convert them from participants into an audience. The familiar, therefore, is key. Recognizable fragments of slang alternate with more elaborate rhyming couplets, the latter often consisting of variations on urban storytelling tropes.

Meanwhile, early emceeing (and this is not generally true for later rap) insisted on a kind of improvisatory immediacy. Although emcees often had notebooks of rhymes they had worked out in advance, the actual deployment of the rhymes and the stock phrases in the moment of the party would depend on the flow of the party itself. Thus, emceeing calls into question the nature of creativity. By deriving material from familiar shards of slang and recognizable tropes, the emcee lays no claim to a creation *ex nihilo*; indeed, the economy of the Hip Hop party depends on the currency of the familiar, the ready-to-hand. Moreover, by making the site of creativity the interactive moment of engagement with the crowd, the emcee instantiates a Socratic insistence on creativity as a way of being, not necessarily culminating in a thing made. The emcee's verbal rhetoric is not "a presented object," to borrow Colebrook's words regarding Socrates, but "an implied desire, a movement towards truth."[25]

[25] Colebrook, *Irony*, p. 28.

Fourth Moment (Deejaying): The Product and/as the Process

The 1970s was a remarkable decade for the recording industry and for album culture. Platinum and multi-platinum artists inspired the recording industry to pour outrageous amounts of capital into the production of albums. The albums themselves came to be regarded as complete artistic projects (a trend started in the late 1960s), and rock, in particular, took on a sense of elitism, replete with artistic pretentions. The itinerant deejay punctured those pretensions by treating the albums not as products to be listened to with reverence but, rather, as the raw material for (re)creation. Here, the pun is telling. On the one hand, the deejays employed the recordings for the recreation of the crowd, just as a radio deejay would. On the other hand, part of that recreation derived from a rearticulation of the material itself. Deejays developed numerous techniques for manipulating recordings, in essence recoding them to give rise to *other* pieces of music—pieces of music derived from the originals and yet in many ways quite distant from them. Deejays took deep pleasure in ironically undermining the partygoers' expectations. DJ Afrika Bambaataa, for example, bragged:

> I'd throw on the Monkees … just the beat part … and [the audience would] start going crazy. I'd say, "You just danced to the Monkees." They'd say, "You liar. I didn't dance to no Monkees." I'd like to catch people who categorize records.[26]

One goal was to extend the "break," a moment within a recording that typically is more percussive and bass-driven without as strong a sense of melody and typically without vocals. It was this section of a recording that seemed to inspire the most involved dancing and that removed the deejaying performance from simply a repetition of the song itself. The deejay extended this section by having two copies of the album on the two turntables. When the first record neared the end of the break, the deejay cued the second record to its beginning and faded from the first record to the second, thereby creating an unbroken, continuous loop of the break. By isolating a characteristic moment from a recording that was *not* typically the section most recognizable by casual listeners, the deejay distanced the performance from another mere iteration of *this* song, transforming it into something other than itself. This in itself is an ironic gesture: the break is part of the song, but it typically does not stand in a synecdochal relationship to the whole; in other words, unlike the refrain, the break does not generally signify (or stand in for) a specific song to a listener. Thus, the break seemingly severs ties with its original context, deconstructing the part/whole relationship: what was an incidental part is now the foundation for a new whole.

Other innovations further distanced the break from its original context. Punch phrasing was a technique developed by DJ Grandmaster Flash in which he isolated

[26] Interview in David Toop, *Rap Attack 2: African Rap to Global Hip Hop* (London and New York, 1991), p. 66.

horn hits or other short and surprising motives from a record and superimposed that over the groove established by the ongoing break. This superimposition of sounds created a musical moment totally foreign to the original recording. The most famous deejay technique is scratching. By pushing the record back and forth with the needle engaged, the deejay creates highly rhythmic sounds superimposed over the main groove. This is the most recognizable deejay technique and, in some ways, the most radical. By bringing into the center of the music what had been considered peripheral unwanted noise, scratching rearticulates the divide between music and noise; the recording *qua* object becomes complicit in its own undoing.

All of these techniques emphasize Hip Hop's ultimate deconstruction: the questioning of the binary between product and process. While 1970s music culture created ever greater distances between the performer and the audience (stadium rock removed proximity from performers and disco nearly eliminated them), Hip Hop introduced an ironic immediacy: on the one hand, the deejay, emcee, and dancers were all part of the party, but the music was based on a recording of people not in attendance whose performances were manipulated by the deejay to be *other* than what they were. Furthermore, the deejay troubled the boundary between the consumer and the performer by performing through an idiosyncratic form of consumption. What had become the shibboleth of 1970s recording culture—the album as the immaculate end-product of a creative process—was turned on its head. The album became the beginning, not the end, of the creative process.[27] Hip Hop's ironic edge calls into question the monolithic status the album had attained by the 1970s. It does so, however, by employing the album itself, which forces the album to speak against itself. By relishing in the non-synecdochal fragment, the deejay allows the notion of recording to deconstruct itself.

"Bring the [Attalian] Noise": The Politics of Pleasure

In his 1977 book, *Noise*, Jacques Attali envisioned the history of music as unfolding through four "networks:" 1) sacrifice: music in the service of power; 2) representation: music as recorded in scores and as spectacle in concert halls; 3) repetition: music as individualized stockpiling via recordings; 4) composition: music "performed for the musician's own enjoyment, as self-communication, with no other goal than his own pleasure."[28] In composition, "production melds with consumption," and one's interest is not in the creation of an object but, rather, "invested in the act of doing."[29] In response to repetition, composition "liberates

[27] For more on flipping this product-as-beginning, see Joseph Plazak's "Listener-Senders, Musical Irony, and the Most "Disliked" YouTube Videos," Chapter 14 in this collection.

[28] Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN, 1985), pp. 31–2.

[29] Ibid., p. 144.

time so that it can be lived, not stockpiled."[30] Attali did not know early Hip Hop, and even later commentators failed to connect the rise of Hip Hop with his speculations.[31] However, Hip Hop's emphasis on production *via* consumption, its overturning of the binary product/process, and its emphasis on playing with established codes to give rise to new pleasures not only marks it as an ideal instance of Attali's notion of composition, but also guides us toward a more critical look at Attali's utopian vision.

The idea that Hip Hop plays some prophetic role in contemporary culture is a well-worn platitude, and once again, the focus is nearly always on the lyrics.[32] However, if we accept Hiphop as an ironic way of seeing (not a product or a set of lyrics), then our understanding of its ability to herald a coming age (as Attali might have it), is resituated. Indeed, in discussing the ironist, Kierkegaard writes:

> In one sense the ironist is certainly prophetic, because he is continually pointing to something impending, but what it is he does not know. He is prophetic, but his position and situation are the reverse of the prophet's … The ironist … has stepped out of line with his age, has turned around and faced it.[33]

The ironist points to aporia, to what cannot be known. But in Hip Hop this ironic prophecy is grounded in a Socratic Eros, a concern for involving others. In this sense, irony need not be elitist or politically impotent. Moreover, irony need not be "superior" to its context. It is not only available to suborned groups, but is best wielded by such groups to call into question the "givenness" of a social–cultural situation (remember that Socrates was not a member of the Athenian establishment). Irony can be as much a view from below as from above. Hip Hop, on this reading, has a critical edge, but it is an edge founded upon pleasure. But if Hip Hop introduces a quasi-Attalian vision of "composition," it also demonstrates the fragility of that particular network. By 1979, hip-hop emerged as a musical genre that reverted to the network of repetition. The early recordings mostly eschewed the notion of deejaying directly, preferring to use house bands to create the instrumental tracks. By the time Hip Hop embraced its "golden age," it had largely eschewed the participatory, critical aesthetics of Attalian composition and became reified in a host of products, returning to repetition, the stockpiling of time, the codification of pleasure. Perhaps Hip Hop suggests that any resistance based on pleasure and subversion of the dominant regime merely awaits its own co-optation. It also suggests, however, that such moments of pleasurable subversion are well worth celebrating.

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[30] Ibid., p. 145.

[31] See, for example, Susan McClary's afterword to the translation, (ibid., pp. 157–8) where she cites New Wave music as the representative of composition.

[32] See Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham, NC, 2004).

[33] Kierkegaard, Søren, *On the Concept of Irony*, trans. Howard Vincent Hong (Princeton, NJ, 1992), p. 261.

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Chapter 9
"Ironic Consciousness" in Early Polish Punk Music

Anna G. Piotrowska

Defining Irony—Methodological Meanders[1]

The most widespread, popular understanding of what irony conveys is that it appears when "the unsaid is other than, different from, the said."[2] Irony also includes subcategories such as paradox and oxymoron and can be expressed in non-verbal forms as well.[3] The oxymoron may be so "instinctive throughout, and impossible either to feign or to explain to one who cannot understand it" that it is considered a good sign "when one who cannot understand irony takes the joke seriously and the serious elements as a joke."[4] Central to my own understanding of irony is exactly the fact that refusing to arbitrate in favor of irony does not negate its existence but merely signals that there is no irony *detected*. Furthermore, since it has been observed that "irony" is rarely found as an entry in music dictionaries,[5] I propose to treat the notion of "musical irony" as an example of a *travelling concept* borrowed from the theory of literature and philosophy.[6]

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[1] Irony was codified in the mid-eighteenth century in French encyclopedias. See Ernst Behler, "The Theory of Irony in German Romanticism," in Frederick Garber (ed.), *Romantic Irony* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia, PA, 1988), pp. 43–81. All translations provided by the author.

[2] Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London, 1994), p. 64.

[3] Elitist in character, irony is a complex comic effect as opposed to a simple one. See Julian Krzyżanowski, *Nauka o literaturze* (Wrocław, 1984), pp. 200–208. Harald Høffding said that "in irony humorous lurks underneath the serious, while in humor the serious lurks underneath the humorous." Elisabeth Oxfeldt, *Journeys from Scandinavia: Travelogues of Africa, Asia, and South America* (Minneapolis, MN, 2010), p. 123.

[4] Rey M. Longyear, "Beethoven and Romantic Irony," *The Musical Quarterly*, 56/4, (October 1970): 647–64 at 648.

[5] Lars Elleström, *Divine Madness: On Interpreting Literature, Music and the Visual Arts* (Lewisburg, PA, 2002), p. 26.

[6] See Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (Toronto, 2002); Birgit Neumann and Ansgar Nünning (eds), *Travelling Concepts for the Study of Culture* (New York, 2012). "Nomadic" or "traveling" refer to the concepts transferred—in

While searching for ironic manifestations of droll humor in works of art, the complex web of surrounding geopolitical and historical circumstances, as well as stylistic preferences and social expectations, needs to be taken into consideration.[7] In the case of Polish punk music, the essential factors include Poland's political situation in the 1980s and the inherent characteristics of the punk style.[8]

Polish Punk and the Notion of Irony

Linked to the struggle for Polish liberation in the early 1980s was the rise of the non-communist National Commission of the Self-Governing Trade Union called "Solidarity."[9] In response to the general social instability (partly caused by strikes on the part of the general populace), the government imposed martial law on December 13, 1981, brutally ending recent advances in social and political conditions. However, the proclamation of martial law, the consequent repressions, and the economic crisis led—ironically—to the strengthening of the illegal opposition among society as a whole, including young people. As Polish historian Marek Wierzbicki argues, most young Poles had viewed the still governing doctrine of "real socialism" and its achievements extremely critically since the escalation of sociopolitical crisis; moreover, the discrepancy between the government's promises and its practice were easily observed. In other words, there was a marked difference between what the government said and what it actually did. Deepening young people's frustration was "the inability to fulfill personal

various cultural, geographical and historical conditions—between science and non-scientific knowledge as well as across disciplines, scholars, or institutions.

[7] For me, approximating irony in music is possible by grasping insights into how musical practices "gather up and reveal … the structures of the internal and external social worlds and the relations … between them." See John Shepherd and Peter Wicke, *Music and Cultural Theory* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 122–9 at p. 129. Furthermore, I will rely on the analysis of the musical experience—cultural production, reception, and circulation—in my search for ironic meanings, rather than purely stylistic analysis. See Harris M. Berger, *Stance: Ideas about Emotion, Style, and Meaning for the Study of Expressive Culture* (Middletown, CT, 2010), p. 23.

[8] Drawing on several authors I propose to treat "punk" as "a set of practices, but practices of strategic empowerment rather than of signification" enabling it to mediate an essence of music. See Lawrence Grossberg, "Another Boring Day in Paradise: Rock and Roll and the Empowerment of Everyday Life," *Popular Music*, 4, (1984): 225–58 at 227.

[9] "Solidarity," the first non-communist trade union to be formed in Poland, is still functioning as of 2013. It was founded in the Gdańsk shipyards on August 31, 1980 and was originally led by charismatic Lech Wałęsa. Involving as many as 10 million people, it soon became a very popular social movement utilizing civil resistance, peaceful demonstrations, and other politicized activities.

needs."[10] Hence, youths tended to express their standpoint by openly taking part in forbidden street demonstrations, engaging in conspiracy movements, and performing punk music—all actions aimed against the communist regime.

In response to the injustice, disastrous economic situation, and lack of prospects, as well as the fossilization of social structures and omnipresent bureaucracy, the earliest Polish punk bands merely expressed their dissatisfaction with the painfully inefficient sociopolitical system. But punk music—which was becoming increasingly popular in Poland—soon became a primary platform contesting the drab Polish reality of the 1980s. This type of musical resistance was most vigorously developed in mid-to-large cities with a well-educated populace; the pioneering band Zwłoki was established in Wrocław, one of the largest Polish cities, for example.

Polish punk originated amongst enthusiasts of American and British punk bands; they were fascinated with the visceral nature of the music (the energy and volume as well as the emphasis on amateurism as the antithesis of virtuosity), but rarely understood the actual meaning of the lyrics. The first Polish groups were established in the very late 1970s, but by the early 1980s there was a conglomerate of independent bands interacting through joint concerts. By that time the most important venue for the punk scene was the annual music festival in Jarocin.[11]

Irony became an obvious tool for criticizing the system, serving as a catalyst for the interpretation of life and art.[12] It facilitated the release of hidden disapproval, exposing the depravity of the system which became its immediate target, its "victim."[13] Irony not only acutely diagnosed problems, it also helped create a certain provocative aura and—arguably, and for a rather short time—even influenced reality.[14] Irony's function resided in its mediating position between enthusiasm (the hope that, despite all odds, something will be achieved and amended) and skepticism (the realization that nothing will be changed).[15] The irony observed in Polish punk was simultaneously corrosive/destructive and affirmative/constructive as if suspended between these two extreme possibilities

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[10] Marek Wierzbicki, "The Phenomenon of the Youth Political Opposition in Poland in the Years 1980–1990 and its Initial Interpretation," in Peter Jašek (ed.), *Anticommunist Resistance in Central and Eastern Europe* (Bratislava, 2012), pp. 408–25.

[11] In order to channel the frustration of young Poles, authorities—ironically—encouraged the cyclic summer punk festivals staged in Jarocin; officials carefully monitored the event, treating it as a controlled means of letting young people "blow off steam." See Krzysztof Lesiakowski, *Jarocin w obiektywie bezpieki* (Warszawa, 2004).

[12] Elleström, *Divine Madness*, p. 28.

[13] Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, p. 15.

[14] Ibid., p. 29. For example during punk concerts.

[15] Behler, "Theory of Irony." The author notes the role of German Idealism philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte's notions of self-consciousness.

of its interpretation, since the ability to detect it was strictly connected to a constant suspicion of its existence.[16]

Irony served as a "satirical weapon"[17] which became a surrogate for actual opposition. For this reason, it is inappropriate to value it as "a commodity in its own right."[18] I agree with Mark Evan Bonds who claims that, in order to be effective, "irony must be used sparingly."[19] In the case of early Polish punk, irony *per se* was substituted by a specific "ironic consciousness" that sought covert signs and symbols as a means of transmission since punk songs—especially the early ones—were neither blatantly nor openly ironic. More popular tactics included referencing easily decipherable metaphors such as the figure of a TV speaker as a symbol of lies propagated by the system (for example, *Television* by Brygada Kryzys), the militia-man as a symbol of regime brutality, or "plonk," fortified fruit wine (called *jabol* in Polish), as a referent to low economic standards and, ultimately, as a symbol of society's escapism through alcoholism (for example, "Jabol" by Dezerter). Furthermore, Polish punk became vulgarized; the lyrics, exclusively in the Polish language, were full of slang/swear words. Characteristic punk musical "bluntness" is evident in the shrieks, false intonations, and clear-cut political messages (in contrast to "beating about the bush") typical of Polish punk music. However, "bluntness," vulgarization, and/or "ironic consciousness" alone did not give Polish punk its unique character; it was instead the particular synthesis of these qualities coupled with its specific targeting of communist Poland. Polish punk resorted to an ironic mode which created the genre's ethos—a sublime consciousness of its wise application rather than a reliance on its omnipresent effrontery.

Conditioning Irony in Polish Punk

By 1841 Søren Kierkegaard understood irony not only as a figure of speech or a mode of behavior, but also as an ability to see the world from diametrically opposing points of views.[20] If "irony is the trope that sanctions multiple linguistic perspectives on reality"[21] entailing evaluative relations between two components

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[16] Rene Burgeouis, "Modes of Romantic Irony in Nineteenth-Century France," in Garber, *Romantic Irony*, pp. 97–120.

[17] Alan Reynolds Thompson, *The Dry Mock: A Study of Irony in Drama* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, 1948), p. 5. See also Ellen Berland, "The Function of Irony in Marston's Antonio and Mellida," *Studies in Philology*, LXVI (1969): 739–55.

[18] Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, p. 28.

[19] Mark Evan Bonds, "Haydn, Laurence Sterne, and the Origins of Musical Irony," *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 44/1 (1991): 57–91 at 86.

[20] Søren Kierkegaard, *On the Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrate*s, trans. Howard Vincent Hong (Princeton, NJ, 1992), p. 121.

[21] Jairo Moreno, "Subjectivity, Interpretation, and Irony in Gottfried Weber's Analysis of Mozart's 'Dissonance' Quartet," *Music Theory Spectrum*, 25/1 (2003): 99–120 at 99.

(reality and its contrapuntal parallel),[22] it is the very existence of these two components, based on a certain asymmetry, which ought to be assumed.[23] Unless the implicit point of reference (possibly ideal or even utopian in character) does not exist in the minds of listeners, there is no space for irony. Indeed, whatever substantiality may be assigned to the irony, it questions the original presentation through the use of certain signs and other tropes.[24] Determined to weaken the ideological backbone of the communist regime, Polish punk created its own, radically simplistic, black and white world: the existing reality (an oppressive communist regime) was contested against the parallel reality which was defined through the negation of the real one (a free and equal society). "Signs and tropes" were manifested in the (punk) music of the disaffected masses.

Bonds notes that "an acute awareness of a composer's or author's presence within a work may seem a basic element of aesthetic perception nowadays"[25] while the concept of romantic irony argues that by annihilating the role of the author, irony allows one to "perceive the art-work with a greater sense of detachment and a correspondingly greater sense of objectivity."[26] I would, however, argue that the latter was not possible for Polish punk. If structural irony was achieved by means of the author's distancing from what was actually said—for example, by introducing a naïve hero or a fallible narrator[27]—would Polish punk songs have had a similar effect if performed by non-Polish bands or in different times?[28] Would they be interpreted as ironic? The central paradox of romantic irony—that the artist "must detach himself" from his work and "regard it objectively, almost as if it were an illusion"—does not hold true in this case.[29]

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[22] Yayoi Uno Everett, "Signification of Parody and the Grotesque in György Ligeti's Le Grand Macabre," *Music Theory Spectrum*, 31/1 (2009): 26–56.

[23] Muecke, drawing on Schlegel who proclaimed that "irony constitutes an analysis of thesis and antithesis," called this parallelism the "double existence" of an artistic creation. See D.C. Muecke, *The Compass of Irony*, (London and New York, 1980), p. 160. Referring to this phenomenon, Iser talked rather of "a transition from the representation of reality to its suggestion." See Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore, MD, 1974), p. 78. See also Walter Kayser, "Die Anfänge des modernen Romans im 18. Jahrhundert und seine heutige Krise," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift, Literaturwissenschaft und Geisteswissenschaften*, 28 (1954): 417–66.

[24] Moreno, "Subjectivity."

[25] Bonds, "Haydn," p. 80.

[26] Ibid., p. 64.

[27] Robin Wildstein Garvin, "Romantic Irony in the String Quartets of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy and Robert Schuman," PhD dissertation (Florida State University, 2008), p. 3.

[28] Especially if we assume that musical participation is also transformative in its character.

[29] Longyear, "Beethoven and Romantic Irony," pp. 649–50.

In fact, punk's postulated "ironic consciousness" was directly linked to the audience's perception of punk musicians as being themselves and not mere performers in the band.[30] Awareness of their status was also generated by a painful reminder of performers' age and gender. When, in Zwłoki's song "Za moimi drzwiami" ("Behind My Door"), the childlike voice asked a naïve question, it was the sound of the demonic answer (as if from hell) that reminded listeners that the current situation (as alluded to in the lyrics) was not a child's game. Leaving little or no blank space for a non-political interpretation, Polish punk songs presented reality gauged through the eyes of narrators (that is, musicians) as integral members of Polish disillusioned youth (thus identifying with listeners).[31] By repeating and multiplying (that is, using the same brainwashing strategies as socialist propagandists) they poignantly pinpointed the system's mechanisms of manipulating society.

The Multidimensional Character of "Ironic Consciousness" in Early Polish Punk

Different types of irony—irony of events (dramatic irony), and verbal and musical irony—shaded into one another in Polish punk, resulting in performances employing both visual and aural "ironic consciousness." Seemingly contradictory elements, such as the fusion of the serious and the comic, characterized Polish punk music, enriching it with the bitter-sweet taste of irony. Although it was uniquely Polish, it should not be forgotten that this movement was deeply indebted to Western patterns, strongly emphasizing aesthetic elements observed in looks, gestures, stage presence and other performative practices. Accordingly, concerts were often accompanied by rioting and spontaneous fits of uncontrolled aggression.

Humor observed in Polish punk songs is largely of referential character, often even limited to extramusical associations and programmatic allusions; mere playfulness, popular with other types of entertainment, was eschewed in favor of the more complex ethos of "ironic consciousness." Its manifestations were observed in the aforementioned performative characteristics since the

[30] There is no space for the audience's "dual consciousness" of the musicians as, on the one hand, themselves and, on the other hand, as showmen, as is the case in other performances—for example, in Elizabethan theatre. See Linda Phyllis Austern, "Sweet Meats with Sour Sauce: The Genesis of Musical Irony in English Drama after 1600," *Journal of Musicology*, 4/4 (1985): 472–90.

[31] During the 1986 concert Zenon Reagan dedicated the song "Inna prawda" ("Another Truth") to all gathered and to the band itself. So irony was present—as Muecke has it—by being *deliberately* ironical since irony "implies an ironist, a someone." See D.C. Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic*, 2nd edn (London and New York, 1982), p. 42. Even if the actual irony was missed, the existence of "ironic consciousness" was usually sensed by the listeners as well as commentators and critics.

bands often played the role of pranksters, and their ironic distance from reality was defined by their actions.[32] The bands resorted to various gestures or different tones of voice in order to convey quite the opposite of what they were saying.[33] Grimaces, accents, manner of singing, and other accompanying circumstances conditioned the conveyed message and facilitated or hindered the existence of "ironic consciousness." This means that the various subtle devices used to create it depended solely on the character of the performance itself.[34] For instance, the leader of the band Armia took the already atypical look of punk to the extreme by wearing toilet paper during performances. The painfully felt shortage of the product in Polish shops was an embarrassment, and this lack soon became fodder for jokes epitomizing Poland's economic situation. Ironic stage depiction of socialist reality in post-Solidarity Poland referred to such absurd abnormalities in order to twist the meaning of irony itself from anomaly to carefully designed tactic.

Although the use of words is not a prerequisite for irony, ideological arguments central to Polish punk's "ironic consciousness" become most visible through verbal irony. Indeed, several authors, including Lars Elleström, stress the importance of a verbal component when interpreting irony in musical pieces.[35] As Linda Phyllis Austern notes:

> Irony of speech or verbal irony becomes musical when the implication of what is said is shown through music to be in painfully comic contrast to its literal meaning. The verbal statement may be presented as a song text.[36]

The irony resides, then, in a clever illumination through musical devices of that which is already explicit—or implicit—in the lyrics.[37] The ironic effect is primarily generated through the contradictory treatment of a text or the exaggerated, overly perfect match between the lyrics and the music. In addition, separated from the political context of socialist Poland, the lyrics of early 1980s songs may appear illogical or meaningless. However, viewed within the specific context, they become acute commentaries, scathing critiques, and sorrowful lamentations. It also should be stressed that most songs were only performed live; some were

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[32] Moreno, "Subjectivity."

[33] Similar tactics were employed by composers by at least the eighteenth century. See Bonds, "Haydn."

[34] It has even been claimed that the sheer "importance of musicians, their image, and behavior in creating the world of popular music is axiomatic since music-making as a profession is linked to representation." See Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis, MN, 1985), p. 19.

[35] Elleström, *Divine Madness*, p. 27.

[36] Austern, "Sweet Meats," p. 476.

[37] Charles S. Brauner, "Irony in the Heine Lieder of Schubert and Schumann," *The Musical Quarterly*, 67/2 (1981): 261–81.

illegally recorded, but rarely if ever officially released in the early 1980s.[38] In orally transmitted lyrics, what they *meant* was less important than what they *might* mean.[39] The lyrics of punk songs taken at face value (as written down) do not necessarily sound ironic, and there may be no general agreement that they even contain elements of irony for they can be perceived as enigmatic, metaphorical, allegorical, mocking, or simply funny.

This also applies to the names of the bands. They were the first and most easily decipherable emblem of "ironic consciousness" since initial contact with any band usually took place through a display on a poster or similar advertisement. These names often made reference to the condition of Polish politics or the economy. In 1981 bands with names that spoke volumes included Zwłoki (Dead Corpse) and Brygada Kryzys (Crisis Brigade). Dezerter (Deserter), Siekiera (Axe), Prowokacja (Provocation), and names referring to the USSR—Moskwa (Moscow) and Aya RL (deciphered as Aya Red Love with the color red carrying emblematic meaning)—soon followed. References to socialist upbringing included Dzieci Kapitana Klossa (Children of Captain Kloss), directly alluding to the popular TV serial about a fictional World War II agent working for the Soviet intelligence service. Interestingly, the influential band Dezerter was originally named SS-20 (after a Russian nuclear missile). An additional layer of "ironic consciousness" could be understood by audiences when bands performed together on stage: for example, Zwłoki (Dead Corpse) and Sedes (Stool) were announced as "dead corpse in a stool"—surrealist/dadaistic associations strengthened the intended pun. The toilet motif—common within the Polish punk movement—also appeared in the names of other bands, including Kobranocka (an untranslatable play of letters; the word has referents in the name of a cartoon for children broadcast at bedtime and a distorted version of the name of a popular Polish TV crime series), initially known as Latający pisuar (Flying Urinal). Vulgarization that could be read as ironic helped create distance from the portrayal of reality. It appeared in the titles of—otherwise non-cynical—songs, including "Sraka praptaka" ("Proto-bird's Diarrhea") or "Jabol Punk" ("Plonk Punk") by Sedes.

"Ironic consciousness" was also visible in the choice of topics covered, and was also sensed in songs referring to sheer absurdity. These songs fused witty and dead-serious elements in such a way that they produced bizarre—but never silly—narratives, as in a song by Siekiera called "Czy zjedli tu Murzyna?" ("Has a Negro Been Eaten Here?"). Seemingly meaningless, incongruous, and totally out-of-place questions appearing in the lyrics can be interpreted as a mirror of communist Poland's lifestyle. The only common threads in such topical songs are references to typical (although chosen at random) Polish traits such as devoutness

[38] It is due to the internet that "authentic" bootlegs are available nowadays to those interested. However, original recordings of the early Polish punk bands are still relatively rare; needless to say, they are not broadcast by Polish music televisions or radios.

[39] Elleström, *Divine Madness*, pp. 31–2.

(mentioning the figure of holy Madonna), the ethos of hard work to the glory of the fatherland (bringing up a turner) and the Polish lancer tradition.

The distinct Polishness of themes referring to history and traditions is another visibly adapted strategy inciting "ironic consciousness." Such lyrics can be interpreted either at face value as "proper" socialist songs appraising the system or as a kind of sarcastic commentary on the current political situation. By blending and contrasting the prosaic and poetic, these songs were more subtly ironic than, say, the "toilet songs." For example, the text of the 1983 song "Ku przyszłości" ("Towards the Future") by Dezerter can be taken as a typical mass song favored by the socialist authorities and perceived as a supreme manifesto of socialist ideals. However, its devastating parodic function is especially evident in light of the proclaimed punk slogan "No future." The "sabotage of narrative conventions" found in such songs creates the ironic effect with humor, at once mischievous and ingenious.[40] The text of a song by Zwłoki entitled "Mesjasz" ("Messiah," alternatively "Christus") represents an ironic distance from Polish history. It overtly considers the messianic doctrine—born in occupied Poland in the nineteenth century—which personified Poland as the Christ of Europe and identified Polish people as suffering with messianic anguish from the lack of officially recognized sovereignty. Symptomatically, in the 1980s the band disagreed with a passive acceptance of the political helplessness invested in this ideology, exclaiming that they were not willing to become a Messiah ("not a chance!").

Similarly, the song by KSU (the name comes from the letters featured on car plates of the region the band originated from) entitled "1944," referred to past events including the Warsaw uprising of that year when, in fact, the droll comments actually targeted the current situation. The band often picked the topic of compulsory army service and, in this particular piece, ironically described the discrepancy between a young man's actual feelings and official propaganda describing what he feels.

Although limited, linguistic figures of speech adapted in the textual layer of Polish punk songs are useful for detecting certain ironies. Simplistic rhymes, known in Poland under the sarcastic term *rymy częstochowskie* (Częstochowa rhyming), demonstrate the narrowing use of irony. Considered banal, this technique is frequently encountered, widely known, and commonly used by amateurish poets. It is a type of predictable, unsophisticated, set rhyme, often raising knowing smiles precisely because of its simplicity and conventionality. The specific choice of inapt words deriving from incongruent registers of speech creates the desired effect: for example, in a song by Zwłoki called "Nie jesteś piękny" ("You Are Not Beautiful"), *pysku-stanowisku*—that is, a "mug" (as in ugly face) is juxtaposed with "professional rank."

[40] Lilian R. Furst, *Fictions of Romantic Irony* (Cambridge, MA, 1984), p. 47.

Musical Irony in Polish Punk

As a concept based on ambiguity, "irony is often considered an intellectual literary device which should by its nature be unsuitable for music."[41] Although it may appear doubtful whether musical irony exists at all as an objective, identifiable phenomenon for any given piece,[42] I believe that irony in the musical realm does exist whenever it is *recognized* as such.[43] Furthermore, musical irony is a highly contextualized notion not only hidden between notes, but also dependent on the interrelationships between the instrumentation, lyrics, and the manner of performance. In this sense, sheer musical phenomena may work as a catalyst exposing different types of irony.

Several musicologists have already commented on the relationship of irony to (art) music, concentrating on such questions as how music can express, relate to, or contend with irony.[44] However, all the features that authors usually assign to musical irony may also be interpreted as non-ironic, and their mere appearance does not determine the ironic character of the musical piece.[45] Hence, in order to detect the ironic message, authors often rely on historical facts, biographical details, and aspects of culture to provide context for the interpretation of a musical moment as ironic. Such a methodology was adopted by, for example, Esti Sheinberg and Robin Garvin who considered it necessary to discuss irony in the

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[41] Brauner, "Irony in the Heine Lieder," p. 261.

[42] Esti Sheinberg, *Irony, Satire, Parody and the Grotesque in the Music of Shostakovich: A Theory of Musical Incongruities* (Aldershot, 2000), p. 57.

[43] It has been suggested that "irony is a propositional statement that asserts by negating and negates by asserting." See Moreno, "Subjectivity," p. 111.

[44] See, among others, Daniel K.L. Chua, "Haydn as Romantic: A Chemical Experiment with Instrumental Music," in W. Dean Sutcliffe (ed.), *Haydn Studies* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 120–51; Daniel K.L. Chua, *Absolute Music and the Construction of Meaning* (Cambridge, 1999); Robert S. Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation* (Bloomington, IN, 1994); Brauner, "Irony in the Heine Lieder."

[45] For a list of 20 different principal compositional techniques used by composers to achieve comic effects, see Enrique Alberto Arias, *Comedy in Music: A Historical Bibliographical Resource Guide* (Westport, CT, 2001), pp. 3–5. Sheinberg suggested that musical criteria be taken into consideration when discussing musical irony, stressing the role of stylistic incongruities and discontinuities, shifts between levels of musical discourse as well as juxtapositions of stylistic or topical contexts. She also underlines the importance of "exaggeration" and "structural distortion" that can be "achieved by three main devices: the removal of an essential component from the satirized object, the insertion of a new component, and the replacement of one or more of the object's characteristic components." Sheinberg, *Irony, Satire, Parody and the Grotesque*, pp. 64, 82. For Lissa, more important is the psychological aspect encountered while listening, which she calls an inadequacy of our *attitudes*. See Zofia Lissa, "O komizmie muzycznym (1938)," in Zofia Lissa (ed.), *Szkice z estetyki muzycznej* (Kraków, 1965).

context of musical conventions used, especially its unusual treatment or even—in some extreme cases—its avoidance.[46]

In the light of observations about the imperceptibility of musical irony, it seems perfectly possible that a listener with no prior knowledge of the political situation encompassing the songs' creation might accept Polish punk music at face value without recognizing its wit. Some claim that Polish punk bands resorted to characteristics typical of punk music in general—minimalism, simplification, as well as a preference for hoarse sounds exclusively to develop the dramatic tension of the songs as exemplified by the use of shouts, false intonation, modest harmonization, and a simple stanza-refrain formula—techniques that were designed not as ironic but simply to fulfill dramatic structural functions. However, certain instances of musical incongruity found in Polish punk, in my opinion, call for a specifically ironic interpretation. The defiance of expressing opposition with musical equivalents is not the consequence of simple musical incompetence or ignorance. The entailing ambiguity, resulting from the simultaneous existence of more than one potential meaning within a discourse, must be treated as an intentionally created irony designed to be interpreted as such by the intended audience.[47] Three subcategories are addressed below: ironic quotation, sonorism and incongruity.

One of the earliest pieces by Zakon Żebrzących (The Order of Beggars) composed in 1986, a song entitled "Harcerze" ("Scouts"), opens with a quotation from a very popular nineteenth-century Polish art song "Prząśniczka" ("The Spinner") composed by Stanisław Moniuszko (1819–1872). Performed by the lead guitar, the simple minor tune is repeated three times and joined by the characteristic Alberti bass—taken from the original piano version—in the second guitar. Thus, a possibility of recognizing the tune is asserted before the guitarist ventures further variations on the theme and it becomes unrecognizable. That prolonged, ironically exaggerated, purely instrumental introduction establishes a clear reference to the well-known song learned by youngsters at schools, praising the ethos of hard work and fidelity. By violating punk conventions with the elaborated arrangement of the tune, the song blends the serious and the comic; the lyrics quickly expose the mendacity of official organizations, such as schools, thereby clarifying the possibility of an other-than-straightforward reading. The reversal achieved through syntactical manipulation suggests the possibility of an ironic interpretation.

Unlike "Harcerze"—which exposes the quotation at the opening—"1944" by KSU hides its irony in the middle section. Not only is a known tune incorporated, but it takes the actual words of a song from a popular Polish serial for teenagers. The cult serial produced in the late 1960s and re-broadcasted several times on Polish TV was called *Czterej pancerni i pies* (*Four Tank-men and a Dog*), and portrayed the adventures of the brave Polish and Soviet soldiers collaborating

[46] Garvin, "Romantic Irony," pp. 12–13.

[47] Sheinberg, *Irony, Satire, Parody and the Grotesque*, p. 15.

against the German army during World War II.[48] The song "Ballada o pancernych" ("The Ballad of the Tank-men") known also from the introductory song "Deszcze niespokojne" ("Restless Rains"), featured at the beginning of each episode, was not only associated with socialist propaganda, but also alluded to the model friendship between Polish and Russian troops during the German invasion. Interweaving that song into the musical context of the punk song can be read as a tongue-in-cheek irony since the failure of the titular event, the Warsaw uprising of 1944, is linked to the passiveness of the Red Army, among other things.

Beyond the appropriation of melodies and texts, punk songs used timbres and sonic combinations to great effect. The contradiction between "what" and "how" creates an ambivalent context conditioning the emergence of irony. The first line of the song, "Za moimi drzwiami" by Zwłoki, achieves the specific climax of the piece. The aforementioned childlike voice is immediately confronted by a horrifying growl. Contrasting sonorous effects, an a cappella opening, and—above all—the juxtaposition of the punch line delivered at the very start of the piece all produce an ironic effect based on the reversal of expectations.

It is only when the overall outcome—reinforced by music—is interpreted as incongruous with our expectations that talk of irony can commence. In the 1984 song "Po co żyć?" ("Why Live?") by Prowokacja, the fast tempo, agitated accompaniment, and openly declamatory style of deliverance help establish its intense emotional atmosphere. The jaunty, carefree tone of the deliberately overemphatic declamation of lines, coupled with a simple accompaniment, seems to be in conflict with the surface meaning of the lyrics which question the value of life (in a socialist country?). Both the rhythmicization and accentuation of the refrain suggest the ephemeral nature of life (the rhythmic figure consisting of three beats rather than the more typical four) but at the same time alludes to its joys. The disintegration between conventions traditionally used to denote happiness and the very reticence of the words suggest extreme emotional complexity and the bitter irony hidden behind a seemingly musically careless façade.

The "Ironic" Shift in the Development of Polish Punk

Although the punk movement has never lost its appeal to (select) Polish audiences, its role and place within the music industry, as well as its use of irony, has changed. As signaled by events and the media, Polish punk closely followed sociopolitical circumstances, adjusting its deployment of irony as a satirical weapon. I strongly believe that criticizing the political situation then required a diversity of strategies and tools, both allusive and uttered *expressis verbis*. In this chapter, I have focused

[48] Based on the book by Janusz Przymanowski, this black and white serial (21 episodes filmed between 1966 and 1970) was extremely popular among youngsters. "*Czterej pancerni i pies*" (1966–1970), IMDb, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0120948/ [accessed November 2, 2013].

on songs dating from the early period of Polish punk development, up until June 4, 1989 when the first democratic elections in postwar Poland were held. It was during that period that, by taking the expressive opposition of the serious and the droll as a trademark, the early Polish punk bands transformed the punk musical style into a means of articulating their own ironic trope through an "ironic consciousness." The mid-1980s were a period of so-called "normalization," characterized by an acceptance of state authority and a relative subsidence of protest action. However, in 1988—the twentieth anniversary of the events of March 1968—strikes and protests were renewed.[49] The vitality of opposition was reborn as the hope and possibility of changes re-emerged. So-called 'Round Table' debates followed (from February 6 until April 5, 1989), during which the communist authorities discussed the future of the country with selected representatives of the political opposition. Although the end of the decade brought an increase in resistance activities, more and more young people as well as musicians participated in protest movements organized by the illegal Pomarańczowa Alternatywa (Orange Alternative), the anarchistic Ruch Społeczeństwa Alternatywnego (Movement of Alternative Society), and the Federacja Anarchistyczna (Anarchic Federation). Increasingly radical action was (ironically?) associated with more widespread use of a straightforward yet still provocative irony that clearly infiltrated the lyrics of Polish punk bands established by the late 1980s. Early punk was a teenage movement, and because its adherents were young, their opinions were not taken seriously by the authorities, but by the late 1980s those same teenagers were adults and a strong component of the Poland's socioeconomic structure. As their voices matured and strengthened, so did the relative aggression of the irony in their music.

The unfitness of Polish punk—especially early Polish punk—resided not only in the complexity of sociopolitical references, but also, and more profoundly, in its paradox of marrying subversive and spuriously obedient elements. Its essence hinged on pretexts to present reality in a distorted mirror thus provoking reflection on the state of political affairs. These distortions served as provocations; the actual means of achieving the desired effect—be it verbal, purely musical, dramatic or contextual—were of secondary importance. The result—specific aesthetics saturated with irony—served as a specific tool of contestation. However, irony used for that particular purpose was not potentially limitless.[50] For Polish early punk it proved to be a limitation in itself and hence—while not negating irony as such—it creatively reinvented itself and established its own "ironic consciousness."

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[49] The Polish political crisis of 1968 (coinciding with other European resistance actions such as the Prague Spring and the Paris riots) was linked to intelligentsia (mainly student) protests against the communist government led by General Secretary Władysław Gomułka. The dissident movement was suppressed, and, as a result of the anti-Zionist campaign waged by the authorities, mass emigration of Polish Jews from the country followed.

[50] As opposed to what Garber suggests. See Fredrick Garber, "Sterne: Arabesques and Functionality," in Garber, *Romantic Irony*, pp. 33–40.

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Chapter 10
Irony, Intentionality, and Environmental Politics in the Music of Cake

David Ferrandino

> "Understanding irony better does not mean getting rid of the confusion it may cause, but getting rid of the confusion that poor explanations of it may cause."
>
> Lars Elleström, *Divine Madness*[1]

D.C. Muecke's *Irony and the Ironic* argues that "the old definition of irony … is superseded; irony is saying something in a way that activates not one but an endless series of subversive interpretations."[2] Irony is, above all, a phenomenon of incongruity, marked by discrepancies of meaning that can manifest themselves in all levels of a particular work: in specific details of the content, the overall structure, the reception, and/or its intertextual relationship with other works. The nature of the irony in a particular work depends on the experiences and reception of the observer who becomes, in effect, the ironist. Whether or not a piece of music, book, or painting was intended to be ironic by the creator, it is the collective community of consumers that makes the aesthetic and hermeneutic judgments regarding the apparent meaning of the work. As Lars Elleström notes, "the *material* of irony is found in the text, but it is *formed* by the reader."[3]

While the field of literary studies developed various modes of interpretation, including reception theory in the 1970s, the discipline of musicology has more often privileged the intentions of the composer in relation to the phenomenon of irony.[4] One reason for this is that it is far easier to legitimize the claims of one individual than a multitude of opinions from critics or fans. The problem of selecting which opinions to include in a given analysis may seem to reduce any reading into pure subjectivism. As Muecke wryly puts it:

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[1] Lars Elleström, *Divine Madness: On Interpreting Literature, Music, and the Visual Arts Ironically* (Lewisburg, PA, 2002), p. 58.

[2] D.C. Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic*, 1st edn (London and New York, 1970), p. 31.

[3] Elleström, *Divine Madness*, p. 49. Italics in original.

[4] Two good examples of studies based on reception are Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Hanover, NH, 1993), which discusses the fan base of heavy metal, and Susan Fast, *In the Houses of the Holy: Led Zeppelin and the Power of Rock Music* (Oxford, 2001). Fast deals specifically with Led Zeppelin and the creation of fan identity.

> While we may legitimately question whether or not something has been said or done with ironical intent, we cannot question anyone's right to see something as ironic. We may question his sense of taste though.[5]

In an attempt to sidestep criticisms of arbitrary relativism, my own analysis will be informed by the interpretations of critics and fans, as well as that of the creator/composer.

This chapter seeks to demonstrate the potential uses of irony as an analytical tool for discussing American popular music at the end of the twentieth century, using the music of Sacramento alternative rock band Cake as a specific example.[6] Cake's music offers contradictory portraits of America's glory days of the post-World War II era, simultaneously glamorizing and criticizing the symbols of American suburbia in order to express an entire range of experiences from nostalgia to condemnation. Two songs from the 1996 *Fashion Nugget* album, "Stickshifts and Safetybelts" and "Race Car Ya-yas," deal with the decadence of car culture, though each approaches the topic from a dramatically different angle. In contrast, my analysis of "Carbon Monoxide" from the 2004 album *Pressure Chief* demonstrates how Cake's lyrical message of moral outrage is set against a restless and shifting musical background that blends together style and genre into an ambiguous play of meaning.[7] While not unique among popular musicians for holding a biting analytical stance towards contemporary issues, Cake's music encourages listeners to form divergent interpretations: one based on the lyrical narrative, and the other informed by the sonic narrative. The band positions these different accounts against each other, with the music providing a detached, and even sarcastic, point of view. Through a lens of irony, Cake musically demonstrates a self-conscious awareness of the complex nature of American culture.

Register, Car Culture, and Automobile Dependence

Cake emerged from the music scene of 1990s Sacramento, California, and since its debut, critics have struggled to pinpoint the band's intentions. Some have found Cake's music to be "understated," "droll," or "quirky," while other writers have referred to their "gorgeous kaleidoscope of sound," and characterized them as a

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[5] Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic*, p. 43.

[6] The current members of Cake are John McCrea, vocals, Vincent DiFiore, trumpet and keyboards, Xan McCurdy, Guitar, Gabe Nelson, bass guitar, and Paulo Baldi, drums. However, *Fashion Nugget* includes Greg Brown on guitar and Todd Roper on percussion, instead of McCurdy and Baldi. Cake, *Fashion Nugget*, Capricorn Records 532 867–2 (1996).

[7] Cake, *Pressure Chief*, Columbia CK 92629 (2004).

group of "veteran, genre-blending, indie-minded rockers."[8] The Cake biography on MTV.com goes so far as to say that they "epitomized the postmodern, irony-drenched aesthetic of '90s geek-rock," though they are lacking in the artiness or pretension of other groups associated with that genre.[9] The band's ambiguity and indifference expressed through their music has also led some to regard Cake as a novelty act, one of many that have tried to make a fleeting claim to commercial success during the last decade of the twentieth century. Critics seem unable to take Cake seriously, and for many their trademark detachedness seems incommensurate with their politically charged critiques of American society.

Irony in individual songs results from the eclectic combinations of stylistic markers that confound musical heterogeneity and force listeners to re-evaluate their previous sonic experiences. For example, *Fashion Nugget* disperses jazz, heavy metal, indie-pop, country, hip hop, and rockabilly amongst the tracks. To understand Cake's approach to style and genre I draw on the theory of "register" recently applied by musicologist Michael Long in his study of film music.[10] Although originally a literary concept, the theory of register is an elegant and simple way to discuss musical meaning: a listener can understand a motive, melody, or timbre in terms of its acculturated associations. As Long puts it, "once they are sufficiently registered (or registrated) as normative practice, sounds in general may be expressive in this sense with no textual linkage."[11] Sounds become mainstream as "our cultural vernacular, is made up of special collections of gestures, sound fragments, and image types."[12] Though most scholars and readers are familiar with the notions of cultural register—that is, high/low scalar modifiers—Long invokes register "less as a general indicator of cultural location than in a more specific sense familiar to scholars of medieval poetics who have linked the *sensory* aspects of cultural products to the *expressive* value of the registers (i.e. collections) in which they are understood to be located."[13] Register, then, acts as a "signal and marker" to the broader field of acculturated styles and genres, triggering a

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[8] See John Paulsen, "Interview with John McCrea of Cake" (May 24, 2007), http://www.bullz-eye.com/music/inerviews/2007/john_mccrea.htm [accessed April 4, 2010]; and Jim Shearer, "Having Your CAKE and Eating it Too" (May 7, 2007), http://newsmusicnation.com/news-notes/2007/05/07/cake-interview [accessed April 15, 2010].

[9] Find their biography at http://www.mtv.com/music/artist/cake/artist.jhtml. It is not clear how useful the genre distinction of "geek rock" really is as it is neither well formulated nor widely discussed, but bands associated with the label include Weezer, Nerf Herder, and Barenaked Ladies.

[10] Michael Long, *Beautiful Monsters: Imagining the Classic in Musical Media* (Berkeley, CA, 2008).

[11] Ibid., p. 12.

[12] Michael Long, "On his Book *Beautiful Monsters: Imagining the Classic in Musical Multimedia*," *Rorotoko* (February 20, 2009), http://rorotoko.com/interview/20090220_long_michael_ beautiful_monsters_imagining_classic_musical_media [accessed September 7, 2011]. Italics in original.

[13] Long, *Beautiful Monsters*, p. 12. Italics in original.

collective association with other visual, textual, and musical objects for a group of people. Objects, genres, styles, or gestures become "registrated" through shared cultural experience, expressive value being added over time until certain expectations emerge and the objects become familiar.[14]

Sounds, while not acquiring "meaning" in the strictest sense, become "meaningful" for members of a particular culture. No listener will associate the entire collection of registered objects with a specific sound but rather discern the cultural and acoustic associations of particular sonic devices on the basis of his or her own experience. Register then allows for both a collective experience of a gesture as well as a personal understanding of sound, thereby giving musical objects intelligibility and consistency while at the same time allowing for expressive immediacy and a sense of intimacy. In a Cake song, the musical registers of punk or hip hop bring very specific sets of ideological connotations to the musical discussion. When used to underscore criticisms of the decadence of car culture, such sonic markers contribute a feeling of anger, tension, or defiance to the song that may not be readily interpreted from the words alone. When the registers vary widely over the course of an album or even within an individual song, listeners become aware of the myriad ways in which they can respond to America's automobile dependence and the crisis of pollution.

In order to position Cake's music as a reaction to "car culture," it is necessary to understand the term as a development of the "American Dream" era of the post-World War II United States. Americans were frustrated and bored with mass railroad transit and were easily won over by the fact that cars allowed for a sense of control as well as adventure.[15] Art historian Karal Ann Marling argues that the rationale behind people's interest in automobiles at the time was very straightforward: "after the privations of the Great Depression, after the hardships and shortages of the war, victorious Americans deserved nothing but the best."[16]

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[14] Musical irony can then be interpreted as a result of the simultaneous or sequential juxtaposition of incongruous registers. The most commonly cited example of such irony is a situation in which lyrics do not "fit" the music—"sad" lyrics set to "happy" music or vice versa. This type of disjunction can also be seen in many cover songs, especially those of the punk scene. For example, The Dead Kennedys' version of Elvis's "Viva Las Vegas" and the Sex Pistol's rendition of Sinatra's "My Way" are ironic in the same way: an iconic classic (that is, thoroughly registered song) of one style of pop is performed in a different and incompatible style. On the one hand, this can be interpreted as a satirical denouncement of the earlier musical style, ridiculing not only the older performers and their fans, but all music in the same classic pop register. On the other hand, it is a testament to the continued importance and vitality of Elvis and Sinatra, indirectly perpetuating their relevance to popular culture. See also see Mimi Haddon's "Paul Anka Sings 'Smells like Teen Spirit,'" Chapter 11 in this collection.

[15] David Blanke, *Hell on Wheels: The Promise and Peril of America's Car Culture, 1900–1940* (Lawrence, KS, 2007), p. 38.

[16] Karal Ann Marling, "America's Love Affair with the Automobile in the Television Age," *Design Quarterly*, 146, Autoeroticism (1989): 5–20 at 5.

At the conclusion of World War II, the average American was able to accrue enough excess capital to purchase a car for pleasure rather than out of necessity, and the automobile industry thrived by selling an image of prosperity and a lifestyle of leisure in addition to a mode of transport.[17]

This aestheticized vision of the automobile as a symbol of freedom, power, and luxury gave rise to a number of intense musical expressions. The supposed first rock 'n' roll song, the 1951 chart-topper "Rocket 88," attributed to Ike Turner, extols the virtues of an Oldsmobile.[18] Blues and soul music had their car song counterparts as well, but it wasn't until the Beach Boys in the 1960s that automobiles became so central to a genre of music. Building on the surf music style that popularized Dick Dale and the Del-Tones in 1961, the Beach Boys combined the appeal of surfing, automobiles, and the general California teen lifestyle in their brand of rock 'n' roll. Their early singles, released by Capitol Records between 1962 and 1965, featured a "surfin'" song on the A side and a "hot rod" tune on the B side, an attempt to double their commercial value and to appeal to a wider audience.[19]

The Beach Boys' musical treatments of both cars and surfboards are identical—based on the reverberated guitar sound with soaring falsetto lines over close harmonies in the vocals—but the lyrical treatments are quite different. The lyrics of the surfing songs emphasize carefree fun as well as the popularity of the activity. The 1963 song "Catch a Wave" assures the listener that surfing is not only the greatest sport, but also easily learned as all you have to do is "paddle out, turn around and raise." The narrator wishes to convey the fact that surfing is easy to understand and quite accessible to the average person. The 1962 "Surfin' Safari" goes a little farther by inviting the listener to join the singer and many others to "come on and safari with me." In contrast, the Beach Boys infused their "hot rodding" tunes with complex technical jargon. The narrator in "409," the B-side to "Surfin' Safari," dreams of owning a "four speed, dual quad, posi-traction" Chevrolet 409, a car popular with auto enthusiasts at the time. In a similar vein, the 1963 song "Little Deuce Coupe" refers to the car's "flathead mill" and "lake pipes," slang terms for the engine and external exhaust pipes, respectively. The song goes on to discuss custom modifications made to the vehicle—"she's ported and relieved and she's stroked and bored." Even with the use of such exclusive language, however, a listener not immersed in the "hot-rodder" subculture could still connect to the music of a Beach Boys' song, and to a particular vision of youth culture.

In positioning the Beach Boys as champions of California car culture, record producers were attempting to create "a mythic place of carefree consumption and

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[17] Ibid.

[18] Blanke, *Hell on Wheels*, pp. 40–41. However, as early as 1905 Tin-Pan Alley songwriters were composing songs about cars, such as Gus Edward's waltz "In My Merry Oldsmobile."

[19] Kirse Granat May, *Golden State, Golden Youth: The California Image in Popular Culture, 1955–1966* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2002), p. 104.

endless summer" targeted at the nationwide youth demographic.[20] The resultant musical product was part of a larger commercial venture to package and sell an idealized version of life in California to the rest of the country. California became synonymous with the "American Dream" and living well. It is this decadent lifestyle that Cake criticizes 30 years later—a mindset obsessed with style, comfort, and the purchase of expensive cars without proper concern for the environmental and social repercussions. However, there remains a hint of nostalgia in "Stickshifts and Safetybelts" as well as a longing for the ease and comfort afforded by the idea of the automobile. While the lyrics may be reminiscent of the Beach Boys, the musical style is not surfer rock but rockabilly, and the vocal harmonies in the bridge are closer to the Everly Brothers than the Wilson brothers. "Stickshifts" occupies two different worlds in this way, and it is impossible to tell where homage ends and satire begins.

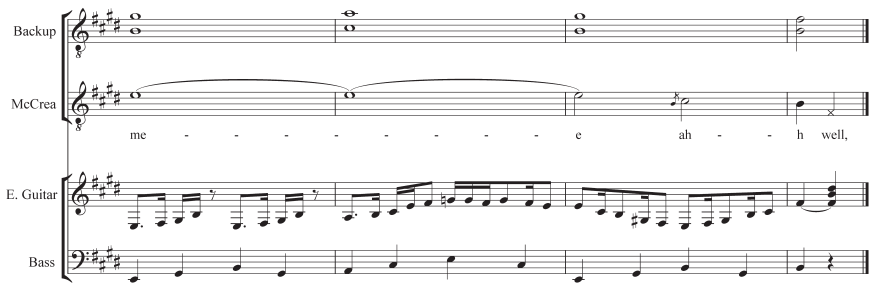
The opening lyrics state that stickshifts, safety-belts and bucket seats have "all got to go," so that the protagonist can have his girl next to him as they drive. While he admits that good cars are made in other countries, including Japan, the singer wants to drive his Chevrolet Malibu, an American luxury muscle car designed in the early 1960s. The lyrics do not participate in the same style of technical terminology that the Beach Boys employ but are instead a playful parody, referring not to engine sizes or car body styles but to the more mundane vehicle components, safety mechanisms and the seating configuration. Singer John McCrea depicts the interior of the Malibu as a place suitable for an intimate liaison instead of casting the car as a convincing symbol of power and luxury. It is a foregone conclusion that the love object will be suitably seduced by the Malibu and wish to take a drive; the problem lies in how to be situated comfortably within the vehicle.

"Stickshifts" makes use of a limited instrumental texture—rhythm guitar, bass and drums driven alternately by lead electric guitar and vocals—reminiscent of early rock 'n' roll music. The guitar solo that opens "Stickshifts and Safetybelts" swings a fast-paced melody on a pentatonic E scale with an occasional blue note (see Example 10.1). This opening solo continues throughout the song playing off of and on top of the vocals throughout the chorus and bridge. When not playing this main motive, the guitar accompaniment consists of driving, half-muted two-note chords typical of a blues shuffle or boogie-woogie progression. The walking bass line and simple drum part also signal this earlier style of popular music. The harmonic structure only deviates from its I-IV-I-V 16-bar blues pattern in the bridge, emphasizing the subdominant harmony. Typical of country and rockabilly, trumpeter Vince DiFiore provides a harmony in thirds above McCrea's melody throughout the choruses. DiFiore adds an additional harmony a fourth below in the bridge, and all three parts are colored by a strained timbre as they reach a high tenor range (see Example 10.1). The effect is one of energy, with the slightly out-of-tune character of the voices raising the level of tension before returning to the verse.

[20] Ibid., p. 98.

While "Stickshifts" invokes a nostalgic glance back to the music of the 1950s and 1960s, it is also possible to view the song as a reaction against the decadence of car culture originally articulated in those decades. With their rock 'n' roll setting, Cake succeed in mocking the symbols of fun, youth, and freedom indirectly by presenting them unaltered to a later society with different values. "Stickshifts" can be taken completely at face value as an upbeat memory of a previous era, or as a farce of the fun, romantic encounters provided by cars.[21] Cake further undermine the homage to car culture by mentioning the vehicular "other" in the bridge section—that is, cheap and efficient Asian cars—magnified by the strained three-part harmony singing.

Example 10.1 Cake, "Stickshifts and Safetybelts" bridge section



Through the acknowledgment of a practical alternative to American luxury cars, the insular nature of idealized car culture becomes suspect. The protagonist of the song seems to prefer the Malibu only for selfish reasons of personal comfort; a more conscientious listener should purchase a less flashy but more economical Asian vehicle. Though not expressed directly or even obviously, the implications hang in the musical space for a moment before being swept away by the shuffle beat.

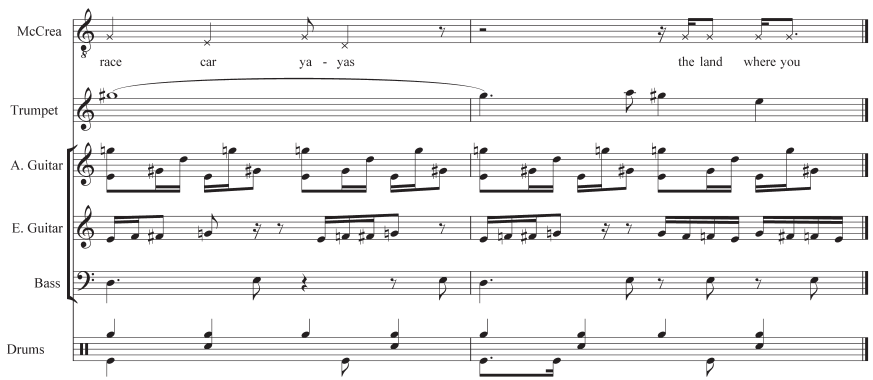
While the type of reminiscence exhibited in "Stickshifts" is generally good natured, in "Race Car Ya-yas" remembering becomes a harsh criticism. The modern manifestations of 1960s car culture are an important aspect of Cake's musical argument because they contribute to a generally negative aspect of residing in the Golden State. The "freedom" and "fun" emphasized by the car songs of the earlier generation have become warped in Cake's view: the values of car culture have shifted to selfishness, competitiveness, and a flaunting of the

21 "Stickshifts" was used in the soundtrack for the 2002 comedy *Waking Up in Reno*. Though the cast included such notables as Billy Bob Thornton, Charlize Theron, and Patrick Swayze, the cheap plot and blatant redneck stereotypes left critics rather underwhelmed. "Stickshifts" was chosen because, on the surface, it faithfully adheres to the stylistic sound of rockabilly and country music in general, reinforcing the Southern "hick" roots of the main characters.

male libido. "Race Car Ya-yas" draws upon the more recent musical framework of hip hop and rap rather than the older styles used in "Stickshifts," creating a sharper distinction between post-World War II and mid-1990s American culture on *Fashion Nugget*. Rather than the carefree consumption and endless summer of early car culture, the protagonist of "Race Car Ya-yas" sees only perpetual frustration and the inconsiderate nature of drivers on the highways of California.

While the piece is short—just one minute in length—it achieves an immediate state of restless tension through static instrumental lines each consisting of one unchanging motive (see Example 10.2). An acoustic guitar enters first, out of tune and slightly distorted, and playing with a style of fingerpicking popularized by Merle Travis, a country guitarist who had a successful career in 1950s California.[22] The E major/minor7 chord that the guitar sustains becomes the basis for the rest of the song. The electric guitar plays distorted 16th-note runs, ascending and descending through the chromatic tetrachord between E and G. The guitars are supported by a simplistic drum and bass line emphasizing a steady 4/4 pulse with a few offbeat accents to maintain forward momentum. Adding to this, the voice lazily intones the melody with a loose treatment of the rhythm. Halfway through the song the trumpet enters, emerging from the thick texture with a sustained and lyrical melodic line arching from concert E4 to A4 with an agogic emphasis on G♯4. These individual lines, layered atop one another in different combinations and durations, form a tenuous musical network that promotes a feeling of nervous anxiety.

Example 10.2 Combination of all layers in Cake's "Race Car Ya-yas"



[22] Though there are many styles of guitar fingerpicking or fingerstyle playing derived from classical, bluegrass, and folk music, Travis picking is one of the most commonly employed by pop musicians. This particular technique is characterized by a set pattern of alternating the thumb and first three fingers of the right hand while the left hand holds standard chord positions.

The discordant effect of "Race Car Ya-yas" is similar to a phenomenon identified by music theorist Adam Krims as the "hip-hop sublime." Krims defines sublimity as something "producing both a pleasure at the adventures of music and a fear of being cognitively overwhelmed by the endless developments."[23] Specifically, Krims explains that:

> … the "hip-hop sublime" is a musical strategy … deploy[ing] dense combinations of musical layers; all of the layers reinforce the quadruple meter, but in the domain of pitch they comprise a sharply dissonant combination, even by the standards of jazz, or soul, harmony. In fact, the layers tend not even to be "in tune," so to speak: instead, they are separated by intervals that can only be measured in terms of fractions or well-tempered semitones.[24]

Cake's song produces the sublime through instrumental technique rather than by means of sampling. While the bass plays in standard A=440 tuning, the acoustic guitar is detuned by a small interval and the distortion on the electric guitar obscures the pitch center. Trumpeter Vince DiFiore alters the intonation of his melody by manipulating his embouchure; his initial attacks are sharp and followed by a loose vibrato that wavers the pitch. Moreover, the vocals are of indeterminate pitch, produced in a speech-like manner. Together, these elements increase the harmonic tension and threaten to overwhelm the listener in a wash of sounds.

The lyrics further fuel the musical anxiety created by the discordant instrumental parts.[25] McCrea directs his lightly veiled intimations of unease and anger toward the drivers enmeshed in California car culture. The narrator implicitly blames overtly masculine drivers for the infuriating driving conditions by comparing fuzzy dice, the superfluous rear-view mirror decoration popularized in the 1960s, to male genitalia. By insisting that the dice are *still* hanging proudly, McCrea is arguing that masculine posturing is responsible for perpetuating an old-fashioned and outmoded lifestyle, one that is perhaps no longer socially acceptable. McCrea sings these words twice in their entirety before repeating fragments of the first line, with various inflections, unable to satisfactorily express his frustrations. Just as each instrumental line is strictly limited to one unchanging motive, the protagonist cannot "change lanes" and is forced to follow a single path. The self-absorbed actions of others on the road have restricted the protagonist's agency, not allowing him or his accompanying musical backdrop to move freely.

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[23] Adam Krims, *Music and Urban Geography* (New York, 2007), p. 99.

[24] Ibid., p. 107.

[25] The term "ya-yas," as it is used today, comes from the title of the 1970 Rolling Stones live album *Get Yer Ya-Ya's Out* which is a reference to a song by bluesman Blind Boy Fuller (1907–1941) "Get Your Ya-yas Out the Door." In this case, and in many blues songs from the early twentieth century, "ya-yas" or "yas-yas-yas" was a common euphemism for a person's posterior. In this context, the term most likely refers to a pleasurable act of questionable moral character, an indulgence that should be avoided.

While tense and constricted, the political message of "Race Car Ya-yas" remains rather nebulous. It is not until the 2004 album *Pressure Chief* that Cake's lyrics begin to respond directly to ecological crisis with moral outrage. In the song "Carbon Monoxide," Cake combines punk, 1960s rock, and pop, achieving a dramatic synergy through the juxtaposition of disparate musical registers. In contrast to the complexities of the music, the lyrics of the song are exceedingly straightforward, baldly claiming that the level of air pollution has become intolerable. The protagonist asserts that his lungs are being damaged by the volume of vehicles driving on California roadways and rhetorically asks "where's the air?" For Cake, air pollution becomes an unignorable social wrongdoing, an offense perpetrated by those who should be more aware of the negative consequences of their actions.

The verses of "Carbon Monoxide" are marked by a sense of minimalism and amateurism, often identified as two principal traits of early punk rock aesthetics.[26] The heavily distorted guitar alternates between power chords on I and V—open fifth harmonies lacking the third scale degree, a technique typical of punk and heavy metal music—the bass plays a slightly syncopated rhythm on a tonic pedal, and the drums emphasize the quadruple meter. Throughout the verse, McCrea sings only a single pitch, a stark contrast to his usual declamatory delivery that more or less follows the contours of normal speech. The effect is one of a mantra-like chant, intoning the criticisms more emphatically and with less detachment. This chanting infuses the lyrics with a rhythmic drive echoed in the power chord progression of the guitar. Though not exactly the manner in which punk rockers achieve their stripped-down sound, this general reference to punk encapsulates many of the musical qualities as well as other aspects of the genre's register, namely a rejection of conservative social mores and an attack on the decadence of earlier eras.

The simple G tonality and punk aesthetic of the verse, however, are abandoned in the pre-chorus and chorus sections.[27] The guitar drops out during the pre-chorus and the bass begins an ascending pentatonic scale pattern on a B♭ chord followed by a C chord. The modal inflection of ♭III leading to IV is jarring to the ear, emphasizing the words in which McCrea admits that, if the positions were reversed, he would also want to drive his luxury car quickly and irresponsibly.

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[26] Bernard Gendron, *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club: Popular Music and the Avant-Garde* (Chicago, IL, 2002), p. 234. Lester Bangs, Dave Marsh, and Greg Shaw are credited with developing punk music as a genre, publishing fanzines and essays that helped shape the New York and Detroit punk scenes. Derived from the music of the Troggs, Bangs' third principal trait is sheer aggressiveness and loudness. This is not present in "Carbon Monoxide" in any appreciable way.

[27] In popular music song structure, the pre-chorus, also known as the "build" or "transition," is an optional section following the verse. Motivic material is generally different from that found in the verse or the chorus, and traditionally the harmonic emphasis is on the subdominant key area.

While these sentiments might be seen as ironically undermining the polemical message in the song, they also convey the extreme desperation of those forced to contend with oppression. The lyrics in the second pre-chorus further lament the lack of an automobile, as the protagonist wishes for a better alternative to being a pedestrian forced to breathe in the unhealthy emissions. The lived experience of Sacramento is not only one of peril but also one of frustration for the protagonist as the unhealthy exhaust is unavoidable, and no solution seems present apart from an imaginary one—that is, driving away in a Mercedes. Rather than being able to finish his sentence, the subject can only utter a wordless cry. If a person does not have or cannot afford a car s/he becomes trapped in the environment, unable to participate in the dominant culture of automobility and, ironically, unable to escape its devastating effects.

This mounting tension leads directly into the chorus where the rhythm guitar begins playing a chord progression with a root movement of I-V-IV-♭III, a variant of a minor pentatonic progression, supported by a lead guitar solo riff.[28] The lyrics, consisting solely of the phrase "too much," are sung in a call-and-response style between DiFiore and McCrea. Also, in contrast to the songs from the previous albums, the chorus features a pulsing synthesizer riff of staccato major seconds over the vocal tracks.[29] Not only is this synthesizer line a sonic reference to late 1960s rock, but it also adds a sense of rhythmic urgency and thrust.[30] The static nature of the vocal lines and guitar riff are driven forward by the insistent and dissonant keyboard pulse adding to the singer's growing anger, which erupts after the chorus.

During this post-chorus transitional section there are no lyrics, but a sustained vocalization on the syllable "ah." The tension of the song is at its zenith here; the vocal and bass parts sustain a ♭VII major^7, a harmony far from the song's G tonality established in the beginning. The bass plays the root and the vocal line rises in thirds to outline the ♭VII major^7. In contrast to this harmonic stasis, the trumpet plays an accented riff on a pentatonic F scale with the last two notes, D3 to B4, anticipating the return to G major of the verse (see Example 10.3). Though ♭VII is not uncommon in the realm of popular music harmony, it is mostly used as either the secondary dominant to ♭III or as part of a Mixolydian modal progression.

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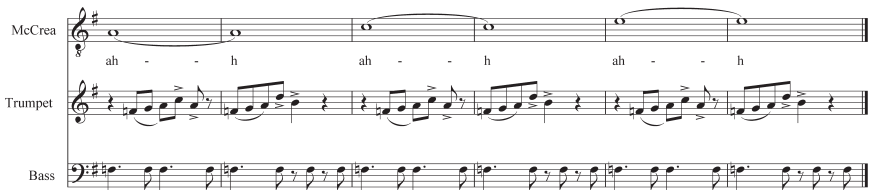
[28] A minor pentatonic scale is composed of the first, third, fourth, fifth, and seventh scale degrees of the natural minor scale, in this case G, B♭, C, D and F; this scale is also known as a gapped blues scale. A minor pentatonic progression is one that is based on the chords derived from this scale, often involving movement from IV to ♭III and lacking a strong leading tone motion.

[29] The synthesizer has become an important part of Cake's sound since *Pressure Chief* in 2004, often replacing the guitar and trumpet as primary soloing/melody instrument.

[30] Though many rock groups make use of this type of synth riff, it is most often and most obviously featured in the music of the Doors. See, for example, the chorus of "Break on Through," the guitar solo two-thirds of the way through "Light My Fire," and the whole second half of "Hello I Love You." One other notable example is the chorus of the Monkee's "I'm a Believer."

While the ♭VII is preceded by a ♭III at the end of the chorus, it does not resolve as if it were a dominant in the key of B♭.

Example 10.3 Post-chorus transition in Cake's "Carbon Monoxide"



Although such a chord is often used to imply modal color, the weight given to this particular ♭VII due to its length—the transition lasts six bars and does not deviate from this one chord—alludes to some greater harmonic emphasis.[31] While F major7 does share tones in common with the dominant seventh (D, A, and C), it lacks the leading tone and thus any strong resolution tendencies. Despite the harmonic complexity, the transition is used more as a foil to the simpler punk style, expressing the wordless rage of the narrator as sharp harmonic and melodic dissonance. The harmonic and emotional tensions are not resolved at the end of the transition; the song just moves abruptly back to the verse, reinstating the clarity of the punk sound.

The message of "Carbon Monoxide" is one of the most direct in Cake's repertoire as it addresses the frustration with car pollution in no uncertain terms and yet still presents a reaction to automobile dependence fraught with complex ironies. Traffic is not a metaphor but a real and present negative fact of life; a pedestrian is forced to suffer in an environment dominated by automobiles. "Carbon Monoxide" moves from clarity to confusion as the voice devolves from full sentences, into fragments, into wordless cries, demonstrating one way of reacting to car pollution: anger, panic, and hysteria. And yet the protagonist of the song still wishes that he were a driver, fantasizing about the fun, freedom, and lack of responsibilities that car ownership would bring. Air pollution is a necessary evil for the protagonist, representing not only potential health hazards, but also the possibility of living well in an urban environment. Just as the music is unable to settle on a punk, rock, or pop style, the narrator cannot commit to his thoughts, unable to condemn fully the use of automobiles while still suffering from the deleterious effects on the environment.

[31] The rising vocal line is also a common technique used in early rock 'n' roll songs such as "Twist and Shout" and "Do You Love Me (Now that I Can Dance)" to exaggerate a dominant seventh chord.

Conclusion

Though I would argue that Cake's music promotes concern for environmental degradation, the power, and quite possibly the appeal, of a Cake song lays in its semantic and musical ambiguity. Muecke argues that irony is a "way of writing designed to leave open the question of what the literal meaning might signify: there is a perpetual deferment of significance."[32] When Cake blends various musical styles, it is as an act of continually suspending musical meaning and activating "not one but an endless series of subversive interpretations." Cake uses an ironic pluralization of perspective in this way to communicate social concerns through multiple levels of registrated cultural meaning while appearing detached from any specific musical or lyrical paradigms. Critics may be justified in calling them quirky or droll, but consideration of their image, musical repertoire, and the arc of the band's career reveals a complex and multifaceted ironic struggle with automobiles as an inevitable part of living in an urban environment. Sometimes a haunting memory and sometimes an immediate threat, society's relationship with cars is always a harsh reality for Cake.

While critical analysis may be Cake's goal, ultimately the listener must recognize the ironic connotations and accept them as polemical. Lars Elleström warns of the detrimental effects of improperly grasping the nature of irony and thus rendering further obscurity to an already complex topic. Whether or not Cake intends their schizophrenic musical settings to amplify the contradictory messages in their lyrics, the sound of their irony is a means of forming a network of experiential resonance, an array of disparate and simultaneous interpretations formed by the listener's individual expectations. The manner in which Cake juxtapose the stylistic markers of various musical genres forces fans and critics alike to reconsider their previous listening experiences. For those with a shared musical background, the irony in Cake's music embodies the cultural shift towards ecological awareness at the end of the twentieth century, not a solution but recognition of the severity of a growing problem as long as automobile dependence in America remains unchecked.

[32] Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic*, p. 31.

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Chapter 11
Paul Anka Sings "Smells Like Teen Spirit"

Mimi Haddon

As a going-away gift in fall 2009, an old friend compiled for me a nostalgia-style mixtape. From the carefully assembled selection of old favorites, pop curios, and oddities, one song in particular warranted repeated rewinding. Perhaps it was because I used to be a grunge girl whose only musical outlet during adolescence was—unfittingly and at the time rather embarrassingly—playing saxophone in a big band that the utter weirdness of Paul Anka's swing cover of Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit" piqued my interest. Hearing Anka, a 1950s former teen idol turned lounge singer, crooning to the tune of teenage bitterness fused together two musical worlds that, although both very familiar to me, should never normally come into contact.[1]

Anka's performance of the song was originally released on his 2005 album *Rock Swings,* a compilation of rock covers that included versions of "Wonderwall" by British group Oasis and "Lovecats" by British post-punks The Cure, as well as renditions of pop songs like Michael Jackson's "The Way You Make Me Feel." Reviewer for the BBC, Antony Hatfield, summarized my own bafflement and intrigue, succinctly opening his appraisal of the album with the words "What's going on here?" He then wryly continued, "Surely no amount of financial inducement can be worth such abject loss of dignity," describing *Rock Swings* as an album that intended to take "any old 'rock' track and rearrange it into an unrecognizable slab of schmaltz." Hatfield singled out the mutated version of "Smells Like Teen Spirit" in particular as "an insult" to the kind of "sensibilities" that were expressed in the original song. On hearing the entire album, then, Hatfield concluded that it was neither "funny" nor "post-modern," but "crap."[2]

Fans of popular music understand almost intuitively why Anka's performance of "Smells Like Teen Spirit" garnered such a reaction. It may seem as though Hatfield's review arbitrarily accords absolute value to certain popular music performances and denies it to others, yet his comments are in fact more nuanced, and less personal opinion than they might seem. Though he opts not to beat

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[1] Nirvana, "Smells Like Teen Spirit," *Nevermind*, BMG Records (UK) Ltd, The David Geffen Company DGCTD 5 (1991). Paul Anka, "Smells Like Teen Spirit," *Rock Swings*, Verve Records B0004751–02 (2005).

[2] Antony Hatfield, "It's Not Funny. It's Not Post-Modern. It's Crap," *BBC Music Reviews* (September 19, 2005), http://www.bbc.co.uk/music/reviews/8v9x [accessed January 2, 2013].

around the proverbial bush, the subtext to Hatfield's damning remarks is that certain musicians, songs, or genres are so closely associated with specific social constituencies and precise ideological meanings that if these rules of equivalence amongst artifact, social group, and ideology are breached, the artifact becomes generically unintelligible or, to use Hatfield's word, "crap."[3]

In the case of "Smells Like Teen Spirit," Anka's performance brings together two "expressive worlds" that are diametrically opposed.[4] A "resounding fuck you to the boomers" was how journalist Sarah Ferguson described the Nirvana original in 1994.[5] Furthermore, the song's scathing critique of consumerist America's exploitation of teenage vulnerability is obvious from the song's title, which derives from Teen Spirit, a deodorant aimed primarily at teenage girls. Anka's performance, then, transforms this "anthem of powerless rage and betrayal," this musicalized "fuck you," into smooth, jazzy lounge music for the snowbirds on the slots at Vegas.[6] The rules of intelligibility established for both the grunge realm of Nirvana and the easy listening world of Paul Anka have therefore not only been breached, but turned inside out.

Perhaps, though, all is not what it seems. Could a resuscitation of the intelligibility of Anka's cover be possible through considering the role of irony? Indeed, one may delineate at least two planes of irony in his performance: first, the irony that ensues from the collision of two opposed musical genres; second, unintentional or even "dramatic" irony, pertaining specifically to Anka's role as a performer in this collocation. That is to say, even though Anka and/or his musical arrangers have attempted to suppress Nirvana's criticism of both the commodification of teenage identity and the phenomenon of mass culture, through musical modifications and theatrical performance gestures, easy listening's style arguably draws *more* attention to Nirvana's critique than the original, and therefore positions Anka as an unknowing critic of his own establishment: the entertainment industry.

This chapter extrapolates the irony in Anka's performance of "Smells Like Teen Spirit," with an eye toward musical genre specifically. I begin by briefly outlining how popular songs are able to "mean" or signify through musical gestures and lyrics via their connections to larger categories of musical genre and social identity. I attend in particular to the social and ideological connotations that

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[3] I have taken the concept "generic intelligibility" from David Brackett's studies of genre in popular music. See David Brackett, "Questions of Genre in Black Popular Music and the Politics of 'Crossover,'" *Black Music Research Journal*, 25/1 (Spring/Fall, 2005): 65–84.

[4] The idea of "the juxtaposition of expressive worlds" is used by Walter Frisch in his discussions of musical irony, and irony more generally, in relation to German modernism. See Walter Frisch, *German Modernism: Music and the Arts* (Berkeley, CA, 2005), p. 209.

[5] Sarah Ferguson, "Kurt Cobain and the Politics of Damage," in Theo Cateforis (ed.), *The Rock History Reader* (New York, 2007), pp. 273–6 at p. 274. For the original article, see Sarah Ferguson, "The Comfort of Being Sad: Kurt Cobain and the Politics of Damage," *Utne Reader* (July–August 1994): 60–62.

[6] Ferguson, "Kurt Cobain," p. 284.

music and performances accrue over time. To develop an ironic interpretation, I analyze precise moments in Anka's performance at which particular musical or physical gestures that are loaded with extramusical meaning rub against styles or gestures that have obverse sociocultural significances. In the second part of the chapter, I extend my interpretation of Anka as a "dramatic" actor by engaging in a little hermeneutic experiment: I explore the different readings that arise when I shift Anka's position from naïve victim to complicit agent, questioning to what extent Anka is aware of his generic transgression. Finally, I employ my ironic interpretation to explore the transformative potential of performance, showing how, through inhabiting the world of "Smells Like Teen Spirit," Anka switches from teen idol to teen angst.

Social Characteristics of Popular Music

The ontology of musical genre is particularly complex, lying paradoxically somewhere between the illusory and the pragmatic. A musical genre is a network of sounds, words, styles, groups, and individuals around which social and other extramusical values and significances cohere and reify. Musicologist David Brackett has noted how popular music's genre labels "denote social identity" more than those in classical music. He adds, "genres indicate a tacit and contingent collective agreement about the 'proper' place for different types of music and the social groups associated with them."[7] Like other social constructs, musical genres are therefore products of iteration, formed according to assumptions about the identities of their producers and the social constituencies to whom they communicate, often with quite flexible criteria regarding actual musical sounds.

Musicologist Kenneth Gloag described "grunge" as:

> A style of 1990s pop music involving heavy, distorted guitar sound and an image and attitude reflecting punk. It originated in Seattle and is typified by the band Nirvana, especially their *Smells like Teen Spirit* (1991).[8]

Grunge is also strongly characterized by its "attitude of alienation and victimization," particularly in terms of its fraught relationship to the entertainment industry.[9] While Nirvana and fellow grunge musicians prioritized symbolic capital (that is, approval from fellow musicians and critics) over economic capital, on the other hand—and this is true of most rock-based genres—they sought symbolic capital from within a commercial framework, thus engendering an irreconcilable

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[7] Brackett, "Questions of Genre," p. 89.

[8] Kenneth Gloag, "Grunge," *Oxford Music Online* (Oxford), http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.proxy1.library.mcgill.ca/subscriber/article/opr/t114/e3047?q=grunge&search=quick&pos=2&_start=1#firsthit [accessed April 17, 2013].

[9] Ferguson, "Kurt Cobain," p. 283.

loving and loathing of commercial success.[10] In addition to this "complex and ambiguous" political ideology rooted in a strained relationship with the culture industry, scholar Thomas C. Shevory has described grunge as demarcated by its "intense sadness," disappointment regarding the "sell out" of 1960s counterculture, and its subversion of "punk leftism with a peculiarly American ideology of the self," which manifested, above all, in disillusionment and intense self-hatred.[11]

Most frequently associated with grunge, "generation X" is an ambiguous demographic variously characterized as those born anywhere between 1960 and into the 1980s. Drawing from Shevory, I suggest that the label "gen X" speaks primarily to the white middle class, lost in the prospectless abyss of contemporary American culture, and shares with grunge a yearning for idealized integrity and authenticity. Musicologist Mark Mazullo noted that Nirvana released their album *Nevermind* in 1991, the same year as Douglas Coupland's novel *Generation X*: *Tales for an Accelerated Culture,* which recounts the lives of three jaded 20-somethings desperately seeking meaning in turbo capitalist culture.[12] Indeed, it was Coupland's novel that introduced the social category "gen X" into the vernacular. Nirvana singer Kurt Cobain's 1994 suicide is another recurrent subject in the discourse surrounding grunge and "gen X." It epitomized the "psychological damage" that, for Ferguson, became the "basis for a social identity," and the chasm felt by Cobain and the rest of the band between commercial success and artistic authenticity.[13]

It is perhaps more difficult to outline the social identity of Paul Anka's audience than it is to describe the social groups broadly associated with Nirvana. The kind of discourse that binds Nirvana to an imagined social body like "gen X" does not surround Anka's music with the same iterative force. Furthermore, Anka's career has spanned several decades rather than a few short years. Rather than occupying a single genre category, Anka's career includes his years as a teen idol and "clean" alternative to late-1950s rock 'n' roll, as well as his current status as a Las Vegas-style purveyor of swing and easy listening.

What is both consistent and important, however, is that Anka represents something that was anathema to Nirvana. Keir Keightley's description of easy listening in his article on middlebrow music provides a useful entry point into

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[10] The "symbolic capital" of social theorist Pierre Bourdieu refers to a type of prestige that is not measured or symbolized by money or material wealth, but rather conferred by producers and critics. See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York, 1993).

[11] T.C. Shevory, "Bleached Resistance: The Politics of Grunge," *Popular Music and Society*, 19/2 (1995): 23–48 at 34. See also Anna G. Piotrowska's "'Ironic Consciousness" in Early Polish Punk Music," Chapter 9 in this collection, for a different take on irony in punk's disillusionment.

[12] Mark Mazullo, "The Man Whom the World Sold: Kurt Cobain, Rock's Progressive Aesthetic, and the Challenges of Authenticity," *The Musical Quarterly*, 84/4 (2000): 713–49.

[13] Ferguson, "Kurt Cobain," p. 284.

conceptualizing Anka in comparison with Nirvana. Keightley suggests that easy listening's audience is mass, uncritical, and passive, has either no musical literacy or very little, and shares a desire for ease, luxury, and entertainment.[14] While Nirvana attained tremendous commercial success, Cobain and the group remained critical of fans' unthinking endorsement, a sentiment evident in "Smells Like Teen Spirit," with lyrics that sardonically sneer about how the audience is waiting to be entertained.[15] Anka's music, on the other hand, especially his early singles like "Diana" and "Puppy Love," are not widely known for their social critique.

Furthermore, unlike Nirvana, who are popular amongst the boomer-haters, Anka aims his most recent music at pre-boomer middle-aged listeners, thus marking a significant generation gap between the two sets of audiences. Verve Records, the label that released *Rock Swings*, specializes in adult genres such as smooth jazz, pop jazz (exemplified by musicians such as Jamie Cullum), and light classical, alongside re-releases of standards and the "serious" vintage jazz of Billie Holiday, Stan Getz, and Charles Mingus.[16] Contrary to the kinds of cultural mores suggested by Nirvana's greasy hair, plaid shirts, shapeless t-shirts, and youthful ruckus, the music on Verve Records is packaged to represent a normative, hip but by no means edgy, bourgeois adult lifestyle. Indeed, the song title "Smells Like *Teen* Spirit" brings its own generational irony if Anka's audience, comprising those who remember mid-twentieth-century "Diana" and "Puppy Love," conflate the idea of a modern "teen" with Anka as a teen, when his stage persona was a desexualized, non-threatening alternative to adolescent rebellion.

Two Kinds of Irony

The juxtaposition in generational difference and dramatically opposed stances regarding the entertainment industry (integral to Anka's career as entertainer *par excellence* but symbolic of self-laceration for Nirvana) is the root of the first level of irony in Anka's "Smells Like Teen Spirit"—one "expressive world" appears to be articulating the values of a contradictory other.[17] This ironic juxtaposition is audible in Anka's performance itself owing to the way in which, over time and in various contexts, specific musical gestures have become sutured to extramusical meanings of a social and political nature. Irony thus occurs when certain sounds,

[14] Keir Keightley, "Music for Middlebrows: Defining the Easy Listening Era, 1946–1966," *American Music*, 26/3 (Fall 2008): 309–35.

[15] See also Greil Marcus, "Comment on Mark Mazullo, 'The Man Whom the World Sold,'" *The Musical Quarterly*, 84/4 (Winter 2000): 750–53.

[16] Verve Music Group, http://www.vervemusicgroup.com/artists [accessed April 17, 2013].

[17] Frisch, *German Modernism*, p. 209.

musical components, or lyrics rub against those belonging to a different, or in this case, opposite, "expressive world."[18]

In his essay "The Problem of Speech Genres," Mikhail Bakhtin suggested that the process of genre transference "not only alters the way a style sounds, under conditions of a genre unnatural to it, but also violates or renews the given genre."[19] Turning to Anka's performance of "Smells Like Teen Spirit," if one understands "style" as the musical parameters that can be altered without entirely obscuring the song's identity, then here, the big-band, easy-listening style has been transferred to the grunge genre. That is, the aspects that constitute the song's *content*—the lyrics and melody—have remained largely intact such that the song is still recognizable while the song's *stylistic* aspects—rhythm, instrumentation, tempo, vocal style, and harmony—have undergone an unnerving holometabolic operation. And yet the memory of grunge and its cultural connotations, conjured by the sound of the song's melody and explicitly articulated in the song's lyrics, are so "unnatural" to Anka's Sinatra-style brand of easy listening that they appear to critique easy listening from within and draw attention to easy listening's musical mechanisms of trivialization.[20] Returning to Bakhtin's formulation, then, the grunge and easy-listening genres "violate" each other by breaking with the conventions set out for each. To put it simply, according to the way in which musical genres are produced and policed by group or collective discourse, easy listening does not normally have these lyrics or emotional sentiment, and grunge does not normally have this instrumental arrangement, rhythm, or these harmonic progressions.[21]

The lyrics of "Smells Like Teen Spirit" accord with the yearning for meaning, and the sardonic disillusionment that characterized generation X, as well as the valorization of symbolic capital over economic capital through embittered, self-immolating language, apathy and sarcasm—a common type of irony.[22] The title satirizes the marketing of commodities toward adolescents and is therefore ironic regardless of Anka's treatment. In an attempt to sanitize the lyrics, Anka and/or his arrangers changed the opening lines. The ambiguous "Load up, load up" has replaced the original "Load up on guns," negating the explicit violence that ignited Nirvana's original. But a trace remains. The open-endedness of the new lyrics forces the listener to ask: "Load up on what?" Malts? Fizzies? In Nirvana's world,

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[18] Ibid.

[19] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX, 1986), p. 66.

[20] Genre transference may also work the other way round. My emphasis on the distinction between style and content, however, is intended to show how easy listening controls the stylistic parameters of this particular performance (the instrumentation, rhythm, harmony, and so on).

[21] For more on subjective (as opposed to group or collective) reactions to genre recognition and their "the customer is always right" theory, see Robert O. Gjerdingen and David Perrott, "Scanning the Dial: The Rapid Recognition of Musical Genres," *Journal of New Music Research*, 37/2 (2008): 93–100.

[22] William Storm, *Irony and the Modern Theatre* (Cambridge, 2011), p. 10.

"load up" could refer to drug usage, a recreational pursuit not readily associated with Anka's audience, but something certainly associated with Cobain, his alleged "desire to become a junkie," and the rise of heroin use in the 1990s.[23] Therefore, even though Anka and/or his arrangers have attempted to censor the original lyrics, a lingering trace of their "unnaturalness" within their new stylistic setting (to recall Bakhtin's term) is left behind; Nirvana's song shows signs of resistance to co-option because it forces Anka into an unintentional double entendre.

Nirvana's lyrics placed within the easy-listening swing style heightens this strong sense of disjuncture. In the Nirvana version, the melody in the verses is modally unusual; it descends sequentially in F Aeolian mode (beginning on C), but closes on scale degree two (G), thus concluding each phrase with a lingering, incomplete thought. This melody unfolds over a repeated bass line that outlines the chordal roots of four power chords (F5, B♭5, A♭5, and D♭5). Shevory has noted that in the grunge genre, songs of "intense sadness" often have a particular "melodic character."[24] Cobain was also praised in early media reception for being "uniquely gifted" at writing expressive melodies.[25] The melancholy uncertainty at the end of the verses' melodic line has perhaps attracted these references to "sadness" or a marked melodic character. Anka's version has retained the pitch contour of Nirvana's melody, but has altered its rhythm, and transposed and reharmonized it using jazz-influenced seventh and ninth chords, which are significantly absent from the original and the grunge genre in general. Anka's reharmonization introduces a stronger sense of dominant-tonic relations based around a Cm7 harmonic palette. Subsequently, the somewhat ambiguous and melancholy quality of the original has been replaced with a more directional sound.

Despite this reharmonization, however, the mournful sentiment of the original song has not been totally erased, but rather disguised. The new harmonic and rhythmic setting, now juxtaposed with the sarcastic lyrics and eerie Aeolian melody creates a mise-en-relief, musically staging the ironic union of the two opposed worlds. To employ Walter Frisch's comments on musical irony in Western classical music, what one hears is "a disjunction between what is (or seems to be) being communicated" (the melody and lyrics) "and the manner of communicating" (the new jazz-influenced harmonic and rhythmic style).[26]

Framing Anka's performance in terms of "dramatic" irony adds to the irony engendered by this generic incongruity or juxtaposition. The *OED* defines "dramatic irony" as "the incongruity created when the (tragic) significance of a character's speech or actions is revealed to the audience but unknown to the character concerned."[27] To Anka's typical audience the song's amended lyrics

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[23] Shevory, "Bleached Resistance."

[24] Ibid., p. 32.

[25] Mazullo, "Man Whom the World Sold," p. 728.

[26] Frisch, *German Modernism*, p. 205.

[27] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "dramatic irony," http://dictionary.oed.com [accessed April 18, 2013].

("Load up, load up") are either unremarkable or simply unintelligible; they are perhaps more dazzled by Anka's crooning showmanship than by the bitter realities behind the performer's mask. However, a different kind of listener might interpret this amendment differently. As dramaturge William Storm has argued, irony's success often relies on "mutuality," on having someone there who is "getting the joke." Toying for now with the idea that Anka has *not* tuned into the meaning of "Smells Like Teen Spirit"—what the song represents nor, therefore, the great irony that he is performing it—to a competent listener familiar with the kinds of subcultural codes that Nirvana employs, Anka is a naïve protagonist. Just as Shakespeare's audience *knows* that Othello's suspicion is unfounded (but is rather spurred and stimulated by Iago), for those familiar with Nirvana, their biography, and their wider sociocultural significance, the fact that Anka is most likely performing this song to a middlebrow audience waiting to be entertained, positions Anka as a tragic victim of whosoever decided it was a good (or cruel) idea to have him perform this song.[28]

In addition to the alterations of the music's text, the difference in performance styles between Cobain and Anka contributes to an ironic reading. Cobain's vocal timbre and singing style make the song's lyrics almost completely unintelligible. Cobain's rough "grain" and "hiccup"-like effects signify "authenticity"; as in other art forms that accord to some degree with the doctrines of modernism, values such as artistic integrity, or indeed the act of obfuscation, are prioritized over accessibility.[29] These vocal nuances are ways of indicating to the audience that Cobain is singing in his "true" and untrained voice—an expression of his "true" emotions complete with heavy doses of self-deprecating sarcasm. However, the stylistic demands of big-band "crooning" require a style that has more clearly defined pitch and enunciation.

The lyrics to "Smells Like Teen Spirit" are far more audible in Anka's performance than they are in the original, and marked moments in the text such as the homophones "hello, hello, hello, how low" are now more prominent. In the Nirvana performance, the musical setting of the words "hello/how low" self-consciously draws attention to the "lowness" (banality) of the lyrics because the melody itself is also unsophisticated, comprising only a two-note half-step

[28] During an interview on National Public Radio (NPR) Anka endorsed Sid Vicious's performance of "My Way" because he sensed a very real or personal resonance for the former member of the Sex Pistols. Hence, it could also be argued that "Smells Like Teen Spirit" articulates a personal sentiment for Anka. For now, however, I have framed Anka as representing a set of values and as a participant in a genre with its own set of connotations in order to demonstrate how incongruities between musical genres produce irony. For the radio interview, see Renee Montagne, "Paul Anka Spins Pop his Way with 'Rock Swings,'" *NPR Music* (December 12, 2012), http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4755657 [accessed June 18, 2013].

[29] For further discussion on the romantic/modernist logic of authenticity in rock, see David Brackett, "Rock," in John Shepard et. al. (eds), *The Continuum Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World*, vol. 10: Genres: International, (London, forthcoming).

oscillation. This text–music relationship, therefore, achieves its sarcasm via the group's sneering self-ridicule, which is audible in the vocal timbre from the start. With Anka, on the other hand, even though this obvious sarcasm is lost, the sudden, now very audible, shift from "hello" to "how low" jars against the buoyant, syncopated realization of the melody and, for a brief moment, offers a peek behind Anka's hypernormative mask.

Anka's performance also includes some curious musical representations of the lyrics. In both versions, the lyrics "a mulatto, an albino, a mosquito, my libido" have an unremarkable melodic setting; they are set to a repeated ascending sequence that follows exactly the same melodic contour as the opening of the chorus. This repetitive musical setting draws attention to how these four nouns seem to be related only by their rhythmic similarity (their three-syllable length) and their phonetic resemblance. Their actual meaning (and any other potential relationships between these words) is not highlighted in Nirvana's performance. In Anka's version, however, even though he retains the same melody, three of the four concepts are accompanied by sonic gestures that elucidate the meaning of three of these nouns: the word "mulatto" is both exoticized and eroticized with "sultry" saxophone lip-bends; trills in the saxophones then evoke the hum of "a mosquito"; and the precise meaning of the brass explosion following the words "my libido" can be left to the imagination. On closer inspection, these four nouns are not only phonetically similar but in fact comprise an index of imperfect, abject, or taboo beings/phenomena: "a mulatto," a racial other; "an albino," a genetic abnormality; "a mosquito," a potentially deadly annoyance; and "my libido," an obviously sexual and therefore taboo subject.[30]

Whether one understands these nouns as nonsense non-sequiturs or linked at a deeper level, such words remain alien and problematic for an easy-listening audience and its "easy" values of hetero-normative romance. I propose that Anka has depicted three of these concepts "cleverly" in order to trivialize or diminish their power as simultaneously nonsensical and taboo to the pre-boomer listeners. Just in case Anka's audience did catch the lyrics, the musical setting slips these phenomena more smoothly into the aesthetics of ease or adult sophistication.

A Generic Drag

This final section is dedicated to furthering and complicating my argument in favor of a reinterpretation of Anka's "Smells Like Teen Spirit" as (unintentionally) ironic. By observing Anka's performance decisions and the impact Nirvana's song has on Anka's stage persona and identity, I provide a somewhat ludic evaluation of the extent to which Anka adopts—or is forced to adopt—a different persona through

[30] These musical details are far more audible in the album version than they are in the live performance that is the focus of the latter half of this chapter. They are, however, still present in the live footage.

this particular musical performance, presenting a challenge to the fixedness of categories of genre and identity. In other words, problematizing Anka's identity as nothing more than a purveyor of easy listening is the fact that he has violated the rules of genre. Under the strain of the song's violent and earnest connotations, his mask and confidence as all-round showman wither, revealing a potentially renewed genre–identity complex.

The live Anka–Nirvana monster can be experienced in all its multisensory glory by the full range of listeners, courtesy of YouTube.[31] In one particular performance, which appears to be taken from the Montréal Jazz Festival, Anka's physical appearance is a world away from "Smells Like Teen Spirit's" damning of the exploits of the culture industry. His black suit, Hollywood grin, "wine-'n'-dine-her" hetero-masculinity, the colored lights, and inhuman shade of tan suggest luxury, entertainment, even glamour. Anka begins his rendition with words of rather unconvincing encouragement for his audience, "Nirvana! Yes, Nirvana! Come on!" he cries. This introductory rallying call suggests that Anka anticipates his audience's total bemusement. Furthermore, just as Anka introduces the song, he raises his eyebrows as though to say, "Yes, believe it or not, I'm going to perform a Nirvana song."

If Anka is aware of the incompatibility of easy-listening swing and grunge, and the resulting irony that emerges when the two are brought together, then my earlier argument positioning him as an ironic—or "tragic"—protagonist is unfounded. Whereas before I suggested that Anka was something of a tragic hero whose ignorance about the sociocultural significance of "Smells Like Teen Spirit" made him an industry pawn whose vulnerability was kept secret from himself but was known to Nirvana's audience, in this Jazz Festival performance his rallying cry and self-conscious body language belie his ignorance.

Indeed, some of the song's lyrics actually unravel Anka's tragic or naïve position. When Anka reaches the line "I feel stupid" for the second time in this performance, he makes a camp hand gesture drawn from the world of musical theatre or cabaret.[32] It is an expression of vulnerability by Nirvana, self-conscious before adoring fans, but here the words refer directly to the travesty of the generic hybrid and Anka's role therein. Anka "feels stupid" because he is singing a Nirvana song. In the same way that the musically self-consciousness setting of "mulatto," "mosquito," and "libido" were attempts to trivialize less accessible words through musical "cleverness," Anka uses an exaggerated camp and self-deprecating gesture to mask his actual vulnerability: his failure to keep sensibly within the limits of his genre, the subsequent alienation of his original audience, and the surge of meta-irony engendered by Nirvana's lyrics.

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[31] The footage that I am discussing is available on YouTube. The logos on the stage floor indicate that the venue is the Montréal Jazz Festival. See Paul Anka, "Paul Anka Smells Like Teen Spirit," (2006), YouTube, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TsS811o21-k [accessed January 3, 2013].

[32] This gesture appears at approximately 2:20 in the YouTube footage.

It is the "meta-critique"—the final layer of irony where Nirvana's lyrics refuse to be fettered by easy listening and return for the last word—that brings Anka's version to an end with an explosion of absurdity: Anka hollers "my libido" into the unrecognizing face of his audience. This "meta-critique" brings about an unanticipated kind of authorial irony; it is as though Nirvana winks to the knowing listener as they pull Anka's puppet strings. Or, could it be that Anka—who began the song as a pawn "abjectly" risking his "dignity" for "financial gain"—has been persuaded by Nirvana, through musical ventriloquism, to commune with them? Are these words a "resounding fuck you" to Anka's pre-boomer audience and the machinations that have thrust him into this position?

By employing a less rigid view of musical genre, and a more flexible conception of the often genre-determined identity of musicians, Anka's "Smells Like Teen Spirit" might be elevated from generic failure to generic rebellion. Anka's temporary adoption of a different persona could therefore be considered a kind of musical drag act. A number of writers on Nirvana have referred to the shifting identity of Kurt Cobain, and Fred Pfeil, Jan Muto, Greil Marcus and Mark Mazullo have all drawn attention to Cobain's cross-dressing in particular.[33] Mazullo suggests that Cobain's cross-dressing was an attempt to escape dictated identities and hetero-normative restrictions.[34] Similarly, in his discussion of the video for Nirvana's song "In Bloom," Pfeil writes that Nirvana engaged in an "othering" process and positioned themselves against the notion of "thoroughly decent fellows" by juxtaposing themselves as subversive cross-dressers against Beatles-like characters.[35] I would add to Pfeil's discussion that the dress of the band is not only "feminine" in this video, but their performance on stage is also overtly homoerotic— further challenging the strictures of identity ghettoization.[36] Marcus describes one of the functions of cross-dressing as a "performance of authenticity," and he argues that Cobain "[removes] all attributes of entitlement (in his case, primarily maleness)" and replaces them with "attributes of abjection."[37]

Does Anka's performance enact a similar kind of cross-dressing, a musical drag act? Does his rendition of "Smells Like Teen Spirit" remove his symbolic privileges and therefore, by challenging the conventions of his genre, approach a kind of authenticity? James F. Smith defines two kinds of teen idol celebrity:

> … "citizen" celebrities, whose adulation is in the mainstream, [and who] reinforce mass cultural values; and rebel or "rogue" celebrities, whose fame

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[33] In addition to the articles already cited by Marcus and Mazullo, see Fred Pfeil, *White Guys: Studies in Postmodern Domination and Difference* (London and New York, 1995); and Jan Muto, "He Was the Woman of His Dreams: Identity, Gender, and Kurt Cobain," *Popular Music and Society*, 19/2 (1995): 69–85.

[34] Mazullo, "Man Whom the World Sold."

[35] Pfeil, *White Guys*, p. 100.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Marcus, "Comment," p. 751.

> rests on the admiration of a cultural subgroup, [and who] embody the particular tastes and values of their admirers, often in opposition to mass cultural values.[38]

Applying Smith's theory, Anka is the ideal "citizen" celebrity and Cobain is the "rogue." If delving into the repudiated "other" is a way to shed symbolic privilege in search for the authentic self, is Anka's play at the "rogue" a way for him to escape the dictates of his genre and channel something "real" about himself?

The generic drag model is not the only way in which to make Anka's performance generically more intelligible. Two historical trends in popular music might also rescue Anka's generic deviance. The first of these relates to Smith's description of the "rogue" artist as one whose "fame rests on the admiration of a cultural subgroup."[39] According to T.H. Adamowski, the parents of generation X received the likes of Sinatra (one of Anka's models in this performance, it seems) with hostility: his alleged allegiance to Reagan and right-wing politics were points of contention, the fact that he did not "write his own songs" made him inauthentic, and his presentations of romantic love were deemed sentimental and almost exclusively middle-class.[40]

However, for generation X itself (*not* their parents) Sinatra became something of an icon. As Adamowski notes, gen X-ers were "intrigued by Sinatra the man."[41] This bespeaks the reclamation of mass celebrities or pop personae by anti-normative or disenfranchised social groups such as generation X, and seems to be motivated by a desire to uncover the "authentic," vulnerable individual behind the celebrity persona or identity. To borrow Ferguson's words, gen X recuperates characters like Sinatra as amongst those who have been "denied the right to feel damaged by society."[42] This trend towards recuperating representatives of mass, normative culture is not unique to Sinatra; American indie group and leaders of the 1990s alt-aesthetic, Sonic Youth, similarly reclaimed Karen Carpenter. The band covered songs by The Carpenters as homages to the tragic story behind the gleaming smile of high-functioning America.[43] Perhaps this creates space for Paul Anka and his generic drag act for popular music subcultures that, both ironically and unironically, reclaim easy-listening singers for their non-mainstream, non-normative agendas.

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[38] James F. Smith, "Bobby Sox and Blue Suede Shoes: Frank Sinatra and Elvis Presley as Teen Idols," in Leonard Mustazza (ed.), *Frank Sinatra and Popular Culture: Essays on an American Icon* (Westport, CT, 1998), pp. 50–68 at p. 51.

[39] Ibid.

[40] T.H. Adamowski, "Love in the Western World: Sinatra and the Conflict of Generations," in Mustazza, *Frank Sinatra and Popular Culture*, pp. 26–37.

[41] Ibid., p. 30.

[42] Ferguson, "Kurt Cobain", p. 284.

[43] A number of Sonic Youth songs refer to Karen Carpenter's life and career, most notably their song "Tunic (Song for Karen)," which appears on their album *Goo*, The David Geffen Company DGC-9 24297¬-D2 (1990). The group also covered the song "Superstar" by The Carpenters in 1994 on the compilation *If I Were a Carpenter*, CD, A&M Records 0258 (1994).

The second trend in popular music to situate Anka's "Smells Like Teen Spirit" is the mid-1990s vogue for sanitizing or ironizing rock artists or songs by lounge-style musicians. Singers such as Pat Boone, Richard Cheese, and Mike Flowers participated in novelty forays into hard rock, indie rock, and metal. Pat Boone released *In A Metal Mood: No More Mister Nice Guy* in 1997, Richard Cheese has made numerous records including *Lounge Against the Machine* in 2000 (the title plays off the group Rage Against the Machine), and Mike Flowers rerecorded Oasis's "Wonderwall" to great popular acclaim in 1995.[44] In this regard, Anka's "Smells Like Teen Spirit" and *Rock Swings* may be part of the tradition of (possibly ironic) novelty rock covers by easy listening.

Conclusion

I have offered multiple suggestions as to how one might frame or interpret Anka's performance of "Smells Like Teen Spirit." From the sheer juxtaposition of two musical genres whose social, cultural, and political values are anathema to one another; to Anka-as-dramatic or "tragic" hero, unaware of his frail and laughable position; to Nirvana's resistant text ironizing from within; and, finally, to a view of Anka as a knowing agent who either communes with the roguery of Nirvana through musical drag, or seeks to satirize like some of his near-contemporaries. It remains wonderfully ambiguous, however, as to whether or not Anka is aware of the fact that, through Nirvana, he becomes a critic of his own celebrity identity, genre, and associated values. A scholar with more celebrity cachet than I might indeed venture to Beverly Hills to ask Anka, but perhaps, in learning the "truth," we would lose the uncertainty so vital to irony.

Understanding irony in popular music is contingent upon reading the historically accrued codes embedded in musical sounds and lyric nuances, and these features are communicated via the rules of genre. In his essay "The Law of Genre" Jacques Derrida describes how certain texts do not "seem to be written sensibly within [their] limits," and that such texts are "rather about the very subject of those limits and with the aim of disrupting their order."[45] In amalgamating the two very different "expressive worlds" of grunge and easy listening, Anka's performance questions the limits and boundaries of genre as complexes of sound, words, and industry agents (celebrities, audiences, arrangers, and executives). Nevertheless, the hermeneutic play, slippage, and simultaneity of multiple ironies that arise from this generic oddity continue to make this performance a jaw-droppingly bizarre pop artifact, even after repeated rewinding.

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[44] Pat Boone, *In a Metal Mood: No More Mister Nice Guy*, Hip-O Records HIPD-40025 (1997); Richard Cheese, *Lounge Against the Machine*, Oglio Records B00004Z40S (2000); The Mike Flowers Pops, "Wonderwall," London Records LONCD 378 (1995).

[45] Jacques Derrida, "The Law of Genre," in W.J.T. Mitchell (ed.), *On Narrative* (Chicago, IL, 1980), pp. 51–78 at p. 58.

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Chapter 12
Wagner, Nazism, and Evil in *Apt Pupil*

Matthew J. McAllister

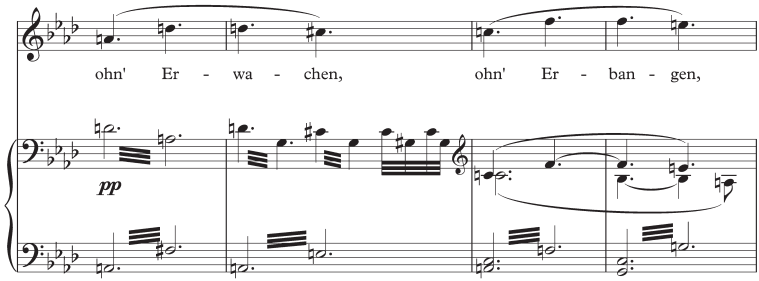
When all-American teenager Todd Bowden (Brad Renfro) discovers aging Nazi Kurt Dussander (Sir Ian McKellen) hiding in his suburban California neighborhood, Todd proposes a deal: he will keep quiet about his knowledge of the criminal, if, in turn, Dussander will recount the grisly details of the Holocaust, leaving out nothing that would otherwise be censored. The stories begin to have an effect on both of them. For Dussander, they slowly reawaken a smoldering blood-lust. For Todd, they plant the seeds of evil.

Apt Pupil is a study of the nature of evil, and unfolds as a psychological power struggle between the two characters.[1] During a pivotal scene in the film, Dussander murders a vagrant (Elias Kotas) in his home, but suffers a heart attack before he can dispose of the (not-dead) body. Dussander calls on Todd to dispose of the body and then locks the boy in the basement to finish Dussander's handiwork. The music of that scene, the "Liebestod" from Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, is a curious and conspicuous accompaniment. Hardly what one would expect to accompany the scene of a grisly murder, this ironically deployed music reinforces the bond between Dussander and Todd, and characterizes Nazi violence as both a kind of unstoppable sexual lust and a supernatural force that transcends human thought and action.

In an early scene Todd is daydreaming and doodling in his high-school classroom, paying no attention to the teacher, who is criticizing his class's performance on a recent test. Todd's facial expression indicates that his mind is clearly elsewhere, and that the elsewhere is somewhat pleasing. As the camera reveals the object of Todd's attention, we notice that he earned an "A" on the exam that perplexed his classmates, a device that obviously brings Todd's intelligence to the fore. However, when the camera pans away from the large, red-ink encircled "A" to where his pen is, we see that Todd has been drawing a series of swastikas on his paper. As the field of swastikas migrates toward the center of the frame, the "Love Duet" from Act II of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* begins to play (see Example 12.1).

[1] Bryan Singer, *Apt Pupil*, Phoenix Pictures (1998).

Example 12.1 Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde*, Act II, "Love Duet," mm. 9–12



The "Love Duet" sonically bridges the classroom scene with a brief intertitle reading "one month later," which then fades to the image of an old-time record player belonging to Dussander, presumably the source of the music. This music works to individuate Dussander in two ways. First, and more generally, his enjoyment of opera speaks to his intelligence and level of culture. Second, and more specifically, his choice of Wagner relates to his Nazi past.

As used in this scene, the music serves as the underscore for Dussander's grisly stories about how gassing was carried out and the horrible effects of the poison on the victims. Here, Todd is listening attentively, a far cry from his dispassionate classroom behavior of the prior scene. The beautiful music is distinctly at odds with the horrific and detailed description of the mass murders; the incongruity invites the audience to read this use of music as ironic. This alternative reading permits discovery of the film's deeper contextual layers.

Irony as Stimulus or "Stable Irony"

Widely credited with the first systematic examination of the concept of irony, Søren Kierkegaard, in his *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*, delineates that irony functions in two basic ways: as a means to an end, and as an end in itself.[2] Kierkegaard refers to the kind of irony that both stimulates thinking and assists in a recognition of the true meaning behind a surface as *irony as stimulus*. According to Kierkegaard, "[t]here is a kind of irony that is only a *stimulus* for thought, that quickens it when it becomes drowsy, disciplines it when it becomes dissolute."[3] Esti Sheinberg, in her *Irony, Satire, Parody, and the Grotesque in the Music of Shostakovich*, claims that this type of irony is finite and, as such, allows for positive solutions or a synthesis between the surface and underlying features of an ironic statement. Irony as stimulus

[2] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony with Constant Reference to Socrates*, trans. Howard V. Ong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ, [1841] 1989), p. 121.

[3] Ibid. Italics in original.

> … aims at a "true" meaning that lies somewhere behind the ostensible message of an utterance. Its presupposition is that both the recipient of the message and its sender share the same value systems and communication codes, thus providing a means for the reconstruction of the covert, "real" message that is to be preferred.[4]

According to Sheinberg, the theories presented by various rhetoricians and philosophers over the course of centuries are remarkably similar. From Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria* of c.95 CE to D.C. Muecke's *Irony and the Ironic* of 1980, she notes that "[t]hey all speak about 'saying one thing while meaning another,' and all stress the aesthetic importance of a correct interpretation by discovering the 'true' meaning behind the ostensible one."[5]

The ability for the perceiver to find a true or real meaning behind the surface is what allows irony as stimulus to function so effectively. In seeking these truths, irony as stimulus, or stable irony, assumes a value system, an ethical hierarchy upon which it operates, while at the same time assuming that the perceiver and ironist share these values. "*Irony as stimulus* dissimulates one meaning by openly stating another in order to ridicule and debase. It is a rhetorical device that strives to reach a goal that by definition will include a value-judgment, either ethical or aesthetic."[6] It is precisely this link between irony, value systems, and ethical hierarchies that renders director Bryan Singer's use of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* as an apology for Nazism, its sociological roots, and, more importantly, its possible resurfacing within seemingly enlightened modern Western societies.

How is Music in Film Ironic?

The Romantic orchestral idiom, specifically modeled on the music of Wagner and Strauss, has been the *lingua franca* of the cinema since the silent era. Primarily because it is tonal and familiar with distinct and intelligible connotative values, it creates "a pool of conventions, of options, whose combination and recombination constitutes an easily recognized discursive field."[7] These conventions are more than stylistic accoutrements decorating narrative films; they are essential signifiers that help drive the narrative. For Hollywood composers during the sound age, Romanticism's orchestrations, harmonic vocabulary, and especially its established emotional connotations, continued to serve the classical-style narrative film.[8]

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[4] Esti Sheinberg, *Irony, Satire, Parody, and the Grotesque in the Music of Shostakovich: A Theory of Musical Incongruities* (Aldershot, 2000), p. 34.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid., p. 35. Italics in original.

[7] Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington, IN, 1987), p. 71.

[8] Caryl Flinn, *Strains of Utopia* (Princeton, NJ, 1992), p. 33. Flinn suggests that far more than just music was drawn from the Romantics. She argues that Romantic ideology

Claudia Gorbman's *Unheard Melodies* (1987) is an influential book concerning narrative film music and includes the following often-cited list of such musical conventions:

> I. Invisibility
> II. "Inaudibility"
> III. Signifier of emotion
> IV. Narrative cueing
> V. Continuity
> VI. Unity
> VII. A given film score may violate any of the principles above, provided that the violation is at the service of the other principles.[9]

In the case of *Apt Pupil* and its use of the pre-existing music of Wagner, the violation of a few of these principles allows the music to be read ironically.

Gorbman's principle of "inaudibility" is key to understanding the psychological role of non-diegetic narrative film music. While film music is never inaudible, it must never compete with or supersede the dramatic elements of the film narrative. This is generally achieved by adherence to a three basic strategies: 1) musical form should be determined by narrative form; 2) music should not interfere with speech; and 3) the mood of the music should match the mood of the scene. The principle of inaudibility, specifically the violation of it, is essential to the perception of music as ironic within a cinematic context. For music to be read ironically it must in some way be conspicuous; it must draw the attention of the perceiver in a way that is unlike the subordinated classical-style film score.

Pre-existing music holds special potential to violate the inaudibility principle. First, the musical form is clearly *not* determined by the narrative form. Second, it may indeed "drown out the voice," by conflicting with the pitch range of the voices on the soundtrack.[10] Flagrant transgressions of the classical-style convention that music should match the mood of the narrative can elicit a strong sense of the ironic.

Music's role in eliciting emotion in cinema is largely taken for granted. It does not simply mirror the characters' emotions but, rather, it signifies the true situation or emotional state behind the surface of the narrative. Music brings a subjective truth that makes the objective, on-screen image track relatable.

Film music may generate a sense of irony when it is conspicuously detached from the mood of filmic narrative. Gorbman calls these kinds of instances

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was so ingrained within film-music composers that it prohibited their ability to profit from their works. She notes that by viewing themselves through the lens of Romanticism as transcendent figures who were above or otherwise uninvolved with contracts, copyright control, and performance rights, film composers greatly undermined their financial, authorial, and employment standings in relation to that of the studios.

[9] Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies*, p. 73.

[10] Ibid., pp. 76–8.

"[c]ounterexamples—music inappropriate to the mood or pace—[that] are usually comedic or self-reflexively modernist."[11] This type of music, termed "anempathetic," refers specifically to music that differs strongly from typical narrative film music in that it does not reflect the emotional state of the characters or their actions. According to French film theorist and composer Michel Chion, anempathetic music shows "an ostensible *indifference* [to the mood of the narrative] by following its own dauntless and mechanical course."[12] By violating audience expectations, music can evoke a strong sense of irony when paired with an image track indifferent to, or in opposition with, commonly accepted emotional connotations.

Gorbman's fourth principle divides into two distinct categories: "referential/narrative" and "connotative." The first of these identifies basic contextual elements within a narrative such as location, time, and character archetypes. Connotative cueing infuses the image and the narrative with meaning; it aids the spectator in deciphering the true nature of the characters' values. Social meanings permeated music long before sound film. Instruments, tone colors, rhythms, harmonies, melodies, textures, dynamics, and forms have formed an understandable connotative language within Western culture for centuries.[13] Film music composers and directors have been exploiting this fact since the inception of the medium. The use of Wagner in *Apt Pupil* at once adheres to and violates this principle.

With the fifth and sixth principles, Gorbman delineates film music's ability to smooth otherwise jarring transitions within the narrative to create unity, or emphasize disjointedness by use of thematic repetition. There is a conspicuous disunity during the murder scene in *Apt Pupil*, and the questions that this causes the audience to consider are vital to the music's role in communicating the deeper contextual layers of the narrative.

Gorbman's final principle notes that film music may *violate the principles*, and it is this "breaking of the rules" that is essential to a perception of ironically deployed music, pre-existing or otherwise. This music does not function to serve one of the other six principles outlined by Gorbman. Instead, it deliberately steps outside the classical narrative strictures and invites the audience to engage at perceptual levels beyond the reach of the typical classical-style Hollywood film. This is not to say that this music ignores these principles—quite the contrary. These conventions are so rooted within the film-going culture that an explicit violation of any of these will be enough to indicate to the perceptive audience member that there is more here than meets the eye. Violations invite the viewers to engage in the process whereby they must make a decision as to whether the author (director) is somehow woefully incompetent or is aiming, through irony, at a deeper level of engagement. The combined violations of the above principles

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[11] Ibid., p. 78.

[12] Chion quoted by Gorbman, ibid. Italics in original.

[13] Ibid., pp. 83–5.

make the use of pre-existing music in *Apt Pupil* impossible to overlook. Moreover, it opens an additional layer of historical narrative.

Singer uses that fact that Hitler held Wagner and his music in high esteem to cement Dussander with his Nazi past. But the use of *Tristan und Isolde* goes further than simply classifying Dussander as a Nazi. A closer inspection of the precise music employed, its text, and its original context shows that there are indeed deeper layers to be mined. The text of the particular section of the "Love Duet" that sounds during the scene in which Dussander is recalling the gassing of prisoners occurs at the moment in the opera when Tristan and Isolde promise themselves to one another, making a 'til-death-do-us-part pledge.

> Thus we would die,
> undivided,
> eternally one,
> without end,
> without awaking,
> without fearing,
> namelessly,
> in love embracing,
> completely to ourselves given,
> for love only to live![14]

In the context of the film, the text of the duet is itself an ironic, prescient commentary on the dangerous, unbreakable bond created between Todd and Dussander in this scene. The music's grotesque synthesis adds weight to Dussander's claim that he and Todd "are fucking each other."[15]

Later in the film, Dussander is approached by a vagrant, Archie, who recognizes the old man after rummaging through his garbage and spies him dressed in his full Nazi regalia. Archie thinks the old man is a pedophile, and implies that he will exchange sexual favors for booze and money. After Archie offers his terms, we hear the opening bars of the Prelude to *Tristan und Isolde*, complete with the so-called "Tristan chord," visually accompanied by a tightening close-up of Dussander's face as he cocks his head and then turns his eyes toward the unsuspecting Archie. The film then cuts to a close-up of the record player, just as in the earlier gas-chamber-story scene between Todd and Dussander. Moreover, the recording Dussander has chosen is not the love duet but instead, tellingly, a scratchy rendering of the

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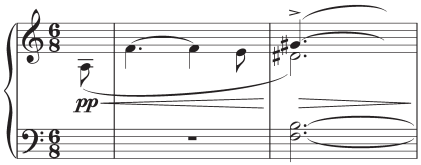
[14] Nico Castel, *Three Wagner Opera Libretti* (Geneseo, NY, 2006), p. 358.

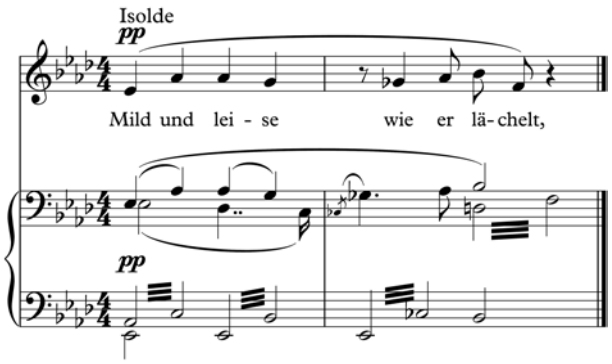
[15] *Apt Pupil* is rife with homoerotic and homophobic subtexts, see Caroline Joan (Kay) S. Picart and Jason Grant McKahan, "*Apt Pupil's* Misogyny, Homoeroticism and Homophobia—Sadomasochism and the Holocaust Film," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* (2002), http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc45.2002/picart/ [accessed April 2, 2012].

"Liebestod."[16] The music elides seamlessly between the Prelude's "Tristan chord" and the opening bars of the love duet (see Example 12.2a and b).

Example 12.2a Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde*, Prelude, mm. 1–2



Example 12.2b Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde*, Act III, "Liebestod," mm. 1–2



This scene is remarkable for its length (over four minutes of nearly uninterrupted, unedited "Liebestod"), for its sound editing—which calls into question the assumed diegetic existence of the music—and, not least, for its dramatic, visual, and musical parallel with the earlier scene between Todd and Dussander. To stress this dramatic symmetry, the same leitmotiv sounds when the record player is shown in both scenes (see Example 12.1). The leitmotiv, sung first by Tristan and then by Isolde, extols the virtues of a union in death.

[16] The title "Liebestod" has commonly stood for Isolde's final apostrophe in *Tristan und Isolde*. Wagner preferred to call the scene "Verklärung" (literally "transfiguration"), and used the term "Liebestod" to refer to the prelude of the opera. Recordings generally use the term "Liebestod" to refer to both the final scene and to the orchestral coupling of the Prelude with the final scene. Scholars use the term interchangeably; see John Deathridge, *Wagner: Beyond Good and Evil* (Berkeley, CA, 2008), who uses the term "Liebestod," while Lawrence Kramer, *Music as Cultural Practice* (Berkeley, CA, 1993), refers to the section as the "*Verklärung.*" The soundtrack for the film lists the title as "Prelude and Liebestod," and this will be the term used throughout the text to refer to the music from the final scene of the opera. Importantly, though, it is the idea of transfiguration that is central to the reading of "Liebestod" as used in this film.

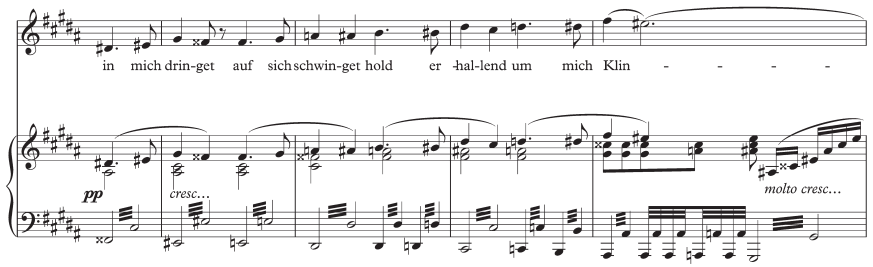
As the scene begins, Archie and Dussander are seated at the kitchen table, drinking. Archie, whose diminished mentally capacity is obvious, rambles incoherently while Dussander attempts to follow his disjointed conversation. On retrieving another bottle of booze, Dussander walks over to the sink, supposedly to find a bottle opener. At this point, the "Liebestod" becomes more than just diegetic background music; it is now a motivator and an active participant in the drama.

Throughout the scene thus far the volume level of the "Liebestod" has roughly corresponded to the implied distance from the record player. When the record player was shown in extreme close-up, the music was foregrounded. When the camera placement was near the table, the "Liebestod" was barely audible, overshadowed by the conversation and even the falling rain. But when Dussander leaves the table to find a bottle opener, the levels changes, no longer conforming to the audience's perception of the music's physical placement within the house.

As Dussander stands at the sink, the audience sees him through a window from outside the house. Instead of the rain being the dominant sound, the "Liebestod" moves to the fore, as Dussander stares ominously out the window. Here, the music is no longer linked with the diegetic "reality" of the house. Instead, the music reflects Dussander's psyche and acts to influence and motivate him. The ghastly rhapsody speaks to both the homoerotic (love) and psychopathic (death) elements of the scene. When Dussander returns to the table, the level of the "Liebestod" again bends to the rules of reality; overshadowed by the conversation and other diegetic sounds, the music recedes momentarily. Here, the music itself becomes the monster rising to the foreground on its own accord, as if sentient. The audience has been shown a glimpse of the monster, and we know it is real, alive, and inside the house. The slipping of the "Liebestod" into the aural background works to create dramatic tension. The audience knows the monster is there, lurking in the (auditory) shadows while the victim, whom we assume hears the music even though he does not know its true significance, is totally unaware. This creates a specifically musical form of dramatic irony.

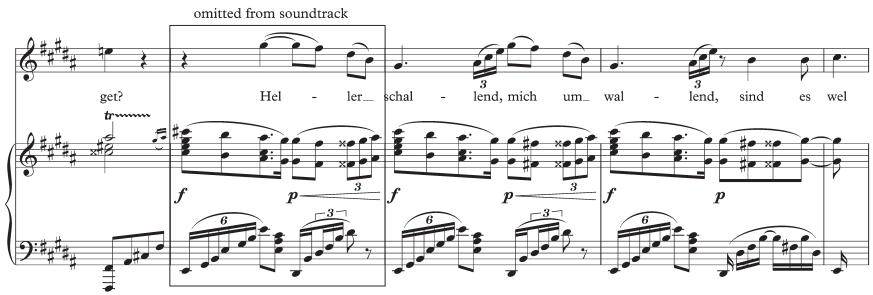
Dussander stares at the vagrant, as if transported by the music, then reaches for Archie's face with his left hand while asking if Archie minds. "No. Not at all," replies Archie. Dussander then stands up and moves directly behind him, caressing his head. Archie then makes the arrangement totally clear when he says to Dussander, "You know, maybe in the morning … if everything goes ok you could let me have ten dollars." "Perhaps," replies Dussander, still looming over Archie from behind. Bringing his right hand into the frame and placing it on Archie's head, Dussander reveals a long kitchen knife. "Maybe twenty," Archie continues, still unaware of the imminent danger. "Perhaps," repeats Dussander, "we shall see." The "Liebestod" moves increasingly to the foreground, the dramatic tension carefully coordinated with the aria's increasing musical tension. "You can relax, you know. I've done this before," says Archie. To which Dussander replies ironically, "That's all right. So have I." As the aria approaches its apex, its volume dramatically increases, and Archie has only a moment before Dussander plunges the knife into his back (see Example 12.3).

Example 12.3 Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde*, Act III, "Liebestod," mm. 38–42



At this exact moment, when we anticipate the arrival of the aria's apex with the plunging knife, the music suddenly falls silent. Instead, we are left watching a stunned Archie and hearing only the diegetic sounds of the chair being pushed back, the rain falling, and Dussander's soft, clumsy footfalls as he backpedals away from his victim. For a full four seconds, a cinematic eternity, there is almost no sound and no movement, only the stunned expressions of both the victim and perpetrator, accompanied by the softly falling rain. And then, suddenly, Archie screams and pushes the table over. With his outburst, the music returns as if uninterrupted. The missing four seconds of music happened, but were unheard by us and perhaps by Archie and Dussander as well; the missing measure calls into question our belief that the music was actually occurring diegetically during the scene (see Example 12.4). With the music's return, its rhythmic activity and undulating dynamic profile parallel a macabre pantomime with Archie's desperate flailing, rapid turning, and frantic reaching for the knife lodged in his back. We also notice here that the recording is no longer scratchy, but is now a crystal clear, digital-quality recording. As Archie engages in this grotesque ballet, Dussander takes the opportunity to strike Archie with a skillet, before taking hold of the beggar and tossing him down the basement stairs.

Example 12.4 Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde*, Act III, "Liebestod," mm. 44–47



Could this music, which we believed so strongly to be emanating from the record player, have been just the murderer's psychic soundtrack all along? Were we made privy to the inner workings of Dussander's mind but made to believe the

music was real? The scene and the music's original operatic context provide clues. First, the text of the "Liebestod" is useful. During this portion of the opera, Isolde sees before her not the corpse of her beloved Tristan, but instead his transfiguration. The text of this aria details Isolde's private, psychic reality.

Gently and quietly
How he smiles;
How his eye(s)
Fondly he opens …
See you Friends?
See you in not?
Always brighter,
How he shines,
Sparkling star-surrounded
Highly soaring?
See you not?
How his heart in him
Proudly swells,
Full and brave
In his bosom it pulses?
How from his lips,
Blissfully, gently
Sweet breath
Softly is wafting?
Friends! Look!
Feel and see you it not?
Do I hear
Alone this melody,
Which so wondrous
And quiet,
In bliss lamenting
All-revealing
Gently pardoning
From him sounding,
Through me pierces,
Upwards soaring,
Sweetly echoing
Around me ringing?
More clearly resounding,
Wafting about me,
Are they waves
Of refreshing breezes?[17]

[17] Castel, *Three Wagner Opera Libretti*, pp. 410–12.

It is useful to understand how Wagner conceived this final scene. His prose sketches for *Tristan und Isolde* indicate the following:

> Isolde, bent over Tristan, recovers herself and listens with growing rapture to the ascending melodies of love, which appear to rise up as if out of Tristan's soul, swelling up like a sea of blossoms, into which, in order to drown, she throws herself … [18]

Dussander, in this scene, is a warped Isolde undergoing his own transfiguration; the music, at least for Dussander, may be emanating from Archie. This reading could account for not only the inconsistencies in the volume levels during the scene, but also the noticeable change in recording quality. Finally, the missing measure, the moment where Dussander plunges the knife into Archie's back, is perhaps the most obvious clue leading to our understanding of the music in this pivotal scene.

When Isolde sings "Heller schallend" (more clearly resounding), Wagner deliberately recomposed her vocal lines. She no longer sings the main melodic material but instead begins to sing a descant while the orchestra continues with the melodic material. John Deathridge emphasizes the significance of this moment, noting that this is

> … when the orchestra begins to engulf Isolde in an ever-increasing surge of sound—an acoustical allegory of drowning that confronts violence and the sublime in a way that is provocative even for Wagner.[19]

In an opera musically noted for its ability to delay, obscure, or deny closure, this missing measure would have provided a rare instance of some fulfillment. The measure prior to the missing measure is a V7 chord that, not unusually for *Tristan und Isolde*, evades resolution to the tonic but instead arrives at the subdominant. But what substitutes for an instance of harmonic fulfillment is the sounding of a series of weak plagal cadences, IV–I6 at measure 44 and repeated in measure 45. These plagal cadences foreshadow the work's final cadence, the one instance of true harmonic fulfillment, which occurs only at the very end of the opera.

Singer's conspicuous elimination of such an occurrence of fulfillment points to Dussander's psyche in this scene. Here is another example of irony: when the text for Dussander should be "Heller [schallend]" or "[resounding] more clearly," it instead vanishes. When Dussander should find his greatest fulfillment, Archie denies him this ultimate pleasure by not reacting. As a result, the spell is temporarily broken. The music is abruptly silenced, and the quotidian realities of Dussander's sonic world rush back in and replace his psychic rapture. Only when Archie finally reacts, by screaming in pain and writhing with fear, does the music return.

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[18] Deathridge, *Wagner*, p. 140.

[19] Ibid., p. 142.

The missing measure also calls to the fore another instance of irony—one that is made clear by an understanding of Schopenhauer's influence on *Tristan und Isolde*. In the opera, the final scene and the death of the two lovers is the culmination of the denial of the will. This, according to Schopenhauer, is the only true path to freedom and to the elimination of suffering through the repudiation of the phenomenal world.[20] Only when the will has been denied, and when human longings, desires, and wants are relinquished, can we truly find fulfillment. Wagner's music in *Tristan und Isolde* is a musical manifestation of Schopenhauer's metaphysics, where the will is denied musically through the evasion of harmonic fulfillment, until the end when both lovers have died and are only then truly united, both with each other and with the universe.

When Dussander attempts to kill Archie, he is acting upon his wants, desires, and longings. However, by attempting to satiate his will he is, in fact, merely creating for himself an increase in his own suffering. And here we see how the elimination of the music from the scene works to bring this narrative point to the fore. By indulging in this act of the will, Dussander becomes deprived of the music of the denial of the will that is embodied in *Tristan und Isolde*, particularly in the "Liebestod."

Lawrence Kramer's interpretation of this moment in the opera is helpful when reading elements of Dussander's personality. He notes: "the moment that Isolde sings 'Heller schallend' … yield[s] a flood of narcissistic pleasure so overwhelming that the ego drowns in it."[21] For Kramer, this "flood" occurs due to Tristan's "metamorphosis from a real to an imaginary object of desire."[22] The same is true for Archie. He is no longer a real object, but instead an object of Dussander's murderous desire and an echo of his past. The homoerotic overtones in this scene also reflect the hermeneutic interpretations of the scene in the opera.

Kramer notes that "[o]nly in its representation of desire as a tidal force that in large measure constitutes the personal subject does *Tristan und Isolde* commit itself unconditionally to the libidinal model," and that *Tristan und Isolde*'s commitment to the libidinal model is what underwrites the opera's effect of being a Freudian "end of the world fantasy" where all of reality is depreciated under the love object, and that this is best seen in the "Love Duet" and the "Liebestod."[23] Moreover, the "Liebestod" shows "that the end of the world can come, and come most forcefully, when the totality of desire rushes back in a flood from the object to the subject."[24]

In the film, Archie is the object of desire, and his murder is the act that should precipitate this "end of the world fantasy" for Dussander. Singer has equated the Nazi libido with a murderous impulse, a less-than-subtle strategy that makes Nazi

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[20] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, ed.Christopher Janaway (Cambridge, 2010), p. 328.

[21] Kramer, *Music*, p. 164.

[22] Ibid., p. 163.

[23] Ibid., p. 166.

[24] Ibid.

figures monsters instead of humans who commit evil acts. But Dussander is unable to complete the murder, and because of this, the totality of desire that he feels for the object (Archie) is not permitted to flood back into him. Dussander's libidinal desires remain unfulfilled.

The fact that the "Liebestod" is thwarted before it can be completed parallels the fact that Dussander is not able to finish destroying Archie. After Dussander throws Archie down the basement steps, he grabs a large mallet and begins to descend the staircase when a heart attack suddenly strikes. As Dussander grabs for his chest and begins to collapse, the "Liebestod" once again vanishes. Typical, classical Hollywood-style film score suddenly replaces Wagner's rhapsodic music.

Tristan und Isolde is musically characterized above all by its denial of fulfillment; the moments in the opera where musical passages reach melodic cadence occur at the same time as they sidestep a full harmonic cadence. This repeated deferral of fulfillment is what Kramer terms the "*Lust*-trope,"[25] and he notes that, in the opera, "[w]hat counts as a fulfillment is actually a rapturous occasion of unfulfillment."[26] Dussander's deferral of pleasure due to both Archie's lack of initial reaction and the fact of Dussander's ultimate inability to kill him parallels the final scene in the opera. Kramer points out that during the "Liebestod," "deferral becomes a trope for the consummation of desire."[27] Wagner's program notes say that during the "Liebestod" "the gates of union are thrown open."[28] The "gates of union" here are opened to Dussander and Todd through Dussander's deferment of fulfillment that is eventually completed by Todd. The totality of desire expressed by Dussander for the libidinal object, Archie, now floods into Todd. The result is Todd's metaphysical assumption of Dussander's murderous libidinal urge, which seals their union.

Whether or not we accept the music as sounding diegetically, the conspicuous indifference to the horror that we both anticipate and see play out on the screen allows for an ironic reading of the scene. However, if we recognize this music as exclusively Dussander's mental soundtrack, then we witness a scene that parodies the opera via Archie's grotesque transfiguration as viewed through Dussander. Irony insists that viewers engage in a rational process that helps them come to the narrative point on their own. By doing so, viewers better comprehend the points made by the director, which in this case characterizes Dussander and, by extension, the Nazis as fetishizing and eroticizing violence because of their libidinal bloodlust.

The choice of the "Liebestod" to accompany this scene taps into longstanding notions about Wagner, his music, his politics, and his influence on the Third Reich

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[25] Ibid., p. 149. "*Lust*" referring to Isolde's final word in the opera that can be translated as "bliss" or "longing."

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid., p. 154.

[28] Richard Wagner, *Prelude and Transfiguration from* Tristan and Isolde, ed. Robert Bailey (New York, 1985), p. 47.

and Hitler. By using Wagner's music to accompany scenes of great import, Singer alludes to these notions concerning Wagner's works as being inherently anti-Semitic and pro-racial-purity.

While the reality of Wagner's role within the Third Reich has been shown to be far more subtle than this, the assertions made during and immediately following the war by influential composers and philosophers living in exile, such as Thomas Mann, Theodor Adorno, and Emil Ludwig, nevertheless continue to influence the public's conception of Wagner's music.[29] And, in the scene depicting Archie's murder, Singer exploits these ideas; Dussander is under the control of the music, responding to its subliminal demands in the same way that many imagine Hitler did.

Pamela Potter has shown that much of the supposed ideological lineage connecting Wagner and Hitler is built upon "the large accumulation of rumor."[30] The reality seems to be that Hitler's enthusiasm for Wagner was based entirely on his music, and that any anti-Semitism, nationalism, arrogance, or xenophobia found in Wagner's works (almost all of these findings occurred after the war) were either unknown or ignored in Nazi Germany.[31] Clearly, Singer is not concerned with the realities of Wagner's influence on Hitler or the Third Reich (indeed, this is an area that even musicology has been nervous about studying until recently) but is instead trafficking in the accumulated cultural baggage that has surrounded Wagner and his works (particularly his operas) since the end of World War II. It is notable, then, that *Apt Pupil* is another text in a long line of films that continue and even intensify the notions of Wagner's music as imbued with the ideological seeds of evil.[32]

Finally, it is important to note that the music is chosen by Dussander, whether diegetic or not. It is more than a coincidence that this music is playing during the murder or the recounting of gas-chamber tales. This choice of music allows for a special kind of individuation for an otherwise generic villain. The popular conception of Wagner's music and politics, and their supposed relationship to the ideology of the Third Reich, is also a part of Dussander's self-characterization, and it speaks to how he views himself: his Teutonicism, intellect, social stature, and cultural sophistication.[33] In the case of Archie's murder, Dussander specifically

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[29] Pamela M. Potter, "What Is Nazi Music?," *The Musical Quarterly*, 88/3 (Fall 2005): 429–55.

[30] Pamela M. Potter, "Wagner and the Third Reich: Myths and Realities," in Thomas S. Grey (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner* (Cambridge, 2008), pp. 235–45.

[31] Potter, "Wagner and the Third Reich."

[32] An earlier example of this is the use of "The Ride of the Valkyries" in Frances Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, Zoetrope Studios (1979), with scenes of the indiscriminate destruction of Vietnamese villages.

[33] For an excellent article on the use of ironically deployed music, specifically anempathy and its role in individuating characters, see Stan Link, "Sympathy with the Devil? Music of the Psycho Post-*Psycho*," *Screen*, 45/1 (Spring 2004): 1–20.

chooses the opera as an accompaniment to the murder of a "degenerate," a not-too-subtle reminder of the purported Nazi predilection for playing classical German music at the death camps.[34]

In the end, Singer's use of Wagner trades in common misconceptions. Singer uses the music as a kind of magic—one that not only directs the evil that Dussander engages in, but also in some way alleviates his responsibility for these murderous acts. By casting these horrible offenses and people as motivated by some supernatural agent, in this case Wagner's music, Singer denies the reality that horrendous deeds and policies are perpetrated by everyday people that walk among us and are products of our own society. Moreover, this kind of individuation is decidedly chauvinistic. Dussander, his evil, and his music are illegal aliens in America; they are European, sophisticated and perverse. Todd is "pure" Americanness inalterably tainted by affectation, intellectualism, and artifice. In this way, *Apt Pupil* also sustains the tired notion that whatever is foreign, especially European, is dangerous, and it uses opera as its most compelling cultural artifact to make this ideological point.

The ironic deployment of both the "Love Duet" and the "Liebestod" comments on Singer's notion of the nature of evil, and on its existence as a powerful force of nature that uses humans simply as a conduit. The evil that caused a nation of otherwise rational people to imprison and destroy millions upon millions of people in the name of purity is not easily conquered. It reaches across time, space, and generations to infect those who are not cautious and who blindly toy with powers they can neither understand nor control. Through irony, and the deeper contextual layers that it both forms and simultaneously unearths, music invites the audience to participate in a much more complex, interesting, and personally affecting narrative.

[34] Potter, "Wagner and the Third Reich." Potter notes that, while the claim about Nazis using Wagner's music to accompany Jews to their deaths has been in circulation since the end of the war, this has never been substantiated.

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Chapter 13
Irony of Absence: Literary and Technological Devices in the Rap of T-Pain

Andrew Shryock

In the final track of his third studio album (*Thr33 Ringz*, 2008), rapper T-Pain addressed those who denigrate and imitate his trademark use of Auto-Tune.[1] With equal force, he cast aside critics who accused him of being a one-hit wonder and cut down the music of his imitators with a mocking hook: "To me it sounds like a bunch of karaoke." The line furnishes the title ("Karaoke") of this vulgar and violent defense of the voice-altering technology that T-Pain deliberately and routinely misapplies to transform his voice into an overtly mechanized form.[2] The

[1] T-Pain's real name is Faheem Rasheed Najm. Auto-Tune is signal-processing software that alters audio signals by adjusting them to conform to a set of pitches predetermined by the user. Andy Hildebrand first conceived the technology as an aid to interpreting seismological data. He adapted it for musical applications and began distributing Auto-Tune through Antares Audio Technologies in 1996. When applied in small doses, Auto-Tune alters pitches that are either sharp or flat in a manner that is, generally speaking, imperceptible to the human ear. Such applications are especially useful for vocalists and in cases where material would otherwise need to be rerecorded. In extreme applications such as the type for which T-Pain is best known, the software generates a terraced audio signal. These applications eliminate all portamento, inter-pitch frequencies, and any tone that does not conform to the predetermined pitch set. A mechanized, disembodied vocal sound is the result.

[2] Negative criticism of T-Pain ranges from the dismissive to the contemptuous. Writing in the *Washington Post*, Chris Richards likened T-Pain to "a horny, android alcoholic" who sings with a "gooey, robotic warble." Chris Richards, "T-Pain: In Auto-Tune with his Audience," *Washington Post* (November 26, 2007), http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/11/25/AR2007112501484.html [accessed July 24, 2013]. Critic Jody Rosen referred to T-Pain's musical style in mildly derogatory terms, calling it a "robo-shtick." Jody Rosen, "Why T-Pain is the Perfect Web 2.0 Star," *Slate* (July 26, 2007), http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/music_box/2007/07/sexbot.html [accessed July 24, 2013]. More sharply, music critic Neil McCormick called Auto-Tune a "particularly sinister invention." Neil McCormick, "The Truth about Lip-Synching," *The Age* (October 13, 2004), http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/10/12/1097406567855.html [accessed July 24, 2013]. In the *Daily News*, Jim Farber reviewed *Thr33 Ringz*, saying, "Pain is still neither a fleet-tongued rapper nor a silver-throated singer, not to mention much of a comedian … there's nothing here to change the image that dogs Pain—as a maker of gimmick songs." Jim Farber, "T-Pain's 'Thr33 Ringz' Gets Two Stars," *Daily News*

frequency of this treatment, paired with the prominence of the songs on which it is heard, creates a context in which the Auto-Tuned voice is the normative one.[3] Departures—that is, instances where the mechanized voice is suppressed—draw attention as a result. This final track is one such instance. The fiery rebuttal, where one might reasonably expect to encounter T-Pain characteristically brandishing the full range of Auto-Tune's capabilities, proceeds almost entirely without the trademark sound. The decision to promote the normative musical style through its temporary muting is ironic in the classical antiphrastic sense: that is, T-Pain's suppression of Auto-Tune in "Karaoke" seems at first glance to contradict his otherwise undisguised intentions to champion the technology.

In this chapter, I will consider the multiple registers (that is, interpretations) of irony that result from the absence of Auto-Tune in "Karaoke." Irony happens as the unaltered voice testifies in support of the mechanized melodies of its Auto-Tuned alter ego.[4] It also happens because this absence compelled T-Pain to ensure musical coherence—often achieved with Auto-Tune, as I will show—through less controversial production techniques and compositional devices. Charting these registers will permit a fuller understanding of ways in which irony is obtained for various communities of listeners. Operating within the black vernacular genre of hip hop, irony resides alongside other figures of speech—most notably Signifyin(g)—that create and occupy space between literal and figurative expression. In this semantic space, T-Pain at once combated a perceived slight, using irony to disarm critics, and asserted Auto-Tune as a legitimate music production tool. Finally, parallels emerge between irony and another central practice in hip hop: techno-black cultural syncretism, which is observed in the act of repurposing technology, such as Auto-Tune, as a mode of expression. Thus, the implications of "Karaoke" are far-reaching and serve as a framework for re-envisioning the function of irony within rap, black vernacular genres more broadly, and, ultimately, other literary and musical traditions.

(November 7, 2008), http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/music-arts/t-pain-thr33-ringz-stars-article-1.336177 [accessed July 24, 2013]. T-Pain, *Thr33 Ringz*, Jive, Zomba Records, Konvict Muzik 88697–31630–2 (2008).

[3] Auto-Tune may be heard on T-Pain's commercially released singles, club anthems, and featured appearances on tracks by other artists. The rapper and the effect were so closely linked that T-Pain (in association with application developer Smule, Inc.) released a mobile phone app entitled "I Am T-Pain," which permits users to record their own voices and alter the recording with a software filter that produces the same effect as Auto-Tune. Auto-Tune served as the most prominent aspect of T-Pain's musical style from the period leading up to the release of his first studio album (*Rappa Ternt Sanga*, 2005) until the summer of 2009, when Jay-Z released "D.O.A. (Death of Auto-Tune)." In the track, Jay-Z called out T-Pain by name, saying, "You T-Paining too much" about those who use Auto-Tune. T-Pain responded with a funeral for the voice-altering effect.

[4] In this chapter, I have adopted the terminology—that is, irony *happens* among (discursive) *communities* of interpreters—introduced in the opening chapters of Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London and New York, 1994).

The principal quality of irony has long been antiphrasis, a figure of speech in which expressed meaning contradicts intended meaning. Recent scholarship has diminished the singular importance of antiphrasis through heightened emphasis on taxonomy and perception. D.C. Muecke and Wayne C. Booth theorized ironic types, introducing terms such as "overt" and "unstable" to account for disjuncture between an ironist's designs and the ways (potentially infinite in number) in which interpreters perceive the device.[5] An observation of distinct communities of interpreters led Linda Hutcheon to challenge the binarism of literary competence—that is, the notion an interpreter either perceives irony or passes over it unwittingly.[6] Her theory of discursive communities redoubles Muecke and Booth's emphasis on perception, which privileges the interpreter and calls attention to the *context of consumption*, a term I will use to encompass historical and social contingencies that shape the ways in which irony happens. Taken together, ironists may intend multiple layers of contradiction coexisting within a single figure of speech, and irony theory now admits communities of interpreters whose environment and experience (not solely literary competence) determine whether or not irony happens, and, if it happens, whether it occurs at a single or multiple register(s).

For musical texts, additional factors contribute to the context of consumption. The listening environment may be private or public. Users may experience a track within or independently of the album on which it appears; it may also be experienced live or in recorded performance, which itself may be an audio or audio-visual document. In these ways, the irony landscape stretches beyond the domain of antiphrasis. It is more fruitfully understood as a semantic space in which literal and figurative meanings intersect, coincide, and contradict in both anticipated and unexpected ways.

Considerations of aural irony, sonic irony, and irony within art music and popular music remain few, however.[7] Reasons for this include the traditional association of the device with written (as opposed to musical) expression. Further, music is less articulate—which is not to say less expressive—than language. Its constituent parts are less precise syntactically, and, by extension, the meaning these parts convey is often less explicit. Thus, identifying antiphrasis in sound poses a challenge for analysts. This is not to suggest that the enterprise is fruitless. Rather, it is to emphasize that hearing irony relies on conventions shared between ironists and interpreters despite different historical and social contingencies. Put

[5] Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago, IL, 1974); D.C. Muecke, *The Compass of Irony* (London and New York, 1969).

[6] Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*.

[7] In addition to this volume, readers may find useful the discussion and bibliography that appears in Eddy Zemach and Tamara Balter, "The Structure of Irony and How it Functions in Music," in Kathleen Stock (ed.), *Philosophers on Music: Experience, Meaning, and Work* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 178–206.

another way, the context of consumption shapes how (or simply if) irony happens in musical as well as literary spheres.

Oriented toward black musical genres, irony resembles a collection of tropes that similarly negotiate literal and figurative meaning yet vary by community and context of consumption. For instance, coded messages in spirituals at once acknowledged plantation owners' attempts at Christian conversion while also transmitting strategies for insubordination and escape.[8] Improvisation and riffing at once reverences and revises earlier solos and performance practices in jazz.[9] In hip hop, sampling recontextualizes pre-existing musical material. Signifyin(g) is most prominent among these tropes. The term is indebted to the semiotic and linguistic principles of signifying concerned with the bond between language and physical objects. However, it is distinguished from signifying in order to emphasize the black vernacular context in which it occurs. Moreover, Signifyin(g) denotes the act of manipulating signs in an effort to revise and reanimate texts and counteract imbalances of power. The practice is encapsulated in the Signifying Monkey tale, in which the Monkey (mis)informs the Lion that he is being made fun of by the Elephant. The Lion, who does not recognize the ruse, confronts the Elephant, who responds to the verbal confrontation with physical force. He stomps on the Lion. Thus, the Monkey redirects through clever wordplay the Lion's aggression, which would otherwise be directed toward him.[10]

Henry Louis Gates Jr articulated the concept most fully in his landmark study *The Signifying Monkey*, in which he emphasizes Signifyin(g) as a rhetorical instrument capable of countering physical aggression. Signifyin(g) "functions to redress an imbalance of power … the Monkey rewrites the received order by exploiting the Lion's hubris and his inability to read the figurative other than as the literal."[11] Adapting the concept to music in *The Power of Black Music*, Samuel A. Floyd emphasized Signifyin(g) as a means of harnessing the ambiguity of language in a manner that brings it within the ambit of irony. "Signifyin(g) is a way of saying one thing and meaning another … to achieve or reverse power, to improve situations, and to achieve pleasing results for the signifier."[12] Imani

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[8] See, for instance, Frederick Douglass, "The Run-Away Plot," in *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York, 1855); W.E.B. DuBois, "The Sorrow Songs," in *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago, IL, 1903). For a discussion of irony and Signifyin(g) in spirituals, see G. Yvonne Kendall's "'I ain't got long to stay here': Double Audience, Double Irony in US Slave Songs and Spirituals," Chapter 2 in this collection.

[9] See, for instance, Robert Walser, "Out of Notes: Signification, Interpretation, and the Problem of Miles Davis," *The Musical Quarterly*, 77/2 (Summer 1993): 343–65.

[10] See further Henry Louis Gates, "The Blackness of Blackness: A Critique on the Sign and the Signifying Monkey," in Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (eds), *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Malden, MA, 1998), pp. 987–1004.

[11] Henry Louis Gates Jr, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford, 1988), p. 124.

[12] Samuel A. Floyd, *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting its History from Africa to the United States* (Oxford, 1994), p. 95.

Perry brought Signifyin(g) into the orbit of hip hop and emphasizes its capacity to operate at multiple registers.[13] As a device that harnesses ambiguity and potentially operates at multiple registers, Signifyin(g) resembles irony, carving out and maneuvering within the semantic space between literal and figurative expression. Thus, the modern (post-Hutcheon) definition of irony is reinforced, affirming that the strength of the figure lies not merely in the rhetorical force of contradiction, but also in its capacity to manipulate literal and figurative expression to ludic, deflective, and redressive ends.

Signifyin(g) and irony constitute displays of intellectual dexterity—manipulating signs, exploiting meanings, and so on—that enable such acts as the Signifying Monkey's challenge of the Lion despite his physical disadvantage. This activity is not limited to wordplay, however. Technology may be similarly manipulated. Indeed, hip hop is marked by an impulse to appropriate technology to unintended applications, and early experiments accompanied the genre's birth in the South Bronx in the 1970s.[14] Practitioners of the infant genre adopted technology as a means of reproduction. Turntables, programmable drum machines, synthesizers, and, later, samplers served their literal function—reproducing prerecorded material—while also inviting more imaginative applications, including the composition of new material. Tricia Rose referred to this practice as techno-black cultural syncretism: "Rap technicians employ digital technology as instruments, revising black musical styles and priorities through the manipulation of technology."[15] Houston A. Baker observed similarly, "high technology of sound production was reclaimed by and for human ears and the human body's innovative abilities."[16] Yet even as the most overt physical activities (for example, breakdancing and turntablism) withdrew to the corners of hip-hop culture, the spirit of repurposing technology survived—even sustained—rap's formative years and continued to fuel the genre in its maturity. Long after a pair of turntables no longer constituted their primary instrument, deejays and producers continue to repurpose technology for the purposes of musical composition. Not infrequently this includes

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[13] Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham, NC, 2004), p. 61.

[14] In the context of a chapter devoted to the topic of the sustained (and sustaining) influence of technology in black music, Nelson George traced this practice of appropriating technology to expressive ends even further into the past, observing, "Since the end of World War II, technology has been a driving force in moving black music ahead—it has given musicians tools and opened possibilities their old instruments never suggested." Nelson George, *Hip Hop America* (New York, 1998), p. 91.

[15] Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, NH, 1994), p. 96. Rose also called attention to Harry Allen's remarks on this topic: "In hip hop, you make the technology do stuff that it isn't supposed to do, get music out of something that's not supposed to give you music quite that way." Harry Allen, "Hip-Hop Hi-Tech," *Village Voice* (October 1988), pp. 10–11.

[16] Houston A. Baker Jr, *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy* (Chicago, IL, 1993), p. 89.

off-label and at times legally questionable activity.[17] In this context, deejays and producers scratch, chop, screw, loop, and sample to produce musical material to accompany the emcee. Despite these relatively new means for generating musical content, the aim ostensibly is not unlike the art music composer who draws on stretto, false entries, augmentation, diminution, and related compositional gestures to provide listeners with a coherent (and hopefully pleasurable) fugue experience.

So it comes as little surprise to discover producers exploring the off-label potential of Auto-Tune shortly after it was released in 1997 as a recording studio salve designed to massage sour notes back into tune. The following year producers Mark Taylor and Brian Rawling spotlighted one such alternative application in the Cher track "Believe."[18] The effect is audible at several places in the song; however, the full force is realized in the music video. Cher performs in a glass cage in a futuristic nightclub. At length the viewer realizes that Cher is a hologram that embodies—visually and lyrically—the psyche of a young woman abandoned by a boyfriend for another woman at the club. Cher expresses the emotions; the *abbandonata* is too overwrought to express herself. At several points even the hologram chokes up. In these places the visual technology falters—that is, the Cher hologram flickers, to reveal a mechanical source. The voice also stutters at this moment. The aural effect is achieved through the application of Auto-Tune, which generates an audio signal devoid of all naturally occurring portamento in Cher's voice. Thus, Auto-Tune plays a primary role in the conceit, betraying Cher's non-human form through the mechanized sound of her voice.

Auto-Tune was again brought out from behind the recording studio curtain in 2005. Rather than comprising a single-track conceit as it had in "Believe," however, the technology constitutes a principal attribute of the musical profile of T-Pain. Auto-Tune is heard on his first single (entitled "I'm Sprung"), which was released in advance of his debut album *Rappa Ternt Sanga*.[19] Even in this

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[17] Joseph G. Schloss has argued for an informal code of ethics shared among a small community of producers. Activities sanctioned by this code do not always align with copyright law, intellectual property restrictions, and other legal statutes that intersect with the activities of rappers and producers. Nevertheless, producers concerned with their reputation among their peers generally abide by this code. See the chapter "Sampling Ethics," in Joseph G. Schloss, *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop* (Middletown, CT, 2004), pp. 101–33.

[18] For further commentary on the composition and production of Cher's "Believe," including a false attribution of the Auto-Tune effect to the analog vocoder Korg VC10, see Sue Sillitoe and Matt Bell, "Recording Cher's 'Believe,'" *Sound on Sound* (February 1999), http://www.soundonsound.com/sos/feb99/articles/tracks661.htm [accessed July 20, 2013].

[19] "I'm Sprung" was released on August 9, 2005. Other tracks on T-Pain's first album, *Rappa Ternt Sanga* (2005), also feature Auto-Tune. These tracks include both commercial singles, "I'm Sprung" and "I'm 'n Luv (Wit a Stripper)" as well as "U Got Me" and "Ur Not the Same," both of which feature Akon. Auto-Tune also figures prominently on T-Pain's second and third studio albums, *Epiphany* (2007) and *Thr33 Ringz* (2008).

early track, Auto-Tune is prominent, and the ways in which T-Pain employs it are already clearly defined. The effect functions in three ways: delineating formal boundaries and structural characteristics, spotlighting poetic attributes of the lyrics, and complementing principal vocal material with melodic, harmonic, and timbral embellishment. As a marker of form, Auto-Tune audibly differentiates the verses from the choruses.[20] T-Pain applied the effect to his voice throughout both verses of "I'm Sprung" (0:38–1:17, 1:55–2:34) while the choruses are almost entirely devoid of the effect. As a result, the more substantive lyrical content of the verses is aurally distinguishable from the more memorable melodic material of the chorus. Additionally, in the verses, T-Pain emphasized the final accented syllable of each line of lyrics with a brief melisma. Applied in these moments, Auto-Tune and its mechanizing quality cause these melismatic passages—and by extension the end-rhyme character of the lyrics—to be heard especially prominently. Furthermore, T-Pain spotlighted these moments within the musical texture: harp, bass, and handclaps are silent (this occurs on the third beat of each measure of each verse).[21] Although heard primarily and most audibly in the verses, Auto-Tune adorns one passage in the chorus of "I'm Sprung." An Auto-Tuned vocal melisma—emerging on the word "do" (0:30)—is heard above the principal vocal material in the final four measures. Because these measures constitute a repetition of the previous four measures, the Auto-Tuned passage is heard as an embellishment of the principal voice. This descant at once de-emphasizes the semantic function of the word on which it occurs and spotlights the mechanizing quality of Auto-Tune. In this early commercial release, then, T-Pain expanded on the single-track conceit used in Cher's "Believe" by incorporating Auto-Tune as a central component of his musical style. The presence and application of Auto-Tune in this track prefigures its place in T-Pain's later music. It is not a "set it and forget it" style of musical production; rather, it is an attentive, circumscribed, and off-label application of the voice-altering technology that figures prominently in later tracks, "Karaoke" included.

Returning to "Karaoke," it seems like a curious decision at first glance to mute Auto-Tune in a track that defends so vehemently its application.[22] However,

[20] "I'm Sprung" features a proportional and conventional form: three 16-measure choruses alternate with two verses of the same length followed by a 16-measure coda.

[21] Although the cymbal is heard at this moment, the disruption is negligible as its unrelenting and omnipresent eighth notes encourage the listener to not notice its presence.

[22] Auto-Tune is heard at three places in "Karaoke." The first is at the word "Auto-Tune" (1:08), an instance of text painting unrelated to the more substantive applications T-Pain defended. The second is at the opening of the final verse (2:50–3:02). T-Pain sings a melismatic passage that was overdubbed and Auto-Tuned. This material replaced the *Messiah* sample as the musical underpinning to T-Pain's rap. Thus, the impulse that motivated "Karaoke"—a defense of Auto-Tune as a production technique—is demonstrated here, as listeners hear Auto-Tune set in relief of sampling. In this moment, the controversial technique replaces the more conventional one. The third place is a four-measure passage, also in the final verse (3:15–3:29), in which Auto-Tune was used to emphasize the

ultimately this approach proves to be more persuasive than a virtuoso display in the vein of "I'm Sprung." The unaltered voice is a striking departure, and the uncommon inflection is especially evident at melismatic sections and end-rhymes, which one might expect to be Auto-Tuned. Paired with the pro-Auto-Tune theme of the lyrical content, some listeners will perceive the contradiction that results: the un-Auto-Tuned voice testifies on behalf of its absent alter ego. A similar contradiction obtains for those sensitive to musical form. Unlike "I'm Sprung" and similar tracks, the voice-altering technology does not highlight the form of "Karaoke." Sampled material—rare in T-Pain's music—performs this function. So here, too, T-Pain contradicts his general practice, turning away from the custom, which privileges Auto-Tune in favor of more conventional music-production techniques. I will discuss momentarily how these contradictions may be heard as irony.

The source and treatment of the sampled material are also noteworthy. The sample was drawn from the chorus "Since by Man Came Death" from Part 3 of George Frideric Handel's oratorio *Messiah* (1741).[23] T-Pain sampled, then altered, two sections of the chorus: mm. 1–3 and mm. 17–22. Although he preserved the harmonies, voicing, and timbre of the chorus, he rendered the words unintelligible by removing the initial consonant sounds. This minimizes the semantic function of the passage in much the same way as the Auto-Tuned descant minimizes the semantic function of the word "do" in the chorus of "I'm Sprung." Additionally, the sample was chopped, a production technique wherein source material is segmented and reordered; T-Pain divided the *Messiah* sample into three segments (Example 13.1). The opening measures (mm. 1–3) constitute the first segment. The second section (mm. 17–22) bisects into two segments: mm. 17–19 and mm. 20–22. On reordering, the third segment (mm. 20–22) is placed at the opening of "Karaoke," accompanying a spoken introduction (0:00–0:10). The second segment (mm. 17–19) is heard next, also accompanying the introduction (0:11–0:21).[24]

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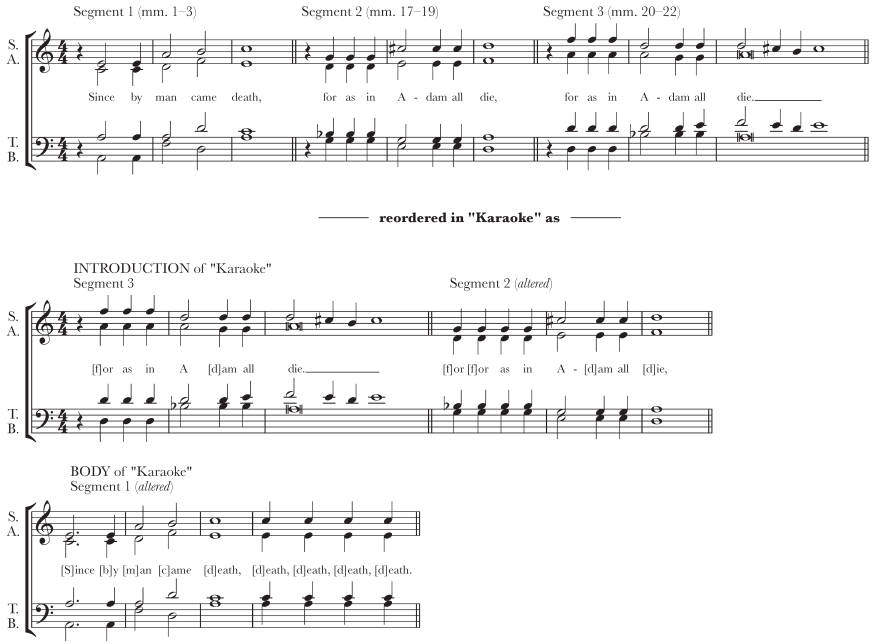
poetic qualities of the lyrics in a manner similar to the verses of "I'm Sprung." It, too, demonstrates a method of using Auto-Tune as a compositional gesture, and notably, this passage follows T-Pain's avowal in the lyrics of the final verse to continue using Auto-Tune despite naysayers and imitators.

[23] "Since by Man Came Death" is the second movement of Handel's *Messiah*, Part 3, in which the Order for the Burial of the Dead of the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* is used to allegorize Jesus' victory over death. The sampled material, lasting roughly 15 seconds, constitutes the only material in *Messiah*—a work lasting nearly three hours depending on the speed of performance—in which the voices are unsupported. I have found no evidence to substantiate a motivation for the use of this a cappella material; regardless, its presence, which calls special attention to the human voice, is striking in a track concerned so centrally with defending T-Pain's own unconventional treatment of the human voice.

[24] T-Pain's voice is heard prominently above the transition between these two segments, thus veiling the harmonic incongruity that results from the reorganization of this material.

Example 13.1 George Frideric Handel's "Since by Man Came Death" from Part 3 of *Messiah* (1741) reorganized in T-Pain's "Karaoke"



The first segment (mm. 1–3) is heard last, and it is looped in the body of the track. This segment endures further alterations in addition to those T-Pain made to the other two segments. Where silence occupies the first beat of the first measure in the *Messiah* source text, T-Pain filled this silence with the chord heard on the second beat, effectively doubling the length of the chord so that it is heard across both beats. He also extended the sample to occupy four measures in its new setting. He achieved this by prolonging the final note—a whole note that fills the third measure—as four stuttering quarter-note repetitions.[25] Thus, the sampled material now conforms to the conventional meter and phrase structure of most rap music, set in common time and organized into four-measure phrases.

Returning to the subject of irony, the context of consumption also shapes the ways in which listeners hear "Karaoke." The track is more likely to be heard as ironic when encountered apart from its setting as the final track of *Thr33 Ringz*, which concludes with two tracks without Auto-Tune: "Keep Going" and "Karaoke." "Keep Going" is a reflection on family: "When I try to give it up … they give me reason to keep goin'," T-Pain sings, and it establishes a link between

[25] Perhaps not coincidentally, the lengthened passage calls especial attention to the word "death," which is heard at this place in Handel's source text, thus emphasizing T-Pain's disdain for critics and imitators.

meaningful subject matter and T-Pain's un-Auto-Tuned voice.[26] T-Pain confirmed this in an interview with Sasha Frere-Jones, who featured the rapper in a *New Yorker* article about Auto-Tune published in the months leading up to the release of *Thr33 Ringz*. When asked about the possibility of forgoing Auto-Tune, T-Pain replied, "I got a song on my album about my kids. I ain't use it on that one."[27] Listeners carry this association through to "Karaoke."[28] Thus, the context of their consumption emphasizes the absence of Auto-Tune as a marker of weighty subject matter rather than irony-inducing contradiction.[29]

However it is heard, "Karaoke" is an impassioned defense of Auto-Tune. Examination of this track alongside others permits a clearer vision of what T-Pain aimed to defend.[30] He does not smother his vocals in Auto-Tune; rather,

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[26] For many listeners, "Keep Going" will stand apart from other hip-hop tracks as an exaltation of paternal responsibility, the nuclear family, and related themes of familial responsibility. In addition, its form is unconventional. The track opens fitfully, with a five-measure introduction, before settling into a loping pattern of eight-measure verses followed by six-measure choruses. Unlike "I'm Sprung," where Auto-Tune illuminates formal sections, the style of vocal delivery serves this function here. T-Pain alternated between a style in which lyrics begin after the downbeat in the verses and, in the choruses, a style in which lyrics anticipate the downbeat.

[27] Sasha Frere-Jones, "The Gerbil's Revenge," *New Yorker* (July 9, 2008), http://www newyorker.com/arts/critics/musical/2008/06/09/080609crmu_music_frerejones [accessed July 20, 2013].

[28] Vicinity to "Keep Going" is not the only attribute to call attention to weighty emotional content. Once again, the formal design of the track warrants mention. The track is an aside, a powerful emotive outburst that departs from the pervading concept of the album, which is organized around a circus theme. "Karaoke" is structured in two parts. A spoken, lightly accompanied introduction opens the track. It is an apology for what follows. T-Pain entreats forgiveness, understanding, and strength from his mentors: fellow rapper and producer Akon, music executive Barry Weiss, and God. A prolonged tirade ensues, accompanied by the full ensemble. Perhaps it is not coincidental, especially in light of the Baroque era origin of the source material, that "Karaoke" resembles in its formal design and rhetorical function the recitative-aria pair of Italian serious opera (*opera seria*), in which a lightly accompanied introduction of brief duration sets the stage for the protracted and fully accompanied monologue that ensues. This is not to suggest that T-Pain intended this connection, but only to observe attributes shared between both types of highly charged musical expression.

[29] It is possible to hear both figurative possibilities. More important, though, is to emphasize the impact of the context of consumption.

[30] Along with defending his own Auto-Tune efforts, T-Pain spared several artists from his verbal assault, namely Kanye West and Lil Wayne (aka Weezy). He calls out both rappers in the opening couplet of the second verse, saying the only ones "that's cool is Kanye and Lil Weezy." The reasons these two escape T-Pain's wrath are unclear. Allegedly, Kanye flew T-Pain to Hawaii during the production of *Graduation* (2007) to help him more fully understand the capabilities and nuances of Auto-Tune. T-Pain also appeared as the featured artist on "Good Life," which won both artists a Grammy Award in 2008 for Best Rap Song.

he repurposes the voice-altering technology in a circumscribed manner. In "I'm Sprung" and elsewhere, it delineates formal sections, emphasizes poetic structure, and increases the density of the soundscape. As a result, the decision to mute Auto-Tune through much of "Karaoke" is not only a significant departure from T-Pain's normative musical style, it also invites questions about the motivation for this decision. Interpreted literally, the decision constitutes an acknowledgment of Auto-Tune's gimmickry. Yet this possibility seems unprovoked and unconvincing. Non-literal possibilities are more compelling, especially ironic interpretations. At one register, the casual listener hears an unmechanized human voice yet ultimately perceives it as an extraordinary inflection invoked to call special attention to the vehemence of T-Pain's rebuke of critics and imitators. At another register, those attuned toward production elements recognize sampling and chopping functioning in the structural role normally fulfilled by Auto-Tune, yet ultimately perceive this as an effort to install it alongside more conventional and less controversial compositional gestures and production techniques. In both instances, Auto-Tune's absence in "Karaoke" initially appears to contradict, yet ultimately supports, T-Pain's efforts to champion the voice-altering technology. Both instances, then, constitute textbook examples of verbal irony.

Irony is not the only figurative possibility, however. The vicinity of "Karaoke" to "Keep Going" may cause some listeners to hear the muting of Auto-Tune in the former in the manner T-Pain intended in the latter, as an aural signpost signaling weighty subject matter. Additionally, figurative expression positioned T-Pain to Signify—to assume an aggressive posture against his critics. "Karaoke" poses a formidable threat for those disinclined to recognize T-Pain's capacity for figurative expression. The community that interprets "Karaoke" literally fails to recognize that T-Pain severed the bond between Auto-Tune and its intended purpose as pitch-correcting software applied silently and within the privacy of the audio engineer's booth. It fails to recognize within "Karaoke" the non-literal applications of Auto-Tune that emerged (in tracks such as Cher's "Believe") shortly after the technology's commercial release. It fails to recognize this activity—the rejection of Auto-Tune's literal application (that is, as a pitch corrective)—as sustaining a tradition of techno-black cultural syncretism that has attended hip hop since its inception. Such critics and communities succumb to the cleverness of T-Pain, who exposed their inability to perceive the non-literal and spotlighted the hubris of

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T-Pain's relationship with Lil Wayne is less clear. Lil Wayne has repeatedly defended both Auto-Tune as a production technique and T-Pain's application of the technology. Moreover, Lil Wayne's "Lollipop" uses Auto-Tune extensively. "Lollipop" was the first single from Lil Wayne's *Tha Carter III* (2008), and is his most successful track to date. In contrast, T-Pain did not pardon Sean Combs (aka Diddy), who announced during the final episode of MTV's *Total Request Live* his decision to give T-Pain "one point"—that is, 1 percent of the royalties—from his upcoming studio album *Last Train to Paris* (2010) in exchange for the right to use Auto-Tune. It is possible, of course, that T-Pain and Combs struck their agreement after the completion of "Karaoke."

those unwilling to extend him the capacity for figurative expression. In short, they suffer the same failure as the Lion in the Signifying Monkey tale.

T-Pain's activities also model how irony may be understood more fully. They reinforce Linda Hutcheon's dismissal of literary competence, which once privileged the distinction between those for whom irony happens and those incapable of perceiving figurative speech, by demonstrating that irony is more fruitfully understood as an interpretive (and potentially aggressive) act performed by ironists and interpreters who manipulate both literal and figurative meanings as well as the semantic space that encompasses them. His activities also elucidate the function and potential of irony in music. Irony is not a figure of speech in "Karaoke." It is a figure of sound, a sonic cue that signals contradiction despite the semantic imprecision of the medium through which it is conveyed. Nevertheless, the meaning is unambiguous: a defense of the innovative music-production techniques afforded by Auto-Tune. Furthermore, setting irony alongside black vernacular practices such as Signifyin(g) sharpens irony's edge, demonstrating how the literary device may retain its potency as a figure of contradiction while also being used as an implement to controvert critics and counter disparity. In combination, irony, Signifyin(g), and techno-black cultural syncretism reflect a single motivation to revise and resituate texts and technologies, to exploit the semantic space between literal and figurative expression, and to maneuver within this space in an effort to combat inequality, to challenge social imbalance and injustice, or simply to rebut harsh treatment by music critics.

Chapter 14
Listener-Senders, Musical Irony, and the Most "Disliked" YouTube Videos

Joseph S. Plazak

Introduction and Scope

In understanding the communication of musical irony, many theoretical models may apply.[1] Kendall and Carterette modeled musical communication as a process with two types of senders (composers and performers) and two types of receivers (performers and listeners), each surrounded by a unique context.[2] Composers, in the historical sense, transmit via notational signals; successful communication of a composer's message requires that notational signals be understood within the context in which they were written. Musical performers both receive notational signals and transmit acoustical signals; successful communication of a performer's message (that is, intention/interpretation) requires that acoustical signals be understood within the context in which they were performed. Most often considered as purely receivers of acoustical messages, listeners may receive and interpret musical messages in a variety of ways. In order for "successful" communication to occur between a musical sender (that is, a composer or a performer) and a listener, some degree of "shared context" is necessary, especially when considering the conceivably large lapse in time between a musical signal's creation and its "consumption." The context of a signal is often highly relevant to the success, or failure, of the communication.

Music changes and evolves, and, therefore, music communication models can change as well. An important recent change includes "the listener" no longer being confined to the role of a "receiver," as outlined in the Kendall and Carterette music communication model.[3] In a recent documentary on remix culture, Brett Gaylor claims that "consumers" are becoming more like "producers."[4] Rather than acting as the mere end-point of a musical communication model, various technologies afford listeners the opportunity to keep the "musical conversation"

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1 As evidenced within this collection.

2 Roger Kendall and Edward Carterette, "The Communication of Musical Expression," *Music Perception*, 8/2 (1990): 129–63.

3 Michael Serazio, "The Apolitical Irony of Generation Mash-Up: A Cultural Case Study in Popular Music," *Popular Music and Society*, 31/1 (2008): 79–94.

4 Brett Gaylor, *RiP: A Remix Manifesto*, Eye Steel/Snag Films (2009).

going.[5] Sophisticated musical manipulations that were once exclusively in the hands of composers and performers (including changes of pitch, tempo, timbre, form, arrangement, and so on), can now be easily accomplished by listeners via a variety of music technologies. Listeners who utilize such technologies to alter musical recordings are hereafter referred to as "listener-senders," reflecting that they are more than mere "receivers." Other terms recently used to describe this same concept include "audience-creators"[6] and "consumer-creators."[7]

The scope of this chapter is to investigate the expression of musical irony beyond the typical boundaries of composers and performers, as well the associated functionalities of such communication. Specifically, user-posted YouTube videos demonstrate the ways in which listener-senders employ irony through music, especially for "disliked" YouTube videos. Although it would be possible to apply the ideas in this chapter to a number of user-posted YouTube videos, only user-posted versions of Rebecca Black's "Friday," the most disliked YouTube video to date, will be used as the primary corpus for investigation.[8]

Sharing Technology

Sharing technology has been one of the main facilitators for researching listener-senders. Although there are many websites and file-sharing servers that could be used to investigate the creative activity of listener-senders, the focus here will be on one particular avenue: user-posted YouTube videos. The study of various aspects of human nature via YouTube user-posted videos has been referred to by Henry Jenkins as "Youtubeology."[9] Lev Grossman summarized the value of Youtubeology with the following statement:

> You can learn more about how Americans live just by looking at the backgrounds of YouTube videos—those rumpled bedrooms and toy-strewn basement rec rooms—than you could from 1,000 hours of network television.[10]

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[5] A similar argument about albums as a starting-point rather than an end-point in the creation of hip hop is made by Chadwick Jenkins, "The View from Below: Early Hip Hop Culture as Ironic Perception," Chapter 8 in this collection.

[6] Serazio, "Apolitical Irony," p. 81.

[7] Tom Maurstad, "Music Mergers," *Dallas Morning News* (July 28, 2002), E01.

[8] Rebecca Black, "Friday," Ark Music Factory (2011), http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kfVsfOSbJY0; Amit Agarwal, "The Most Disliked Videos on YouTube Ever," *Digital Inspiration* (blog) (April 4, 2012), http://www.labnol.org/internet/most-disliked-youtube-videos/ [accessed August 15, 2013].

[9] Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York, 2006); and Filip Hráček's site www.youtubeology.com [accessed August 5, 2013].

[10] Lev Grossman, "Time Person of the Year: You," *Time*, 168/26 (December 25, 2006): 38–41 at 40.

User-posted YouTube videos are a particularly rich source for researching listener-senders. Approximately 80 percent of YouTube videos are user-posted (as opposed to corporate postings), and music is the largest category of YouTube videos by category tag, accounting for almost 20 percent of YouTube's content.[11]

Audio and video manipulations found within user-posted YouTube videos are often sophisticated. Whereas musical performers once held a monopoly over a number of musical features, such as tempo, expressive timing, intonation, vibrato, transposition, and the like, technology now allows for the easy manipulation of these musical features by non-musicians through inexpensive, user-friendly software. If, for example, a listener does not like the recorded tempo of a musical work, or if the tempo does not seem to fit the current context or user needs, then he or she can elect to adjust the tempo accordingly.

Empirical data supports the idea that listener-sender YouTube manipulations are pervasive. A quick convenience sample of 100 user-posted YouTube videos found that 75 percent contained a nominal alteration of pitch and/or tempo.[12] These listener-sender alterations are likely to be prevalent for multiple reasons. Consider the following hypothetical example. In teaching a music technology class how to use software that alters the transposition of a recording (without changing the tempo), students may discover many different applications. Vocal students may transpose their favorite recordings to fit their vocal range, composition students may fix an instrumental part that they forgot to transpose, some might alter the transposition of a song they intend to post on the web (in order to avoid being detected by copyright violation software), and others might alter the pitch of a popular song in order to transform the singer's voice into that of a chipmunk, or a monster.

In each of the above cases, listener-senders employed pitch-alteration technology to achieve different goals, including: convenience, error reduction, avoiding illegality, and creative expression. Although the context of this example consisted of a room full of music students, it could just have easily been any classroom in that such technology requires no musical training to use. This is one way in which technology can bridge the gap between musicians and non-musicians. When listeners start customizing or altering their musical experience, regardless of intention they imprint a bit of their identity on the end-product. This imprint could be their vocal range, forgetfulness, cunningness, or perhaps a negative attitude toward the original musical "sender." Therefore, with some evidence that listener-senders use technology for expressive purposes, one might investigate the specific expression of listener-sender musical irony.

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[11] Michael Wesch, "YouTube Statistics" (March 18, 2008), http://ksudigg.wikifoundry.com/page/YouTube+Statistics [accessed January 20, 2013].

[12] Joseph Plazak, "You Get What You Pay For: Pitch and Tempo Alterations in User-Posted Videos," presentation, International Conference on Music Perception and Cognition (Thessaloniki, Greece, 2012).

Utsumi's "Unified Theory of Irony"

In order to investigate listener-senders' expressions of musical irony, it is necessary to clearly distinguish between irony and non-irony. Akira Utsumi's "unified theory of irony" offers three necessary qualifications for distinguishing spoken irony from non-irony.[13] Verbal irony: 1) exists in an ironic environment to which it is bound; 2) presumes an implicit display of the ironic environment; and 3) has a certain degree of prototypicality, providing typical conditions under which verbal irony may be manifested. Below, Utsumi's theory is applied to musical irony.

According to Utsumi, ironic "utterances" are surrounded by an ironic environment, "a situational setting which motivates verbal irony."[14] These environments consist of three features: a) sender expectations, b) sender expectation failures, and c) a negative response toward these failed expectations.[15] Without an ironic environment, Utsumi claims that irony will not be comprehended.[16] Notably, Utsumi's "ironic environment" has nothing to do with "receivers." Therefore, when applying Utsumi's theory to music, obvious musical applications include irony originating from composers (via written/notational cues) or performers (via aural/paralinguistic cues), but, instead, the present focus is on musical irony originating from listener-senders. According to Utsumi's qualifications, listener-senders may be situated within an ironic musical environment if they have: a) musical expectations, b) musical expectation failures, and c) negative emotional attitudes toward these failed musical expectations. On the basis of these conditions, the following is an examination of the ironic environment surrounding user-posted YouTube videos of Rebecca Black's "Friday."

The story behind the music video, "Friday," has been covered extensively in the popular press.[17] This song/music video was produced by ARK Music Factory in 2011 for a fee of several thousand dollars—a fee that was paid by Rebecca's family. The video depicts teenaged Rebecca Black singing throughout a typical school day.[18] A large portion of the video involves clips of Rebecca and her friends engaged in stereotypical teenage activities, and the video ends at an evening

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[13] Akira Utsumi, "Verbal Irony as Implicit Display of Ironic Environment: Distinguishing Ironic Utterances from Nonirony," *Journal of Pragmatics*, 32/12 (2000): 1777–806.

[14] Ibid., p. 1778.

[15] Ibid., pp. 1778–9.

[16] Ibid., p. 1783.

[17] See, amongst others, Eriq Gardner, "Rebecca Black's 'Friday' Taken Off YouTube," *The Hollywood Reporter,* (June 17, 2011), http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/thr-esq/rebecca-blacks-friday-taken-youtube-202893 [accessed August 13, 2013]; Stephen Baldwin, "Five Things You Need to Know about Rebecca Black's 'Friday,'" *National Post* (March 17, 2011), http://arts.nationalpost.com/2011/03/17/five-things-you-need-to-know-about-rebecca-blacks-friday/ [accessed August 13, 2013].

[18] Readers are highly encouraged to view the original video via the following link: www.youtube.com/watch?v=kfVsfOSbJY0 [accessed July 31, 2013].

party in which Rebecca is giving a concert. The music throughout the video is a fairly conventional pop song; the vocal tracks are noticeably processed and tuned. The original music video for "Friday" has been viewed on YouTube more than 50 million times and has been largely panned; "Friday" was dubbed as the "most disliked YouTube video of all time" (surpassing Justin Bieber's *Baby*).[19]

Ironic musical environments begin with listener expectations, and many expectations could define the ironic environment surrounding YouTube user-posted versions of Rebecca Black's "Friday." Relevant expectations include, but are not limited to the following:

- music is art rather than a commercial product
- young artists are recognized for high levels of talent
- a music video with millions of hits should be "good"
- successful artists are authentic
- musicians should not be reliant on auto-tuning technology, and/or
- the content of music videos should not feed a false performer identity.

The second qualification for an ironic musical environment is a thwarted expectation. Expectations, and the extent to which these expectations are violated, are both subjective and contextual. However, one could make a case for the thwarting of any of the above-mentioned expectations in Rebecca Black's "Friday." The final element of an ironic environment is a negative response to thwarted expectations. As previously mentioned, evidence of the negative reaction to this video includes four times as many YouTube user "dislike" ratings as "like" ratings. Therefore, all three elements of Utsumi's ironic environment convene on Rebecca Black's "Friday."

In addition to the presence of an ironic environment, Utsumi claims that ironic communication must involve an "implicit" display of an established ironic environment. If an utterance "explicitly" states a sender's expectation, or if an utterance "explicitly" states a sender's negative attitude toward a failed expectation, then the utterance is likely to be perceived as "non-irony." However, the distinction between explicit and implicit utterances may not always be clear. Further, merely avoiding an "explicit" display of the ironic environment is not enough to convey irony. According to Utsumi, implicit displays of ironic environments include one or more of the following features: "allusion," "pragmatic insincerity," or the "indirect expression of negative attitudes."[20] Although only a single implicit display is required to express irony, oftentimes, ironic utterances will contain multiple implicit displays.

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[19] Jay Hathaway, "The Top 10 Most Hated YouTube Videos—Rebecca Black Just Became Number One," *Urlesque* (blog) (March 30, 2011), http://www.urlesque.com/2011/03/30/top-10-most-hated-youtube-videos/ [accessed August 13, 2013].

[20] Utsumi, "Verbal Irony," p. 1786.

Returning to "musical" irony, how might listener-senders be capable of implicitly displaying an ironic musical environment? In some ways, music is at a certain advantage in that instrumental music does not exist in a realm of narrow explicit meanings. In investigating the musical structures and cues of implicit ironic displays, it might be helpful to examine implicit displays used by senders of other mediums, including written and spoken language. Offered below is a brief overview of ironic "structures" (textual/notational features found in a written medium) and ironic "cues" (visual and acoustical features found in live situations or recordings).

Utsumi highlights "pragmatic insincerity" as an important implicit ironic display.[21] Pragmatic insincerity is concerned with surface-level incongruities and violations of norms, which again begs the importance of contextual information for communicating irony.[22] There are many structures that may be found in written irony, including: adjective–adverb collocation, extreme adjectives or adverbs, foreign terms, formulaic expressions, interjections, pauses, punctuation,[23] clashes of style, conflict of fact within work, conflicts of belief, known error proclimation, straightforward warnings,[24] hyperbole, oxymoron, pretense, and repetition,[25] to name a few. Pragmatic insincerity requires that a receiver have some idea of what to expect before being capable of identifying surface incongruities. These receiver expectations stem from familiarity with certain cultures, genres, geographic locations, styles, and so on.

Are the ironic structures mentioned above similar to ironic structures used by musical senders? Are there musical equivalents to any of these techniques? For example, might there be a musical equivalent for expressing irony by using extreme adjectives or adverbs? Musical examples might include an extremely modified musical theme, or a theme modified in some unusual manner. In a similar vein, might music also employ "clashes of style" as a technique for composing "ironies" within music? Here, the music of Charles Ives, Peter Schickele, Frank Zappa, Weird Al, and several others come to mind. Some of the above-mentioned ironic structures may be unlikely within untexted musical contexts. However, there does seem to be some overlap between textual and musical structures of irony, which might prove to be useful in examining listener-sender musical irony.

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[21] Ibid., pp. 1784–7.

[22] See Katherine L. Turner's "'Strange Fruit': Cognitive Linguistics and Pragmatics of Ironic Comprehension," Chapter 3 in this collection.

[23] See Gina M. Caucci, Roger J. Kreuz, and Eugene H. Buder, "'I'm Always Sincere': What is Salient In Sarcasm?," poster presented at the 49th Annual Meeting of the Psychonomic Society (Chicago, IL, 2008); and Gina M. Caucci, Roger J. Kreuz, and Eugene H. Buder, "Acoustic Analyses of the Sarcastic Tone of Voice," paper presented at the 48th annual meeting of the Psychonomic Society (Long Beach, CA, 2007).

[24] Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago, IL, 1974).

[25] Raymond W. Gibbs, *The Poetics of Mind: Figurative Thought, Language, and Understanding* (Cambridge, 1994).

In addition to structural surface incongruities, Utsumi also emphasizes the importance of verbal cues in distinguishing irony from non-irony.[26] Tone of voice, or prosodic, cues of irony include: a nasalized timbre,[27] heavy or erratic articulation,[28] slower presentation rate,[29] and marked pitch and intensity patterns,[30] to name a few.[31] Do musicians also utilize certain "tone of voice" cues in order to express musical irony? Both performers and listeners have been found to use a noisy timbre, staccato-like articulations, altered rhythmic durations, relatively greater intensity, and relatively lower pitches to distinguish musical sarcasm from musical sincerity.[32] As an example, imagine a saxophone playing a sarcastic rendition of the tune "Happy Birthday." Tone of voice cues likely to be employed by the performer might include buzzy timbres, irregular and choppy articulations, greater intensity, and so on. Again, accepting the possibility of some overlap

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[26] Utsumi, "Verbal Irony," p. 1787.

[27] See Anne Cutler, "On Saying What You Mean Without Meaning What You Say," in M. Galy, R. Fox, and A. Bruck (eds), *Papers from the Tenth Regional Meeting, Chicago Linguistic Society* (Chicago, Il, 1974), pp. 117–27; Rachel Schaffer, "Are There Consistent Vocal Clues for Irony?," in C.S. Marek, R.A. Hendrick, and M.F. Miller (eds), *Papers from the Parasession on Language and Behavior* (Chicago, IL, 1982), pp. 204–10; Roger Kreuz and Richard Roberts, "Two Cues for Verbal Irony: Hyperbole and the Ironic Tone of Voice," *Metaphor and Symbol*, 10 (1995): 21–31; and John Haiman, *Talk is Cheap: Sarcasm, Alienation, and the Evolution of Language* (New York, 1998).

[28] See Cutler, "On Saying What You Mean"; and Kreuz and Roberts, "Two Cues."

[29] See Patricia Rockwell, "Lower, Slower, Louder: Vocal Cues of Sarcasm," *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research*, 29 (2000): 483–95; Gregory Bryant, "Prosodic Contrasts in Ironic Speech," *Discourse Processes*, 47 (2010): 545–66; as well as Caucci et al., "'I'm Always Sincere'"; Cutler, "On Saying What You Mean," and Kreuz and Roberts, "Two Cues."

[30] F_0 is a standard abbreviation for "fundamental frequency," a physical property of sound rather than its psychophysical correlate, pitch. Most research on the affective sound is reported using this physical, rather than psychophysical, unit. Relatively Lower F_0: Rockwell, "Lower, Slower, Louder"; Caucci et al., "'I'm Always Sincere'"; Relatively Higher F_0: Linda Milosky and Janet Ford, "The Role of Prosody in Children's Inferences of Ironic Intent," *Discourse Processes*, 23 (1997): 47–61; Gregory Bryant and Jean Fox Tree, "Recognizing Verbal Irony in Spontaneous Speech," *Metaphor and Symbol*, 17 (2002): 99–117. Reduced F_0 range: Ivan Fonagy, "Double Coding in Speech," *Semiotica*, 3 (1971): 189–222; Patricia Rockwell, "Vocal Features of Conversational Sarcasm: A Comparison of Methods," *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research*, 36 (2007): 361–9. Exaggerated F_0 range: Takanori Adachi, "Sarcasm in Japanese," *Studies in Language*, 20 (1996): 1–36; Haiman, *Talk is Cheap*.

[31] The literature on ironic prosodic cues has revealed mixed results, leading several scholars to doubt the existence of an ironic "tone of voice." See Bryant and Tree, "Recognizing Verbal Irony," Raymond W. Gibbs, "Irony in Talk Among Friends," *Metaphor and Symbol*, 15 (2000): 5–27.

[32] Joseph Plazak, "An Empirical Investigation of a Sarcastic Tone of Voice in Instrumental Music," PhD dissertation (Ohio State University, 2011).

between spoken and musical ironic cues, these features might also prove to be useful in examining listener-sender musical irony.

Structural incongruities within user-posted YouTube videos may be used to detect listener-sender implicit displays of ironic musical environments. Such implicit displays are possible any time a YouTube user alters original source material. The following examines implicit displays of the ironic environment surrounding user-posted YouTube responses to Rebecca Black's "Friday."

YouTube users have employed a variety of technologies to modify and alter Rebecca Black's "Friday." Speed changes are one of the most prevalent alterations, including user-posted videos which speed up or slow down the song by various multipliers, including 5x, 8x, 25x, 500x, 1000x, 5000x, and many others temporal variants.[33] Beyond changes in speed there are also user-posted videos with changes of pitch. Not only is it possible to find versions of "Friday" that have been pitch-shifted a few semitones (possibly to avoid having the video removed or flagged for copyright violation), but it is also possible to find rather extreme transpositions (for example, both "chipmunk" and "deep voice" versions of the song).[34] Further, perhaps as a nod to motivic compositional techniques, user-posted YouTube videos of "Friday" also include retrograde and inverted versions, which present the music video backwards or upside down.[35] Beyond musical manipulations, one rather complex visual incongruity consists of splicing in a car crash scene as an alternative ending for "Friday's" music video.[36] However, the above-mentioned alterations should not be taken as an exhaustive list of structural incongruities in YouTube user-posted responses to Rebecca Black's "Friday." Rather, these examples represent only a few ways through which listener-senders have altered known source material as a vehicle for expression.

The final element of Utsumi's unified theory of irony is the existence of an irony "prototype" to which potential ironic utterances may be compared.[37] The elements of Utsumi's irony prototype have already been discussed above: namely knowledge of sender expectation, sender's emotional response, allusion, surface

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[33] "Rebecca Black—Friday—slowed 5x," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U1M5Q3onsX4 [accessed August 15, 2013]; "Rebecca Black Friday slowed to 25% throat singing," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H18J_dVoWS0 [accessed August 15, 2013]; "Rebecca black—Friday slowed down 500%," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H18J_dVoWS0 [accessed August 15, 2013]; "Rebecca Black—Friday SPED UP 1000%," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PSquE4dEtyw [accessed August 15, 2013].

[34] "Rebecca Black—Friday—Chipmunk Version," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PjncsgOULcE [accessed August 15, 2013]; "Rebecca Black—Friday (Deep Voice)," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n9v0QJtP28c [accessed August 15, 2013].

[35] "Rebecca Black—Friday (In Reverse)," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UYNazPGsZu8 [accessed August 15, 2013]; "Rebecca Black—Friday [official video] Upside down," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CNRpWHjdhBA [accessed August 15, 2013].

[36] "Rebecca Black—Friday (alternative ending)," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yupr0rJX7l4 [accessed August 15, 2013].

[37] Utsumi, "Verbal Irony," pp. 1787–8.

structural incongruities, verbal and non-verbal cues, and so on. The more of these features contained within an utterance, the more likely the communication of irony. Even if one or more elements is missing (for example, knowledge of a sender's expectation in the case of a stranger), it is still possible to perceive irony if enough cues, or particularly salient cues, are present. Is there is a prototypical "musical" irony? Assuming a sufficient context and the presence of enough ironic structures and/or cues, it seems reasonable to suppose that musical irony is capable of being modeled into a prototype—an exemplary display of musical irony—against which other musical examples may then be considered more or less ironic in comparison. However, assessing the prototypicality of musical irony is difficult as there are many ideas and opinions on a proper definition.

Through the application of Utsumi's theory, it is possible to claim that many YouTube user-posted alterations of "Friday" are ironic on at least two counts. First, there is a clearly established negative sentiment towards the piece, and, second, there are a number of surface incongruities that seem to "implicitly display" these negative sentiments within YouTube user-posted videos. However, this does not preclude the possibility (or likelihood) of other motivations behind listener-sender alterations of this, or other popular YouTube videos. For example, Psy's "Gangnam Style,"[38] a viral video released in 2012, has also generated a large number of YouTube user-posted alterations, many of which are similar to the above-mentioned alterations of "Friday." Recall that alterations alone are not sufficient for identifying listener-sender musical irony; it is also necessary to demonstrate that the alterations took place within an ironic environment. The following section strengthens the case for listener-sender expressions of irony in music by demonstrating the useful purpose of such communication.

Functions of Listener-Sender Irony

Why might listener-senders use musical irony? And what might they hope to achieve? As with any type of communication there must be some communicative value. I claim that functions of listener-sender musical irony include the expression of anger, social alliances, and disgust.

Spoken irony can be used "directly," meaning that the receiver of an ironic message is also the target of the utterance. Gibbs provides the following example of direct irony, "You're a fine friend."[39] If spoken to "directly" criticize another person, this message might be interpreted as communicating a milder form of the literal meaning: "You're a bad friend." In such cases, irony might function to lessen the severity of an expression of anger.[40] The utterance above might be considered

[38] Psy, "Gangnam Style," YG Entertainment single (2012).

[39] Gibbs, *The Poetics of Mind*, p. 386.

[40] This idea is attributed to a 2002 talk given by Claudia Claridge, cited in Patricia Ann Rockwell, *Sarcasm and Other Mixed Messages: The Ambiguous Ways People Use*

"half-angry" in that it is semantically positive, but with a negative intention. Is there a musical equivalent for direct irony? Specifically, is there a case in which listener-senders employ musical irony to directly criticize someone or something? I would argue that this is the case in many of the Rebecca Black examples provided above. Ironic user-posted videos may have intended to signal musical disapproval "directly" to Rebecca Black. An interview with the artist indicated that she felt she was being "cyberbullied" by the various reactions and comments to her video.[41] It seems that, in these particular cases, "direct" irony was successfully communicated both by individuals and by the larger listening community.

Spoken irony can also be used "indirectly." In such instances, instead of directly addressing the target of the ironic utterance, the criticism is communicated through a third party. Rockwell provides the following example: "I bet that resumé will get him the job."[42] In this case, the use of irony functions to enhance the sender's message.[43] Rather than merely stating that "the resumé" is not good enough, this ironic message implies that "the person who wrote the resumé" is not good enough—covert criticism of the author under overt criticism of the work. One theory regarding the communicative value of irony is its ability to signal social alliances.[44] Irony can function to signal a speaker's negative feelings about someone to a third party, often in a semantically "safe" manner.[45] Those who share the same beliefs as the speaker, or listeners who know the speaker well, are likely to decode the speaker's true intention. This raises the question whether "indirect" irony is relevant to musical communication. Do listener-senders gain any benefit from using irony to signal social alliances? Through musical irony it may be possible for listener-senders to express negativity, or potentially insulting viewpoints, in a socially normative way, while at the same time remaining semantically neutral to those with different beliefs. In the Rebecca Black example, user-posted videos may not be attempting to criticize the artist overtly; rather, they might be covertly criticizing those who "like" the music video. Some ironically-altered versions of the song have generated a substantial number of views, many of which have garnered a large number of user "likes." I would argue that these "likes" represent social alliances, as do YouTube "video responses" and user comments. In other cases, indirect musical irony may also be relevant to certain

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Language (Lewiston, NY, 2006), p. 134.

41 Chris Lee, interview, "Rebecca Black: 'I'm Being Cyberbullied,'" *The Daily Beast* (March 17, 2011), http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/03/17/rebecca-black-friday-and-cyberbullying.html [accessed August 13, 2013].

42 Patricia Ann Rockwell, *Sarcasm*.

43 Maggie Toplak and Albert N. Katz, "On the Uses of Sarcastic Irony," *Journal of Pragmatics*, 32/10 (2000): 1467–88.

44 Lori J. Ducharme, "Sarcasm and Interactional Politics," *Symbolic Interaction*, 17/1 (1994): 51–62.

45 Rachel Giora, "Masking One's Themes: Irony and the Politics of Indirectness," in M.M. Louwerse and W. van Peer (eds), *Thematics in Psychology and Literary Studies* (New York, 2002), pp. 283–300.

types of revolutionary music (political, cultural, social), or be used to promote group solidarity as in a form of protest in powerless groups.[46] Musical irony's intelligibility to some, but not others, provides a unique function for creating or strengthening social alliances.

A third context for considering the communicative value of listener-sender musical irony is through vicarious irony. Vicarious communication refers to a type of self-alienation in which a speaker communicates from another's point of view, and Haiman claimed that irony sometimes functions in a similar way.[47] As opposed to an affect like empathy, which involves perceiving the feelings of another, irony may involve rejecting that which disgusts us. Rozin and Fallon found that the limitations of self are important in determining revulsion.[48] In this regard, "vicarious" irony may function to expel or vent the thoughts and feelings of others from our sense of "self." Could there be a musical equivalent for vicarious irony? It seems that one possible way to signal a social alliance would be to express mutual disgust, in which case the formation of social alliances and the expression of mutual disgust may work in tandem. An example might include musical parody, which often involves a form of artistic self-alienation. By making art from another perspective, it becomes possible not only to try on the thoughts and feelings of another person or group, but also to expel such feelings from our sense of self. In the case of user-posted alterations of Rebecca Black's "Friday," it seems plausible that some listener-senders may have intended to signal a form of musical disgust. Remaking the video under the guise (even if loosely veiled) of Black might divorce the listener-sender from their sense of self and provide an avenue for acknowledgment of a new social alliance. One notable example, although admittedly beyond the category of "listener-senders," includes an uploaded video by a group of Julliard graduates entitled: "Rebecca Black 'Friday' in the style of Handel."[49] In addition to arranging "Friday" for soprano, flute, violin, harp, and synthesized harpsichord, this particular live rendition of the tune features a wealth of musical mockery techniques, many of which are acknowledged via audience laughter. Compromising the seriousness that the performers struggle to portray (the vicarious seriousness of Rebecca Black's artistry) are smirks and laughter (perhaps the performers' true sense of self).

Case Study

As a summary, it might be helpful to consider a specific example of listener-sender irony. "Rebecca Black—Friday (In Reverse)," a time–reversed, user-posted

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46 See Ducharme, "Sarcasm"; and Giora, "Masking One's Themes."

47 Haiman, *Talk is Cheap.*

48 Paul Rozin and April E. Fallon, "A Perspective on Disgust," *Psychological Review*, 94/1 (1987): 23–41.

49 "Rebecca Black 'Friday' in the style of Handel," http://youtube/ixh88c1LHKE [accessed November 1, 2013].

YouTube video, will be used to summarize the main concepts presented above, including ironic environment, implicit displays of the ironic environment, prototypicality, and functionality.[50] All elements of this user-posted video are identical to Rebecca Black's "Friday;" the only introduced change is a reversal of playback direction. For the sake of clarity, this specific listener-sender video is hereafter referred to as Rebecca Black's "yadirF."[51]

Ironic Environment

Media sharing takes place via a variety of digital streams (for example, Twitter, Facebook, email, and so on), and the expectations surrounding digital sharing are highly contingent on context.[52] Without actually contacting the YouTube user responsible for creating "yadirF," it is not possible to catalog completely the listener-sender's expectations. Further, the creator of "yadirF" might have difficulty identifying the musical expectations that framed his or her initial response to "Friday." These caveats notwithstanding, it is still possible to speculate about, and discuss, several relevant musical expectations. We might assume that the context surrounding this listener-sender's first exposure to "Friday" was colored by a caption that said "worst song ever written" or "video of the year." Note that each caption frames a unique set of expectations, and therefore a unique set of expectation violations. If led to believe that a listener-sender is clicking on a link to the "worst song ever written," potential expectation violations include the track being not as bad as one might expect, or, conversely, being even worse than expected. A link leading to a "video of the year" could singlehandedly stage an ironic environment for an otherwise innocuous work. Negative response to these, or any other, violated expectations would fulfill the qualifications for an ironic environment.

Implicit Displays of the Ironic Environment

Structural incongruities often signal ironic communication, and listener-senders easily introduce such incongruities through a variety of digital manipulations. In considering the case of "yadirF," time-reversing the original source video introduces a simple, yet radical, structural incongruity. Reversed audio manipulations are

[50] The reader is highly encouraged to view the video before reading the summary section: "Rebecca Black—Friday (In Reverse)," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UYNazPGsZu8 [accessed August 15, 2013].

[51] A search for "yadirF" revealed multiple reversed versions of Rebecca Black's "Friday."

[52] Not only would one expect receivers to be sensitive to details such as hyperlink text, associated hyperlink images, and/or the reputation of the link's source, receivers also have expectations based on who is sharing information with them (such as friends, family, work colleagues, and so on).

rarely used for entire musical works as such manipulations typically destroy a musical work's intelligibility.

Prototypicality

It is difficult to claim that "yadirF" is a prototypical display of musical irony in that neither written nor spoken language use "signal reversal" to convey irony. However, beyond the structural change (that is, the reversed direction), a larger purpose might be considered: namely, destroying the content of the original material. Therefore, the function of this implicit display (destroying the work), rather than the manipulation itself (time reversal), might be considered to display a high degree of ironic prototypicality.

Functionality

In any claim regarding the presence of irony, it is important to consider the functionality of the communication. YouTube videos communicate to both known and unknown audiences, and it is therefore possible to hypothesize a range of communicative functions for "yadirF." Reversing and effectively destroying the intelligibility of Rebecca Black's "Friday" might serve to directly express a mild form of anger at Rebecca Black. Note that a stronger expression of anger could be accomplished through a literal rant video or a letter to the artist. "YadirF" might also serve the function of "indirectly" signaling a social alliance with other YouTube viewers who dislike the original video. Being privy or sensitive to the listener-sender's ironic environment allows these social alliance signals to be detected; a lack of context allows such alliances to remain covert. Finally, "yadirF," if created somewhat vicariously through Rebecca Black, might function to signal social disgust. Of course there are plenty of ways of expressing disgust for this song without actually engaging in digital manipulation of the original work.

The example above fulfills all the necessary elements of ironic communication. If we suppose that the listener-sender's response might have originated within an ironic environment, and that implicit displays were then made to reflect this ironic environment, the implicit display could be considered prototypical of ironic expressions, and, finally, the ironic communication could serve a variety of communicative functions.

Conclusions

There are many challenges to the study of musical irony, but one particularly salient challenge should be apparent from this chapter: music and musical communication continue to change, and consequently so too will our ideas on musical irony. Technology pushes and problematizes the boundaries of musical

senders, and bridges the gap between the expressive intentionality of musicians and non-musicians.

In applying Utsumi's theory of irony to music, I have made several claims. Musical irony, like other forms of irony, is likely to exist within an ironic environment. Although knowledge of the sender's expectation is not required for the perception of musical irony, it certainly facilitates such communication. Further, musical irony involves an implicit display of the ironic environment. Such displays may borrow the same structural incongruities or prosodic cues found in ironic language. While these structures and cues are not required for the perception of musical irony, they may facilitate such communication. Finally, the notion of prototypical irony suggests that musical irony is unlikely to follow a single formula. What may be ironic for one receiver may be perfectly meaningless for the next, a point that may be highly relevant to the functionality of musical irony. Even though the hypothetical functions of listener-sender irony mentioned above are presented individually, instances of musical irony likely involve a mixture of functions. Potential functions of listener-sender irony may include the expression of anger, social alliances, disgust, or any possible combination of these, as well as other unknown functions.

A potential question arising from this chapter centers on the differentiation between "expressions of musical irony" and "expressions of irony through music."[53] Future studies will need to address this subtle distinction. The difference may hinge on the extent of involvement/control employed by the musical "sender." Because both composers and performers control all or most of the musical variables that express irony, and are responsible for "making music," one might consider their messages to be both "expressions of musical irony" and "expressions of irony through music." It remains unclear which category better classifies listener-sender alterations of music.

This chapter has provided evidence suggesting that listener-senders are capable of expressing irony through music. In some of these examples, ironic expressions resulted from the manipulation of only a single musical element (such as pitch or tempo). In such cases, some might object to classifying these instances as "expressions of musical irony," thereby drawing a distinction between "music making" and mere "music editing." However, regardless of the extent or type of sender involvement in expressing irony via music, the end-result is the same: music serves as a vehicle for carrying an ironic message. Future studies of musical irony therefore have the potential to reveal not only the complexities of ironic musical communication, but also the complexities of "music making" in general.

[53] I'd like to thank Andrew Shryock for leading me toward this important distinction.

Chapter 15
The Narrowing Gyre of Music Recommendation

Damien McCaffery

Introduction

Of all the things my parents sent me off to college with, the one thing that went farthest to ensure my survival that first year was a cassette tape. This mixed tape gathered some of my Dad's new fascinations and abiding musical champions: Shirley Horn, Simply Red, Jimmy Reed, Van Morrison, and, most significantly, Miles Davis's "All Blues," which came to feel like instructions for functioning in the world with one's soul intact. How did my father predict that I would fall hard for this song, a jazz tune no less, the genre furthest from my interests and comprehension?

For someone with inside knowledge there were telling clues to Miles Davis's immediate appeal to my sensibilities. I was an adolescent partial to literate loners, pining dandies, and pan-sexual outsiders: Prince, The Smiths, Talking Heads, The Cure, Michael Jackson. That Davis's soulful, longing horn cleft me to the core seems, in light of this predilection, obvious. Many years later, when I learned that people had programmed machines to make mixes specific to individual taste, I wanted to find out just *how* they thought they could do it; sussing out idiosyncratic personal preferences seemed like hubris to me. That is when I was introduced to the theory and practice of MIR.[1]

Manoeuvres in the Dark: MIR, Anarchy, and Order[2]

Music Information Retrieval (MIR) algorithms fail to truly expand their users' musical horizons because they favor sonic sameness over novelty, a distinct example of irony. The contradiction at the root of this irony is that commercial MIR algorithms imply that they will expose users to music they have not heard before,

[1] This chapter discusses the algorithms that power the large-scale download and streaming sites like Pandora and Spotify—sites that seek download sales, advertising revenue, and/or subscriber retention.

[2] Orchestral Manoeuvres In the Dark, *Orchestral Manoeuvres In the Dark*, Dindisc DID 2 (1980).

even while proposing songs that sound similar to those that listeners already like.[3] A further irony lies in that a recommendation engine whose outcomes yield an equal balance of more and less familiar music to its users fails to fulfill one of a recommendation algorithm's central purposes: to limit user options.

The user's expectation of novel recommendations belies how commercial music sites actually function, which is to conform to parameters within a range defined by that user. As I will show, this narrowing gyre is not a flaw in the design of any of the various recommendation algorithms, but is in fact integral to their design. Indeed, this narrowing may be their true purpose. The resulting feedback loop orients users toward reflections of their taste rather than toward truly unfamiliar possibilities; the creation of dwindling and increasingly homogenous options creates what I call a *taste tautology*.

Pleased to Meet Me: The Static Commendation[4]

The logical imperative that guides music recommendation algorithms can be illustrated by reducing a hypothetical failed recommendation to the point of absurdity. The obvious example of a failed music recommendation is one that is absolutely alien to a user's tastes and sensibilities—if a user expresses a preference for the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, for example, and the algorithm suggests she might enjoy American hip-hop collective Odd Future. In making such a suggestion, the recommendation algorithm has—clearly—failed to grasp the musical qualities the user most appreciates. The user might well conclude that, in making such an incomprehensible suggestion, the program has been miscoded at the source; in other words, that she and the recommender were not speaking the same language.

The inverse example helps further illuminate the elemental purpose that animates MIR algorithm design, which is to bridge the distance from ignorance to knowledge, from the familiar to the new. In the opposite instance, the user says she likes the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, and the recommendation engine in turn recommends the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. Here, the algorithm has performed the simplest part of the recommendation task: it has produced a suggestion. But, obviously, when origin and destination are identical, the user remains unenlightened because no exchange has taken place from ignorance ("What new music might I enjoy?") to knowledge ("I enjoy this music, which is new to me"). This communication failure is similar to that which produces the alien suggestion above. In this example, the response is not an irrational statement, but an uncomprehending echo.

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[3] Pandora purports to offer its users a "never-ending experience of music discovery," yet simultaneously claims to "play only music you'll love." See "About Pandora," Pandora, http://www.Pandora.com/about [accessed March 14, 2013].

[4] The Replacements, *Pleased To Meet Me*, Sire Records 9 25557–1 (1987).

This breakdown—the distance between the algorithm which powers a music site and its user—is measured in information: the gap between the known and the unknown, or, in Linda Hutcheon's words, "between … the said and the unsaid."[5] In *Irony's Edge*, that gap between what is said and what is left unsaid is a site of polyvalent, unstable potential where irony is created neither by the initiator (the person making the ironic statement, whom Hutcheon calls the ironist) nor the receiver (the person receiving the statement, whom she calls the interpreter), but "happens" within the intricate lattice of knowledge coursing through the "discursive communities" to which the parties belong.[6] In other words, irony depends on both participants holding some power, neither of which is wholly active *or* merely passive. Hutcheon also notes that irony is often assumed to rely on hierarchies ranked with "those who use it at the top, then those who 'get it' and, at bottom, those who do not."[7]

In the case of music recommendation, irony is absent at the outset because music fans, even fans of artists who engage extensively with irony or who enjoy irony in music, do not signal their tastes ironically, nor is the service offered ironically.[8] These sites need users, and users want music they will like or they'll go elsewhere to get it. The flaw in a static recommendation engine is that a recommendation that circles back to the origin counsels users too cautiously, but commercial algorithms in fact favor cautious suggestions. Pushing listeners too far from their preferences is seen as the greater evil.

Indeed, in order to garner the largest number of users (and thereby remain financially solvent), MIR engines for music vendors and services must bet conservatively, leaning toward relevance over novelty. Much of this has to do with how little cultural capital a machine-generated recommendation has: listeners lose faith in a computer's suggestion much more quickly than in a friend's. The recommendation engine designer's goal is winning and then maintaining the user's trust, and ultimately gaining that prized position, that of an authoritative recommender. The challenge is to emulate characteristics a user once valued above and beyond even commercial media sources (mass media such as radio, TV, magazines, and blogs), the intimate knowledge held by an inner circle of their most trusted influencers—namely, the user's peers.

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[5] Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London and New York, 1994), p. 11.

[6] Ibid., p. 17.

[7] Ibid.

[8] For example, fans of the Pet Shop Boys are unlikely to be pleased with the suggestion that they check out Willie Nelson, despite the success of Pet Shop Boys' cover of Nelson's "Always On My Mind." In other words, they will tend to signal their appreciation of the music itself, not of the array of ironic meanings at play around the music.

"Domo Arigato, Mr Roboto": Striving for Peer Status[9]

The poet and essayist Stephen Dobyns once described the challenge of writing well thus: "That is one of the paradoxes of writing, that the conclusion of a given piece must appear both inevitable and surprising."[10] Like writing, making a good music mix is a terribly difficult pleasure, which must both reassure by meeting expectations and delight with the novel.

The invention of iTunes Genius, which proposed that a machine could put together a good tracklist—instantly and impersonally—seemed absurd, and somewhat chilling. Could any computer code find a sonic, social, or emotional thread within a song sequence that imparted that seamless flow, the quality of a well-told tale, comparable to one created by a human being? Was there any *deus ex machina* that could be conjured, capable of grasping music's ineffable qualities and reaching connections to any individual's idiosyncratic tastes?

Ghost in the Machine: The Music Industry's New Next Big Thing[11]

MIR has become the arbiter of consumer choice, the omniscient ghost in the machine.[12] Drawing from computer science, mathematics, musicology, and sociology, MIR algorithms generate recommendations on the basis of what they "learn" about what those users already like, then select new artists or similar songs in the guise of a suggestion for further listening.[13] As anyone who has used Pandora.com or Last.fm has discovered, MIR's automated algorithms are rapidly developing uncanny accuracy at deducing user likes and dislikes—insights that increasingly resemble clairvoyance rather than simple informed guessing.[14]

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[9] Styx, "Mr. Roboto," *Kilroy Was Here*, A&M, SP-3734 (1983).

[10] Stephen Dobyns, *Best Words, Best Order: Essays on Poetry* (New York, 1997), p. 38.

[11] The phrase "ghost in the machine" was first used by Gilbert Ryle to describe Descartes' mind–body dualism in his 1949 first edition of *The Concept of Mind* (Chicago, IL, 2002), p. 35; later, The Police borrowed the phrase for their 1981 album of the same name.

[12] Alex Pham, "Discovery: The Key to Digital Fortune," *Billboard FutureSound* (2012), http://www.billboard.com/biz/articles/news/1082961/billboards-futuresound-white-paper-why-discovery-data-and-licensing-are [accessed March 14, 2013].

[13] Bear in mind that definitions of musical similarity, familiarity, discordance, and novelty issue from different forms of analysis, and grow slippery in the context of popular music forms as social factors gain influence over taste.

[14] The Boil the Frog project (http://static.echonest.com/frog/) created by Paul Lamere, developer and community director at music discovery company the Echo Nest, makes for one interesting example. This online program aims to generate a musical "path" between two disparate artists chosen by the user—the starting example Lamere offers is Justin Beiber

In commercial applications, MIR is designed to influence user behavior similarly to other cultural arbiters such as radio DJs, music critics, or a personal connection. Amazon.com's well-known "People Who Bought This Also Bought" feature is one very basic example of an MIR-based recommendation engine at work. While it plainly implies a similarity-based recommendation, it still recommends new music by more than a single artist with the ultimate goal of "purchase" rather than pure "discovery."

Several MIR techniques exist, but all have essentially the same target definition. An effective recommendation is one that the recipient perceives as equally appealing and edifying, relevant and novel. A recommendation that strikes that perfect balance serves the listener by introducing him to music that immediately appeals to his aesthetic sensibilities and broadens his musical scope at the same time.

This Year's Model: The Shape of a New Market[15]

MIR companies ironically veered from their touted goal of discovery as they were becoming integral to the music industry. In many ways, Chris Anderson's 2006 book *The Long Tail* is an apt summary of how electronic communication and automated information search and retrieval has made matching demand and supply, particularly in the music business, much faster, more precise, and more nimble. His thesis holds that such data collection will logically encourage an increasing number of narrower specialty categories for all kinds of goods from sneakers to wedding dresses to cultural products like music. Anderson describes this as a shift from a culture of "hits" to one of "niches," predicting that this will encourage an increasingly diverse and finely focused range of discursive communities centered on musical taste—essentially, fan groups.

The "long tail" model proposes that the market paradigm has been utterly transformed in the digital age, most crucially in that the majority of commercial transactions and record-keeping processes have evaporated into digital bits. The dynamics of supply and demand have fundamentally altered, expanding our options into a longer "tail" of infinite choice, and away from the limitations of a shorter "head" of hits that reach consumer hands, artificially limited by physical shelf space in brick-and-mortar stores.[16] Digital tools allow for a more precise taste-oriented selection that is easier to use and free from the constraints of shelf space; it also rewards a more curious consumer with wider, more detailed means

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to Cannibal Corpse—in stylistic gradations so subtle as to make the shift unnoticeable to the listener.

[15] Elvis Costello, *This Year's Model*, Radar Recordings RAD 3 (1978).

[16] Chris Anderson, *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More* (New York, 2006), p. 52.

of exploration. *The Long Tail* schematizes the power of one of the digital age's most daunting gifts: powerful tools to explore infinite choice.

The caution with which the music industry adopted the new internet-propelled market cost it dearly. In essence, the origin of the enormous changes the global music industry has (and is) weathering is only one version of the "long tail's" effect. But these upheavals hit early and hard for music because, unlike in other domains, the medium changed utterly, from atoms to bits. At the same time, the barriers to entry for musicians were dramatically lowered by the same digital means, allowing them to distribute their work easily and globally.

Most observers agree that the single most critical recent change in the recorded music industry was not simply the advent of the MP3, but how radically that format changed music distribution; Allen Bargfrede and Cecily Mak cite the advent of MP3 technology as a "dramatic paradigm shift in the control and delivery of creative assets in the past 15 years."[17] The physical infrastructure, the central artery of records creation, sale and distribution, was literally and figuratively, reduced to bits.

Droppin' Science: MIR Techniques[18]

A look into how MIR works will illuminate how it creates taste tautologies. As an initial requirement, music recommendation algorithms need information about two things in order to do their work.

- users—listeners desiring music recommendations
- items—the songs, artists, and albums held within a service's collection.

Recommendation algorithms use this data to calculate difference and similarity between users and items. The results are ranked, and the outcome determines the recommendation. The methods used to produce music recommendations fall into four widely accepted categories used by scholars such as Oscar Celma, and Brian Whitman, co-founder of the Echo Nest, a major music search company which collaboratively filtered content-based, context-based, and hybrid techniques from the methods below.[19]

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[17] Allen Bargfrede and Cecily Mak, *Music Law in the Digital Age* (Boston, MA, 2009), p. xi.

[18] Marley Marl, "Droppin' Science," *In Control, Vol. 1*, Cold Chillin' 1–25783 (1988).

[19] Oscar Celma, *Music Recommendation and Discovery: The Long Tail, Long Fail, and Long Play in the Digital Music Space* (Heidelberg, 2010); Brian Whitman, "How Music Recommendation Works—and Doesn't Work" (n.d.), http://notes.variogr.am/post/37675885491/how-music-recommendation-works-and-doesnt-work [accessed March 14, 2013].

1. collaborative filtering: relies on user input to refine and adapt his or her profile on the system, tends to be subjectively-oriented, and external to the music item;
2. content-based attribute recognition: relies on a music composition's metadata, and also its formal, internal features, and tends to be more standardized and objective;
3. context-based filtering: assesses how items are categorized and how users behave on the web in order to build profiles and calculate similarity—tends to use web-mining methods and social tagging to glean textual data that are independent of items and users;
4. hybrid approaches: these use all these methods in combination, though, as noted MIR researcher Oscar Celma says, "most commonly, collaborative filtering is combined with other techniques."[20]

All four approaches reinforce a narrowing gyre of recommendations. Each displays specific weaknesses in handling certain types of music.

Seasonal and/or religious music serves as a good test. For example, a context-based filter might direct listeners who enjoy John Coltrane's "A Love Supreme" to gospel or other devotional music because Coltrane was explicitly addressing his religious faith with this song. But a content-based filter, recognizing sonic qualities that indicate a jazz composition, might recommend music which had nothing to do with religion. Similarly, a collaborative filter would recommend a song like Art Carney's reading of "The Night Before Christmas" to listeners hunting for Christmas music—though that song, by the stylistic criteria a content-based filter uses, might be categorized as rap. Owing to Carney's well-known status as a comedic actor, the obscurity of his musical output, and the unlikely choice of material, a hybrid filter would probably categorize this song as a novelty tune, and recommend Eddie Murphy's 1985 track "Party All the Time," or something (indeed, anything) off of William Shatner's 1968 album *The Transformed Man*.

Apposites Attract: Collaborative Filtering

Collaborative filtering aligns listener response to individual users through items and groups of other system users by considering taste similarity. Individual listeners within these groups are called neighbors. Similarity is judged via feedback, usually in the form of user-submitted ratings, click-through rates or purchase-matching, in the same way that Amazon recommends an item to a customer on the basis of what other customers who clicked on that item also bought or viewed.

Alignments like these require a dataset of the links users click on, and "how" they click on them: that is, if they buy what they find, how long they stay on a given page, if they come back to it, and so on. Collaborative filtering then harnesses

[20] Celma, *Music Recommendation*, p. 34.

artificial intelligence to sort the subjective, human-generated data it gathers, creating conditions that virtually guarantee imperfect results. AI by definition utilizes computational power to achieve goals.[21] This, of course, requires external input; without new data, an AI system cannot meaningfully adapt or re-sort the data it holds. In short, AI systems cannot "learn"—or build on existing data—without fresh information.

In this first and most basic MIR method, the route of recommendation travels from known item to unknown, (again, like Hutcheon's formulation, *from said to unsaid*) but is biased to trace a curve leading back to its origin. Based on a binary expression (like/dislike) and on communities of users who have expressed similar tastes, collaborative filtering favors sameness over novelty.

Word is Bond: Context-Based Filtering[22]

Context-based filtering entails gathering information about how a song is described or categorized, or on how a user behaves on the web with respect to music-related data points. In short, the filter gathers information from customer and (professional) critical reviews, blogs, forums, and chats, in reference sources and more. The context, in the sense it is being used here, is not only an arbitrary set of labels assigned to a song or artist by various blogs and comment boards, but also those more stable, closely considered identifiers used in online reference sources or in metadata attached to the song by the record label.

User-based context is often gathered through online session logs that track what John Batelle, author of *The Search*, calls "clickstreams."[23] Primarily through the use of spyware cookies, context is gathered through the user's browsing history, site visit length and return rate, and which items show up repeatedly during a given web session. These and other web-surfing habits are collected and aggregated, and a value is calculated, which is then used to match listener preferences.

Context filtering also employs crowd-sourcing by following sets of social tags (often called "folksonomies"), capturing both user behavior in assigning tags and the number and variety of tags assigned to items, in order to determine similarity and suitability to taste profile. Here, it is possible to see how a different MIR system's method of generating recommendations, though more complex than collaborative filtering, tends to favor similarity over novelty. It proceeds on the logical assumption that a composition's context is formed by drawing comparisons, rather than pointing out contrasts. In other words, to describe Ray LaMontagne's

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[21] John McCarthy, "What Is Artificial Intelligence?" (2007), http://www-formal.stanford.edu/jmc/whatisai/node1.html [accessed November 12, 2007].

[22] Brand Nubian, "Word Is Bond," *Everything Is Everything*, Elektra ED-5711 (1994).

[23] John Batelle, *The Search: How Google and Its Rivals Rewrote the Rules of Business and Transformed Our Culture* (New York, 2006), p. 9.

sound to a listener, it would be more efficient to say that Ray LaMontagne sounds *a lot like* Leon Russell, as opposed to sounding *wholly unlike* Diamanda Galas.

Tick-Box Taxonomies: Content-Based Filtering

The third MRI method differs from the collaborative and context-based forms in that content-based filtering classifies music using its formal properties and so tends to categorize more objectively than subjectively, or socially. It resembles context-based filtering but differs in that, in order to judge song similarity and difference, the music's compositional elements are gathered and analyzed, not its subjective descriptors (as one finds in reviews, ratings, comments, blogs, user-generated tags and so on).

Content-based filtering categorizes music using two types of information, textual and sonic. Celma points out that the textual part of content-based filtering "ha[s] its roots in the information retrieval (IR) field. The early systems focused on the text domain [metadata attached to the music], and applied techniques from IR to extract *meaningful* information from the text."[24] The metadata standards capture information about the music such as record label, release date, and song title. Classifying music this way depends on information that is usually assigned to it by those who package and distribute it—usually a record company or a company like Gracenote, which provides metadata for iTunes. Because of their source, content-based metadata tend to stick to standard descriptors (genre, song and album title, composer, songwriter, or record label), as opposed to like versus dislike, folksonomic tags, or a rating system. But, as Celma points out, text-based "music analysis is not ready yet to accurately predict the *mood* of a song but, on the other hand, it does the job well when dealing with descriptors such as: harmony, rhythm, etc."[25]

These sonic qualities are the second aspect of content-based filtering that uses technology to pick out and identify the audible characteristics of music. One example of sonic fingerprinting and feature-extraction program is the mobile song-identification program Shazam, which literally takes songs from mid-air when users hold their cell phones up to a speaker that is playing a song they want to identify. The sound is sent to Shazam's database, processed, and matched to the appropriate song. The user then receives the song's title and artist on their cell phone.

Unlike the metadata-based aspect of content-based filtering, sonic fingerprinting is increasingly capable of identifying quite subtle musical qualities, such as mood.[26] Content-based characteristics also include attributes such as beats-per-

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[24] Celma, *Music Recommendation*, p. 28.

[25] Ibid., p. 29.

[26] Youngmoo E. Kim et al., "Music Emotion Recognition: A State of the Art Review," paper presented at the 11th International Society for Music Information Retrieval Conference, Utrecht Conservatorium (Utrecht, August 2010).

minute (BPM), tempo, rhythm, harmonic progression, composition structure, and instrumentation. As they are *structural* and *internal* to the music, like metadata, they are more objective in nature.

This, again, is another form of MIR that tends to guide listeners to more of the familiar. Even without the narrowing effect of fan-created discursive communities, genre parameters drawn from connections and descriptors scraped from the Web, or similarity-matching via user feedback, these metadata elements and sonic properties tend to confine listeners to their comfort zone which shrinks when it is located only within traits such as BPM counts, acoustic instrumentation, vocal timbre, or genre designations like "swing," "doo-wop," or "hip hop."

Get It Together: Hybrid techniques[27]

As the name implies, hybrid methods of music recommendation combine types of MIR to arrive at felicitous recommendations for potential favorite tunes. While it is unnecessary here to go into the specifics of how such hybrid methods like Last.fm, Slacker.com, and Spotify.com integrate different systems in products, the notion that it is possible to do so is worth examining.

As noted by Celma, almost none of the MIR systems described above use one technique exclusively because music categories overlap and are often inextricable. For example, Pandora necessarily includes social information in its Music Genome Project. The quality they label "head-nodic beats" includes a certain type of hip hop but not the myriad other genres that compel a listener to nod their head. Their category recognizes a precise, social definition of head-nodding over the formal understanding of a certain meter to which one could easily nod one's head. Similarly, Amazon's collaborative filter reflects some content-based data because it inevitably produces recommendations that align users' preferences in formal terms: in other words, a history of buying soft rock will yield more and more music with soft-rock's sound and "feel," reflecting elements like tempo, chord structure, and instrumentation. A context-based filter will inevitably capture formal characteristics that have developed into social tags: for example, forms such as "three-chord rock" or "strathspey."

Blinded by Science: Pandora's Hybrid Gets Into Music's Genes[28]

Pandora has made great contributions to MIR by adopting a human-labor-intensive and risky filtering system while navigating the high seas of the open market. Yet

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[27] Beastie Boys, "Get It Together," *Ill Communication*, Grand Royal C2 7243 8 28599 2 5 (1994).

[28] Thomas Dolby, "She Blinded Me With Science," *The Golden Age of Wireless*, Venice in Peril Records VIP1001 (1982).

even with the intention of perfecting discovery and "reward[ing] the musically curious among us" they stuck to a narrow course towards sonic sameness, and arguably present the starkest irony within the MIR field.[29]

Founded in 2000, Pandora aimed to create a uniquely subtle music discovery engine, minutely attentive to some characteristics while blind to others, by creating its much discussed Music Genome Project (MGP). It employs "musician-analysts" (people who know a bit more about music than the average person, possessing a familiarity with both technical aspects of music and social ones) to listen to songs and classify them using over 400 predetermined tags to indicate their internal characteristics and "feel."[30] Essentially, these musician-analysts assign musical-feature metadata. For each song or artist provided by the listener, the MGP uses a dataset, which includes over 700,000 songs, to match and predict listener tastes. When the features of that initial song are entered into Pandora's algorithm and compared to those of other songs, the result is not just a few recommendations but what Pandora calls a "radio station," which plays hours of music matched to your tastes, all based on that first "seed" song. The same user is also able to offer feedback on each song as it plays, and even create different stations based on different "seeds" already provided.[31]

This system works like both collaborative and context-based filtering in that it runs a similarity-matching program, but not based on user preferences and click-through patterns, or an aggregate of web-based information. Instead, it uses the MGP's own internal database of music characteristics, defined and attributed by human "musicological experts." This highlights an advantage that Pandora's MGP has over other recommendation filters; with songs cataloged in advance, their "cold start" problem (wherein an MRI system is stumped due to the absence of an initial dataset about the user) is solved by the user's entry of that initial song. There is no need for a user to go through manual information entry, fulfilling a "training set" of sample responses, or for a reliance on implicit information garnered by tracking through cookies or click-through tallies that allow the system to get a sense of user preferences. The MGP is designed to be sensitive enough to build a "station" around just one song—clearly an easier method for the user than either context or collaborative filtering.

Pandora's demonstrates its unscientific bias through its use of less empirical, subjective notions such as the very limited term "head-nodic." While formulated and often applied with a certain level of strictly "musicological" precision, the MGP can only sort and assign musical values imprecisely. Pandora's marketing strategy is ironic: what the company puts forward as its complete and strictly rational approach to music discovery—as signaled by using scientific nomenclature to identify its innovation and trade secret—could be seen as designed not to broaden

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29 Pandora, "About Pandora."

30 Ibid.

31 Claire Cain Miller, "How Pandora Slipped Past The Junkyard," *New York Times* (March 8, 2010).

users' musical taste but to subjectively reaffirm their perceived notions about the social affiliations of their favorite music genres.

Beyond this, Pandora's labor-intensive method of entering music into the MGP—musician-analysts categorizing each new song—slows its ingestion rate. Completely computerized MIR methods that rely on automated means of creating the datasets move much faster. Maintaining subscriber levels compels Pandora to process and enter songs that the largest number of users will like, and to do so before devoting resources to more obscure songs. Consequently, Pandora tends to favor more mainstream artists than companies like iTunes that enter smaller artists into their offerings at the same rate as mainstream ones. This practice limits Pandora's range of offerings, and hence its range of recommendations.[32]

Further, in favoring music's compositional elements over its social ones, Pandora purports to operate with disinterest towards social factors, which makes the MGP particularly vulnerable to a key blind spot. By ignoring social connections that *cross* categories delineated by formal qualities, the MGP risks missing affinities that may help generate more salient suggestions. Such dependence on musical features over social ones tends to neglect musical cognates that might prove revelatory for listeners.

This more limited pool of possible recommendations presents yet another irony; Pandora seeks to play only "music you'll love" and simultaneously offer a "vast trove of music" to explore. Yet returning to the primary motivation of MIR companies—to stay afloat financially—Pandora has a compelling reason to keep its collection closely curated by its experts. It is able to virtually guarantee that its users will find its recommendations relevant, while providing seemingly infinite possibilities. Pandora simultaneously attracts users through the appeal of infinite discovery, yet offers a relatively narrow selection of predetermined, sonically similar music based on each "seed." The irony resides in the user's expectations versus the MGP's interpretation of those expectations.

Gimme Some Truth: An MIR Reality[33]

It should come as no surprise that music-lovers engage with MIR-powered music services hoping to broaden their cultural horizons, and that the promise of music discovery is enticing to them. We desire to know more, to achieve some kind of fulfillment, to gain a new perspective. However, we often do not have the means

[32] Pandora founder Tim Westergren admits his company's slow ingestion rate, but sees it as a virtue. "Ironically, I found over the years that the fact that we couldn't go fast was a big advantage," he says. "The problem that needs solving for music is not giving people access to 2.5 million songs." Linda Tischler, "Algorhythm & Blues," *Fast Company*, 101 (2005): 87–9. OmniFile Full Text Mega (H.W. Wilson) [accessed October 25, 2013].

[33] John Lennon and the Plastic Ono Band, "Gimme Some Truth," *Imagine*, Apple Records TC-PAS 10004 (1971).

or time to explore every musical option ourselves; MIR engines offer an easy means to realize our true desire, and tacitly ask us to trust them. Users interpret the experience of receiving MIR suggestions as music discovery, and the suggestions they receive offer the additional comfort of validating what they already know they like, without any of the aural challenges posed by engaging with music that feels unknown.

Conclusion: Malthusian Blues[34]

"Exploring the long tail" is a fundamental human enterprise, it is the process of broadening one's cultural horizons. If such broadening is an *a priori* good thing to pursue, then, clearly we ought to do so; exploring the range of human expression is not merely personally edifying, but a social virtue. As discussed earlier, pushing further out into the long tail can only be done effectively with the aid of complex automated tools. Those tools need to be steadfast but also finely calibrated, able to reflect complexities in the universe of musical forms.

But just how to go about conducting that exploration offers up tricky issues. We need help, but we don't all need or want the same kind of help, and deciding how to go about searching will determine how satisfied we are with the results. And we will also have to wrestle with the question of what, exactly, is the right kind of help. As with any taxonomic system, music recommendation engines always bear the imprint of their designer's hand, and they are never truly impartial—though, in truth, we might not even want them to be. While casting about a vast range of options, we rely on them not only for finding information but, crucially, for selecting it. Ironically, we need search algorithms to *limit* our options as much as to *expand* them.

The MIR engines explored here propose differently flawed directions for music discovery, but a "true" discovery engine would work in one fundamentally different way. It would pull results from beyond the boundaries we set for ourselves, and maintain sensitivity to contextual nuances as yet indiscernible to MIR. By another kind of reasoning, the trick to getting the "right kind" of help is designing a search-and-recommendation engine that tells a listener what they might not be prepared to hear, or even want to hear. This hypothetical search engine—which I will call the "edifying" recommendation engine—would find music that users might never

[34] "Malthusian Blues" references Aldous Huxley's 1932 novel *Brave New World*. Played on "Synthetic Music apparatus" for "Alpha" citizens, "Malthusian Blues" is one example of the centrally created and mandated culture the rulers of the World State used to replace "prohibited" cultural forms deemed too potentially disruptive of the "planetary motto" "Community, Identity, Stability." As the character known as the Controller explains, "The world's stable now. People are happy; they get what they want, and they never want what they can't get … You've got to choose between happiness and what people used to call high art." Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (London, 2004), pp. 66, 193–4.

anticipate that they would enjoy, but exposure to which will bring them something beyond entertainment.

On the one hand, this hypothetical MIR engine would hold the possibility of bringing people out of those narrowing feedback loops and taste tautologies, and fulfill the promise of discovery sincerely, rather than ironically. On the other hand, it could also be said to take the "distanced" position Claire Colebrook writes of in *Irony: The New Critical Idiom*: "Reading ironically means … looking beyond the standard use and exchange what this or that might *really mean*."[35] In this way, the edifying MIR engine would not only know what the user wants, but also have better taste than the user does. Like the ironic reader, the edifying engine would find what you *really want*. It would be a recommendation engine like the proverbial independent record store clerk, both critically distanced and ready to guide and edify.

Of course, the motivation behind creating such a recommendation engine—the compulsion to tell other people what they ought to be listening to, instead of the drivel they're listening to now, without the benefit of a vast body of knowledge and exquisitely refined taste—is the dream of all music snobs everywhere. Stuffed with conspicuously worthy musical roughage, this search engine would contain links to the kind of "challenging" music that is, in the classic formulation, much better than it sounds. Inevitably, creating such an engine is by nature an ironic proposition, as it is premised on an impossible universal consensus on the history, relevance, and influences of every song ever in every genre made or being made.

Until we reach this mythic consensus, music recommendation programs will tend to reinforce listener taste rather than expand it, with the further inherent irony that most of us only want it expanded so far. Predictability, as neuroscientist Daniel Levitin points out, is one of the central qualities determining individual musical taste, each of us appreciating different proportions of surprise and inevitability as being musically ideal.[36] The balance of the ironies found within MIR is located in the unspoken; the antithetical experience of MIR "discovery," as well as the unspoken desire of users for such an experience.[37]

Manipulating listener expectations is what composers do, and, when done well, it is one of the central aspects of music's appeal.[38] So, if some want their expectations satisfied again and again, and others want to be cast out of their comfort zones, made to work (and wait) for the aesthetic pay-off music can offer them, we must ask how prevalent are the latter? MIR holds every advantage in helping us find good music, except one: our own human, patternless intuition. The edifying MIR engine is actually a service that wouldn't concern the casual

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[35] Claire Colebrook, *Irony: The New Critical Idiom* (London and New York, 2003), p. 13. Emphasis in original.

[36] Daniel J. Levitin, *This is Your Brain on Music: Understanding a Human Obsession* (London, 2008), pp. 115–19.

[37] Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, p. 35.

[38] Levitin, *This is Your Brain*, pp. 115–19.

listener, and in fact serves the sort of music enthusiast who would probably try to expand his or her own musical horizons anyway, with or without the help of a computer program.

And so, ironically, a method purportedly designed to push the boundaries of one's listening habits will inevitably cater to that minority which is already doing so and would therefore fail commercially. Overwhelmed within a universe of infinite choice, at least we can take solace in knowing that we are using the best tools available to find the best music available within the narrowing gyre of the taste tautologies we have constructed for ourselves.

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