

Reading Pop Production

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Reading Pop Production
Sonic Markers and Musical Identity

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Eirik Askerøi, May 21, 2012

Preface

As with most popular musicologists, I entered the academic study of popular music through my experience as a performing musician—in my case as a guitarist both live and in the recording studio. This informs my approach to all aspects of music today. A studio session with producer Yngve Sætre, for Maria Due’s record *Kissing in Public* (2010), illustrates the interdependency of my music-making and scholarship. While recording electric guitar for a song called “Hagerty Square”, Sætre stopped me during the second take, saying calmly yet authoritatively: “What happened now? Now, you’re suddenly sounding like Django Reinhardt. Bring back Chet Atkins, please”. Playing exactly the same notes, I had inadvertently changed the feel (technique, note length and rhythmic approach) by testing out a new idea. For Sætre, there had been something attractively “incomplete” about the sound in the first take, and ultimately we used that take. What also struck me at that time, was the speed and conviction of Sætre’s reaction to such a slight modification on my part. For during a studio session, as I realized, the musical details means everything.

Stemming from my practical background, two main premises have emerged that shape my analytical perspective; first, I have taken a great interest in all of the things that affect music production. Having been part of a project to build a recording studio of 125 square metres, with five separate rooms and acoustic specifications prescribed by an acoustician, made me very curious about the effect of the space surrounding the technology. Testing different microphones with different voices and instruments through different preamps produced a sensitivity toward the technology in relation to the performer and her/his (my) instrument, whether that was the voice or an electric guitar. Renting a Mellotron for a recording session left me utterly intrigued by the strange immediacy of this instrument in relation to its operator as well. Such encounters have profoundly interested me in the man/machine interaction—a relational process that takes place in every recording session.

Second, given the impact of multitracking upon pop music production, the ability to listen closely, and to profit from the results of one’s listening, has become more important than ever. This is because music production demands the

reconciliation of the smallest sonic detail to the greater good of the whole, a continuous process of interpretation and evaluation that *marks* that musical whole sonically. Such processes relate most directly to my use of hermeneutics and, which account for my choice of popular musicology as the field within which I locate this study.

Together, then, the continuous creative dialogue between human and machine and the continuous navigation of the producer and musician between details and the musical whole form the backdrop for the following thesis. As a result, my interpretations venture beyond what a “regular” listener would attempt, particularly with regard to the social meaning of musical details. At the same time, however, I strive to ground those interpretations in interviews, documentary material, artist biographies and blogs—that is, the many utterances in the social sphere, which, to a greater or lesser extent contribute to the formation of the musical identities that are in turn conveyed through the aesthetics of pop.

1. Reading pop production

Throughout the first decade of the 2000s, vast piles of sonic driftwood from the musical past washed ashore through bands such as the Strokes, the Hives and the White Stripes. In particular, these bands' explicit focus on sounding "authentic" through more or less specific references to sonic ideals of the mid-1960s (the Who, the Kinks, etc.) provided them with an immediate and largely unquestioned credibility amongst journalists and fans. Similarly, the late Amy Winehouse, most significantly with her record *Back to Black* (2006), led a soul revival through her sonic evocation of the signature sound of 1960s soul and R&B that garnered her the favour of the press as well. While I do not intend to suggest that this is the *only* meaning-producing aspect of these musical texts, I will argue nevertheless that their overall impact derives from various *appropriations* of the sound of pop history. In this thesis, then, I will explore how inherited *sonic markers* have played a major role in the development and renewal of popular music—not only during the first decade of the new millennium but also as a production strategy in recorded popular music in general.

Based upon the assumption that musical sound and social structure interact on several levels, this project sets out to explore the ways in which sonic markers act as compositional tools in pop production and in turn play a major role in the formation of musical identity. The four objectives of this project are as follows:

1. To demonstrate the ways in which musical details function as sonic markers in various genres of pop production.
2. To explore how sonic markers in turn act as audible signifiers of musical identity.
3. To illustrate the links between sound recording and styles and genres.
4. To consider the intricacies of the social and cultural processes that are at work in the formation of musical identity.

This thesis engages mainly with two intersecting positions to produce a textual and a contextual perspective that forms the basis for its discursive analyses. First, a music

analytic approach sets out to demonstrate how musical details can be identified as sonic markers. By my definition, sonic markers can be identified through the explicit use and construction of expressive devices in music that range from vocal peculiarities to instrumental stylings and the technological aspects of production. One example of this is the slap-back echo that is often associated with recordings of the 1950s, and Peter Doyle (2004) has paid a great deal of attention to the history and creation of echo and reverb up until the 1960s, including the use and development of various forms of slap-back echo in this era.

Second, I subject the effect of textual details such as the slap-back echo to a range of contextual implications. For example, the slap-back echo would not have had the impact it did if not for the artists—the musical identities—who brought it to a larger audience. As Richard Middleton has underlined, the slap-back echo on Elvis Presley’s voice in early recordings such as “Heartbreak Hotel” (1956) represented a crucial moment in recording history:

Elvis Presley’s early records, with their novel use of echo, may have represented a watershed in the abandoning of attempts to reproduce live performance in favour of a specifically studio sound; but the effect is used largely to intensify an *old* pop characteristic star presence: Elvis becomes “larger than life”. (Middleton 1990: 89)

Here, Middleton makes a clear distinction between *intention* (the technological construction of space) and *effect* (the underscoring of Elvis’s star presence). Furthermore, the affective qualities of the slap-back echo have now lost their initial shock effect, and it has become a sonic marker of nostalgia within recent popular music history. When a similar such effect is applied to much more recent productions, then, it evokes *both* the 1950s in general and the “King of Rock’n’Roll” in particular—on Dave Gahan’s voice on Depeche Mode’s “Personal Jesus”, for example, the effect appears to be to amplify, as a sonic marker, the song’s parody of larger-than-life preachers. In pop productions, then, even the subtlest signifiers—the sound of an acoustic guitar, or the virtual space created by digital reverb—connote principal narratives of authenticity and authorship as well as gender, sexuality, space

and place. Together, these perspectives comprise a discursive analytical model based on a textual focus on the audible details of pop production and the contextual implications of the meanings of these details.

The acknowledgment of technology's effect on the development of recorded music has recently gained attention. Several studies (Camilleri 2010, Doyle 2005, Katz 2004, Lacasse 2000, Wicke 2009, Zak 2001) have made strong cases regarding the impact of music technology on the development of popular music and specifically the ways in which this technology contributes to the shaping of musical narratives. Albin Zak, for example, explores the affective dimensions of technology in popular music from the perspective of the "recordist"—either the producer or the sound engineer. Additionally, Zak acknowledges the impact of individual performances in recordings: "In the recording studio, musicians' styles take on a symbolic quality, signifying a particular set of associations. This is another element in the rhetoric of record making" (Zak 2001: 52). Although Zak goes a long way in identifying the potentials of various elements in a recording for colouring the musical narrative, he does not undertake musical analyses as such. Mark Katz, in addition, applies the notion of the "phonograph effect" to explain how music technology impacts musical output through having "encouraged new ways of listening to music, led performers to change their practices, and allowed for entirely new musical genres to come into existence" (Katz 2004: 5).

No one doubts that technology has had a profound impact upon the development of popular music, in the end, and a range of studies has provided strong academic support of this point from various perspectives. Notably, though, few scholars have taken up questions regarding how the *affective qualities* of this recording history, what Leilo Camilleri refers to as "sonicprints" (Camilleri 2010: 210), have also been used as compositional strategies of pop production. One exception to this general rule appears in Simon Reynolds's book *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Self* (2011), which presents an extensive, yet rather gloomy, account of this form of musical "borrowing" during the first decade of the 2000s: "The 2000s was . . . the decade of rampant recycling: bygone genres *revived* and *renovated*, vintage sonic material *reprocessed* and *recombined*" (Reynolds 2011: xi). What the Strokes, the

Hives, the White Stripes, and Amy Winehouse had in common, then, were certain sonic similarities with existing *notions* of the 1960s that both shaped their musical texts aesthetically and shaped the reception of those texts (and the identities of their artists) as ultimately authentic. What Reynolds terms “vintage sonic material” has most certainly affected the process of identity formation in these examples. Although Reynolds is a journalist, not an academic, his observations reveal central mechanisms of the recent development of popular music. His idea of vintage sonic material, for example, equates for me with sonic markers of time and helps to explain how appropriations of musical sound in fact comprise a central mechanism of musical development.

This mechanism has to do with the fact that recorded popular music is more or less premised on continuous processes of transformation.¹ There is always a demand for something new and literally unheard of, although Reynolds seems to be mourning the exact opposite. At the same time, popular music is equally contingent on processes of reflexivity on behalf of performers and producers. Middleton, for example, insists, “Radical work can only hope to succeed if it plays, by modification, inversion, rearticulation or contrast, off an acknowledgement of the strength of existing manifestations of technology and cultural forms” (Middleton 1990: 90). Further, Stan Hawkins notes: “The recorded performance is an ongoing process of *transformation* that shapes the act in various ways” (Hawkins 2009: 38, author’s emphasis). This is not to say that the process of transformation produces a constant drive *forward*, but, as I intend to explore from different perspectives throughout this thesis, it is the act of *looking back* through sound that has constituted its transformative nature. Jason Toynbee insists: “What is extraordinary about popular music making is its continuing technological reflexivity” (Toynbee 2000: 101). These two processes—transformation and technological reflexivity—form the basic premises for my investigation into how

¹ I emphasise the term recorded popular music here. This is not only to underline the distinction from live performances, which itself was invented because of the increasing amount of recordings in the 1950s (Toynbee 2000). The development of popular music is often regarded proportionally with the development of recording technologies. However, as Derek B. Scott (2008) demonstrates, the popularisation of music started long before that. According to Scott, a popular music revolution took place in London, Paris, Vienna and New York already in the early 19th century.

sonic markers contribute to the communicative aspects of production and performance aesthetics in popular music.²

Reynolds's pessimism about the extensive appropriation of vintage sonic material seems to derive from two main concerns. One is related to the highbrow/lowbrow dichotomy that has come to exist within popular culture: "Where retro truly reigns as the dominant sensibility and creative paradigm is in hipsterland, pop's equivalent to highbrow", he laments (Reynolds 2011: xix). As Derek B. Scott argued in 1990, the apparent dichotomy between high and low culture, which is often used to separate classical music from the popular, has long been adopted in popular music:

Artistic sincerity may not be enough; the musical style itself needs to be disassociated from commercialism. The modernist quest for novelty and exclusivity, related to the ever-present fear of art's being standardized and turned into a commodity, has parallels within jazz and rock, which, though regarded as mass culture, have produced their own modernists such as John Coltrane and Pink Floyd. (Scott 1990: 387)

In turn, this evokes Reynolds's second concern, namely that the act of looking back in time through sound—the appropriation of sonic markers, in short—also represents a shortfall in pop creativity from the mid-1980s onwards:

Right in the heart of mainstream with artists such as Kate Bush, The Police, Bowie and Peter Gabriel, musicians were spurred by the desire to create something never heard before. But from the mid-eighties onwards, gradually but with increasing momentum, that changed into an impulse to create something very much heard before, and moreover to do it immaculately, accurately in every last detail. (Reynolds 2011: 176)

The question, then, is *what* has been recreated so accurately, and, more importantly, *why* are the effects of these apparent re-creations not the same? In this introductory

² Save for one reading of a live performance in chapter 3, I will devote myself exclusively to studio-produced music.

chapter, I intend first of all to dwell on the theoretical premises of the thesis. Because theory is also discussed in the individual chapters, the prime focus of the two following subsections will be specifically to clarify central terminology that will be applied in this thesis, particularly in relation to how I will use the terms “authenticity” and “identity”, and how they are interrelated. Second, I describe here the methodologies that will form the analytical basis of this project. Third, through a brief account of certain aspects of recording history, I endeavour to pinpoint some of the central technological inventions that will emanate from the case studies that form the main body of this thesis. In so doing, I hope to position my case studies within the larger theoretical and methodological framework that characterises the field of popular musicology.

Spectres of Authenticity

This project is situated within popular musicology, after all, a field of research that has, during the last decades, become a distinct branch of popular music studies. In his introduction to *The Ashgate Companion to Popular Musicology*, Derek B. Scott (2009) provides an extensive review of the field, including its historical development, central debates and, to some extent, future paths. According to Scott, popular musicology arose from the urge to acknowledge popular music as a discourse worth studying using musical premises. He observes that popular musicology “is distinct from ‘popular music studies’ in that its primary concern is with criticism and analysis of the music itself, although it does not ignore social and cultural context” (Scott 2009: 2). Whereas popular musicology has become an interdisciplinary field of research, earlier studies of popular music were more or less anchored within specific disciplines. Arguing this point, Allan F. Moore notes that Wilfrid Mellers “employed his version of the standard discursive analytical practice of the time” in his work on the Beatles (Moore 2003: 3). Informed by close analytical listening, Charles Keil studied blues with methodologies based in anthropology, hoping to “discover the role the contemporary blues singer played within urban, lower-class Negro culture” (ibid.). Charles Hamm (1979) approached the blues via methodologies derived from historical musicology.

Yet it is only in retrospect that these studies have gained recognition as precursors to the field today. As both Scott and Moore emphasise, it was only with the “second generation” of scholars, such as Philip Tagg (1979, 1982, 1991), Franco Fabbri (1982) and Richard Middleton (1990), that popular musicology began to take on a historical importance of its own. The divide between cultural sociologists and musicologists who leaned toward semiotics characterised popular music studies during the 1980s:

While cultural sociologists emphasized mediation in communicating meaning, poststructuralists and semioticians focused on the importance of representation in the construction of meaning. Semiotics is not just about spotting an individual sign and deriving a meaning. Signs acquire meaning by being interrelated, or linked in a chain. (Scott 2009: 10)

Given their roots in cultural sociology, popular music studies have long taken up much of the theoretical real estate of French post-structuralism. One crucial aspect of post-structural thought that has likewise found a place in popular musicology is the idea that authenticity should not be considered an *immanent* quality of objects. Rather, as Scott points out, authenticity should be treated as an *effect* that is *articulated* by certain elements in the musical text—an effect, in short, that is realised in a specific context:

Authenticity in poststructuralist semiotics was seen to rely on a number of signs brought together to construct, represent or valorize authenticity. Instead of being perceived as emanating from an honest, sincere, inner essence, it became “authenticity”—the scare quotes directing the focus on an assemblage of signs governed by particular conventions. (Scott 2009: 3)

As Scott’s observation indicates, the concept of authenticity has caused a range of problems in popular music studies, and scholars have approached them from different perspectives. First of all, the concept of rock authenticity has been closely linked to notions of being “real”, “honest”, “true” and so on in popular music. Secondly, as Robert Walser (1993) observes, the heavy metal idiom is based on the formation of

myths “about authenticity, beauty, and culture, on the one hand, and authenticity, rebellion, and political critique on the other” (Walser 1993: 24). Thirdly, the uneasy relationship between rock authenticity and the presumably broader notion of *pop* authenticity reveals a series of contradictions and paradoxes all on its own.

Aiming to clarify some of these issues, Moore (2002) suggests three modes of *authentication*, based upon the positioning of the listening subject. First-person authenticity, or the authenticity of expression, “arises when an originator succeeds in conveying the impression that his/her utterance is one of integrity, that it represents an attempt to communicate in an unmediated form with an audience” (2002: 214). Third-person authenticity derives from a music’s truthfulness to its performance traditions: it “arises when a performer succeeds in conveying the impression of accurately representing the ideas of another, embedded within a tradition of performance” (218). Ultimately, second-person authenticity relates to the validation of the listener’s experience: “When a performance succeeds in conveying the impression to a listener that that listener’s experience of life is being validated, that the music is ‘telling it like it is’ for them” (220).

Moore’s first-person perspective, however, appears to deny the possibility of authenticity to pop artists and bands whose musical expressions are premised on mediation. Arguing this point with reference to the Pet Shop Boys, Hawkins therefore extends the concept of authenticity to encompass the *authenticity of the inauthentic* within pop texts: “Acknowledging banality in any form demonstrates the probing further into pop expression and the notions of (in)authenticity it evokes” (2002: 148). Hawkins points out that the Pet Shop Boys deliberately exaggerate markers of the inauthentic and display their narratives of fakery with such ironic distance that they become authentic. The “cold” synthesisers that accompany Neil Tennant’s emotionally detached vocal style form a sonic marker that indicates irony, which in turn surfaces as a prime characteristic of the band (and its unique authenticity). In line with poststructuralist thought, Hawkins concludes that authenticity is as inextricably linked to *how* one communicates being true to one’s musical self as it is to notions of an actual “truth” within a given musical expression.

In *Voicing the Popular*, Richard Middleton makes a similar point regarding what he terms the “spectre of authenticity” (Middleton 2006: 199). He finds the whole concept rife with self-contradiction, at least as a means of evaluation, because it tends to mark out various unhelpful binary pairs: original against copy, honest against false, roots against surface, and so on. Middleton exemplifies this situation with John Lennon’s elevation of the blues over jazz as a result of the former’s simplicity, which Lennon by all accounts equated with honesty and directness.

That authenticity is a context-dependent effect rather than an inherent quality of these choices is obvious from a previous era’s association of the very same things with *inauthenticity*. In 1936, as Simon Frith (1986) observes, BBC program director Cecil Graves regarded crooning to be dishonest (and even effeminate) because of the intimacy that characterised this soft style of singing, enabled in the main by the electrical microphone:

“Legitimate” music hall or opera singers reached their concert hall audience with the power of their voice alone; the sound of the crooners, by contrast, was artificial. Microphones enabled intimate sounds to take on a pseudo-public presence, and, for the crooners’ critics, technical dishonesty meant emotional dishonesty. (Frith 1986: 264)

Obviously, soft, languorous singing would not be audible without a microphone in the context of a big band or an orchestra. By 1936, however, this enhancement was perceived as unnatural, with the resulting sonic imbalance containing a “lie”. (Richness in the higher frequencies tends to signal closeness, because these are the first frequencies to disappear at a certain distance.) By Lennon’s time, however, the electrical microphone was well integrated into studio production processes, and the affective qualities of soft singing (enabled by close-miking) had become the norm rather than, to paraphrase Benjamin, a series of intimate and effeminate shocks. (For Lennon, this closeness also signalled the blues, and, by extension, musical authenticity in general.) Moreover, *crooning* had left behind its technologically “obscene” origins (and its culturally “obscene”—that is, sexually decadent—associations) to become a legitimate tool in the pop singer’s toolbox. I will return to aspects of crooning in

chapter 5, where I will demonstrate how it becomes an expressive sonic marker through Ian Curtis's vocal performance in "Love Will Tear Us Apart" (1980). Furthermore, in chapter 6, I will also aim to demonstrate how the evocative power of Johnny Cash's rendition of Trent Reznor's song "Hurt" derives from markers of vulnerability and nostalgia—qualities that are enabled sonically by close miking and further reinforced by the naked instrumental arrangement of the cover version.

For Middleton, then, Lennon triggers an incipient crisis for the entire concept of authenticity. This is because authenticity is not inherent (in the blues, for example) but instead derives from the manner in which one *claims* the truth:

Authenticity is a quality of selves and of cultures; and they construct each other: which is another way of saying that the question here is not so much what or where authenticity is, but how it is produced. (Middleton 2006: 206)

If, as Middleton suggests, authenticity is a quality constructed from a dialogue between selves and cultures, then it follows that we must take good note of who/what is "speaking" and who/what is "listening". The notion of the *cultural* construction of reality in music—which, in the footsteps of Scott, Walser, Moore, Hawkins and Middleton, I will refer to as music's *authenticity effect*—must be linked to the way in which a given text, and all of its stylistic, generic and sonic peculiarities, relates to a contextual framework. Of course, many fans (and journalists) would have it otherwise, much preferring the myth of authenticity as an immanent core quality of the music rather than the reality of authenticity as a cultural construct. While I will not dispute the sentiment behind this position, I would emphasise that the changing myth of authenticity depends as much upon time and context as upon the musical triggers that signal it. If authenticity arises as an effect of empathy or nostalgia, it is nonetheless the product of technology. Thus, it is my belief that *all* of the ramifications (and associations) of technology gradually undergo a cultural transformation from initially radical, even shocking, experiences (via trends) to become norms and eventually "traditions" as they become associated with certain cultural events and figures. The quality of authenticity, as a product of the changing affective qualities of pop

production, therefore helps to shed light on an intricate relationship between “human and machine”, as well as the gradual cultural appropriation of expressive technological devices.

So far, I have attempted to position my project within the field of popular musicology, mapped against the field’s complicated discourse on authenticity. Ultimately, in line with Hawkins, Middleton, Moore and Scott, I understand authenticity to be an effect of performance and production within a specific context, rather than an immanent quality of the music itself. Asking *who* rather than *what*, then, in turn makes it relevant to ask how the authenticity of popular music is contingent upon processes of identity formation. Authenticity, after all, plays a vital role in the construction of identity in popular music, a point to which I shall now turn.

Constructing musical identity

Shaped according to grand cultural narratives, social identities, broadly speaking, are constructions realised partly by how we act, dress, speak, and so on, and partly by the people who surround us, through the norms and conventions of the society in which we live. As “recurring patterns of musical material whose historical precedents are wrapped up in notions of individuality” (Hawkins 2009: 10), popular music in particular plays a vital role in both the idealisation and the negotiation of these identity formations. In her seminal work *Female Masculinity*, Judith Halberstam argues that identity is best “described as [a] process with multiple sites for becoming and being” (Halberstam 1998: 21). For Halberstam, the formation of identity is a process of subject positioning, in terms of either positioning oneself or being positioned by others, in relation to established identity categories. This positioning is often done on the basis of physical appearance, and Halberstam exemplifies how problems might arise when one’s appearance interferes with a clear-cut existing divide. Her discussion of the “bathroom problem” (ibid.: 20ff) is particularly illustrative. Public bathrooms, representing “the crumble edifice of gender in the twentieth century” (ibid.: 24), are strictly divided in terms of gender. And, as Halberstam observes, the ways in which gender is performed visually decide whether or not it would seem appropriate to enter.

Halberstam concludes: “Public versus private gender, openly sexual versus discreetly repressive, bathrooms beyond the home take on the proportions of a gender factory” (ibid.). While this public form of gender divide is evaluated within the visual domain, it is often the case, as Halberstam further notes, that “real” belonging is revealed through the voice.

However, as several scholars (Hawkins 2009, Jarman-Ivens 2006, Koestenbaum 2000, Middleton 2006, Steinskog 2008) have demonstrated, the voice has become a contested site where the apparent fixity of gender categorisation is confronted, negotiated and developed. Steinskog, for example, discusses Antony Hegarty (of Antony and the Johnsons) vocal performances specifically in terms of how the meaning of the music to a large extent becomes formed by the gendered ambiguity of the vocal performances. For Steinskog, Antony’s queer vocalisation constructs a “mainstreaming of what *used to be known as* ‘deviances’” (Steinskog 2008: 10, my emphasis). Thus, by conceptualising this gendered ambiguity in the vocal performance as an expressive musical parameter, Steinskog presents a viable inroad for also understanding how the subjectivity of the voice contributes to negotiating and forming musical identities.

The significance of a vocal performance, however, does not stem from the vocal performance of the lyrics alone. Frith has argued that listening to songs “involves layers of interpretation, and in pop it is therefore impossible to disentangle vocal realism, on the one hand, and vocal irony, on the other” (Frith 1996: 199). For Frith, it is through our attendance upon the generic conventions presented by the music that the reading of voice and lyrics for meaning can be realised: “All songs are narratives; genre conventions determine how such narratives work; words are used to define voice and vice versa” (ibid.). The meaning-producing aspects of a gendered voice, then, depend to a great extent upon what happens behind it. For example—although this is not the main focus of my chapter on Morrissey—it is worth noting how he shifted in his performed relationship to masculinity from his years with the Smiths to the years of solo work that followed. Notably, this was an *audible* shift, as John H. Baker notes: “The very sound of his new album, *Your Arsenal*, contributed to this sense that Morrissey was asserting his masculinity and distancing himself from his

former ‘sensitive’ image” (Baker 2011: 66). In other words, Morrissey’s “new” image, his post-Smiths subject position, was also contingent on sonic markers to fulfil the impression that something new was about to happen—that Morrissey after the Smiths was something more than simply the Smiths without Johnny Marr.

If the voice acts as the primary sonic mediator of gendered representations and negotiations in popular music, then to what extent could it be considered a gendered marker? I would suggest that, rather than being a gendered marker by nature, the voice *becomes* a gendered marker because, as listeners, we expect it to be so. In this way, identity, understood as a process of becoming and being, defines not only those who place themselves, or are placed, “outside” established identity categories but also those who would (seem to) be situated comfortably within them. I am here referring to the notion that the label “white male” is the only identity category that has been exempted from gendering. As Matthew Bannister observes, “There is a regrettable tendency to view ‘white men’ as monolithic, missing the point that if gender is socially constructed, then that applies as much to the ‘dominant’ group as any other” (Bannister 2006: x). Undoubtedly, even white men face strains when confronted directly with Western society’s shrillest notions of normality, and popular music has become one of the most important arenas where such strains are put on display and negotiated.³

Common to those performers whom he labels “new male singer/songwriters”, Ian Biddle observes, are the following qualities: “a kind of openness to vulnerability, a commitment to social and sexual intimacy, and a tendency to want to avoid the overt spectacularization of masculinity” (Biddle 2007: 125). I would hasten to point out that the degree of this openness varies considerably, and that the musical examples in this thesis would be better approached as subject to what Hawkins refers to as

³ In the novel *Bikubesong* (1999), Frode Grytten addresses the subject of normality as a category through the character of Harry Lund, who receives VG’s award for being the most average Norwegian of all times. Lund responds to this award first by getting drunk, then by succumbing to such an overwhelming paranoia that he ends up announcing on television that he is gay, providing a compelling fictional example of the way in which heteronormativity can turn into transgression once confronted. As Hawkins (2007, 2009) has pointed out in his studies of masculinity, transgression through displays of heteronormativity continually strive towards upholding binary structures.

“vulnerability-on-display” (Hawkins 2009: 39). This vulnerability, Hawkins argues, is mainly communicated through temperamental markers of vocal performance. Moreover, as he points out, and as I will argue throughout this thesis, this act of vocalisation is always conveyed through a pop aesthetic framework and thereby negotiated in terms of both performance and production. Ian Curtis and Johnny Cash, for example, play on notions of the laconic male rather than the spectacular male, which should release them from the “dangerous” zone of gendered ambiguity. Yet, as Biddle suggests:

It seems as if, for men to become *gendered* (that is, to become marked by the operation of discourse), they must now also entertain danger, an openness to hurt, for without entertaining that danger, the figure of masculinity operates without boundaries, as if it were always already the only position from which to wield a discourse (a non-gender). (Biddle 2007: 129)

Hawkins contributes to Biddle’s point by insisting: “The individual is an actual person, while the ‘subject’ is constituted by a set of roles constructed by cultural, ideological and aesthetic values” (Hawkins 2009: 39). Alongside national identity, ethnicity, race, sexuality and class, gender is one specific discursive axis that supplies a viable approach for theorising subjectivity. Through his historical conceptualisation of British pop mannerisms and agency, Hawkins emphasises the negotiation of masculinity as a constitutive element of Western popular culture. Through transgressive behaviour, particularly regarding established identity categories, men have long undermined their own fixity of definition; in Europe and then America, for example, from Beau Brummell and Barbey D’Aurevilly in the early nineteenth century to Noël Coward, Oscar Wilde and Andy Warhol late into the twentieth, the *dandified* performance of gendered ambiguity has obtained a strong foothold in popular culture (see Hawkins 2009: 15–36). As Hawkins emphasises, this *ambiguity* of gendered representation has in fact become one of the founding premises for performing gendered identity in popular music.

With many male performers, this ambiguity can be traced to their performance of a certain balance between strength and vulnerability, and the case studies in this

thesis are no exception. According to Annik Honoré, for example, Ian Curtis of Joy Division “looked at the same time very strong and very fragile” (Honoré, quoted in Gee 2007). Musically, as I demonstrate in greater detail in chapter 5, this balance is identifiable in Curtis’s vocal temperament and its tendency to dictate the dynamic progression of the music. Interestingly, this balance seems also to characterise the construction of “guilty, suffering men” (such as Ian Curtis and Morrissey; Bannister 2006: 135) but also the strong, silent type—the “man” (such as Johnny Cash, to whom I will turn in chapter 6; *ibid.*: 100). The difference seems to be related to where the man in question derives his strength. For the artists discussed in this thesis, vulnerability and strength are founding (if opposed) sensibilities that are negotiated musically through sonic markers. Different identity categories therefore supply points of reference for any evaluation of music. In fact, as Hawkins points out, identity is itself contingent on fixed categories (2009: 108). Conceptualising dandyism in pop as constantly navigating among various levels of masculine performance, Hawkins emphasises the relevance of both transgression and heteronormativity to the idea of masculinity as category. Transgression, according to Hawkins, is about approaching identity in new ways. Heteronormativity, on the other hand, is a way of constituting the self “as a unitary and pre-social project that is resulting in assumptions about men’s desires and identities” (*ibid.*). The “problem”, then, is not within the categories themselves but rather arises when notions of *fixity* are ascribed to the categories and thereby contribute to constructing unwritten conventions that govern social space through binary oppositions.⁴

If identity depends on existing categories, it is nevertheless the *result* of the subject’s navigation of them. To build on Biddle’s and Hawkins’s work, identity formation, whether musical or social, relies on dialogical processes of identification that take place among existing notions and preconceptions. Although there are strong relations between musical and socio-cultural identity, they are not the same things, and this requires a clarification of terms. So far, I have been dealing with the formation of gendered identity. In sum, I am curious about the ways in which musical identity is

⁴ For further discussions about the construction of hegemonic versus alternate gendered identities, see, for example, Butler 1990 and Kimmel 2001. For more on the construction of gender in music, see, for example, McClary 1991, Whiteley 1997, Whiteley et.al. 2006.

performed and negotiated sonically through aesthetic features of performance and production in recorded popular music. How, then, does recorded musical performance construct identity and subjectivity, and how do sonic markers in pop production represent the audible aspects of these constructions? Throughout this thesis, musical identity is conceived through the sound produced by voices, instruments and recording technologies that provides the recording with a recognisable mark.

Nowhere in popular culture is the negotiation of difference more evident than in popular music, and especially its development and deployment of sonic markers. The basis of my argument is that markedness is both contingent on and identifiable with socially constructed dichotomies. In my study, then, the focus will fall on how identity categories are negotiated sonically in popular music—not merely through the voice alone but through the ways in which the effect of that voice is impacted by sonic markers in the musical backdrop. This is a point of departure that I will use in this thesis as well when I consider the sonic aspects of recorded popular music, an arena where social and cultural norms and rules are constantly being negotiated and developed. How, then, can musical identities, identified through sonic markers, contribute to the production of new ways of negotiating apparently fixed identity categories such as gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity? In the following section, I will provide a brief overview of how I will apply sonic markers as an analytical model in this project.

Sonic markers as an analytical concept

The title of my thesis, “Reading Pop Production: Sonic Markers and Identity Formation,” signals my interest in the pop song as a cultural whole—“pop production” is meant to imply not only the sonic product of the recording studio but also the music videos, record covers, journalistic writings, interviews, reviews and star narratives that it either inspires or contributes to in some other way. In short, the pop production encompasses every aspect of the musical text that takes part in the construction of artistic identity. In my various studies, I have narrowed my scope to the sonic aspects of pop production and positioned myself as both a producer and a listener, as required

by my analysis. I will employ the analytical trope of the “close reading”, a methodological approach that Hawkins has described as designating “a move between focusing on the structures of music alone and the broader context within which the music is located” (Hawkins 2002: 2). For me, the close reading demands a flexibility of perspective that addresses primarily the role of a producer or engineer in a recording session. In the following section, I intend to demonstrate my use of sonic markers as an analytical model.

I will begin with some questions. Given the analytical framework of “codes” already established within popular musicology, why would I develop a new framework around “sonic markers”? Moreover, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a marker is “an object used to indicate a position, place or route” (Soanes 2006: 461). But music itself is only nominally an “object,” so how might it contain further objects (markers) within it?⁵ Within popular musicology, the act of *reading* music as a text requires a concept of the codification, rather than the objectification, of sound. The fact that musical sounds can be read as signifiers is related to cultural codification (contextual implications). As Amy Winehouse, the Strokes, the Hives and the White Stripes exemplify, culturally coded musical signifiers have been used and constructed as sonic markers through appropriation. These examples also illustrate that while the meaning of an audible signifier is not universal, categories and labels tend to help establish *notions* of such universality—a process of construction that the use of sonic markers reinforces.

At this point, a definition is in order: sonic markers, in short, are *musical codes that have been historically grounded through a specific context, and that, through their appropriation, serve a range of narrative purposes in recorded music*. To further identify and discuss them, I have chosen to describe them from three vantage points:

1. Sonic potential: close readings of the musical text in the interests of identifying musical codes of potential significance.

⁵ Of course, the French composer Pierre Schaeffer approached sound as an object in his *musique concrete*, in which he attempted to de-contextualise nonmusical (concrete) sounds and thereby reinvent them as sonic objects (*les objets de sonore*).

2. Contextual influence: the identification of those historical and biographical aspects that form the sonic marker's contextual framework.
3. Discursive formation: a description of the ways in which the sonic marker constructs, and is constructed to serve, narrative purposes in recorded popular music.

Philip Tagg has pointed out that the meaning of musical sounds is inextricably linked to socio-cultural processes and must be negotiated in terms of the music's context. His comparative methods—hypothetical substitution (HS) and interobjective comparison material (IOCM)—have long formed a reliable basis for the contextual reading of musical structures (Tagg 1982: 43). IOCM relies upon other musical material that can be categorised as similar to the analytical object by means of a checklist of musical parameters, while HS represents a way of evaluating the sonic similarities between songs. One of my objections to Tagg's methodologies is that the music is reduced to an analytical object, while musicians and fans are reduced to emitters and receivers.⁶ At the same time, it is feasible to regard these ideas as (sterile) illustrations of some of the processes at work here. It is in this manner that Tagg's comparative methods serve as a basis of sorts for my own analytical methods, though I will expand on his qualification of substitutions as "hypothetical".

I will take up Tagg's concept of HS most explicitly in chapter 3, where I explore the question of taste using three musical examples. Although the chapter as such will be based on other theorists, with a specific focus on the ideas of Simon Frith (1996) and Susan McClary (2000), Tagg's methodologies will serve as a backdrop for the musical analyses. Two of the three musical examples presented in this chapter, Céline Dion and Anastacia's version of AC/DC's "You Shook Me All Night Long" and Senor Coconut's rendition of Kraftwerk's "Autobahn", provide concrete examples of substitution. While the notes played in the "original" versions are covered almost down to the last detail, they are not delivered by the same voices. I include these examples in the interests of discussing the potential effects when artists or instruments

⁶ See, for example, Middleton (1990: 233ff) and Walser (1993: 38ff) for in-depth discussions and evaluations of Tagg's methodologies.

are substituted in already recorded songs. In this way I intend to show how musical codes become sonic markers through those codes' relations to specific musical identities. As I will argue, the substitution of Dion/Anastacia for AC/DC's lead singer Brian Johnson raises a range of moral issues of taste with reference to ownership and belonging. Senor Coconut's rendition of Kraftwerk, on the other hand, raises a range of questions related to notions and preconceptions about the relationship between musical taste and national identity.

But back to my definition of the sonic marker: to a greater or lesser extent this is contingent on a concept of markedness, meaning that while certain sounds appear to be *marked* with a certain meaning in a given context, others are not. What I am arguing for here is the *narrative potential* of the sonic marker, in that it refers to the processes at play when sounds are linked to cultural narratives regarding gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity or class by suggesting binary oppositions. Sonic markers, then, are contingent upon cultural codification within a specific context.

In his book *Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation* (2004), Robert Hatten uses musical markedness to theorise the interrelations between musical structure and meaning in Beethoven's music. Although he develops his concept in relation to Western art (as opposed to pop) music, his observation about the "asymmetrical valuation of an opposition" (Hatten 2004: 291) is relevant to both musics. Marked entities, he notes, have a narrower range of meaning than unmarked ones—they appear less frequently and are more narrowly distributed. However, all forms of markedness are context-dependent—there is no single listening "position" from which to experience all of these markers the same way every time. For example, to the extent that the minor/major modes mark "sadness" versus "happiness" in music, they do so dialogically—it is not sad *versus* happy, as core values of the music itself, but rather one is sad *because* the other is happy (McClary 2000: 63–109). Identifying a musical gesture's markedness, then, requires not only a comparison with other gestures but also a full awareness of the dialogical processes at play within the marked gesture's specific context.

One objection to Hatten's theory of markedness is that it demands a specific historical competence on the part of the listener:

Markedness may originate from a unique or salient event which the competent listener understands as creating or implementing a new opposition. This new opposition then becomes part of the style, as an instance of style *growth* . . . Although markedness may originate in this way, the markedness value of an opposition, once accepted into the style, is not lost when the opposition is no longer salient . . . Saliency, on the other hand, is basic to the perception of expressive focal points, and such crucial events will be strategically marked, even as tokens of stylistically unmarked types. (Hatten 2004: 63)

Essentially, Hatten bases his concept of markedness on a range of generalised premises. We might wonder, for example, who this “competent listener” is—if we say that a sound is marked, we must also identify for whom. Hatten’s contrast of markedness and saliency thus raises questions about the intended recipient of these qualities. For example, musical elements that appear often in a piece of music would not necessarily be its primary carriers of meaning. Similarly, marked entities are not the ones that generally appear most often. Both these processes of identification and interpretation depend, then, on a specific listening competence.

Musical codes and listening competence converge in the matter of markedness and are therefore involved in any reading of pop texts, and my working definition of sonic markers builds on the insights in this regard of Richard Middleton (1990), as further developed by David Brackett (2000) and Stan Hawkins (2002) and others. In his seminal book *Studying Popular Music* (1990) Middleton’s main methodological contributions regard the primary (denotative) and secondary (connotative) levels of signification in music. Most significantly, Middleton concludes that the decoding of musical expression is inextricably linked to the level of competence of the listener. For example, in Beck’s music, which I discuss in chapter 2, the internalisation of sonic markers from recent, Western recording history actualises questions related to time. Joy Division’s music, which I will discuss in chapter 5, has often been described as timeless but is nevertheless closely related to the band’s hometown of Manchester, England; their music, then, actualises questions related to space and place. However,

identifying time and/or place within these musical expressions demands a specific type of competence.

Expanding further on Middleton's work, Brackett emphasises the "irregular transactions" in the adaptability of cultural forms:

In the end, the adaptability of cultural forms depends on an "irregular chain of historical transactions" involving countless negotiations, exchanges, and competing representations, which come into prominence or recede based on fluctuating power relations. (Brackett 2000: 9)

Irregularity, adaptability and the notion of fluctuating power relations are crucial mechanisms for my concept of markers, in that they initiate discursive analysis.

Hawkins, a contemporary of Brackett, takes a somewhat different turn, based on the work of Middleton, Tagg and Stefani, devising and developing his analytical premises on the notion of *compositional design*. At the level of primary signification, Hawkins distinguishes between stylistic codes, which are "relatively discernible through performance, genre and musical trend", and technical codes, which refer to "established music-theoretical parameters that denote musical units and structures" (Hawkins 2002: 10). Most important, however, is their interaction: "It is through their arrangements within the recorded audio space . . . that stylistic and technological codes are blended into the compositional design" (ibid.). Based on this model, Hawkins suggests five basic types of compositional features:

1. Formal properties: the sections within the song's overall structure, often binary (verse-chorus-verse), that support the general progression of technical codes;
2. Harmonic idioms: the goal-directed or static progressions depending on genre and style harnessing tonal or modal systems;
3. Recording and production techniques: the controlling function of the production as manifested in the audio mix, which is responsible for shaping the compositional design;
4. Textures and timbres: the heterogeneous profusions of colours and patterns that arise from vocal and instrumental gestures within the arrangement;

5. Rhythmic syntax: the recurring groupings and combinations of metric patterns that communicate the “beat”, groove, and “feel” of the text. (Hawkins 2002: 11ff)

Hawkins’s concept of compositional design offers a means of developing ways to identify sonic markers. Stemming from his model of stylistic and technical codes, my concept of sonic markers is also rooted in semiotics—the study of signs and their significance—yet with numerous reservations. In conjunction with Hawkins I consider that the problem with the semiotic perspective is that it relies upon “a degree of immanence in the text when questioning value and meaning” (ibid.: 9). Similarly, Brackett points out that this is one of the reasons why the concept of codes has been criticised as reductive or limiting relative to the range of possible relationships between signifiers and signifieds. “Without the concept of the ‘code’”, Brackett argues, “there can be no connotation, meaning, or ‘communication’, which throws the emphasis from meaning back to structure” (Brackett 2000: 11). Hawkins further reminds us that “the reductionist processing of musical codes is only the first stage in discoursing on how codes function” (Hawkins 2002: 10).

Hawkins’s point leads to the establishment of a second premise in my working definition, namely the idea that sonic markers contain references to specific contextual circumstances. As Reynolds (2011) observes, the history of recorded popular music plays a major role in the process of constructing pop-musical identities. Whether at the primary or the secondary level of signification, musical sounds become marked by signifying a time, place or space. My argument is that the effect of cultural codification, as it is manifested through recording history, can be used compositionally in pop production and thus potentially acquire a narrative function in recorded music. What is it that leads listeners to regard a recorded song as old, modern or futuristic? The answer will vary with interest and competence, but most of us would be able to mobilise at least some historical associations when exposed to Taylor Dayne’s “Tell It To My Heart” (1987) or “Rock Around the Clock” as performed by Bill Haley and His Comets (1954). Of course, a lot could be said about these songs that has nothing to do with any particular point in time, but many issues of vocal and musical style,

production aesthetics, compositional conventions, arrangements and instrumentation will reveal themselves to be history dependent. This is because recording technology changes all the time, and any given recording would represent the technology available at that time.

As I indicated in the opening section, the retro wave—the act of looking back in time through sound—has influenced popular music in two ways. First, it is a means of constructing authenticity for contemporary artists. Second, it plays an important part in forming a popular music canon—a discursive formation that takes place through dialogical processes. I will argue that appropriated style traits function not only as sonic imitations of the past but as representatives of the past’s socio-cultural values. When we discern a narrative purpose in the sonic marker that is already characteristic of a specific decade, the marker comes to represent a possible inroad into the process underpinning the codification of musical sound as culturally constructed. I will return to this possibility in more detail when I discuss certain musical codes that are created in the context of real events in history and in turn denote specific sets of meanings. Yet even so, these codes are not necessarily experienced in this way forever. Rather, as I intend to emphasise, the use of sonic markers in new musical contexts involves re-contextualisation and even de-historicization, which in turn produces new meanings for the same codes.

The third and last premise for the definition of sonic markers concerns their narrative purpose, which is inextricably linked to the historical grounding of musical codes. My intention in using sonic markers as an analytical concept is not to develop a typology of musical signs that implies definite meanings for musical material. Instead, I hope that sonic markers will point to the ways in which musical sound can *represent* or *articulate* socio-cultural values. Musical codes are identified (and appreciated) through their *expressivity*, whereas markers derive from and in turn evoke either historical or geographical origins (or both). Yet the notion of a narrative purpose for the sonic marker directs our attention to a problematic area of popular musicology, in that any attribution of a narrative purpose to music raises a range of questions concerning its *intentionality*. Recorded music has allowed people to connect musical sounds to socio-cultural values to an unprecedented degree. The affective qualities of

these sonic markers are never completely arbitrary, but they are not perfectly consistent either, even within a single, defined, Western cultural idiom (the Manchester sound or the Stax sound, for example), because listeners' experiences and reference points vary. I am most interested in those sonic aspects of music that have become almost uncritically laden with value and have thus acquired a strong narrative valence. While we need musical categories, it is important to note that the ability to accurately label music will vary from context to context, and the closer one gets to the music, the more difficult it becomes to categorise it in general terms. Yet genre categories do activate a set of generic, stylistic and sonic expectations.

Franco Fabbri's definition of musical genre, which is still the most widely applied in popular music research, in many ways pinpoints the instability of the term:

A genre is a kind of music, as it is acknowledged by a community for any reason or purpose or criteria, i.e. a set of musical events (real or possible) whose course is governed by rules (of any kind) accepted by a community. (Fabbri 1999: 7)

This definition, of course, invites multiple interpretations. Musical genres are defined on musical premises but always in relation to the generic expectations and norms of a given community. The question, however, is when and to what extent genre represents a useful musical categorisation rather than simply an ideological position. Genre is often far too general when it comes to recorded popular music—even the distinction between pop and rock becomes a matter of ideology and identity rather than any particular performance qualities. Fabbri's definition then leads us to the work of Simon Frith (1996), Jason Toynbee (2000) and those others who argue that style and genre are the primary conceptual links between musical form and social structure. As Frith observes, genre has come to serve a range of ideological purposes “at the heart of pop value judgement” (Frith 1996: 75)—genre categories are useful as marketing tools, for one thing (ibid.: 76). Allan F. Moore identifies genre and style even more broadly as “categories in which we sort what we hear” (Moore 2007: xiii), but at some point in this process, I find, we distance ourselves from rather than draw closer to the actual sound.

For example, a genre category like “guitar-based rock” can include bands as different as Dinosaur Jr. and Coldplay, yet the credibility of both of these bands depends specifically upon their (in fact quite disparate) sounds (as well as their relationships to the music industry). In his book *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures* (1999), Keith Negus argues that the music industry not only produces culture but also itself represents a product of cultural production. For Negus, the relationship between the recording industry and cultural formations is dialogical:

Production does not take place simply “within” a corporate environment structured according to the requirements of capitalist production or organizational formulae, but in relation to broader culture formations and practices that are within neither the control nor the understanding of the company. (Negus 1999: 19)

In this way, while Dinosaur Jr. still enjoys a high status within the realm of alternative rock, Coldplay is associated more strongly with the commercial record industry. The concept of genre, then, as Fabbri argues, will always depend on who is using it and what they want to do with it. Thus, following Negus, genre as a category is more useful as a starting point for discursive analysis than for the identification of a set of definite musical boundaries.

In contrast to interrelated categories such as style and genre, *sound* has been theorised only to a limited extent in popular musicology. Jason Toynbee (2000) discovers that “sound” developed into a category of sorts with the increasing dissemination of records in the 1920s. Through a historical survey of technology as an instrument, Toynbee identifies three particularly useful aspects of record production: the *documentary tendency*, *ventriloquism* and the *technosphere* (Toynbee 2000: 69). The first refers to the priority of any recording to communicate the “truth” (however that is interpreted) of the original, unmediated performance. Ventriloquism attenuates the documentary tendency via the body/instrument relations in recording; it represents a projective mode, whereby the artist must reconcile the art to the absent audience and/or the sonic possibilities available in the studio—that is, create a new truth in

production that is distinct from the performance. These sometimes-conflicting aspects impinge on a discursive formation that Toynbee refers to as the technosphere:

A domain of imaginary possibilities and constraints which lies between performance on one side and more or less remote reception of sound on the other. The technosphere is thus premised on the idea of a performative dislocation, but also a belief on the part of musicians that this might be bridged. (Toynbee 2000: 69)

Within the confines of this technosphere, the documentary and ventriloquism can be translated into production ideals—that is, reproduction versus production. As I will discuss in greater detail in chapter 2 regarding Beck, these ideals in fact serve as a basis for my understanding of pop aesthetics. Reproduction focuses on the straightforward parboiling of artistic raw material through the recording, mixing, and mastering process. Production sees the recording process as a tool of pop *composition*. I will not approach these ideals as separate poles, though others do. I am instead interested in the ways in which this binary construction of sound allows for the formation and dissemination of cultural narratives, particularly when juxtaposed with genre and style. In this context, I will activate sonic markers only to move past them, or, in Moore’s words, to “use detail less as the substance of an argument than as the detail which opens up an issue” (Moore 2007: x).

A song’s sound, in other words, should be seen not only as the sum of its sonic events but also as yet another way to categorise it. Paul Théberge (1997) goes so far as to argue that *sound* as a musical category rivals melody and lyrics:

In the age of electronic reproduction, with recordings and radio disseminating and reinforcing “sound” as an identifying mark of contemporary music making, individual “sounds” have come to carry the same commercial and aesthetic weight as the melody and the lyric of pop songs. (Théberge 1997: 195)

Théberge views sound as an identifiable attribute, like melody and lyrics, through which producers, record labels, critics and other listeners categorise music. And sound in fact engages a whole system of musical, social and technological factors, as Peter

Wicke (2009) points out: “It [sound] is not just a sound image, but also a particular concept of sound, that results from the creative handling of recording technology” (Wicke 2009: 149). As a concept, sound has been theorised according to particular studios (Bowman 1995) or particular places (Bennett 2002, Cohen 1994, Porcello 2002, Webb 2004).⁷ Rob Bowman’s (1995) musicological analysis of the Stax sound represents a qualitative approach to locating those sonic characteristics of studios, musicians and producers that are constitutive of their sound. Bowman suggests nine basic areas of inquiry: instrumentation, repertoire, structure, keys, aspects of harmonic construction, aspects of time, melodic construction, ornamentation, and timbre/production considerations (Bowman 1995: 289). His inquiry therefore encompasses production aesthetics as well as the stylistic traits of each instrumentalist—in terms of people, then, both the producer *and* the artist.

Sara Cohen (1994), on the other hand, has conducted an *ethnographic* study of what has come to be known as the “Liverpool sound”. Her interviews, interestingly, indicate that the Liverpool sound, and more specifically the “Merseybeat” (another name for the Liverpool sound), is defined in terms of an opposite—that is, the Manchester sound:

Distinctions made between Manchester and Liverpool through popular music thus encompass binarisms such as technological and synthesised vs. acoustic and raw; rich vs. poor; hospitable and open vs. closed and wary; creative vs. restricted. (Cohen 1994: 124).

Here, then, sound factors into a comparative strategy rather than provides a means for identifying musical traits that underpin the construction. From a musicological perspective, Thomas Porcello uses the notion of liveness in instrumentation as a marker of the Austin sound (and especially its authenticity): “Drum sounds are the single most important source of information about roominess, and therefore have a dramatic impact on the degree of liveness evoked in a recording” (Porcello 2002: 74).

⁷ Earlier studies of sound as a category of recorded popular music have also been undertaken in Scandinavia. See, for example, Brolinson & Larsen 1981, Michelsen 1997.

All of the above-mentioned studies suggest viable inroads for identifying sonic markers that might constitute a specific sound as a category. Yet it is the idea of sound as the result of the collaborative act of music production that interests me most, particularly in terms of the ways in which that act engages with our pre-existing musical reference points. As I will argue in what follows, the effects that accompany certain singing styles, musical instrument “sounds” and uses of recording technologies can be traced to specific decades, studios or scenes through their cultural codification. And it is through their use in recordings that they then appear as sonic markers.

A multiplicity of voices: Vocal, instrumental and technological markers

As argued in the previous section, the construction and use of sonic markers comprise a relational process in pop production. In what follows I will present some examples of the ways in which the aesthetic qualities of vocal performances, musical instruments and certain technologies have been constructed as sonic markers in specific contexts. Although this is by no means a comprehensive list, I hope to use it to outline some of the relational mechanisms at play in this process. My argument is that aesthetic qualities can be mapped onto the sounds of voices, instruments and technological artefacts through these things’ history of use in recordings. In this project, I aim to demonstrate how sonic markers offer inroads into the various ways in which music-technological development has affected the aesthetics of recorded popular music and, in turn, into the ways in which socio-cultural sets of values are represented through musical sound. Based on these observations, I will then attempt to map the potential of sonic markers for negotiating with, supporting or conflicting with grand cultural narratives. This whole analytical apparatus derives from the fact that sonic markers are culture specific and almost never universal in their effects. In other words, musical sounds do not mean the same in every musical context, although their affective qualities may limit the possibilities for infinite interpretations. In this thesis, I therefore hope to demonstrate analytical tools for identifying how pop music conveys messages

via relational processes among vocals, lyrics, accompaniment and even images that carry or acquire specific meanings in specific contexts.

Vocal Mediation

The voice of the song's putative storyteller, the singer, can be more or less distinct but almost always represents the primary site of interaction with listeners. Yet as Frith (1996) points out, whose voice is it that we hear? Is there a play of identity underway beyond the assumption that the artist is singing about his or her own life? Frith suggests approaching the performed pop voice "through four headings: as a *musical instrument*; as a *body*; as a *person*; and as a *character*" (ibid.: 187). This voice presents not only the lyrics and the melody but also the singer's physical presence, or "body". As Barthes argued in his seminal text "The Grain of the Voice" (1977), the voice always contains bodily traces (what he called *geno-song*), even when, as Steinskog (2008) points out, the voice is perceived to be disembodied. The concept of disembodiment relates to voices heard apart from the body—in the telephone, on the radio, in literature, but most importantly in recorded music. The performed voice's relationship to the body has raised moral as well as cultural issues throughout music history (Koestenbaum 2001), and bodily traces in the voice have a crucial effect on the musical experience. That said, as Steinskog reminds us, "[d]escribing voices is notoriously difficult, and not only when these voices challenge normativity" (Steinskog 2010: 142). Drawing upon Frith's "headings" and Barthes's notion of the *geno-song* as a conceptual backdrop, I shall now link two related theoretical concepts to my own description of the voice as a unique sonic marker.

First, Serge Lacasse's (2000) concept of *vocal staging* as a platform for navigating aspects of performance and production is relevant for my research.

The expression *vocal staging* is used in a general sense and refers to any deliberate practice whose aim is to enhance a vocal sound, alter its timbre, or present it in a given spatial and/or temporal configuration with the help of any mechanical or electrical process, presumably in order to produce some effect on potential or actual listeners. (Lacasse 2000: 4)

Vocal staging therefore engages the affective qualities (or evocative power) of the technological processing of the voice in recorded music. Importantly, Lacasse observes that this staging occurs temporally as well as spatially—that is, it participates in compositional design, a temporal aspect of the musical work, as well as isolated events, which are spatial aspects. Rather than regard voice and accompaniment as separate entities, then, I intend to account for their *interaction* through a dialogical process that is crucial to the “staging” in question (Bakhtin 1986).

Second, I apply Hawkins’s (2009) concept of the *peculiarities of performance*, expressed as follows: “[b]ecause vocal closeness is mediated through the recording, any critique of it needs to involve considering vocal expression alongside the performative inscriptions of the body” (Hawkins 2009: 123). In this regard, I am interested in identifying whether these bodily inscriptions can be read as sonic markers of biographical presence, and I will take this up in greater detail in chapters 4, 5 and 6. In line with Hawkins, there is also Frith’s idea of putting on a vocal “costume” (ibid.), not only in terms of the effects that can be added to the voice but also in terms of how the voice can be “dressed up” through the song’s compositional design. This invites us to look at the musical whole as a form of staging upon which we can interpret the communicative powers of musical sounds. Through the processes involved in vocal staging, the peculiarities of performance that expose the voice as both the body and an instrument, and the representation of the song’s character and/or the person behind it, I will demonstrate that the voice can also be read as a sonic marker of *biographical presence*. This is a concept that I will then apply from various perspectives throughout this thesis.

If we accept that the voice is the prime mediator of meaning in a song, we should further note that it fulfils this role within the context of the lyrics, the musical backdrop and the visual expression of the song—elements that together form its narrative structure. Thus it is not sufficient to simply identify the voice as a sonic marker; it must be interpreted in relation to the other elements of the production. The musical backdrop always attenuates the message contained in the lyrics and vocal performance. Hawkins makes the following observation:

Recordings offer a material site for the artist's temperament, whereby the spectator is obliged to adopt a subject position that is predetermined through the structure and codes of the text. Furthermore, recording technology induces repeated listening (and viewing) that is conditional on familiarity and memory. (Hawkins 2009: 41)

In addition to markers of biographical presence in the voice, relevant sonic markers can therefore be found in the sounds of instruments and the applications of various recording technologies. Omnipresent in popular recordings, the electric guitar, which will be a topic in chapter 4, can take on a wide range of sonic characteristics, based on the instrument, the amplification, effects processing, and, perhaps most importantly, performance style. It is even possible to hear the electric guitar as a separate voice, and, on occasion, a sonic marker with a direct impact on the communicative power of a song. Guitar sounds (and guitarists) can also attach themselves symbiotically to a voice, as Johnny Marr did with Morrissey, so that, when they are parted, neither ever sounds (or signifies) the same again.

In the red zone: Instruments and technologies

The instruments I deal with throughout my studies take on socio-cultural value through being used in ways that were not prescribed by their manufacturers. In many cases, what started off with an economic motivation developed into a new form of musical expression. One example of this is the Mellotron, to which I will return in chapter 6. Credited as a precursor to the digital sampler (Goodwin 2011, Shepherd et. al. 2003), the Mellotron has appeared on a range of recordings, including as the flute-sounding intro to "Strawberry Fields Forever" (1967b) by the Beatles and as the "strings" on Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven" (1971). What distinguishes the sound of the Mellotron is the somewhat unstable quality of the eight-second tape loops set in motion when the instrument's keys are pressed. Although it was initially intended to replace session strings, the Mellotron has claimed its own position in the pop and rock idiom due to its sonic qualities and elite band history in an era when the

recording studio had begun to take over as the arena for pop composition (Toynbee 2000).⁸

A similar example of an unintended use of a musical instrument arrived two decades later with the implementation of drum machines and samplers in hip-hop. The Roland TR-808 drum machine, for example, has since that time become a powerful ideological symbol of class struggle and race issues in the United States. As Tricia Rose has observed, hip-hop producers first used drum machines like the Linn Drum and the Roland TR-808 because of their sonic qualities, but they eventually acquired a political and ideological status as well. Among the desirable qualities of the TR-808 was its capability to tune down the bass drum in order to achieve a more formidable “boom”, which was found to be rewarding both aesthetically and ideologically:

Using the machines in ways that have not been intended, by pushing on established boundaries of music engineering, rap producers have developed an art out of recording with the sound meters well into the distortion zone. When necessary, they deliberately *work in the red*. (Rose 1994: 75, author’s emphasis)

The sound of the TR-808 is discernible on many early hip-hop recordings—Afrika Bambaataa and the Soulsonic Force’s classic “Planet Rock” (1982), for example, is based on a TR-808 beat and an appropriation of Kraftwerk’s “Trans-Europe Express” (1977).⁹ The drum machine’s later cultural significance as a sonic marker surfaces in a range of more recent recordings—in Beck’s “Hollywood Freaks” (1999), for example, he refers to the act of “banging like an 808”. The TR-808 can be found on several of Missy Elliot’s songs, including “Hot Boyz” (1999). Furthermore, references to this particular drum machine can be found through band names like 808 State and album names like Kanye West’s 2008 release *808s and Heartbreaks*. In these recordings, the instrument itself is less relevant than the ideological marker (and its associated

⁸ As Mark Lewisohn (1988) notes, the Beatles quit playing live around 1966. While this was a choice they were more or less forced to make due to the increasingly hysterical tendencies of their audiences, it would also have consequences for their creative freedom. No longer compelled to perform their songs live, the Beatles, in collaboration with George Martin, began to profoundly exploit the creative potential of the recording studio.

⁹ For a discussion of this appropriation, see Lindvig 2008: 121–32.

credibility). I will return to a fuller discussion of this in chapter 2 with reference to Beck's purposeful re-contextualisation of sonic markers.

Recording technologies are perhaps the most challenging to identify specifically as sonic markers. In contrast to instruments and voices, they do not produce tonal or harmonic structures but rather affect the timbral qualities of musical elements. In this way, this equipment contributes to "colouring" the music to a significant extent. Audible effects—echo, delay or reverb, for example—have long been what Peter Wicke terms *design features* of pop musical composition (Wicke 2009: 157). The roles and impacts of equalisers, compressors, and preamps, on the other hand, are generally perceptible only to the initiated. As I will return to in greater detail in chapter 5 with regard to Joy Division, strong associative processes can be set in motion by various applications of delay, for example, in the recording studio. Such effects are fundamental to understanding the impact of Joy Division's music and in fact define their characteristic sound, especially because these effects literally resonate with the defining tragedy of the band following lead singer Ian Curtis's suicide on May 18, 1980. Producer Martin Hannett's specific sonic design for the band perfectly captured the city of Manchester's industrial image in the late 1970s as well (Haslam 1999).

Perpetual dialogical processes between technological innovations and their subsequent cultural appropriators have arguably driven the development of popular music for many decades. These processes generate friction as well as forward momentum, and they produce sonic markers along the way. They even contribute to the development of new popular styles and genres (see Frith 1986, Hebdige 1979, Jones 1992, Katz 2005, Toynbee 2000, Warner 2003). In the process of recording music, whether at home or in a professionally equipped recording studio, there will always be trends, traditions and norms—local, global or glocal¹⁰—that govern the choice of instruments and technology, and, in turn, the reception of the music itself.

Placed in opposition to existing preconceptions of founding social structures such as nature, community or art, technology as a cultural artefact represents an ideological challenge (see Frith 1986). Close miking, as mentioned earlier, for

¹⁰ In popular music studies, the term "glocal" has been used to bridge the apparent gap between the local and the global in relation to the international stature of local sounds like Seattle, Bristol, New York, Los Angeles, Manchester or Liverpool.

example, was a technical/creative solution that begat crooning, which was banned by the BBC in 1936 because it represented a transgression of normative behaviour in the studio. As mentioned earlier, Middleton points out that the application of slap-echo to Elvis's voice in the mid-1950s underpinned the notion that he was in fact larger than life (Middleton 1990: 89). In turn, this also recalls Rose's argument about working in the red zone, whereby certain aesthetic qualities of technological effects are considered morally suspect (Rose 1994: 75). These represent examples in which moral and aesthetic judgements become intertwined. However, the morality that might govern the process of evaluation at one point in time often tends to fade rapidly at another. As Dick Hebdige argues: "Youth cultural styles may begin issuing symbolic challenges, but they must inevitably end by establishing new sets of conventions" (Hebdige 1979: 96). Hebdige exemplifies this process through the fashion industry's appropriation of punk's visual markers under the slogan "To shock is chic" as early as 1977, which, in Hebdige's words, "presaged the subculture's imminent demise" (ibid.).¹¹ Hebdige suggests that the end of punk as a subculture came with its entry into the fashion market—in other words, that the opposition of one generation or group becomes the conventions of another. Moreover, as exemplified by the different revivalists at the beginning of this chapter, it is when nostalgia displaces morality that sonic markers are revealed.

Multi-voiced utterances

What the examples in the former subsection demonstrate, apart from pinpointing certain technological turning points, is that sonic markers are constructed through dialogical processes. In addition to sociology, semiotics and media studies, one specific example of the interdisciplinary character of this particular project is the theorisation of sonic markers in relation to Mikhail Bakhtin's (1986) dialogical approach to speech communication. Of particular relevance is his conception of *utterances* and their subjective positioning in relation to established speech genres:

¹¹ Punk was more or less ignited by the Sex Pistols in 1976. The fact that visual markers of punk were appropriated by the fashion industry the year after would indicate how fast the process of appropriation can be.

Any utterance—oral or written, primary or secondary, and in any sphere of communication—is individual and therefore can reflect the individuality of the speaker (or writer); that is, it possesses individual style. (Bakhtin 1986: 63)

In his critique of the structural semiotics devised by Ferdinand de Saussure, Bakhtin noted that, in addition to explicit forms of language, the communicative strength of speech derives from the *combination* of these forms. As a basic unit of speech communication, the utterance becomes an alternative to grammatical units of language, such as words and sentences. Bakhtin's main argument is that a sentence will mean different things according to the context, although its grammatical structuring may be exactly the same. This may be true of the pop song as well—it may mean different things despite no change in the affective qualities of its instruments and music technology. For Bakhtin, the *whole* of any utterance is inseparably linked to its thematic content, style, *and* compositional structure, all of which are equally determined by the context of the speech communication (1986: 60). Bakhtin further argues that even though the meaning of an utterance is determined by its context of appearance, it is not arbitrary. Rather, it is governed by certain normative frontiers, or what he labels “speech genres”:

Speech genres are much more changeable, flexible, and plastic than language forms are, but they have a normative significance for the speaking individual, and they are not created by him but are given to him. Therefore, the single utterance, with all its individuality and creativity, can in no way be regarded as a *completely free combination* of forms of language. (Bakhtin 1986: 81)

Part of my argument is that in pop texts, the aesthetic qualities of production and performance work as sonic markers in ways evocative of Bakhtin's utterances. This is because pop production is to a large extent a matter of balancing and structuring a wide variety of well-worn musical codes so as to strengthen the music's ability to communicate in a way that seems original. In a Bakhtinian vein, one could say that since the musical grammar (that is, form, harmony and tonality) might be perceived as

narrower in most popular music than it is in Western art music, one might also conclude that it is a challenge to make the music appear to be original—that is, an utterance of normative significance.

This suggests at least two levels of reading. On one level, the song could be read as an utterance within a normative framework that is indicated by markers in the text. On another level, one could also read details of performance and/or production as utterances within the text. Such navigation between levels of interpretation requires, as Hawkins puts it, the ability to “balance between the autonomy of the detail and the discourse that describes the whole” (2001: 4). Indeed, an excessive focus on detail also represents a potential problem (indeed, a quagmire) for the music analyst (Brackett 2000, *interpreting*, Hawkins 2001, *settling*). Though certain musical details would appear to have the potential to structure the musical experience, there is no guarantee that they will produce effects that are perceived in the same way by all listeners. As Moore suggests, one of the main challenges of analysing music “lies in deciding which differences do make a difference, which carry any interpretive weight” (Moore 2003: 6). One goal of this thesis is to find ways of identifying those musical details that actually do make a difference.

This helps clarify why my focus falls on socio-cultural values and their articulation through the coding of musical sound. Through the pages of this introduction, I have attempted to illustrate how contextually charged musical codes can be constructed as, and employed as, sonic markers in pop production. As I have discussed, when musical trends are appropriated and disseminated by new performers, they tend to end up as “traditions”. Because most popular music contains vocals, a biographical presence is often provided by the voice. Yet, as I will discuss further, recorded music produces meaning also as a result of what happens *to* the voice, and *behind* it. Sonic markers affect the meaning of a piece of music through their cultural codification of sound. As an analytical concept, then, sonic markers must be read through their interaction with other elements in the music—as relational processes in and of themselves—but also through their interaction with socio-cultural values. This would imply that the formation of musical subjectivity is related to the aesthetic qualities of studio production, which in turn indicates that genre, style and sound

should work as discursive frameworks through which sonic markers can be applied to the articulation of subjectivity in pop production.

Synopsis of Thesis

During the following chapters of this thesis, I aim to explore how the affective qualities of vocal, instrumental and technological sonic markers are dialogically intertwined with contextual factors to become vital components in the communicative power of pop production. In selecting my case studies, I took two aspects in particular into account:

1. The *use* of sonic markers as a means of constructing musical identities in pop production (sonic markers as narrative strategies);
2. The *construction* of sonic markers through different narrative strategies (sonic markers as analytical concepts).

In chapter 2, I will provide a reading of Beck's music according to three lines of inquiry. First, I will pursue the idea of *retronormativity* as a formative principle of Beck's musical identity. Second, I will consider his music in light of his overall discography, which reflects his signature juxtaposition of all sorts of sonic markers. Third, I will investigate the extent to which Beck toys with sonic markers within one specific song, "Sexx Laws" from his 1999 album *Midnite Vultures*, a joyride through pop music history that includes horns, bluegrass-like banjo strumming, pedal steel guitar, the wah-wah pedal, and analogue synthesisers. The aim is to explore the ways in which this apparent eclecticism becomes a basis for negotiating musical identity. Through its hyperactive sonic referencing, Beck's music navigates a range of different identity categories. How does all of the activity inform his own identity construction?

In chapter 3, I will engage with the sonic conditions of music and taste, drawing upon the work of Frith (1996), McClary (2000) and Kassabian (2004), among others. "The apparent judgement of the music", Frith argues, "is a judgement of something else altogether, the social institutions or social behaviour for which the music simply acts as a sign" (Frith 2004: 20). My purpose in this chapter is to show how the

appropriation and reinterpretation of musical codes informs musical judgement. I will draw upon three examples, starting with Céline Dion and Anastacia's cover version of AC/DC's "You Shook Me All Night Long", performed at the *Divas Live* concert in Las Vegas in 2002. My second example is Senor Coconut's (a.k.a. Uwe Schmidt) rendition of Kraftwerk's "Autobahn". The focus here is on how the overall "cheesiness" of this production is exaggerated through the use of studio technology, and especially digital reverb. In the third example, I will look at the Swedish rapper Promoe's crass song "Svennebanan", a sarcastic, almost moralistic comment on stereotyped normality that appropriates sonic markers characteristic of Eurotrance. Although stylistically disparate, these examples in different ways provide inroads to discussing how the re-contextualisation of musical codes may evoke humour and parody by playing on notions of taste.

Markers of loneliness and marginalisation will be the focus of chapter 4, as I deal with gendered subjectivity. While Morrissey's music is often interpreted in relation to his visual representations or his lyrical and vocal qualities, his songs are also sonically marked simply in relation to their era. My main argument in this chapter is that the musical backdrop of Morrissey's persona, and particularly the electric guitar, forms a central part of his image. Through a close reading of "Something Is Squeezing My Skull", I will apply a threefold analytical model to the sonic markers at play here. First, I will focus on the vocal production, especially in terms of its contribution to the main melodic hook of the chorus. Second, on a broader level, I will explore the dialogical relationship between the singing voice and the sonic qualities of the electric guitars employed in this song, with a focus on how Morrissey, through his lyrics and vocal performance, potentially alters the discursive framework of the heavily distorted electric guitar, and vice versa. Third, I will consider Morrissey's performance strategies in relation to the socio-political climate around the song's release in 2009. The goal of this chapter is to show how sonic markers like the electric guitar sound affect meaning even when juxtaposed with such a powerful personality.

In chapter 5, I will turn to Joy Division as a point of reference for investigating acts of musical appropriation, with the sonic resuscitation of post-punk in the 2000s as a contextual backdrop. This chapter falls into four sections. The first section explores

the socio-political context of late-1970s Manchester in relation to the establishment of Joy Division as a point of reference in popular music history. The band has been credited as a predecessor of post-punk in documentaries, a range of biographies and the movies *24 Hour Party People* (2002) and *Control* (2007). Such narrative strategies have also contributed to the construction of Manchester as what Andy Bennett (2002) has labelled an *urban mythscape*. Yet the band's signature sound plays a role here as well, and in the second section I will look at some of Joy Division's performative peculiarities. Alongside Curtis's characteristic baritone, each member of the band played a very distinctive role both compositionally and aesthetically. In the fourth section, I look at the band's collaboration with Martin Hannett and the construction of the band's musical identity, both before and after Curtis's suicide. Ultimately, through close readings of a selection of their songs, I aim to identify some of the musical characteristics—or sonic markers—that contain potential links to their overall identity formation.

Moving on to chapter 6, I make an attempt to extend the concept of sonic markers to the audiovisual properties of the music video. Through a close reading of Johnny Cash's rendition of "Hurt", I will demonstrate how markers of nostalgia and sentimentality are identifiable in music. Cash's version actualises a range of questions, both in relation to the original version of the song (by Nine Inch Nails) and in relation to how this song is given new life through an old man's voice. To what extent is this powerful performance connected to the mythologies that constitute Johnny Cash's persona? To what extent does his collaboration with producer Rick Rubin represent a new era in Cash's career, and how does this relate to his former signature sound?

Through these case studies, then, I will place a strong emphasis on the relationship between details of musical sound and the construction of musical identity in pop production. How does the person with whom a song is associated affect the meaning of its sounds? These case studies help demonstrate how sonic markers can be identified in transformations from one style to another, either through appropriation or re-contextualisation. When we identify sonic markers as the result of relational processes in pop production, we have the basis of a methodological inroad into how

music develops in time, and how the affective qualities associated with this development in turn can be used as sonic markers in recoded musical texts.

2. Sonic Markers of Time: appropriation and retronormativity in Beck's music

As time goes on, I'm more and more interested in embracing my own time. I think there's been so much reliance on the '60s and '70s, and at this point the early '80s are looking a lot more dynamic and original than things do now, and whoever thought we'd be saying that?

—Beck, interviewed by Barney Hoskyns for *Mojo*, December 1998

Every decade seems to have its retro twin. The syndrome started in the 1970s, with the 1950s rock'n'roll revival, and it continued through the 1980s (obsessed with the 1960s) and the 1990s (ditto the 1970s). True to form, and right on cue, the noughties kicked off with a 1980s electropop renaissance.

—Simon Reynolds, from his blog in *The Guardian*, January 22, 2010¹²

Introduction

Each of the preceding statements indicates the close relationship between musical sound and historical era in popular music. Indeed, Beck's conception of this relationship plays a major role in his music and the sonic markers deployed within it. What specific aspects of the pop song, then, activate these sonic markers? In Beck's music, I would argue that the *sound*, and in particular its production aesthetics, is at least as significant in this regard as the voice—the latter of which is typically considered to be the primary vehicle of meaning in popular music. Moreover, what the music says might not always be what the lyrics say, and different listeners might have different impressions of these things as well. While we all listen to the lyrics and the vocals, they are always framed, or staged, by the music, forming a dialectical relationship that in turn generates meanings of its own via sonic markers evocative of particular times, places or styles. To unpack this process, we must take into account the various uses of music technology in pop production, as well as how (and for whom) the affective qualities of these technologies have acquired their cultural

¹² Available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/musicblog/2010/jan/22/eighties-revival-decade> (date accessed: August 9, 2011).

significance. Music critic Simon Reynolds assumes a link between a style of musical expression (or “sound”) and a given decade. I would like to introduce in this context the notion of retronormativity, which labels the mechanism of placing the “past” in the “present”, perhaps at twenty-year intervals, as Reynolds proposes, but not necessarily. Retronormativity further implies a nostalgia for technological artefacts in the return to the “sound” of the 1950s, 1960s, and so on.

In this chapter, I will follow three main lines of inquiry in my analysis of Beck’s music.¹³ I will juxtapose Beck’s apparent interest in early 1980s pop aesthetics with Reynolds’s notion of a “retro twin” to first introduce the idea that the affective qualities of the musical sound of a certain era can be packaged as a tool for subsequent pop production (see Toynebee 2000 and Wicke 2009, among others). These are, in short, the unwritten norms and conventions that affect aesthetic choices according to identifiable principles that I will group under the rubric retronormativity. Certain artists exploit these principles more than others, and I will continue this chapter with an assessment of the ways in which Beck’s musical identity has been constructed from his eclectic, retronormative play with sonic markers of other eras. This will include a brief overview of his main albums and their various producers.¹⁴ As Virgil Moorefield (2005) suggests, the producer has become an *auteur*—a figurative centre of power in music making—due to the fact that the process of recording has turned from a technical to an artistic matter, and, as he argues: “Recording’s metaphor has shifted from the ‘illusion of reality’ (mimetic space) to the ‘reality of illusion’ (a virtual world in which everything is possible)” (Moorefield 2005: xiii). I will not attempt to define the role of the producer as such but instead focus on how different production ideals are applied to the construction of different *musical settings* for each of Beck’s records.

¹³ Beck also supplied a case study for my master’s thesis (2005) concerning the “signature sound” of the song “Where It’s At” from *Odelay* (1996).

¹⁴ I specify his “main albums” because Beck’s contract with the David Geffen Company (DGC) allowed him to release records on smaller labels as well. To my knowledge, this only happened around 1993–94, when he released four albums (only one of which was on DGC) and one EP: *Golden Feelings* (Sonic Enemy, 1993), *A Western Harvest Field by Moonlight* (EP, Fingerpaint Records, 1994), *Stereopathic Soul Manure* (Flipside, 1994), *Mellow Gold* (DGC, 1994), and *One Foot in the Grave* (K Records, 1994).

This is a concept developed by Burns, Lafrance and Hawley (2008), who propose that musical settings

comprise the vocal and instrumental timbres of the song (“who” is performing), the form and gestures (“what” the voices and instruments are doing), and the mediation of voice and instruments (“how” the voice and gestures are framed within a sonic environment). (Burns et al. 2008: 4)

I will then present a close reading of “Sexx Laws” from the 1999 release *Midnite Vultures* to illustrate how Beck’s retronormative play with sonic markers of time informs not only entire album concepts but also individual song structure and composition. My goal, then, is to show the extent to which Beck’s music presents eclecticism as constitutive of his identity and how this eclecticism is contingent upon a retronormative approach to appropriation.

Retronormativity

Beck entered the realm of commercial pop with the single “Loser” in 1994, nuancing immediately the extremely popular early 1990s grunge of Nirvana and Pearl Jam with a new “slacker” attitude.¹⁵ Abandoning the grunge markers of droning electric guitars and what Diane Warwick has described as “emotively growling vocals” (Warwick 2009: 352), Beck appropriated sonic markers of hip-hop and blues as constituent elements of his own lo-fi universe. Arranged around a sampled drumbeat and a repetitive slide guitar hook, “Loser” somewhat serendipitously captured the apparently laid-back, self-ironic attitude that Beck would own from that point forward. In an interview with Mark Kemp for *Option* in 1994, Beck explained:

So we went to this guy’s house and I played him a few of my folk songs. He seemed pretty all-around unimpressed. Then I started playing this slide guitar part and he

¹⁵ Despite his music’s apparently “anti-commercial” aesthetics, both “Loser” and the subsequent album *Mellow Gold* were huge successes in terms of sales numbers. “Loser” peaked at number 1 on the Billboard Hot Modern Rock Tracks as well as on the Norwegian singles charts, and *Mellow Gold* went platinum in the United States.

started taping it. He put a drum track to it and it was, you know, the “Loser” riff. I started writing these lyrics to the verse part. When he played it back, I thought, “Man, I’m the worst rapper in the world—I’m just a loser.” So I started singing, “I’m a loser, baby, so why don’t you kill me.” I’m always kinda putting myself down like that . . . that song was written and recorded in six hours. No plans went into it. (Beck 1994)

Indeed, both the slide guitar and the sampled drumbeat are generic codes from different realms of popular music. The guitar evokes what is often referred to as delta blues, which is associated with artists such as Son House, Robert Johnson and, later, Muddy Waters (Cowley 1981).¹⁶ The drumbeat itself is sampled from Johnny Jenkins’s song “I Walk on Gilded Splinters” (1972), so it could be said to evoke the 1970s to an extent, but it is the act of its sampling that represents the more powerful code: 1990s hip-hop, and pop music more generally, at a point where it had extended the notion of sampling to any genre at any time.¹⁷ In addition to “Loser”, this particular beat also underpins tracks as various as the Beastie Boys’ “Pass the Mic Pt. 2” (1992), Enigma’s “Why” (1996), Blackalicious’s “A to G” (1999) and Oasis’s “Go Let It Out” (2000). In these tracks, the very same beat is part of many different musical “narratives,” which in turn prove to be composed of a number of distinct elements. The narrative of “Loser” incorporates its two most obvious musical gestures—the slide guitar and the drumbeat—and, of course, Beck’s singing, which offers, among other things, a filter through which to hear the first two gestures as sonic markers. Those markers are constructed intertextually with reference to time on two levels—in separation, those outside of “Loser” (the Delta blues; the 1970s) and, as a whole, those of “Loser” (the mid-1990s).

Reynolds’s (2010) idea of a retro twin to a given era’s musical expressions (at a remove, apparently, of some twenty years) points to the fact that sonic qualities can

¹⁶ Beck has even recorded a version of Son House’s “Grinnin’ in Your Face”. Other artists that have covered Son House include the White Stripes (“Death Letter”, *De Stijl*, 2000) and Cassandra Wilson (“Death Letter”, *New Moon Daughter*, 1995).

¹⁷ My gratitude goes to Kristoffer Carlsen for locating the source of this drum sample. Jenkins’s track has a long drum intro, which makes it well suited to sampling. A comparison between the songs can be found on http://www.whosampled.com/sample/view/123/Beck-Loser_Johnny%20Jenkins-I%20Walk%20on%20Gilded%20Splinters/ (date accessed: September 29, 2011).

have quite purposeful applications as nods to the past, whether aesthetic or historical. His book *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past* (2011) describes an increasing obsession in popular culture with artefacts from recent history. Music journalists also delight in categorising new musical events with reference to old ones. Such discursive formations, Foucault (1972) reminds us, build on *notions* (or narrative constructions) of tradition, influence and development, always coloured by the specific agenda of the artist or critic. The notion of *tradition* suggests a relationship between successive phenomena according to some form of similarity or analogy. The notion of *influence* is based on causality and juxtaposes individuals, works, terms or theories with reference to both place and time. The notion of *development* tends to derive from a narrative (rather than dialogic or juxtapositional) organisation of events. In music, as I will demonstrate, the whole idea of appropriation builds on such notions—an idea that was in turn reinforced through digital sampling technology.

Arguing this point, David Hesmondhalgh (2000) suggests that digital sampling technologies have contributed to a reconfiguration of the acts of cultural borrowing and appropriation. He focuses specifically on electronic music that samples what he describes as “non-Western” sources—Fun-da-mental, for example, samples sounds from Hindi film music, muezzin wails and quawwali singing, then mixes it with a Jamaican vocal style atop beats that conform to the generic conventions of North American hip-hop. Such musical borrowings invite various powerful ideological interpretations; according to Hesmondhalgh, Fun-da-mental’s work demonstrates “an explicit allegiance to African American Islamic radicalism, and to the black separatist politics of groups such as the Black Panthers” (Hesmondhalgh 2000: 284). The band’s samples strengthen their political message by referencing “Other” musics, while their method strengthens it by evoking other political hip-hop acts, such as Public Enemy. Anne Danielsen (2008) has argued that much of the communicative potential in Public Enemy’s music lies not so much in the sounds (or words) themselves as in the sonic montage they create: “Public Enemy uses the expressivity of the successful montage to communicate something more about power relations and inequality in American society that is fundamentally richer than any exclusively verbal text could manage” (Danielsen 2008: 415). In these cases, sampling plays a major role in conveying a

specific political intent and thus positioning the bands with reference to concrete sonic markers.

Beck's musical appropriations gain in their impact by virtue of their juxtaposition, similar to the work of Fun-da-mental and Public Enemy. However, they are seldom borrowed from "Other" musics, and they very seldom display an explicitly political intent. Therefore, by mobilising the term retronormativity, I aim to illustrate the extent to which Beck's musical identity is built on musical appropriations, often through sampling, and the ways in which these become signs of his musical innovation. This is not to suggest that appropriation equals innovation. Rather, appropriation might well be a central component in the *process* of innovation. As Middleton has argued, any form of musical innovation must begin with an awareness of existing conventions (Middleton 1990: 90)—an awareness that Beck displays through his widespread appropriation. Beck's innovative qualities rely a great deal on his ability to juxtapose sonic markers from different styles and eras, and to make them work as a musical whole that is larger than the sum of its parts.

As Eric Clarke and Nicola Dibben note "[m]usical materials have a 'history of use', one consequence of which is that sounds are heard as cultural references and associations" (Clarke and Dibben 2000: 233). Clarke and Dibben demonstrate the way in which Pulp's "This Is Hardcore" could represent a "critique that entails an element of complicity" (ibid.: 240)—not merely through its lyrics and imagery but also to a large extent through the cultural references mobilised by its musical materials. Along similar lines, Stan Hawkins conceptualises the *stylistic appropriation* in the Robbie Williams song "Let Me Entertain You": "Williams' performance is not only pure spoof of 1970s rock, but also an example of camp, excess and self-parody" (Hawkins 2009: 67). In this way, although they never state so directly, both of these examples involve the appropriation of sonic markers from the popular canon of Western music history. The meanings of both "This Is Hardcore" and "Let me Entertain You" are strongly affected by their "borrowings" of musical materials, which in some way or another refer to a history of use. At the same time, this history of use is not sufficient to explain the narrative value of the sonic markers. As mentioned earlier in relation to "Loser", a range of different artists sampled the same drumbeat to very different ends.

My argument is that it is through the particular context of Beck's voice and the slide guitar that this beat comes to serve its unique narrative purpose for him.

This leads us to the role of Beck's play with various musical settings in his identity construction. To a large extent, as I will argue further below, his music builds upon the appropriation of canonised markers. Beck, of course, not only appropriates beats and sounds but also methods of production—a level of appropriation of which he seems to be well aware. As he stated in a recent interview with the music magazine *Pitchfork*:

Over the last 20 years, myself and a lot of other musicians my age have tried to discover things in 50s, 60s, and 70s recording techniques that were lost or discarded. We've all been trying to crack this code. It's been an important period in the last 15 years, reclaiming some of those lost approaches to making records. (Beck quoted in *Pitchfork*, 2008)¹⁸

I would argue that the retronormative focus that Beck displays in this quotation holds vital clues as to how his musical identity has arisen. His use of sonic markers lends an inherent ironic distance to his music and his image, situating him between or among the ideologies that each marker evokes (and the overall ideology that the use of markers implies). If he is not a “retromaniac” (in the sense of Reynolds), Beck is at the very least an orchestrator of multiple musical voices positioned within a sample-based retro aesthetics.¹⁹ His music gives us the opportunity to engage with the expressive dimensions of musical codes. As stated earlier, sonic markers are used compositionally in pop production; Wicke points to “the way in which the physical parameters of sound are connected with the aesthetic parameters of the music” (Wicke 2009: 147ff). My concept of retronormativity, then, introduces the added aspect of the historical canonisation of some of these markers. In the following, I will demonstrate how, in a retronormative manner, Beck *constructs* sonic markers by appropriating musical

¹⁸ Available at http://pitchfork.com/features/interviews/8026-beck-15-years/?utm_medium=site&utm_source=related-content&utm_name=features (date accessed: March 28, 2012).

¹⁹ Often regarded as an artist of the 1990s, Beck is mentioned only briefly in Reynolds's book, which is mainly focused on the 2000s.

materials from many eras of Western popular music, and how their proper apprehension requires a broad cultural awareness. To understand his exploitation of the entire phenomenon, we must begin with his back catalogue.

Sonic markers of time

From Beck's discography we can discern a relationship between his retronormative use of sonic markers and his collaborations with different producers. This is relevant, because, as Whiteley, Bennett and Hawkins observe: "Discussing the production processes in music involves not just considering the realisation of the compositional material itself, but also the political positioning of the *author* in the form of the producer, the performer, the engineer or the musician" (2004: 18). An artist like Beck, who harnesses the expressive power of music that is well outside his immediate environs, would appear to risk disappearing among all of his references, and his producers are part of the reason he does not (table 2.1). In general, the producer has in many ways been framed as the "author" of the pop song, or at least a collaborator virtually at the level of the artist. This is not only because of technological wizardry but also because of the ability to fulfil the responsibilities of *creative agent* and *expert listener*. Although Beck's many producers include Tony Hoffer, Mickey Petralia, Rob Schnapf and Tom Rothrock, it is the Dust Brothers (Mike Simpson and John King) and Nigel Godrich who have had the greatest impact on the construction of his musical identity.²⁰ One obvious Dust Brothers influence upon Beck is their sample-based aesthetic (among their countless credits is the Beastie Boys' album *Paul's Boutique*). In relation to the extended use of drum loops and non-musical sounds and noises,

²⁰ At the time of writing, Beck's most recent solo album was *Modern Guilt* (2008). Produced by Danger Mouse, this album represented a new turn in Beck's career, as his signature blend of folk and hip-hop was here replaced by distorted drums, close guitars and muted bass guitar characteristic of 1960s pop and psychedelia, combined with an overall calmness in his vocal expression that characterises albums such as *Mutations* and *Sea Change*. In order to illustrate the impact of different producers on Beck's musical identity, I have chosen to focus on his collaboration with the Dust Brothers and Nigel Godrich, but I fully acknowledge the unquestionable impact Danger Mouse had on *Modern Guilt*.

Table 2.1
Beck albums, producers, sonic characteristics and selected lyrics

ALBUM	YEAR	PRODUCER(S)	MUSICAL SETTING	SELECTED LYRICS
 <i>Mellow Gold</i>	1994	Beck, Tom Rothrock, Rob Schnapt, Karl Stephenson	Delta blues, hip-hop, anti-folk, indie	“I’m a loser, baby, so why don’t you kill me”. “That’s why I pay no mind”. “It’s just the shit-kicking, speed-taking, truck driving neighbours downstairs”.
 <i>Odelay</i>	1996	The Dust Brothers, Mario Caldato Jr., Brian Paulson, Tom Rothrock, Rob Schnapt, Beck	Old school hip-hop, the Beatles, 1960–1970s sounds	“Two turntables and a microphone”. “Something’s wrong, cause my mind is fading”. “She’s alone in the new pollution”.
 <i>Mutations</i>	1998	Nigel Godrich, Beck	Folk, psychedelia, “New Roots Explosion”, singer-songwriter	“And on and on, it doesn’t matter”. “Nobody’s fault but my own”. “Misery waits in vague hotels”.
 <i>Midnite Vultures</i>	1999	The Dust Brothers, Tony Hoffer, Mickey Petralia, Beck	Stax, country, bluegrass, space age pop, synth pop, break dance, hip-hop	“I’m a full grown man, but I’m not afraid to cry”. “Looking like a hot date, banging like an 808”. “Word up to the man thing”.
 <i>Sea Change</i>	2002	Nigel Godrich	Folk, singer-songwriter	“I’m tired of fighting for a lost cause”. “It’s only you that I’m losing”. “You got a devil up your sleeve, and he’s talking to me”.
 <i>Guero</i>	2005	The Dust Brothers, Beck	Hip hop, sample-based pop, hints towards 1960s rock	“Put the elevator music on. Pull me back where I belong”. “Nana, nana nana, na”. “Que onda guero?”.
 <i>The Information</i>	2006	Nigel Godrich	Sample-based pop, hints to hip-hop, elements of folk and indie	“Think I’m in love, but it makes me kinda nervous to say so”. “God is alone, hardware defected”. “I’ve got my maps all backwards and my instincts poisoned”.

Rolling Stone (2003) described *Odelay*, Beck's first collaboration with the Dust Brothers, as follows:

Burrowing into the studio with the Dust Brothers, Beck came back with a Technicolor version of his Woody Guthrie meets Grandmaster Flash vision, demonstrating to all his rock peers on "Devils Haircut" and "Where It's At" that turntables had a brighter future than refried grunge—at least for the next decade.²¹

Released as the album's first single, "Where It's At" is constructed around an Am7 Wurlitzer hook, a looped drumbeat and Beck's slightly nasal, laid-back rapping in the baritone register. Noisy elements, mostly created through feedback from vocals filtered by a distorting megaphone, are especially prominent in the third verse and generally placed between the vocal lines. In fact, although the song contains a variety of decontextualized elements, musical as well as non-musical, they all have a specific place in the mix, and their meanings do not blur into one another. Recurring spoken, noisy or musical gestures stay clear of the vocals as well, except for the megaphone effect in the choruses. In general, then, these elements do not change the narrative "direction" of the song but instead suggest alternative meanings or opportunities along the way.

On one hand, the sound of the Wurlitzer might evoke the 1960s or 1970s. This is because, alongside other stringless electric pianos such as the Fender Rhodes, the Wurlitzer figured as a central instrumental agent in the wake of electric jazz and soul in the 1960s.²² This particular sound would thus carry references to one specific history of use. On the other hand, Beck was certainly not alone in his own era in applying loops of old electric pianos as suppliers of a harmonic foundation during the

²¹ Available at <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/500-greatest-albums-of-all-time-19691231/odelay-beck-19691231> (date accessed: August 9, 2011). *Odelay* reached number 305 on *Rolling Stone*'s list of the 500 greatest albums of all time, which was originally published in a special issue in November 2003.

²² For examples of different uses of the Wurlitzer, listen to Sun Ra's "India" (1956); Joe Zawinul's "Mercy, Mercy, Mercy" (1966); Marvin Gaye's "I Heard It through the Grapevine" (1966); John Lennon's "How Do You Sleep?" (1971), as well as Pink Floyd's "Breathe", "Money", "Time" and "Have a Cigar" (1973).

1990s, so labelling this element as strictly a marker of the 1960s would be misleading. For example, sample-based hip-hop and trip-hop acts such as Arrested Development, Digable Planets, Us3, Tricky, Portishead and Massive Attack were all in different ways appropriating and experimenting with various forms of sample aesthetics. Further strengthening the transparency of the use of “old sounds” and at the same time hinting at hip-hop is the sound of the crackling that emerges from an LP player as the needle is dropped at the very beginning of a record. In this particular context, the LP crackling suggests a DJ putting a record on, which in turn refers to the recurring lyrical line “I’ve got two turntables and a microphone” in the choruses. It also contributes to the impression that the Wurlitzer hook has been sampled from an older recording and looped with an ideological purpose in mind. Additionally, the strategic musical use of noises in turn evokes 1990s bands like Sonic Youth and My Bloody Valentine. Rather than merely appearing as sonic markers of early recording history, then, these elements together form a basis for arguing that Beck builds his musical narratives upon credible instruments and technologies—that is, sonic markers of retronormativity.

Such markers of retronormativity are also present on “The New Pollution” from the same album. Albin Zak has described Beck’s music as a “kaleidoscope of references”, and “The New Pollution” in particular as a “collage of Revolverisms” because of the way it “combines allusions to the bassline from ‘Taxman’, the drum groove and ambience from ‘Tomorrow Never Knows’, and George Harrison’s swooping Indian-influenced vocal style on ‘Love You Too’” (Zak 2001: 186). On one level here, Zak is suggesting that Beck delves very deeply into a very specific source: a single album by the Beatles. But on another level, Zak is simply acknowledging the resonance between the compositional practices behind *Revolver* (“Tomorrow Never Knows” was, in fact, a live recording of eleven tape loops conducted by George Martin [Lewisohn 1988: 72]) and Beck’s own affinity for layering musical references in his work.²³ For Beck, then, this form of layering through digital sampling and stylistic appropriation becomes a compositional tool and provides an example of how

²³ Public Enemy also sampled “Tomorrow Never Knows” in their song “Psycho of Greed” (2002), which was banned because of copyright issues (see Rambarran 2010: 115).

his use of sonic markers associated with time has played one part in the formation of his musical identity. The bigger picture, however, is the more relevant one: the eclecticism of Beck's free use of sonic markers overall matters more than any given sonic marker, especially in relation to his musical identity. These examples help to explain why so much of Beck's music has been so strongly associated with the 1990s—and, ultimately, why these elements taken together as sonic markers contribute to the formation of Beck's musical identity as a whole.

Yet his music stretches beyond the realm of sampling aesthetics as well, and this has a lot to do with his distinct collaborations with different producers. In terms of production ideals, Nigel Godrich represents something close to the antithesis of the Dust Brothers, though he enables Beck's stylistic appropriation just as well. Beck himself notes that Godrich is “very much oriented to capturing a performance” (Beck 1998).²⁴ Beck made a promotional interview with a robotic voice for the launch of his album *Mutations*. The short black-and-white film shows Beck sitting in a designer chair, discussing the recording process, songwriting and his collaboration with Godrich. This collaboration is apparent throughout the album, including the opening track, “Cold Brains”. The song starts with an acoustic guitar sounding alone for four bars. Drums, bass, wah-wah guitar and the bubbly sounds of an analogue synthesiser are introduced in the next four bars. As the song gathers around the acoustic guitar, which is deliberately reinforced by the bass and drums, the synthesiser and wah-wah guitar begin to stick out as slight nods to psychedelia. These psychedelic allusions do not stem from the wah-wah guitar or the bubbly synthesiser alone. Rather, I would argue, they present as sonic markers thanks to the dialogic interplay between such psychedelic hints (the sonic potential), on the one hand, and the main setting (the musical context established around the acoustic guitar), on the other.

As discussed in the introductory chapter, Jason Toynbee (2000) identifies three governing “tendencies” for the history of recording from the 1920s to the 1990s: the documentary, ventriloquism and the technosphere. These tendencies can also work as foundations for idealised production strategies in the studio. From this idealised

²⁴ Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fBk5tNrxXC0> (date accessed: August 19, 2011).

perspective, the examples discussed so far could be held to exemplify these tendencies. Roughly speaking, while the Dust Brothers celebrate ventriloquism, Godrich strives to document a live performance in the studio, or at least construct an *image* of such a documentary ideal. The scheme, however, becomes more complex when we incorporate Toynebee's third tendency—the technosphere. As “[a] domain of imaginary possibilities and constraints which lies between the performance on one side and more or less remote reception of sound on the other” (Toynebee 2000: 69), the technosphere constitutes a framework for creativity and tolerance towards the use of technology in a recording. Toynebee demonstrates how this framework is constantly developing, alongside the audience's tolerance regarding what could be considered “documentary”: “At stake here is not so much an opposition as a continuum between musician-audience co-presence on the one hand and various kinds of distantiation and manipulation of sound on the other” (ibid.).

Given the disparateness of influence of the Dust Brothers and Godrich upon Beck's music, this continuum is also relevant here. Therefore, we would do well to look harder at what it is, specifically in terms of the relationship between musical output and production ideals that makes Beck “Beck”. On the one hand, his collaboration with different producers constitutes further play with the restricted domains of the technosphere—that is, the framework of production ideals (or musical settings) implied by one's choice of producer. On the other hand, he would also be restricting his domain of possibilities by making his use of sonic markers so explicit that it becomes *equal to* his musical identity. This last point would be the case for his flirtation with both hip-hop and folk references. In most vocals-based popular music, as I discussed in the introductory chapter and will return to in chapters 4, 5 and 6, the voice can be viewed as the primary marker of the biographical presence of the song's protagonist (Hawkins 2009, Frith 1996, Middleton 2006). With Beck, as exemplified by “Loser”, there seems to be in addition a particularly strong relationship between the voice and the musical backdrop. To paraphrase Zak, I would suggest that Beck's kaleidoscopic attitude towards recording history—that is, his extensive play with sonic markers—has become an assurance of his biographical presence in his recordings.

Alongside his voice, then, it is his play with sonic markers that has come to supply the main premise for his musical identity.

With regards to production ideals, a viable comparison to *Mutations* would be *Sea Change* (2002), which was also produced by Godrich. Beck has characterised both of these albums as “sort of introspective records” (Beck 2006), and they both exhibit a predilection for simple arrangements based upon acoustic guitar and vocals. “Cold Brains” shares a range of both compositional and production-aesthetic features with “Lost Cause”, the first single from *Sea Change*. One of these commonalities is an apparent focus on harmony and melody, which, together with the lyrics, often receives more attention from composer as well as listener when the instrumental arrangement is stripped down. These elements also form a basis for reading the music as the result of a documented performance—from Toynbee’s perspective they become markers of a documentary tendency. For example, in “Cold Brains”, the verses, with D as their tonal centre, follow the chord progression D-A-G-C-D-A-G-G7. The choruses then start on A and move via D to F, a progression that is repeated twice before a four-bar conclusion on E. This would indicate two tonal centres for the song as a whole: D on the verses and A on the choruses. In “Lost Cause”, the tonal centre is C throughout the song. Here, the verses create a never-ending movement from F via C to G/B that is repeated three times before a conclusion on E7. The choruses move between F and G before landing on C every eighth bar. Thus, the harmonic tension that is built up in the verses is released to some extent in the choruses. In both songs, the harmonic focus becomes particularly relevant, due to what appears to be documentary production ideals, and the open arrangements forged around acoustic guitars.

“Lost Cause” is built around country-style fingerpicking on acoustic guitars, played in counterpoint to a clavinet part that is panned to the channel opposite the guitars. The two parts’ slight similarity in timbre and rhythmic movement contributes to a calm yet quite dense sonic framework that is supported by hi-hat cymbals and accented first beats on the glockenspiel. By further underpinning the calmness of the song, the glockenspiel suggests a sarcastic undertone in the context of the lyrics. This sensibility is further reinforced by the recurring backwards sounds, mostly in the form of what appears to be reversed recordings of voices or instruments. These reversed

sounds, coupled with the glockenspiel, then, become sonic markers with a narrative purpose in the context of Beck's vocalisation of the concluding line of the chorus, "tired of fighting, fighting for a lost cause". This line refers directly to Beck's breakup with his long-term girlfriend. In his review of *Sea Change* for *Rolling Stone*, David Fricke writes:

The clarity of his crisis has a lot to do with the naked strength of Beck's singing. For someone who started out as a teenage folk hobo—just voice and strum—Beck rarely walked this far out in front of the music on his own records. (Fricke 2002)²⁵

Fricke here draws a clear line between Beck's vocalisation and the fact that he had parted company with his girlfriend. This interpretation was validated by a good promotional campaign that managed to connect these dots for the press. In fact, the whole record was promoted as a response to this breakup, although several of the songs were written at earlier stages in his career—even as early as in 1993. In an interview with Dave Maher for *Pitchfork*, Beck explains:

You know, it's funny. There wasn't really a change at all. What happened was that I had these kinds of songs—some of the songs on that record were pretty old—that I'd just been keeping to myself: introspective or more personal. (Beck, quoted in *Pitchfork*, September 2, 2008)

In this way, "Lost Cause" would be a good example of how sonic markers are used with the intention of setting a stage for identity formation to take place. In a similar musical setting but with the opposite effect, the wah-wah guitars and synthesisers on "Cold Brains" act as sonic markers that underline an indifferent attitude towards death by the way they relate to the lyrics. Again with reference to table 2.1, I would argue that these sonic markers hint at "psychedelia" by the way they relate to the lyrics, for example through Beck's suggestion that "misery waits in vague hotels".

²⁵ This review was first published in *Rolling Stone* on September 10, 2002. Available at <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/albumreviews/sea-change-20020910> (date accessed: September 26, 2011).

What separates the two songs in terms of their effects are the lyrics themselves and their explicit links to Beck's biography. *Mutations*, again in a Toynbeeian sense, represents what could be labelled a playful documentary style. *Sea Change*, while drawing on many of the same stylistic references, such as acoustic guitars, contains specific references to an incident that took place in Beck's private life. Beck has been known to compose lyrics according to the sound of the words rather than their meanings, as the selected lyrics in table 2.1 indicate. Yet there are still intersections between his lyrics and the *music's* various meanings. Lines like "I'm a loser, baby, so why don't you kill me" or "MTV makes me want to smoke crack" underline a general sense of indifference that one can *hear* as well. On the other hand, "nobody's fault but my own" and "misery waits in vague hotels" present an almost ironic self-reflection that resonates with the hints of psychedelia he inserts into the generic conventions of the singer-songwriter tradition. As my table aims to illustrate, Beck's catalogue is full of such apparent links. And, most importantly, there are contextual reasons why these similar musical codes impart different meanings, even for the same artist.

Shared between the albums discussed here is Beck's positioning of his play with sounds between (rather than in tandem with) his vocal lines, as if to emphasise that there is still a narrative that is important here, whatever the blur of outside references that share the song. An alternative approach is evident in the Dust Brothers/Beck collaboration *Guero* (2005) and the Godrich/Beck collaboration *The Information*, both of which return the artist to a sample-based aesthetic. Yet something had apparently changed. As longtime Beck follower Barney Hoskyns put it:

Beck is back, which is always a good thing. *Guero* may be less "rich and strange" than its predecessor but as another instalment [*sic*] in the guy's ongoing dialectics it's as welcome as anything he's done. (Hoskyns 2005)

Musically, this apparent lack of *richness* and *strangeness* could relate to Beck's use of a calmer vocal style, a point I will explore while reviewing *Guero* and *The Information* as I build upon my concept of the voice as a marker of biographical presence. Certainly, as Beck pointed out himself, *Sea Change* was by no means intended to

constitute a break in his career. Rather, it came about as a compilation of songs representing in general the same mood. The songs, however, dated from 1993 to 2002 and did not derive, as some journalists supposed, exclusively from his breakup with his long-time girlfriend. This returns us to the question of intent. For example, the sense that something had changed in Beck's music after *Sea Change* informed reviews of his two later albums as well. Rob Mitchum, for example, in his review for *Pitchfork*, compares *Guero* with *Odelay* and concludes:

It seems likely that what worked for the subject [Beck] almost ten years ago may not be appropriate at this later stage; in today's landscape, the methods seem a bit obsolete and over-prescribed. Mr. Hansen may have given us what we demanded, but, at this juncture, we should consider that his personalities have drifted so far apart that they are better left that way. (Mitchum 2005)²⁶

What Mitchum seems to suggest is that though Beck applies the same musical methods with the same producers, the effect is no longer the same. Beck's play with different styles and genres was once (in the 1990s, presumably) read as a sign of irony and playfulness. In this way, Mitchum's observations point in very much the same direction as those of Hoskyns, namely that while comparisons to his earlier records are likely to be drawn regarding this new material, Beck's performative enthusiasm is nevertheless experienced as being curbed. This would in turn point to the relevance of situating meaning within a historical and cultural context. While Beck apparently managed to construct an image of a borderless artist with fans and journalists in the 1990s, *Sea Change* also marks a musical break in his career. If, as Stephen Thomas Erlewine suggests, *Guero* is "a successful mature variation on *Odelay*" (Erlewine 2006), then this maturity should be possible to hear in his music as well.²⁷

²⁶ Available at <http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/621-guero/> (date accessed: March 17, 2012). It must be noted that this review is written as a medical journal, which is why terms such as the *subject* and his *personalities* are applied to Beck.

²⁷ Available at <http://www.allmusic.com/album/the-information-r859047/review> (date accessed: April 12, 2012).

Example 2.1

“E-Pro”: Vocals over guitar and bass riff on the chorus (0:40–0:45).

An example of this further tendency can be found on “E-Pro”, which was the first single from *Guero*. Here, the musical setting is based around a looped drumbeat sampled from the Beastie Boys’ “So What’cha Want” (1992).²⁸ Sauntering along at a medium tempo, the choruses basically consist of the words “Na na na-na-na-na na” in a two-bar, four-note melody (example 2.1). These rather nonsensical lyrics are reeled off above a unison bass/guitar riff whose distorted timbre recalls the sound of the lead fuzz guitar of the Rolling Stones song “Satisfaction” (see Gracyk 1996: 124). Such retronormative tendencies in the accompaniment certainly evoke the playfulness that characterised Beck’s earlier collaborations with the Dust Brothers. They also suggest the comparison to *Odelay* in the first place. Yet what seems to lead Hoskyns and Mitchum to conclude otherwise is traceable to Beck’s serene vocal performances and increasingly despondent lyrics here.

An indication that this could be read as an overarching tendency was that similar responses came out after the release of *The Information* (2006). According to Beck, this album was the result of Godrich’s sudden desire to produce hip-hop. The first single, “Cellphone’s Dead”, represents an example of Beck bridging the production poles of documentary style and ventriloquism. The most prominent sonic marker of time in this song would be the bass riff and the drum part, which are similar

²⁸ The Beastie Boys are even credited as co-composers of this song.

to but probably not actually sampled from Herbie Hancock’s “Chameleon” (1973). The beat does sound sampled from somewhere, however, partly because of its top frequency spectrum. The synth bass, on the other hand, evokes Hancock’s song but plays a slightly different riff (ex. 2.2). Again, these musical codes are constructed as sonic markers through appropriation. Vocally, Beck replaces his earlier “slackness” of delivery with a still relaxed but now more distant vocalisation. His rhythmic phrases suggest the *sprechgesang* tendencies of “old-school” rap—the half-spoken, half-sung delivery that characterises early hip-hop.



Example 2.2

“Cellphone’s Dead”: Bass riff (0:13–0:18).

So far, I have discussed Beck’s music in relation to his collaboration with different producers, contrasting mainly his work with the Dust Brothers and Nigel Godrich, respectively. Certain musical elements seem to recur, of course, but for the most part, it is his ironic take on indifference that identifies Beck as “Beck”, generally expressed via his voice. Although it has altered to a certain extent with age, and although he constantly plays around with different idioms, such as rap, crooning and even a Prince-like falsetto, Beck’s vocal delivery remains distinctive. Having presented the concept of retronormativity as a production strategy that, in different contexts, has consistently contributed to the construction of Beck’s musical identity, I will now develop this model through a close reading of one further song. In what follows, I will use “Sexx Laws”, the first single from *Midnite Vultures* (1999), to demonstrate how Beck’s eclecticism is traceable as a mark of musical identity at the level of a particular song’s musical details.


“Sexx Laws”



Uncut journalist Kit Aiken, in his review of *Midnite Vultures*, described Beck’s music as “mountain music plus technology, down-home sounds and structures with art noise and street beats, brilliant-but-wearing typing-not-writing lyrics, rap, folk, hardcore, country” (Aiken 1999: 1). As I indicated in the previous section, this eclecticism of style and content derives from a variety of culturally established sonic markers. On the one hand, as we have seen, sonic markers of time play an important part of Beck’s musical identity, because these markers contain cultural references and associations (Clarke and Dibben 2000). On the other hand, as I will now demonstrate, these cultural references and associations are identifiable not only as characteristics of each album but also, through the ways in which they are juxtaposed within singular songs, as strategies of studio production and composition. Through internal dialogical relationships, then, these cultural references can be identified as sonic markers that serve a narrative purpose in Beck’s music.


In table 2.2, inspired by Hawkins’s reading of the music and video for Annie Lennox’s “Money Can’t Buy It” (Hawkins 2002: 116), I attempt to map out how various sonic markers from “Sexx Laws” affect and develop different musical settings for the song. In my analysis, however, I will not provide a reading of the video, although it certainly reinforces the song’s narrative. Rather, I will focus on how Beck succeeds in expressing his signature ironic detachment through the interaction between the sonic markers and his vocal performance(s), lyrics and the generic conventions of the pop song. This interaction comes across in three ways during this song:

- The musical staging of Beck through melody, lyrics and vocal performance
- The harmonic and instrumental “support” to this staging
- The instrumental break that follows the horn section after the second chorus

Table 2.2: “Sexx Laws”: Formal structure, sonic markers and musical settings

FORM	LYRICS AND THEMES	HARMONY		SONIC MARKERS	MUSICAL SETTING
Intro (00:00– 00:15)		H	G#	Playful bass and busy drums in a	Horn section, bass playing, the drum groove and
		H	G#	“question and answer” (dialogic?)	the offbeat electric guitar suggests Stax
		H	G#	relationship underneath the horns and	recordings such as “Mr. Pitiful” and “I’m
		A	F#	the electric guitar, which provide a	Depending on You” with Otis Redding. The
				general push. The “positive” energy of	harmonic progression, however, consisting solely
				the song is further marked by the	of major chords, seems to direct the melodic
				major mode and a relatively fast	movements.
				tempo (134 bpm).	
Verse 1 (00:15– 00:44)	Can’t you hear those cavalry drums Hijacking your equilibrium Midnight snacks in the mausoleum Where the pixilated doctors moan Carnivores in the Cowloon night Breathing Freon by the candlelight Coquettes bitchslap you so polite Till you thank them for the tea and sympathy	H	G#	As intro, but with the horn section	The verses suggest the Stax sound when the horn
		H	G#	now answering Beck’s vocals rather	section responds to Beck’s vocals. At the same
		H	G#	than carrying the main thematic role.	time, Beck’s relaxed vocal performance ensures
		A	F#		his signature presence. This presence is further
		H	G#		reinforced by the ironic tone of the lyrics.
		H	G#		
		H	G#		
		A	F#		
Chorus 1 (00:44– 01:03)	I want to defy the logic of all sex laws Let the handcuffs slip off your wrists. I’ll let you be my chaperone. At the halfway home. I’m a full-grown man, but I’m not afraid to cry	E	E	The accompaniment of this section	Shifting tonal centres seem to direct the melodic
		G#	C#	would hint to the Stax sound as well,	movements to a greater degree than in the verses.
		G	G	if not for the interference of the	The musical setting still refers to Stax, although
		F#	E	electric guitar that appears between	with a hint of Prince in Beck’s vocalisation.
		D	D	the vocal lines. Against Beck’s	
		A	A#	increasingly hysterical vocalisation	
				and the Stax-like accompaniment, this	

				guitar takes on the role of a sonic marker of country music.		
Theme (01:03– 01:18)		H H H A	G# G# G# F#	 	As intro, but with Beck’s falsetto voice as the focus of attention	The horn section theme returns, this time as to further punctuate Beck’s confession that although he is a full-grown man, he is not afraid to cry. This sensibility is underlined by Beck, in a falsetto voice, stretching out the word “cry” for four bars.
Verse 2 (01:18– 01:46)	Neptune’s lips taste like fermented wine Perfumed blokes on the Ginza line Running buck wild like a concubine Whose mother never held her hand Brief encounters in Mercedes Benz Wearing hepatitis contact lens Bed and breakfast getaway weekends With <i>Sports Illustrated</i> moms	H H H A	G# G# G# F#	 	Beck’s voice is now accompanied by a drum loop, a bass and a nasal-sounding analogue synthesiser.	Indicating the first break in the established sound, the first half of the second verse has now been stripped down. The drums have been replaced by a drum loop. The synthesiser, which is also present with the same line in the first verse, is now getting more attention and to some extent takes on the role of the horn section.
Chorus 2 (01:46– 02:06)	As chorus 1	As chorus 1			The electric guitar now appears with a wah-wah pedal alongside what seems to be a banjo with the same effect.	The hint to country music is now replaced by a hint to psychedelia, although the musical setting is still grounded in the Stax aesthetic.
Theme (02:06– 02:20)		H H H A	G# G# G# F#	 	Beck’s vocalisation indicates a bit more desperation than it did after the first chorus.	As the theme preceding the first chorus

Bridge (02:20– 02:35)	Instrumental section	H G#	Structured over the verse chords, this break represents the most drastic musical shift in the song. Harmony and time are kept by bluegrass-style banjo strumming, over which synthesiser arpeggios and pedal-steel guitar supply the thematic content.	Sonic markers reinforce the compositional design. Banjo, pedal-steel guitar and analogue synthesiser construct an ambiguous aesthetic that contrasts with the soul allusions that have characterised the main musical setting.
		H G#		
		H G#		
		A F#		
Chorus 3 (02:35– 02:55)	I want to defy the logic of all sex laws Let the handcuffs slip off your wrists. I'll let you be my chaperone. At the halfway home. I'm a full-grown man, but I'm not afraid to cry	E E	Banjo, pedal-steel guitar, wah-wah guitar and synthesiser are now given more space alongside Beck's voice.	The freewheeling mix of banjo, pedal-steel guitar, wah-wah guitar and synthesiser underlines the increasing sense of generic juxtaposition in the song.
		G# C#		
		G G		
		F# E		
		D D		
Theme (02:55– 03:09)		H G#	Mainly as intro, but the banjo gradually comes in towards the end of the first repetition. Also, one of Beck's falsetto voices concludes with a "yeah" after having kept the word "cry" for four bars.	The use of added instruments with different generic connotations has gradually altered the musical setting of the song. What started off in a Stax-like soundscape with bass, horns and offbeat guitar over a funky drumbeat has gradually been taken over by other instruments, such as banjo, pedal-steel guitar, wah-wah guitar and synthesiser.
		H G#		
		H G#		
		A F#		
Fade out		:H G#	Banjo and pedal-steel guitar gradually take over completely as the song fades out.	
		H G#		
		H G#		
		A F#		

First, I want to focus on the musical staging of Beck through lyrics, melody and vocal performance. Often, Beck's lyrics appear to be nonsensical, but his vocal performance (which draws upon different forms of dubbing, including octave doubling) and the song's melodic construction supply a narrative where the lyrics do not. The lyrics, then, gain a certain meaning through the way they are staged, technologically and performatively, to fit the music. At the same time, the apparently nonsensical lyrics in the verses make more sense as we arrive in the choruses. Here, Beck concludes that his primary wish is to "defy the logic of all sex laws" but then confesses that although he is "a full-grown man", he is not "afraid to cry". This statement is supported by both the musical arrangement, as we will continue to see, and the vocal production, to which I will now turn.

While this form of octave doubling is employed by a range of artists, from J Mascis (Dinosaur Jr.) to Axl Rose (Guns'n'Roses), it has a unique impact upon the listener's impression of Beck's general detachment. In fact, overdubbing oneself is often associated with a sense of detachment, mainly because two takes of the same voice can potentially erase the personal "grain" of the individual voice. Freya Jarman-Ivens (2006), in her chapter on the Carpenters, links the overdubbing of Karen Carpenter's voice to her brother Richard's fascination with the Beach Boys' perfectionist attitude towards vocal performance.²⁹ At the same time, she also remarks upon the way this overdubbing appears to blur the boundaries that Barthes sets up between what he labels pheno-song and geno-song. For Jarman-Ivens, this obscuring of (imagined) boundaries results in a form of "disembodied eroticism" (Jarman-Ivens 2006: 18ff). In the Carpenters' music, vocal dubbing marked them as "unthreatening", but Jarman-Ivens sees it further as a means of "taming the grain" (ibid.: 9ff) or otherwise abstracting the singer from her body via a technological "geno-process mediated through a pheno-process" (ibid.: 26). In "Sexx Laws", however, as I will now demonstrate, Beck's play with vocal dubbing supplies the lyrics with an ironic detachment. If a disembodied eroticism is anywhere to be found in this song, it must

²⁹ It must be noted that I have downloaded Jarman-Ivens' PhD from her web page. In this version, all chapters begin with page 1. Hence, these references

be in the choruses.

In the first four lines of the choruses (see table 2.2), Beck's voice appears as his regular baritone but overdubbed with a falsetto that appears to emphasise his emotional availability. "At the halfway home" is sung in the baritone but overdubbed by one vocoder voice and *two* falsetto voices, after which "I'm a full grown man, but I'm not afraid to" appears as *Sprechgesang*—half spoken, half sung.³⁰ This leads to the baritone/falsetto pronunciation of "cry", which extends over more than four bars. In this particular moment, which teeters on hysteria, Beck appropriates a Prince-like falsetto.³¹ While Prince might use such exaggerated performance strategies to attempt to blur race and gender norms (Hawkins 2002: 170), Beck uses them to further mobilise the ironic distance he has already set up through his rapid references to sonic markers. The delivery of "cry" is decidedly ambiguous. Is Beck joking? Is he straining? Is he in pain? Is he actually crying? Moreover, while the Beck baritone rests its case, the two falsetto voices continue upwards toward a mock hysteria. Hawkins calls this affected vocalisation in Morrissey's performances a *trope of hyperbole*: "a communicative device" that "underlines the artist's spirit of engagement, his idealism, his earnestness and ironic distancing on all matters" (Hawkins 2011a: 311). If such hyperbolic tropes can be found in Beck's music, they derive directly from his play with sonic markers.

The musical backdrop supports the timbral markers that characterise Beck's voice(s) and the lyrics' description of the "soft male". The track is built on a steady groove at about 134 beats per minute around a drumbeat (live drum kit and loop) and horn section motif that evoke the Stax sound of the 1960s. Justin Meldal Johnson's electric bass guitar adds an overall liveliness, and the offbeats on the snare drum are reinforced by electric guitar. Entering the choruses, the groove is supported by handclaps and tambourine, and a piano takes the lead role in supplying the harmonic content. As Beck announces that he is not afraid to cry, the electric guitar begins a line

³⁰ Thanks to Shara Rambarran for addressing this point.

³¹ I am drawing attention to Prince here because many of the reviews of *Midnite Vultures* point to him as a reference for several of the songs on the record. Apart from "Sexx Laws", the most notable example from the album would be "Debra". For an in-depth discussion of Prince's vocalisation, see Hawkins (2002) and Hawkins and Niblock (2011).

of climbing sixths, which is a sonic marker of country music.³² The nod to country sounds jarring in the context of both the other sonic markers, which point towards Stax recordings of the late 1960s, and the sensitive lyrics in the chorus.³³ Revisiting table 2.1, then, the statement “I’m a full grown man, but I’m not afraid to cry” must be read in a historical context. Such a statement would perhaps have been a bold assertion in the USA in the 1950s or 1960s. In the 1970s, it would most likely have been taken as a symbol of political correctness. However, in the late 1990s, set against Beck’s frivolous play with all sorts of sonic markers and vocalised in a dubbed falsetto voice that borders on hysteria, it gains a decidedly ironic dimension.

The instrumental bridge following the second chorus and the repeat of the theme take the song to a less intensely dynamic resting point before the final choruses. In this part of the song, an arpeggiated synthesiser melody begins a call-and-response pattern with a pedal-steel guitar, all the while accompanied by bluegrass-like banjo fingerpicking. This is a genre- and gender-bending moment, in which the arpeggio could be heard to provide a feminine counterpoint to the traditional masculine markers of banjo, pedal-steel guitar and electric guitar. Alone, these elements would represent different genres of popular music, but their juxtaposition adds to the song’s ironic lyrics and vocal performance. Harking back to the early 1980s, the nasal timbre of the analogue synthesiser in particular also marks Beck’s retronormative methods of composition. In addition, the genre-related tension that is present in this section resonates with the ambiguity of the lyrics and the vocal performance, particularly in the chorus. As mentioned, the pedal-steel guitar and the banjo are both characteristic sonic markers of country and bluegrass; they also demand a high level of technical skill and have strong musical characters that cut through and otherwise colour any context in which they appear. This bridge therefore incorporates diverse yet purposeful

³² Perhaps the most emblematic example of country music’s thematic use of sixths on the guitar is Clayton McMichen and Jimmie Rodgers’s “Peach Pickin’ Time in Georgia” (1932). Beck in fact performed this song with Willie Nelson on the *Tonight Show* in 1997; available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DjqhZnWcU-U> (date accessed: September 21, 2011).

³³ Though many *musicians* do not listen to lyrics (Walser 1993: 26ff), even in their own songs, many *listeners* do, and the pop producer must always know what is being said while the music is being played. If the lyrics and music do not correspond, unintended meanings can surface in the gap between them.

performances on distinctive instruments that appear all the more ironic for their careful presentation here. As opposed to the low-fi, sample-saturated aesthetic of Beck's early albums, "Sexx Laws" appears to indicate that Beck means business when he employs sonic markers—that, in effect, those markers *are* his music, rather than simply ornamentation upon it. And it is exactly that explicit statement of faith that makes Beck at once earnest and ironic—that makes Beck, in short, "Beck".

Conclusions

Retronormativity builds strongly on appropriations, meaning that sonic markers are never merely copied but rather constructed by being incorporated into an entirely new musical language. Beck has built his musical identity on his eclectic and retronormative play with sonic markers, which tend to resonate with the feel and form, rather than the meaning, of his lyrics. Beck in fact appropriates these compositional methods from postmodern art, which he would have been exposed to through his grandfather, Fluxus artist Al Hansen, and his mother, Bibbe Hansen, who were both associated with Andy Warhol's Factory. Beck's retronormative construction of sonic markers by merging of musical codes from country, Stax or hip-hop with delta blues and folk even evokes the pop art collage. Regarding Warhol's work in particular, Hawkins explains,

In his critique of the Hollywood film industry, Warhol appropriated elements from this culture in order to critique it. And rather than rejecting Hollywood per se, Warhol would demystify it by introducing the ambiguous and risky workings of camp; in the main, his political mission was to carry this out through deconstructing glamour.
(Hawkins 2009: 27)

As a "high art" take on "low art", Beck's play with sonic markers is not entirely new. In fact, as Derek B. Scott has argued, modernist views on high and low art have for a long time been appropriated by jazz and rock:

The argument over high and low art, a familiar component of elitist and mass-culture views, is, ironically, repeated within the very areas of music which are so often attacked as being low. In jazz, the debate concerns the difference between true jazz and dance band music. In rock, there is an attempt to distinguish between serious rock and brash, commercial pop. (Scott 1990: 387)

Scott sees the development and promotion of a rock canon as derived from the notion of a Western classical music canon. Allan F. Moore describes this urge as “popular modernism”, suggesting that listeners “are encouraged to conceptualize the invention of music as a branch of magic, to believe that musical actions and gestures cannot be subject to any level of explanation, and hence understanding, beyond the trivially biographical” (Moore 2003: 7). Beck’s identity, of course—by way of his facility with the sonic marker—derives directly from the elevation of the trivial, whether music-historical or biographical.

In conclusion, then, the appropriation of musical sounds coded to a given era implies their recontextualisation, in terms of the song that contains them and the artist who writes and performs it. Both song and artist profit from the cultural references already contained in those sonic markers, but more than this, they profit from the new meanings those markers acquire in the context of the current song. Beck’s many allusions announce him as eclectic, ironic, and hip, but they also make very good (and multivalent) music. With the help of the Dust Brothers and Nigel Godrich, he has perfected the integration of retronormative musical gestures into entirely new contexts and buttressed his own reputation along the way. As he stated in a recent interview: “Eventually, if you’re experimenting with a sound that’s unfamiliar, it gets absorbed, and somebody comes and does it better, and it becomes part of a vocabulary” (Beck, quoted in Dombal 2011).³⁴ Beck’s sonic markers derive exclusively from the discourse of Western popular music history. They also raise issues of taste—why do some sound cheesy and others maintain their credibility?—and this additional valence of the sonic marker, and the artist’s identity, will be the subject of the following chapter.

³⁴ Available at <http://pitchfork.com/features/interviews/8026-beck-15-years/> (date accessed: March 18, 2012).

3. Sonic Markers and Taste: re-contextualisation, substitution and appropriation

Good taste and frugality are the enemies of creativity.

—Pablo Picasso

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I discussed the ways in which musical sounds can be re-contextualised as sonic markers of time with an ironic intent. I sought to illuminate the extent to which associations to socio-cultural values can affect the meaning of musical sounds and thus inform the communicative process of pop production. Regardless of the “reality” of his personal life, Beck establishes his musical credibility by exploiting the nostalgic potential of sonic markers according to the principles of retronormativity. The retronormative use of sonic markers, however, also signals notions of credibility and high cultural status. As Simon Reynolds notes, “[W]here retro truly reigns as the dominant sensibility and creative paradigm is in hipsterland, pop’s equivalent to highbrow” (Reynolds 2011: xix). This would indicate that the re-contextualisation of musical sounds could also evoke ideological connotations that relate to taste. Although Beck appears to advocate neither ideological nor political motifs through his music, the ability to appreciate his ironic take on popular music history demands a certain acquaintance with its development. In this way, taste also plays a role in his use of sonic markers—thus the extended implications of retronormativity. In the following chapter, I will follow this line of thought through an alternative means of utilising

stereotyped sonic markers in popular music, switching my magnifying glass from aspects of time to the question of taste. My aim is not to provide a typology of sonic markers of taste but to explore the potential *effects* of using, and thus constructing, sonic markers of socio-cultural value in recorded music—a process that relies upon a subtle negotiation between validating and challenging fixed conventions of pop aesthetics.

This chapter is structured around three musical examples in which sonic markers act strategically as a basis for negotiating the quality of the musical performance in question. The first example is Céline Dion and Anastacia's live performance of AC/DC's "You Shook Me All Night Long" at the *VH1 Divas* performance in Las Vegas in 2002. There are no studio recordings of this particular rendition, but the clip I am referring to is available on YouTube for repeated listening outside the live context in which it first appeared. In this performance, professional musicians play the song incredibly accurately, yet many people consider it one of the worst cover versions of all time. My analysis will look at why this is so. The second example is Senor Coconut's version of Kraftwerk's "Autobahn". Following up on the idea of inappropriate codes, I will engage with the "cheesiness" of this cover version's production aesthetics, particularly its exaggerated digital reverb, as a heavily value-laden construction. While just about anyone would note something "over the top" about this version, only insiders, both culturally and musically, would fully appreciate its play with the binary opposition between stereotypes of the Latin American and the German. (Uwe Schmidt, the German electronica artist also known as Senor Coconut, moved to Chile and made a specialty out of "Latino" renditions of Kraftwerk songs.) My third example is the Swedish rapper Promoe's song "Svennebanan". While both the lyrics and the video are intended to satirise "normality", perfectly characteristic generic codes associated with dance and trance function in this narrative as sonic markers. My argument in this section is that the appropriation of these generic traits in fact validates the lyrics.

The overall aim of this chapter, then, is to investigate the utilisation of sonic markers of taste as performative strategies in recorded popular music. In other words, I am keen to investigate how the juxtaposition of moral and aesthetic evaluations takes

place on the basis of musical sound. What are the markers of taste, I will ask here, and how can they be identified?

Re-contextualisation: Céline Dion and Anastacia’s “You Shook Me All Night Long”

Evaluating music along the lines of “good” and “bad” is a discursive practice that is most often reserved for fans and journalists and certainly *not* musicologists. Therefore, I must stress that I do not intend to judge the present musical examples or demonstrate the validity of good or bad taste in general as anything other than a socio-cultural construct. Rather, my position is in line with Simon Frith’s argument that the whole idea of “bad taste”, as a construct, can be derived from two musical aspects that function as triggers of “badness”. One is the genre-centricity of so-called “formula music”, which is “judged in the context of or by reference to a critique of mass production” (Frith 1996: 69). Another is “imitative music . . . the implicit contrast with ‘original’ or, perhaps, ‘individual’ sounds [whereby] a record or artist is dismissed for sounding just like someone else (or, not least, for sounding just like their own earlier records or songs)” (ibid.). This aspect is generally applied to cover versions, though not universally; George Plasketes (2010), for example, discusses the new versions of songs generated by *MTV Unplugged* performances, *American Idol*, impersonators, tributes and even karaoke and concludes:

The cover phenomenon in popular culture may be viewed as a postmodern manifestation of rampant recontextualization in music as artists revisit, reinterpret and re-examine a significant cross section of musical styles, periods, genres, individual records and other artists and their catalogs of work. (Plasketes 2010: 2)

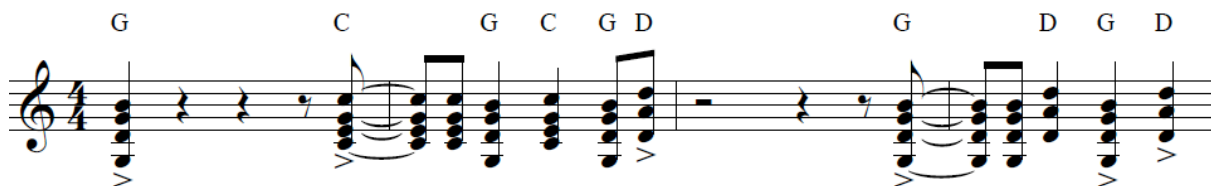
Frith’s point about imitative music—that one perpetually risks being judged for sounding just like someone else, or even oneself—would indicate that musical expressions could also function as sites for deciding where (or to whom) the music belongs. As discussed in the introduction, the value of music has a lot to do with the genre or style to which it is being ascribed, but also to the expectations that would

follow such ascription. This is a relational process that in turn gains support from Plasketes's argument about re-contextualisation, which is made possible because of an inherent stylistic, generic or periodic belonging of the music. In sum, both arguments display the impact of the musical sound—and thus the sonic marker—on any evaluation of the music. Such relational mechanisms, I would argue, can be identified by examining the juxtaposition of the biographical presence conveyed through the singer's voice and the aesthetic framework through which this voice is conveyed. In the intersection between such factors, there is a good chance of a mismatch that would invite the construction of sonic markers. In short, while the sound instruments and voices in themselves might signal a generic or stylistic belonging, their positioning as sonic markers arises through the *context in which they are used*.

One example of re-contextualisation can be found in Céline Dion and Anastacia's version of "You Shook Me All Night Long". This song was originally released by AC/DC on their album *Back in Black* (1980). Featuring for the first time Brian Johnson on vocals and the Young brothers as the main songwriters, this album is one of the best selling ever, surpassed only by Michael Jackson's *Thriller* (1979).³⁵ AC/DC's original recording is built around a strong, simple guitar riff (ex. 3.1) played by rhythm guitarist Malcolm Young; the arrangement is further characterised by Angus Young's signature guitar solo style and Brian Johnson's nasal vocals over a straightforward rock backbeat. Aesthetically, the guitar timbre of the basic riff is distorted but relatively dry, in the sense that it has a short sustain time and minimal use of reverb. This has to do with the band's relatively small-sized guitars, equipped with humbucker pickups, but it also has to do with Malcolm Young's stylistic approach to the instrument.³⁶ For AC/DC, both this dry guitar sound and Johnson's vocal stylings are sonically identifiable markers of a musical identity.

³⁵ *Back in Black* was AC/DC's first record after the death of former vocalist Bon Scott. The sales statistics are available at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Back_in_black (date accessed: August 7, 2011).

³⁶ Both the Gibson SG used by Angus Young and the Gretsch Jet Firebird used by his brother, Malcolm, are lightweight, solid-body guitars, which provides them with less sustain compared to heavier guitars such as the Gibson Les Paul. Although Angus performs most of the solos, Malcolm is often credited as the source of the band's sound. A similar "dryness", though applied in a completely different style of music, is to be found in Barney Sumner's guitar



Example 3.1

“You Shook Me All Night Long”: Guitar riff (0:16–0:24).

Twenty-two years after the release of *Back in Black*, on May 23, 2002, Céline Dion and Anastacia took the stage at MGM Grand Las Vegas to perform at the *VH1 Divas* show. Right from the start, there are certain visual indicators of the playful attitude of the performers. Dion, for example, is dressed in tight white trousers, high-heeled black sandals and a short-sleeved antique pink top with long, thin drapery hanging down from her elbows, an outfit that is not particularly characteristic of “rock”. During the performance she even makes a half-hearted attempt to imitate Angus Young’s popularisation of Chuck Berry’s duck walk (fig. 3.1). The general impression, then, is that this performance should not be taken too seriously. Right away in the second half of the first verse, Anastacia takes over the lead vocals with her hoarse, Tina Turner–like voice. At the guitar solo, “special diva guitarist” Meredith Brooks takes the stage and performs a part that appropriates the characteristic traits of Young’s guitar style.³⁷

playing with Joy Division (see chapter 5). He too used the Gibson SG as one of his main guitars.

³⁷ Brooks is perhaps best known commercially for her 1997 hit “Bitch”.



Figure 3.1: Celine Dion performing her rendition of Angus Young's "duck walk".

Although Brooks is perhaps not quite up to Angus Young's standards, the song is successfully reproduced overall—that is, every note of the original version is in place and performed by professional musicians at a high level of ability. Rock fans, however, have savaged it. Net forums and blogs generally consider it to be among the worst cover versions of all times. Chris Vinnicombe of musicradar.com writes: "Céline Dion and Anastacia do truly horrible things to AC/DC's 'You Shook Me All Night Long'".³⁸ Josh Yaxley on musicouch.com calls Dion the song's "murderer", continuing: "They should just stay away from all of our favourite, legendary rock songs and maybe do some of their own? And maybe, just maybe, they could do them well, although that's probably asking a bit too much".³⁹ On badcoverversions.com, Joe Sparrow rather dramatically finds this cover version to be "irredeemable proof that the lifeless body of Rock has been drained to a point where the veins gurgle, spit and splutter".⁴⁰ Why the furore, though? Must these individual music genres remain inviolate, so that pop stars never venture into (and desecrate) rock (or vice versa, though this happens less)?

³⁸ Available at <http://www.musicradar.com/news/guitars/blog-the-worst-cover-versions-on-youtube-146107> (date accessed: May 28, 2011).

³⁹ Available at <http://musicouch.com/musicouching/the-10-worst-cover-songs/3/> (date accessed: May 28, 2011).

⁴⁰ Available at <http://www.badcoverversions.com/Céline-dionanastacia-you-shook-me-all-night-long/> (date accessed: May 28, 2011).

From a musicological perspective, Robert Walser's (1993) observations about guitar and vocal distortion as sonic preconditions of rock and heavy metal may help us to locate one point at which Céline Dion and Anastacia's AC/DC cover went wrong. Walser states:

The most important aural sign of heavy metal is the sound of an extremely distorted electric guitar. Anytime this sound is musically dominant, the song is either metal or hard rock; any performer that lacks it cannot be included in the genre. (Walser 1993: 41)

The sound of a distorted electric guitar, in other words, is held to be a founding premise of either heavy metal or hard rock. In Dion and Anastacia's performance, the distorted electric guitar takes centre stage through the signature riff and the guitar solo, but does it in fact *dominate*? I would suggest not—in fact, I would suggest that the musical “power” of this cover version remains with the two female superstars who perform it, and further that those superstars represent a quite different set of socio-cultural values than that of the song's creators.

Most significantly, this transfer of power is played out through the vocal performances, and perhaps Dion's in particular. Walser further argues that vocal distortion is also a central premise of rock as well as metal, and the stylings of AC/DC's lead singer Brian Johnson are a good example of this sound. Like Tina Turner, Anastacia is capable of summoning a growl when she wants to, but Céline Dion is known exclusively as a vocal virtuoso whose timbral qualities virtually define the conventions of *clean* singing. While she generally sings in a middle range, rumour has it that her range is in fact five octaves. According to Carl Wilson, Dion possesses a “big voice”, which triggers a specific set of connotations:

The “big voice” is very showbiz in this sense. In the case of singers like Céline, some of the intoxication is in the sensation that she is at once doing tricks with her voice and is herself overwhelmed by its natural force: Her virtuosity is simultaneously slight-of-hand and somehow *real* magic, a kind of vocal sublime, a mighty waterfall inspiring fear and awe. (Wilson 2007: 71ff)

For Wilson, then, Dion's performing voice balances between calculated manipulation, on the one hand, and true vocal sublimity, on the other, which would indicate that all voices, even the "big" ones, are in fact highly personal entities. As Erik Steinskog observes, "A singer's voice is, in so many ways, a signature, marking her or him as musician and performer" (Steinskog 2010: 142). In other words, as I have argued elsewhere, the unique qualities of the individual pop performer's voice alone comprise a marker of identity—a marker of the protagonist's biographical presence in the song. Given how strong Dion's voice (and pop identity) is, rock fans such as those writing so angrily above might well wonder whether "You Shook Me All Night Long" would stand a chance "against" her. Yet it may not be enough to see this cover version as an instance of competition between an existing song's known and celebrated markers of hard rock and its adopted performer's known and celebrated markers of pop. For one thing, Leslie M. Meier argues that Dion in fact displays a "relatively non-aggressive femininity" (read: pop identity) and poses little threat to the "normative masculinity foundational to rock culture" (Meier 2011: 133). But to what extent might Dion's non-aggressiveness and "excessively maternal femininity" (ibid.) constitute another kind of affront altogether? And how does such an overwhelming impression of "bad taste" emerge from this rather harsh meeting between two sets of conventions: rock authenticity (Walser 1993, Moore 2002) and the "diva-effect" (Hawkins 2009: 7)?

One possibility could perhaps be found in Wilson's description of Dion's voice as a "mighty waterfall" (Wilson 2007: 72). The evaluation of this particular cover version obviously engages with questions of taste and aesthetics, but might it also involve unmet expectations? For the rock fans of AC/DC, there is simply no way that Céline Dion and Anastacia will be equal to the task of performing that signature song, no matter how talented they are. But most fans then take their righteous anger a step further, accusing the two of "stealing repertoire" from one of the bestselling bands of all time. Indeed, at this point in the discussion, the music itself has been left behind, and the non-musical aspects of the performers (and the song) move to the forefront. Sonic markers continue to underpin the debate, however, as rock fans insist on their

utter unreproducibility and Céline Dion goes ahead and replicates them anyway. Upon a second glance, we then wonder if AC/DC really does do anything so different? What is in play becomes a certain phobia about even the possibility that the sonic markers of rock authenticity could be “normalised” in contexts as horrific (to rock fans) as *VHI Divas*. Perhaps it is less the cover itself that is in bad taste than the decision by Céline Dion and Anastacia to cover it. Yet the music informs this equation nevertheless, and I will use the next two musical examples to explore that impact further.

Instrumental Substitution: Senor Coconut’s “Autobahn”

The process of re-contextualisation includes some form of substitution. So far I have only tackled this fact indirectly, by examining the potential outcome of substituting the artist within a specific repertoire. In the following example, I will pursue the idea of *instrumental substitution*, in order to identify the relationship between moral and aesthetic judgements of musical sound. This idea is based on Philip Tagg’s (1982) concept of hypothetical substitution (HS), which engages with the level of musical analysis whereby experimentation with the potential effects of altering harmony and melody in songs will falsify or verify the assumed affective meaning of these elements (Tagg 1982: 51). It is, however, possible to find a range of songs in which such substitution is no longer hypothetical. One example is Senor Coconut’s rendition of Kraftwerk’s “Autobahn” (1974) as a cumbia. While the original composition and arrangement have been preserved, his exchange of both instruments and vocals constitutes the entire basis for the impact of this rendition.⁴¹ How, then, do these substitutions relate to sonic markers in the formation of musical identity? As I have argued in the previous example, substituting the protagonists of a song affects its meaning, even when its delivery closely resembles the original. In that case, rock fans savaged the pop stars’ playful intent. But humour and pleasure can also evoke ideological connotations, as I will explore in the following example.

⁴¹ For a close reading of Kraftwerk’s original version, its reception in the United States and ultimately its contribution to the construction of German identity—even as a national anthem of the BRD—see Lindvig 2008: 37–68 and Albiez and Lindvig 2010: 15–44.

Senor Coconut is only one of German electronica artist Uwe Schmidt's many aliases, which also include Almost Digital, Atom Heart, Erik Satin, Bund Deutche Programmierer, Midisport, Mono, Pornotanz, Lassigue Benthouse and Lisa Carbon, among more than sixty others. Upon moving to Chile in 1996, Schmidt promptly created "Senor Coconut" and began to fashion musical comments on society in the guise of electronica-inflected Chilean salsa, cumbia and merengue. In 2000, Schmidt released his second album as Senor Coconut, entitled *El Baile Alemán* (the German dance). Consisting of computer-programmed "Latin" renditions of nine of Kraftwerk's most famous tracks, the album features Venezuelan singer and producer Argenis Brito (from the band Mambotour) and Jorge Gonzalez (bassist and lead vocalist of Los Prisioneros) on vocals. In an interview with *NuMagazine Sweden*, Schmidt commented on his eclectic musical endeavours:

It doesn't matter whether it is music or design/art work, I am always concerned with codes and discourses. "Latino" or "Kraftwerk", "Jesus" or "porno"—logos, styles and those perceptions connected to them are the elements, which need to be studied, experimented with, juxtaposed and questioned. (Schmidt 2000)⁴²

Of course, all this might be construed as witty although the extent to which this humour is perceived depends upon the degree to which the listener can appreciate Schmidt's intertextual play. Rendering Kraftwerk in different styles associated with Latin American music is interesting on an abstract cultural level, but it is also a musical feat, and subtle details of his production work make the whole gesture viable and, in a general sense, allow Schmidt to be the pop-musical maverick he is. In this section, I will explore the extent to which the substitution of instruments plays a real role in a song's meaning, and how these new meanings might in turn play on notions of taste through sonic markers.

Anahid Kassabian (2004) has discussed the strategic use of place-oriented sonic markers as a common trait in world music: "Thanks to artists like Enya and Loreena McKennitt, Celtic sounds have become perhaps the quintessential marker of

⁴² Interview with *NuMagazine Sweden* 12/00. Available at <http://www.multicolor-recordings.de/senorcoconut/> (date accessed: October 12, 2007).

elsewhere. In this sense I've been drawn into a party, a pub session, a ceilidh" (2004: 217). In this case, codes associated with the Celtic musical tradition can be identified as sonic markers of it when they are performed in a new context. Neither Enya nor McKennitt would claim to be performing truly traditional Celtic music, yet they have become ambassadors for it. In world music, then, such codes are being re-contextualised in such a way as to achieve a narrative purpose as sonic markers of the place to which they supposedly belong—which is simply “elsewhere”, in this particular case. Masked, both sonically and visually, as Senor Coconut, Uwe Schmidt experiments with, juxtaposes and questions sonic markers of place in a humorous yet very complicated manner. Although few think of Uwe Schmidt as “world music”, he obviously plays with musical references to place on several levels.⁴³ When this German by birth puts on a sonic mask in the interests of evoking a Latin American combo playing Kraftwerk on two samplers (Akai MPC3000 and S6000), he raises a host of questions related to notions and preconceptions—or, to borrow McClary's term, *conventional wisdom*—about both German-ness and Latin American-ness. I would argue that it is on exactly this level that sonic markers come to play an important role in Schmidt's identity formation.

Through his elaborate imitation of Latin American musical codes, on the one hand, and his parody of both German and Latin American stereotypes, on the other, Schmidt as Senor Coconut straddles the two places/cultures/musics. As Kassabian notes, “It is in the musical qualities of the recordings, the attention we give to the listening, and the settings in which we listen that entanglement takes place” (Kassabian 2004: 221). Production practice also contributes to Schmidt's multinational flair. In particular, by adding small non-musical sounds to his music, Schmidt parodies both his home country and his adopted one. In the original intro to Kraftwerk's “Autobahn”, for example, a car roars off as a robotic voice vocoder begins a twenty-two-minute audio tour of one of Germany's finest infrastructural achievements. In his cover version, however, Senor Coconut's car fails to start up at all, and we hear the

⁴³ For more detailed endeavours into the discourse of world music, see, for example, Taylor 1997 and Frith 2000.

driver get out, cursing in Spanish (*carro mierda*, or “crappy car”) as the male choir sings “Auto-wahn”.⁴⁴

The song, then, plays out as programmed marimbas beneath English that is sung with a powerful Spanish accent. It is tempting to dismiss the whole cover as pure pastiche, but Schmidt’s parody takes place at more subtle levels of production as well. As John Bush wrote in his review for *Allmusic*:

Latin music can be a surprisingly precise genre of music, and Schmidt walks the verge between Latin and techno with a special genius that would be practically impossible for other electronic producers. Far more than just a novelty record (though many will see it that way), *El Baile Alemán* accomplishes an excellent Latin-electronic fusion. (Bush 2000)⁴⁵

One example of Schmidt’s precision is his use of reverberation on the vocals, which can be read as a sonic marker reinforcing the sense that markers of bad taste are present in the recording. As emphasised by several scholars (Cunningham 1998, Doyle 2005, Katz 2004, Lacasse 2000, Wicke 2009), the shaping of virtual space in the recording studio underwent a transformative change with the move from echo chambers to plate and spring reverbs. The further invention of digital reverbs in the late 1970s, most notably with the Lexicon-reverbs, added yet another dimension to the possibilities of reverberation. In addition to providing an entirely new artificial space for the recordings of the 1980s, digital reverb also became an effect that would impact the overall sound of the music.⁴⁶

Schmidt, however, appears to be using a particularly low-tech version of this digital technology, as if to imply a closer connection to the low-fi Latin American “sound” (as opposed to the high-tech fetishism of much European and American pop

⁴⁴ In German, *wahnsinnig* is often shortened to *wahn*—meaning insane or delusional. Thanks to Professor Michael Rauhut at the University of Agder for pointing out this detail.

⁴⁵ Available at <http://www.allmusic.com/album/el-baile-alemn-r489356/review> (date accessed: April 24, 2012).

⁴⁶ During its development in the 1980s, digital reverb was used on individual instrument sounds as well as a recording’s overall virtual “space”—listen, for example, to the snare drum in Joe Cocker’s “River’s Rising” (1987) or the gated reverb on the bass drum in Prince’s “Kiss” (1986).

music). In their article “The Emergence of *Rap Cubano*” (2004), Debra Pacini Hernandez and Reebee Garofalo note that Cuban musicians, for example, have long lacked access to newer equipment, so what sounds dated in Europe sounds simply “right” to “them”:

The emergence of *rap Cubano* coincided with a time when US rap had moved to a new technological plateau of samplers, sequencers, and digital drum machines. Cuban rappers, in contrast, began to develop their craft by fashioning Spanish rhymes over primitive backing tracks recorded on cassette, which were produced at great personal and financial sacrifice. (Hernandez and Garofalo 2004: 97)

In other words, the lack of updated technological equipment in Cuban music production has also affected the music produced there. Cuban hip-hop, as Hernandez and Garofalo point out, has thus been marked by the low-tech production facilities in which it has been produced. Schmidt, on the other hand, extends this low-tech production style to Latin America in general, taking advantage of the fact that these sounds become sonic markers of a place (and in this case a style) when re-contextualised in his music. As he indicates, of course, simulating “Latin American” music on his computer brought with it some challenges:

Programming a simulation is a tricky matter, however, as it must be coherent. You can’t just start programming, you need to consider real arrangements, e.g. how musical notes are distributed, arranged and “sedimented”. Subsequently you have to imagine the band as it is: the number of trumpets, the role of percussion and how a composer would arrange all these elements.⁴⁷

Thus an economic and cultural circumstance (some Latin musicians’ lack of access to new equipment) translates into a sonic marker of an entire genre when fed back (through a parody) to an alternative culture’s ears. On the one hand, this *Senor Coconut* album consists of funny cover versions of Kraftwerk that re-present the

⁴⁷ Interview with *Numagazine Sweden* 12/00. Available at <http://www.multicolor-recordings.de/senorcoconut/> (date accessed: October 12, 2007).

original band's harmonic and melodic lines via the instruments (and genre-specific rhythms) of a Latin combo. On the other hand, this music harnesses all of this “bad taste” to a larger purpose, as Schmidt singlehandedly co-opts and then undermines a host of musical and cultural stereotypes through his deft and unexpectedly delicate application of sonic markers.

Appropriation: Promoe's “Svennebanan”

Appropriation is a third mechanism linking taste and sonic markers, and it derives directly from the music's relationship to existing cultural *conventions*. Susan McClary (2000) has looked at the social premises—the unwritten and often unspoken norms and customs—of entire musical repertoires and notes, “By ‘convention’ we usually mean a procedure that has ossified into a formula that needs no further explanation” (McClary 2000: 3). McClary aims to dispel ideas of naturalness and necessity regarding tonality in music, as well as the existence of a category such as the purely musical: “Whatever we label these structures, they are intensely ideological formations: whether noticed or not, they are the assumptions that allow cultural activities to ‘make sense’” (ibid.: 5). Through her readings of a wide spectrum of musical texts (the twelve-bar blues, John Zorn, Monteverdi), McClary argues: “The jostling among expressive devices, conventions, and ‘purely musical’ procedures becomes most apparent during those episodes of stylistic flux” (ibid.: 4). As I have argued so far in this chapter, examining forms of re-contextualisation or substitution of musical codes can help us to identify sonic markers—that is, it is when stylistic or generic codes are used in a new context that they appear as markers at all. Therefore, I am keen to explore what McClary refers to as *episodes of stylistic flux* with reference to taste in the following section. In this case, stylistic flux provides a basis for comparison between original and copy—as Frith (2004) reminds us, bad is not just bad regardless of context. Rather, as I will attempt to demonstrate, bad is typically argued in relation to good and demonstrated through the use of conventions. The issue here is how the narrative potential of sonic markers be used (or misused) to provoke a reaction in the listener according to existing, if changing, cultural conventions.

Indeed, it could be argued that Céline Dion and Anastacia challenge generic conventions by covering AC/DC. Similarly, Uwe Schmidt, behind his disguise as Senor Coconut, certainly negotiates a range of conventions by playing explicitly on stereotypical notions of both German-ness and Latin American-ness through his music. Yet these examples are all cover versions of existing songs—that is to say, these negotiations take place within an existing repertoire. If I am arguing that taste can be linked to the conventions associated with musical sound, I must therefore also include an example in which this takes place in an “original” recording. While Beck, as discussed in the previous chapter, exploits the credibility of certain sonic markers to construct his individual musical identity, others have made more explicit use of “bad taste” to direct a critical voice against society. One example where such a negotiation takes place is the Swedish rapper Promoe’s song “Svennebanan” (2009).

Promoe’s political engagement has defined his career as a solo artist and as a member of the rap collective Looptroop Rockers. “Svennebanan” was released as the first single from Promoe’s fourth solo album, *Kråksången* (2009).⁴⁸ It is an excellent example of the ways in which artists harness sonic markers to political ends, particularly in terms of socio-cultural conventions. The socio-political dimension of this song begins already with its title, which comes from two words. *Svenne* is an abbreviation of “Medel-Svensson”, which is the nickname for the “average Swede” (“Ola Nordmann” in Norway, or “average Joe” in the United States), while *banan* (banana) simply emphasises that the *svenne* is male. The composite term, however, has immediate negative connotations:

Svenne är en nedsättande benämning på en person som lever som en såkallad medelsvensson, en stereotyp som lever et tråkigt og konventionelt liv, vilket härvid inte anses eftersträvansvärt. Svenne kan också avse *svensk* i negativ mening, ungefär på samma sätt som uttrycket blatte kan användas nedsättande om någon som har ickesvenskt ursprung. [*Svenne* is a derogatory term for a person living as a so-called *medelsvensson*, a stereotype who lives a sad and conventional life, which in this case

⁴⁸ The record title refers to the way in which a voice might become altered through passion and engagement—in this case, *singing like a crow*—which points to Promoe’s conviction that the message is more important than its delivery.

is not considered desirable. *Svenne* can also cover Swedish in the negative sense, in much the same way as the term *blatte* can be used to disparage a person of non-Swedish origin.] (http://sv.wikipedia.org/wiki/Svenne_%28sk%C3%A4llsord%29)

For Promoe, the term “svennebanan” evokes a set of stereotyped conventions whereby people actualise their need to escape from their everyday lives by resorting to acts that they know are in bad taste. In an interview on the breakfast show “Vakna!” on *The Voice TV Sweden*, he explains:⁴⁹

Jag tycker låten handlar mest om at försöka fly ifrån nånting som man inte, så där, tycker om hos sig själv genom at supa eller att fly in i dålig underhållning. [I think the song is about trying to escape from something that one does not like in oneself through drinking or fleeing into bad entertainment.]

Interestingly, what Promoe found as he attempted to satirise people’s descent into bad-taste entertainment (and bad habits) is that the sonic markers that proved useful for underscoring his critique were in fact also very enjoyable. In the studio, he admits in the same interview, he and his collaborators were in fact laughing as much from pleasure as from disdain. This does not, however, take the edge away from the social commentary that is underlined in the music—in “Svennebanan”, it is the musical sound itself that plays a major role in its impact. One of the “Vakna!” interviewers, Josefin Crafoord, agreed:

Jamen, för hela låten är ju svenne. Ljuden, liksom. Allt. Man får lust å hoppa runt på nått sån där billigt disco med heltäckningsmatta när man hör den. [Well, because the whole song is svenne. The sound, in a way, everything. One wants to jump around in some sort of cheap disco with floor-covering carpets when listening to it.]

This quotation certainly illustrates how musical sounds or qualities can trigger deep-seated socio-cultural values. Here, musical sounds are held as signs of bad taste

⁴⁹ Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=egRMHrzB1HQ> (date accessed: May 30, 2010).

through their association with a cheap disco (as opposed to the exclusive discos that Crafoord presumably frequents?) and wall-to-wall carpeting. I would argue that it is through the specific uses of these sounds in the music, against the background of the protagonist's established musical identity, that they become sonic markers—in this case, of bad taste.

There are at least three obvious sonic markers in the song that further its narrative regarding a Swedish average Joe. First of all, there are the signature snare drum rolls in the middles of the verses and the build-ups to the choruses. These rolls originate with the Roland TR-909, a drum machine whose impact on the development of electronic dance music from the late 1980s onward cannot be overstated. Although it was produced for just one year (1983–84) and totalled merely ten thousand items, this particular machine has become a generic Western cultural signifier of dance, house and techno. Peter Shapiro points out: “The four-on-the-floor groove and endless snare-roll crescendi ubiquitous in house, techno, and everything that followed come from the [TR-]808 and 909” (Shapiro 2000). From its relatively underground origins, then, the TR-909 and especially its drum roll have come to signify a whole spectrum of electronic music genres. Based on this “history of use” (Clarke and Dibben 2000: 233), these snare drum rolls are consciously appropriated as a sonic marker with a narrative purpose in “Svennebanan”. As the two quotes above indicate, the sound of this song triggers “bad” associations, and thus the signature snare drum rolls from this particular drum machine can be interpreted as a sonic marker of bad taste.

This reading, however, is only plausible when placed within the larger musical and visual narrative. In the music, two motifs (and their respective timbres, in particular) reinforce the sense of bad taste. The first of these is the synthesiser theme that appears in the second half of the verses (ex. 3.2), whose timbral qualities and tonal and rhythmic patterns point explicitly to trance. Straight quavers move in fifths and small sixths, outlining a four-chord harmonic pattern for the song: Em-G-C-H.⁵⁰ In

⁵⁰ To be more precise, the synthesiser theme outlines both this four-chord pattern *and* a three-chord pattern (Em-Em-C-H), where the second Em would be the same chord in its second inversion (starting on the third). The latter is present in the second halves of the verses, while the bass line in the choruses underlines the G. This dual function has to do with G and Em being parallel keys, where the bass note would decide the actual chord.

addition to its obvious role as a melodic hook, this motif also works generically as a bridge between the rap on the verses and the trance in the choruses.



Example 3.2

“Svennebanan”: *Synthesiser theme (0:57–1:01)*.⁵¹

The other musical code that signals bad taste stems from the rhythmic pattern and the sound of the synthesiser bass line (ex. 3.3) around which the choruses are built. Followed by yet another 909-derived snare drum break, this bass line provides a certain generic framework for the musical utterance—that is, euro dance, or even trance music. Taken together, these codes become sonic markers by evoking trance music through their apparent contrast to the content of the lyrics and also to Promoe’s musical identity (his identification with hip-hop and his political engagement).



Example 3.3

“Svennebanan”: *Synth bass hook on choruses (1:19–1:23)*.

As a visual support to these sonic endeavours, the video for “Svennebanan” further underpins the narrative purpose of the sonic markers discussed earlier. According to Promoe, the video consists of authentic clips from a bachelor’s party on a ferry between Sweden and Finland. The story starts off in a car with the cameraman and two of the bachelor’s friends. The weak sunlight indicates early morning, and

⁵¹ These time codes are extracted from the music video version, which has a longer intro than the single version. In the single version, this theme appears around 0:31 into the song, while example 3.3 would start around 0:53.

eager outbursts from the boys indicate a strong sense of excitement in the air. In the next shot, the young men blindfold their friend, whom they jokingly refer to as “the pig”. The song starts off with Promoe gently singing “Svennebanan” as the bachelor appears in a chicken costume on the ferry to the laughter and applause of his friends, who now number six individuals. During the song, the bachelor reappears in different costumes—first in a blue dress and blond wig done in pigtails, then in swimming trunks heading for the dance floor, and then in a diving suit. All of these outfits are thrust upon the protagonist by his friends and represent a “norm” of sorts for Scandinavian bachelor parties. The prospective groom is supposed to be dressed up in a silly costume; otherwise, the party is considered a failure. The grainy quality of the images, the use of a handheld camera and the rough cutting of Promoe’s appearances in the video all strengthen the impression that these are authentic clips.





At the same time, while the surface of the video bears strong marks of having been filmed with a handheld camera, a closer look would reveal a rhythmic synchronisation between the music and the images. In this way, the video resembles what Robyn Stilwell has labelled a “modified documentary style” (Stilwell 2003: 62). In “Svennebanan”, as we will continue to see, the synchronisation between music and video contributes to the authentication of the lyrics in two ways. The first is that some of the lyrics have virtually been placed in the mouths of the partygoers. The first four lines of the first verse include allusions to Thailand:

Tack som fan kap kun kap
Koh pangan koh tao khao lak
Fuck it i phuket pingpong show
Kalla folket för tjingtjonghoes

The images accompanying these lines display an aggressive attitude initially directed towards ridiculing their soon-to-be-married friend. Synchronised with the music, however, this aggressiveness suddenly takes on a socio-political dimension (table 3.1). The words “fuck it” from the third line in the first verse has been rhythmically synched with the boy in the polo-necked grey sweater on the left. His aggressive looks threaten to position him as a frequenter of sex tourism in Thailand, an impression that is

reinforced by the second clip, which is taken just a second later. Looking almost angry, the same person apparently shouts “tjingtjonghoes”, as if it is his personal opinion that women from Thailand in general are prostitutes. Up to this point in the song, the music does not hint at trance or dance, and Promoe’s lyrics occupy our attention. Then, about halfway into the verse, the synthesiser theme (ex. 3.2) enters, which in turn brings us to the second form of synchronisation between music and images.

Table 3.1: Rhythmic synchronisation of lyrics and pictures

Lyrics	Pictures	Point of synchronisation
<i>Fuck it</i> i phuket pingpong show” (0:38)		Promoe’s rap is based around a hip-hop beat and a simple quaver-based bass line on the ground notes of the chords. The synchronisation concludes on the words “fuck it”, as if to indicate the boy’s attitude.
“Kalla folket för <i>tjingtjonghoes</i> ” (0:41)		Zooming in on one of the boys underlines the synchronisation between the aggressive look on his face and the word “tjingtjonghoes”.
“Soppatorsk och foppatofflor” (0:57–0:59)		Dressed in a blond wig and a blue dress, the bachelor dances with an innocent passerby as the synthesiser theme (example 3.2) enters.
Svennebanan, svennebanan, svennebanan, svennebanan . . . (1:20–1:34)		The boys take off on the dance floor. The song is taken towards its climax by a 909-snare drum roll, before the chorus sets off on a trance beat that is sonically marked by examples 3.2 and 3.3.

The bachelor, who is now dressed in a blue dress and a pigtailed, blond wig, dances with an innocent passerby. This dancing scene has been looped twice in order to synch

with the music, and it also functions to underpin the apparent utility of the theme as a sonic marker. This form of synchronisation takes place throughout the music videos, and these short examples are extracted in order to illustrate the lines along which the song's narrative is structured. Pictures of the boys dancing drunk at the ferry's disco have been synchronised with the trance mood that characterises the choruses. Thus, instead of dancing to the actual music from the disco (which we in fact get short glimpses of towards the end of the video), the boys are dancing to the trance-like sound and beat of the choruses, while Promoe mockingly repeats the single word of which the choruses consist:

Svennebanan, svennebanan, svennebanan, svennebanan
Svennebanan, svennebanan, svennebana-han
Svennebanan, svennebanan, svennebanan, svennebanan
Svennebanan, svennebanan, svennebana-han

Constructing markers of taste

Through the three musical examples presented in this chapter, I have attempted to identify a range of sonic markers that elicit questions of taste. In different ways, these examples use musical codes that become identifiable as sonic markers of taste through re-contextualisation, instrumental substitution and appropriation. On one level, as we have seen, these rather disparate performances accentuate questions of taste as a pleasurable aspect of music. On another, as I will conclude here, these examples also reveal how socio-cultural conventions reside in the socio-cultural codification of musical sound. Frith (1996) argues that pleasure ultimately guides us in our judgments of songs, although we cannot help but introduce a moral dimension to our aesthetic inclinations:

The marking off of some tracks and genres and artists as “good” and others as “bad” seems to be a necessary part of popular music pleasure and use; it is a way in which we establish our place in various music worlds and use music as a source of identity. And “good” and “bad” are key words because they suggest that aesthetic and ethical

judgements are tied together: not to like a record is not just a matter of taste; it is also a matter of morality. (Frith 1996: 72)

From this, it could be argued that taste, as a mix of morality and pleasure, is also an aspect of the musical experience that is evoked through processes of constructing sonic markers. This process, as I discussed in the introductory chapter, takes place on (at least) two levels: use and reception. While the use of sonic markers has a lot to do with re-contextualising, substituting or appropriating musical codes, the complexity of the process of constructing markers of taste, as we have seen, resides to a great extent in the *reception* of the music—the reading, that is, of the production. In this way, the examples presented in this chapter recall Middleton’s “specter of authenticity” (Middleton 2006). Middleton reminds us that authenticity is a result of ways in which one claims the truth, and must be searched in how the music is produced and how and by whom it is performed rather than searching for an immanent quality of the music itself. It is through the ways in which sounds are used in the previous examples, then, that markers of taste (and thus authenticity) are constructed.

Céline Dion and Anastacia lay claim to musical codes of hard rock in general, and AC/DC in particular—codes that are markers of authenticity for AC/DC. Yet, sworn rock fans prefer to think of these codes as inviolate, and Dion/Anastacia are in turn determined to be acting in bad taste. Based on the harsh critique aimed at their cover version of “You Shook Me All Night Long”, the song appears to “belong” to a certain group of rock fans. That the album from which this song is taken in fact belongs to more than forty million people worldwide does not seem to dampen the sense of exclusivity associated with this repertoire. The use, then, of AC/DC’s musical signatures—the sonic markers that form a part of their musical identity—is interpreted as a marker of bad taste through re-contextualisation. At the centre of this process is an apparent mismatch between the voices (as markers of biographical presence) and the music (in this case, as a marker of rock authenticity). While some would read the playful intent of this mismatch as humorous, others, as we have seen, take it as a personal insult.

In his cumbia rendition of Kraftwerk's "Autobahn", Senor Coconut traffics in sonic markers of bad taste and (willingly or not) makes a larger point about socio-cultural stereotypes along the way. At first, this version might appear to be a superficial ridiculing of the robotic sensibility of Kraftwerk's music—in a sense, a "blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs" (Jameson 1991: 17). Senor Coconut's use of sonic markers, however, in fact engenders a complex parody of stereotypical notions of both German-ness and Chile. His carefully crafted transformation of "Autobahn" into a cumbia not only represents a substitution of instruments (in terms of *using* sonic markers) but also forms a musical foundation for questioning aspects of taste with reference to notions of national identity (in terms of *constructing* sonic markers through instrumental substitution). In this way, by playing consciously on existing notions and preconceptions of what it means to sound German or Chilean, he also both uses and constructs sonic markers of taste. His taste, in other words, is only as bad as we let it be.

Rather than covering an existing song, Promoe instead employs *sounds* that he regards as markers of bad taste to bring down notions of normality in general and reinforces them with images of bad taste as well. He uses the cultural codification of the sounds—their sonic potential—to construct a sonic environment for his critique against conventional Scandinavian behaviour. With "Svennebanan", we are asked to reconcile the harsh reality of Promoe's rap, the video's images and the music's benign trance mood, as the young men in the video are "forced" to act out certain male stereotypes that are described by Promoe's words and underlined musically by markers of trance. In this way, the video authenticates the lyrics and reinforces the communicative power of the generic codes of trance. "Svennebanan", then, by building a narrative structure around these codes, constructs sonic markers that enable a discussion of notions and preconceptions in relation to what is being stated lyrically, and, not least, to the artist behind the words. Notions of stereotyping are further highlighted by the music video, which, as we have seen, arguably contributes to specifying the role of the sonic markers.

In sum, my argument in this chapter has been that by deliberately using musical codes with a narrative purpose, then, one is at the same time constructing sonic

markers. The extent to which these markers actually make a difference to the musical narrative, however, depends upon expectations and competence. As Allan F. Moore notes:

As listeners, although we must recognize and exteriorize our grounds for cognizing the text, this does not imply that we will all do it in the same way. How we do it will depend on the style to which we assign that text, and our competence within that style. (Moore 2001: 17)

Styles and genres, as argued elsewhere, are not constant properties of music. Rather, as McClary reminds us, the conventions governing our judgements would also be subject to socio-cultural change and made specifically identifiable in “episodes of stylistic flux” (McClary 2000: 4). In music where such episodes play a major role in the meaning of the work of art, then, sonic markers can be a viable inroad to discussing aspects of taste on musical premises.

4. No Love in Modern Life: Matters of performance and production in a Morrissey Song

As time speeds up, nothing changes. People become more lonely. And the more they surround themselves by electronic gadgets, they become more isolated and lonely, and I think there'll be a reaction against that.

—Morrissey 2009⁵²

Introduction

Narratives of loneliness, marginalisation and vulnerability have been recurring themes in Morrissey's music, both as front man for the Smiths and as a solo artist for over twenty years.⁵³ Through the musical delivery of these narratives, and also through his offstage media persona, Morrissey has raised important questions about the politics of male identity, especially in relation to the commercial record industry.

Understandably, music journalists, scholars and fans have devoted most of their attention to his lyrics and vocal performance. In this chapter I will focus on how the lyrics and vocals are also contingent on the musical backdrop to his persona, and especially the electric guitar that is so ubiquitous in his songs. Ever since the Smiths era, Morrissey has cultivated a special relationship with the guitar. Early on, he collaborated with Smiths guitarist Johnny Marr on song writing, and the two were a formidable pair; Johnny Rogan describes the relationship as “another exercise in

⁵² Available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=026c_Q9tARg (date accessed February 19, 2009)

⁵³ This chapter was published under the same title in E. Devereux et al. (eds.), *Morrissey: Fandom, Representations and Identities* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2011). Certain changes resulted from later copyediting, but in form and content, it is the same chapter.

doublethink: the Smiths projected a semblance of pop group solidarity and camaraderie, but all the power and influence lay with Morrissey/Marr” (Rogan 1992: 227). Marr’s distinctive guitar arrangements were often characterised by subtle melodic lines atop the harmonic structures.⁵⁴ Given Marr’s preference for a clean or lightly distorted guitar sound, his instrument aligned with Morrissey’s lyrics and vocal performance rather than contesting it. During his solo career, Morrissey has continued to collaborate closely with his guitarists, including Boz Boorer, Alain Whyte and Jesse Tobias. He has recorded with producers including Steven Street (*Viva Hate, Bona Drag*), the late Mick Ronson (*Your Arsenal*), Steve Lillywhite (*Vauxhall and I, Southpaw Grammar, Maladjusted*), Tony Visconti (*Ringleader of the Tormentors*) and the late Jerry Finn (*You Are the Quarry, Years of Refusal*), all of whom made sonically identifiable marks upon his music. In all of his work, Morrissey’s lyrics and vocal performance have succeeded within a specific pop aesthetic framework that has in turn contributed to their meanings.

In this chapter I will explore the expressive dimensions of Morrissey’s production in light of his evident appreciation of (and dependence upon) both guitarists and producers. In particular, an analysis of “Something Is Squeezing My Skull”, the powerful opening track of *Years of Refusal* from 2009, will demonstrate the ways in which certain aesthetic qualities of the production contribute to the meaning of the song’s narrative. This narrative, as I will demonstrate, is both related to the story told in this specific song and inextricably linked to Morrissey’s persona. Structured by an excursion into details of performance and production, this chapter falls into three sections. First I will focus on Morrissey’s vocal performance in the song, especially in relation to the main melodic hook of the chorus, where we find a “moment of transcendence” (Hawkins 2002: 112). Next I will consider the dialogical relationship between the singing voice and the sonic qualities of the electric guitars employed in this song, with an emphasis upon how Morrissey, through his lyrics and vocal performance, potentially alters the discursive framework of the heavily distorted

⁵⁴ Listen, for example, to “This Charming Man” (1983), “William, It Was Really Nothing” (1984), “Heaven Knows I’m Miserable Now” (1984), “Bigmouth Strikes Again” (1986), or “Girlfriend in a Coma” (1987).

electric guitar—and vice versa.⁵⁵ Lastly, I will consider Morrissey’s performance strategies in relation to the socio-political climate of the song’s release in 2009. In the previous chapters, I identified sonic markers that in different ways trigger notions of time or taste. This chapter sets out to investigate the extent to which the concept of markedness is also inextricably linked to artistic persona in a specific socio-cultural context, and how reading the song as an *utterance* (Bakhtin 1986: 60) can serve as an inroad to identifying sonic markers of narrative significance. The goal of this chapter, then, is to identify the sonic markers in the contributions of certain instruments or studio effects to a specific and bounded musical context. The aim is to demonstrate that while musical codes do function differently according to context, they represent compelling musical gestures in their source context nevertheless.

Lyrics and vocal performance

Before turning to questions of production, I want to spend some time on the relationship between Morrissey’s lyrics and the communicative power of his vocalisation. Through his now huge body of work, Morrissey has offered glimpses into the mind of a strong and introspective yet vulnerable, self-critical and lonely man. Songs like “Satan Rejected My Soul”, “Maladjusted” and “Suedehead” present Morrissey the protagonist in the first person as a misfit in modern society. Other songs embrace his listeners as well, through the first person plural, including “We Hate It When Our Friends Become Successful” and “Interesting Drug”. With few exceptions, it is either “I” or “we” in the main role, though Morrissey is remarkably nimble even within these narrative stances, deftly employing what Gavin Hopps terms “oxymoronic mobility”: “A light-footed tendency to turn on himself, and then turn on this turning, and in doing so inhabit without being identified with a variety of divergent positions” (Hopps 2009: 62). Often his verses start with punchy one-liners that are followed by a sudden, unpredictable turn. In “Something Is Squeezing My Skull”, for example, Morrissey is apparently teetering on the verge of madness but

⁵⁵ The two electric guitars on this track are panned left and right, as in a traditional rock recording, but one (played by Jesse Tobias) is processed with heavier overdrive and dominates in the soundscape. It is the more relevant guitar part for my discussion here.

insists that he is “doing very well”. The lyrics go on to hint that some things are not quite as they should be:

I'm doing very well
I can block out the present and the past now
I know by now you think I should have straightened myself out
Thank you drop dead

Indeed, Morrissey's lyrics offer an important insight into the meaning of his music overall. Yet there is more going on as well, in terms of the ways in which his characteristic vocal style contributes such a strong, emotional dimension to the lyrical content. Herein lies one of the main clues as to why he is able to appeal so directly to his listeners' personal feelings. Morrissey's own awareness of his powerful vocalisation comes through in an interview with Zane Lowe of MTV, where he notes:

Sometimes the great singers are not singers who have great voices, but they are just people who catch your attention . . . There is something very sexual in the singing voice, and it draws you in. And it doesn't necessarily mean you want to be physical with the person, but the person is pulling at your very being, and your heart and so forth. (Morrissey 2009)

In distinguishing between having a great voice and being a great singer, Morrissey draws attention to the emotional attractiveness of the vocal performance. In his seminal text “The Grain of the Voice”, Roland Barthes likewise differentiates between *pheno-song* (“everything in the performance which is in the service of communication, representation, expression”) and *geno-song* (“the volume of the singing and speaking voice, the space where significations germinate ‘from within language and in its very materiality’”) (Barthes 1977: 182). According to Barthes, the “grain”—the bodily presence in the voice—is located within the space of the *geno-song*. When Morrissey suggests that a great voice is not necessary in order to be a great singer, he is pointing to the singer's ability to communicate, whatever the nature of his or her voice, with the listener. As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, Céline Dion, by virtue of a great

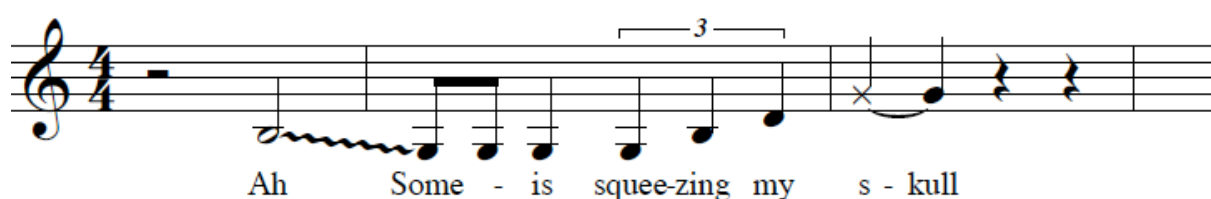
voice—in terms of her vocal range and technical brilliance—is more or less excluded from the discourse of rock authenticity. It was virtually impossible for Dion and Anastacia to gain respect from rock fans for their cover version of “You Shook Me All Night Long”, even though the performance itself was flawlessly executed. Yet that example also demonstrated the extent to which artistic persona(e) played a significant role in the reception of the music. Of course, this was a recorded live performance, whereas “Something Is Squeezing My Skull” is a recording with no accompanying music video.

It could be argued that Barthes’s distinction is somewhat idealistic—mostly because Barthes seems to suggest that the geno-song is extra-cultural. Emphasising the problems with thinking of a voice as independent of its contextual implications, Erik Steinskog argues that traces of the body are *always* left in a voice, even in recorded music, where the voice might otherwise appear to be disembodied:

The voice, as an abstract entity in the singular, is a construct; there is no singular voice, but rather different vocal expressions. And when we hear a voice, we simultaneously hear a body. The voice emanates from the body, and the body—with all its different characteristics—colors the voice. (Steinskog 2008: 2)

Given the challenge inherent in unpacking the grain of the voice in any given performance, we would do well to explore the idea of the geno-song in the work of a performer as authoritative as Morrissey. For even though there is an intimate relationship between the voice and the body, the difficulties encountered in pinning down a vocal sound in words demand proper terms for any kind of deconstruction to take place. With this in mind, the idea of the geno-song is a useful platform for discussing aspects of the voice, which are *not*, to borrow Barthes’s phrase, “customary to talk about” (Barthes 1977:182). The principal point here is that a singer’s bodily presence is always interlinked with his or her vocal expression, and that these bodily traces contribute to the elicitation of an emotional response. According to Stan Hawkins (2002), Morrissey has a remarkable ability to evoke just such an empathic response through his vocal style, successfully harnessing expressive parameters such

as inflections of pitch, precise enunciation and vocal timbre (Hawkins 2002: 84). At the same time, Morrissey balances his irony with a display of vulnerability, exaggerated or otherwise. Hawkins insists that Morrissey is “motivated by the significance of his words” (ibid.: 87) and at times *intentionally* fails to hit his own high notes, in order to assert his authenticity and further enhance his appeal. In “Something Is Squeezing My Skull”, for example, he overreaches during the fanfare-like melodic hook of the chorus to great effect (ex. 4.1).



Example 4.1

“*Something Is Squeezing My Skull*”: The melodic hook of the chorus (0:31–0:35)

The precise manner in which Morrissey actually reaches his top note (the high G) of the chorus demands the listener’s attention and suggests at least two possible interpretations. On the one hand, we might read it as a sign of conformity—perhaps he has finally resigned himself to the ever-increasing demands of “clean” singing. On the other hand, it might also represent his way of emphasising the ironic tone of his lyrics. For one thing, he does not reach this note without tremendous effort, a performative gesture that resonates with the sentiment of suffering in the lyrics. He employs a quirky, rhythmically delayed pronunciation of the single-syllable word, revealing a slight timbral alteration of his voice at the “L”. While I will not speculate on whether or not his voice has been tuned in the studio, this rapid vocal vibrato stands in stark contrast to the calm delivery of the verse and further underlines the narrator’s desperation in the chorus.

As in all of his songs, Morrissey’s voice exploits a range of stylistic markers that make it a recognisable entity of himself as the protagonist. His voice cements his biographical presence in his music—a presence that is further buttressed by the

similarities between his singing and spoken voices. As Hawkins argues elsewhere, such similarities decrease the potential distance between his on- and off-stage personae, one result of which is that “his voice comes over as ‘natural’ and ‘untrained’ . . . This type of voice succumbs to the ordinariness of speech through a range of technicalities, such as pitch slippage, straining and controlled exertion” (Hawkins 2011: 310). While all of these aspects represent generally familiar characteristics of Morrissey’s vocalisation, the particular moment between the words “my” and “skull” in the chorus of “Something Is Squeezing My Skull” is markedly different for two reasons: its *correct* pitch and its pronounced timbral alteration, which in the context of Morrissey’s vocal characteristics (natural and untrained) suggests a moment of disembodiment. Does the gesture as a whole imply some degree of conformity to the music world within which he operates? After all, despite Morrissey’s stance against the commercial record industry and also against the press, he has been totally dependent on both in order to become the artist we know him to be. Have these entities finally somehow won him over? Or does this particular moment play a part in Morrissey’s larger story? When this performing voice loses contact with its body for a few seconds, it marks out a difference that, when interposed with the lyrics, gains a significant narrative relevance to the song. As opposed to interrupting his otherwise powerful geno-song, this gesture extends it, acting as a sonic metaphor for the medical treatment Morrissey describes in the lyrics of the song’s middle section, to which I will return later.

So far, I have focused on aspects of vocal performance and production. Yet the pop song ultimately pivots on its music as well as its texts, and the question still remains: *how* is the lyrical content and the vocal performance conveyed? After all, the three and a half minute pop song is Morrissey’s main vehicle for interacting with his fans—it is through his music that he touches his listeners. In the following section, I will therefore demonstrate the ways in which certain aesthetic features of the musical performance play a vital role in conveying Morrissey’s narratives. More specifically, I will direct the focus towards one of the most pertinent sonic features of this song, namely the heavily distorted electric guitar and its role as a sonic marker in the context of Morrissey’s musical identity.

Reading the electric guitar as a sonic marker

Even though Morrissey has pursued his solo career ever since the Smiths split up in 1987, his performances (both live and on record) have continued to rely upon the presence of a strong (and stable) band. Since 1991, Morrissey has credited guitarists Boz Boorer and Alain Whyte as regular co-writers, to the amazement of some in the industry: “Against all expectations, these creative relationships would persist well into the 21st century; over three times longer than Morrissey’s famous liaison with Johnny Marr” (Brown 2008:172). Having always insisted that his solo career was more or less thrust upon him, Morrissey celebrates his relationship with his band: “The musicians are handpicked, really. They are not just anybody who turns up to play . . . The point is I couldn’t simply play with session musicians or people whom I didn’t like” (Morrissey 2009). As mentioned earlier, Morrissey’s guitarists are also active in the songwriting process. Whyte, for example, wrote the music for “Something Is Squeezing My Skull”, though Jesse Tobias, who replaced Whyte as a regular band member in 2004, performs the guitar parts with Boorer on this song.

One way to position the narrative importance of the electric guitar as a sonic marker would be to think of Morrissey’s songs as utterances, following Bakhtin. In his later writings on various forms of speech as communication, Bakhtin argued that any utterance is comprised of three parts: *thematic content*, *style* and *compositional structure* (Bakhtin 1986: 60). *What* the utterance says, then, is always thoroughly intertwined with *how* it says it. From this narrative perspective, speech communication has a lot in common with recorded music. Aside from the thematic content of the lyrics, the song also “means” what it sounds like. Building on Bakhtin’s theories, Middleton (1995) has analysed musical textures and processes as dialogues among style elements and their associations, and his “voices” include musicians as well as vocalists: “The dialogic interplay of ‘voices’ offers a range of possible points of identification: not just this style but also that, not just lead vocal . . . but also other voices in the texture” (Middleton 1995: 478). Central to Middleton’s argument are the discursive planes, such as class, gender and ethnicity, that in some way signal a form of difference: “If discourse is dialogic, styles will signify in relation to each other, in a field of meaning, which is ‘structured in difference’” (ibid.: 472). According to

Middleton, such fields are actualised by the various voices in the music. In light of its history of use (see chapter 2), the electric guitar, as a sonic marker, is a voice that has the capacity to reinforce the communicative power of the song.

Certainly the electric guitar has come to hold a strong symbolic and ideological position in popular music, one that is traceable back to the cultural and political climate of the 1960s. Peter Wicke (1995) has described how rock music gradually abandoned its largely commercial origins in the 1950s to become a vehicle of political protest in the 1960s. Individuality (and the ability of the individual to change) figured prominently in these cultural politics, thanks to two main driving forces. On the one hand, the British art school, whose influence on popular music in the 1960s was profound, celebrated creativity as a main source of individuality. On the other hand, across the Atlantic, Bob Dylan, Jimi Hendrix and others had decided to contest American capitalism. At the hub of it all was the electric guitar. According to Wicke, the existing folk music movement dismissed rock as “merely an unappetising expression of capitalism’s ideological powers of temptation” (Wicke 1995: 102). In particular, the electric guitar was strongly associated with the sensuous pleasures of dancing, which were especially contentious and seemed to put the seriousness and consciousness of the class struggle at risk. Dylan brought it all together when he took his electric guitar out on stage at the Newport Folk Festival in 1965, a moment when music stopped navel-gazing and united in its common cause (Shelton 2003: 301–4). As Wicke puts it:

[B]y doing this Dylan had shown a way forward which was not only followed by many former folk musicians but which placed rock music in contexts which led its development to follow increasingly political criteria. (Wicke 1995: 102)

Celebrating creativity, communication and community, rock music would become the soundtrack of the revolution, thanks in part to its signature instrument: the electric guitar. This laudable history has preserved pride of place for the guitar in many genres of pop music to this day.

Morrissey draws on those associations as successfully as any contemporary star who is not a guitar player him/herself. Matthew Bannister notes that one role of the “guitar heroes” in bands like the Smiths or REM was “to normalise the aestheticism and tendentiousness of the lead singers by grounding them in ‘rock and roll’” (Bannister 2006: 109). Yet for Morrissey, there seems to be a narrative purpose to it as well. Rather than channelling a given genre like punk or hard rock, Johnny Marr came up with guitar parts that marked the Smiths songs with musical codes signalling a difference from other bands in the 1980s. One of the aspects that characterises Marr’s guitar style in the Smiths is the way in which he opens up his chords (combined with his choice of guitar sound). Naming producer Phil Spector as one of his main influences, Marr recalls: “I wanted my guitar to sound like a whole record” (Carman 2006: 45). By expanding his chords using open strings, often with an undistorted guitar sound, Marr could occupy a lot of space in the song without overwhelming the singer, and supply a characteristic colour to the music as well. Marr in particular used his guitar to amplify Morrissey’s performative vocal insistence, though with an important caveat, as Richard Carman points out: “While the Smiths over the years earned an undeserved reputation for glumness, Johnny’s guitar lines were resplendent in their optimism, as fresh as a walk at dawn on a cool spring morning” (Carman 2006: 43).

Indeed, during the 1980s, the pop music industry became increasingly obsessed with synthesiser-driven constellations of sounds, especially following the invention of the Musical Instrument Digital Interface (MIDI) in 1981 (Théberge 1997, Hawkins 2002). At the same time, and partly as a reaction to this, the growing heavy metal scene celebrated the guitar hero as the consummate symbol of masculine power and authenticity (in relation to the “effeminate” pop star; see Walser 1993). Somewhere between these equally commercial poles arose the practitioners of independent rock, to some degree out of the ashes of DIY punk ideals (Bannister 2006). Among these varied bands was the Smiths, who coupled Morrissey’s lyrics and personality with Marr’s guitar playing to present a distinctive and autonomous ideological standpoint. Morrissey took those ideals (and those mechanisms) with him when the Smiths ceased to be.

In “Something Is Squeezing My Skull”, the heavy, crunchy wall of guitars evokes what might be referred to as “pop punk”. The song’s producer, the late Jerry Finn, worked on Morrissey’s 2004 release *You Are the Quarry* as well as releases by the pop punk acts Blink 182, Sum 41 and Green Day. In this genre, heavily distorted guitars and clear, clean, tight drums have become stylistic idioms, adapted from grunge and punk, respectively, then “polished” to fit the commercial pop market. Grunge predecessors of this sound from the early 1990s such as Nirvana and Pearl Jam embraced the electric guitar in the face of certain pessimistic predictions concerning “the death of rock”.⁵⁶ In the new millennium, the punk pop aesthetic has codified around an institutionalised, nuanced adaptation of the codes embodied by the electric guitar. Now at once authentic and commercial, the punk pop guitar presents an interesting counterpoint to Morrissey’s expressive guitar legacy in his music, and “Something Is Squeezing My Skull” relies upon all of those mingled codes to communicate its powerful intent.

During the first eight bars, the aggressive tone of the guitars sets the scene for the song through a syncopated rhythmic patterning. The distorted and sustained tones rest on every second beat, set off by sixteenth-note triplet upbeats.⁵⁷ Though Morrissey’s vocal style clearly stands apart from the stylistic idioms of punk pop, the guitars, presented in this way, offer a suggestive counterpoint to his performance, strengthening rather than weakening it. The song’s aesthetic content displays an generally aggressive tone that is in turn central to the compositional structure of the song. Based on these lyrical and musical dynamics, then, the song divides into three sections. The first section consists of intro, verse, chorus, verse and then double chorus—it conforms to the structure of a regular pop song, in other words, and contains the bulk of the narrative in the lyrics. At first, the guitars keep a steady pattern that features palm muting with a release on every third note.⁵⁸ This goes on for

⁵⁶ For example, on January 25, 1991, Dave Marsh claimed in *Entertainment Weekly* that “rock and roll is dead again”. (Available at <http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,313087,00.html>; date accessed: March 22, 2012.)

⁵⁷ This is a technique that has become widespread in alternative music. Listen, for example, to the acoustic guitar on the Cure’s “Just Like Heaven” (1987).

⁵⁸ For a detailed description of this technique, see, for example, <http://www.guitarscholar.co.uk/p/palmmuting.php> (date accessed: March 30, 2012).

four bars, as Morrissey celebrates his mental health, all evidence to the contrary (in this song, anyway) (ex. 4.2).

The image shows two staves of music in 4/4 time. The top staff is a vocal line with lyrics: "I'm do - ing ve - ry well I can". The bottom staff is a guitar line consisting of a continuous eighth-note pattern. The lyrics are: "I'm do - ing ve - ry well I can".

Example 4.2

Guitar pattern against first line of the first verse (0:12–0:18).

This claim soon proves false, and as the mood of the lyrics changes, the left-speaker guitar, which features the heaviest overdrive, assumes a melodic role for eight bars that works contrapuntally with the sung melody. By adopting this thematic role, the electric guitar enters into a dialogue with Morrissey the singer. On a micro level, this is an example of how Morrissey’s previously mentioned oxymoronic mobility (Hopps 2009) can be underpinned by the music. In “Something Is Squeezing My Skull”, the musical backdrop even accommodates this mobility. Abandoning the chord-based palm-muted style of the previous section (ex. 4.2), both guitars now open up and begin a quaver-based melodic line in octaves that starts to compete with the main melody (ex. 4.3). As the guitar graduates from a controlled and restricted pattern to an independent melody of greater density, Morrissey sings about how he is now able to block out the past and present and exults at the vision of taxis in motion. The electric guitars, of course, support this lyrical ambiguity, both tonally and texturally—echoing Morrissey’s oxymoronic mobility, they come across with a form of restrained aggressiveness.

The image shows two staves of music in 4/4 time. The top staff is a vocal line with lyrics: "I can block out the sent and the past now". The bottom staff is a guitar line with a complex, rhythmic pattern of chords and single notes, illustrating a "contradictory guitar pattern" as described in the text.

Example 4.3

Contradictory guitar pattern against the later lines of the first verse (0:18–0:25).

After the second chorus, the intensity of the song is relieved in its short middle section, during which Morrissey reviews his various anti-depression treatments. Heavy medication as well as Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) and Electroconvulsive Therapy (ECT) are listed in an affected, almost crooning manner while the two guitars supply a whole note–focused chord progression. But this section only lasts eight bars—“How long must I stay on this stuff?” he soon wonders, with gradually increasing pointedness. Given its pronounced dynamic contrast to the rest of the song, coupled with Morrissey’s individually presented ironic contrast between the content of the lyrics and his vocal style, this section builds considerable tension as it drives towards the final section, thematically, stylistically, and compositionally.

Much more plaintive and direct, the first section, then, amounts to a sarcastic comment on love in society, underlined by the restrained aggressiveness of the band, the last section, which stretches an entire minute of the song’s run time. The lyrics consist of Morrissey desperately shouting “Don’t gimme anymore!” in reference to the medical treatments he listed in the middle section. After sixteen bars of this final section, the drums change to a martial, snare-driven rhythm and the other band members back up Morrissey by shouting “Hey!” on every second and fourth beat, a cheering gesture that evokes classic punk performances or even football supporters. After another eight bars, a widely panned tom-tom fill rips through the soundscape, displacing the drums slightly to the left. “You swore!” Morrissey shouts, as the right-speaker guitar begins a series of upward octave slides. Crash cymbals on every beat, underlined by sixteenth notes on a double kick drum, further intensify the texture, and

a synth-string line that was first introduced low in the mix in the second half of the first verse now begins to operate in the same frequency area as the voice. The song culminates with Morrissey's vocals literally subsumed by the guitars, strings and drums. The fight is over, and he has lost.

A significant sonic marker in this song is therefore identifiable in the way in which the guitars, despite their apparent stylistic diversification from the voice, still relate to and also reinforce the song's narrative structure. In a compositional sense, as we have seen, there is actually a strong correlation between textual variation and melodic, harmonic and rhythmic build-up in the guitar. Indeed, as a culturally coded mediator of nonverbal communication, the electric guitar operates as a powerful sonic marker, providing a stable platform for Morrissey's lyrical critique, with its punk/rebellious referents. So far I have argued that the aesthetic features of the performance, particularly the vocals and electric guitar parts, play a major role in the communicative power of this particular song. Yet these features inform Morrissey's larger performance strategies as well. If the electric guitar affects the narrative through its dialogical relationship with Morrissey's voice and words, then the meaning of the sum of these aspects would also be subject to contextual implications, a point to which I will now turn.

Discourses of irony and terror

So far I have been arguing that the aesthetic features of the recorded performance, particularly in terms of the relationship between Morrissey's vocalisation and the sound of the heavily distorted electric guitar, play a major role in the communicative power of "Something Is Squeezing My Skull". Yet the electric guitar only impacts the narrative through its dialogical relationship with Morrissey's voice and words in a specific context. In fact, reading this song as an utterance would also require a consideration of Morrissey's persona in the socio-political context in which the song appeared. For while thematic content, style and compositional structure are prevalent ingredients in the utterance, Bakhtin continues to remind us that they are also "inseparably linked to the *whole* of the utterance and are equally determined by the

specific nature of the particular sphere of communication” (Bakhtin 1986: 60).

First of all, one of the most prevalent aspects of Morrissey’s performances is his use of irony, and especially his wry take on relationships and gender politics. Stan Hawkins has argued that in music, irony functions dialogically by juxtaposing the effects of the musical codes with the words of the song (Hawkins 2002: 91). He finds that the guitar solo on “Billy Budd”, for example, “harks back to the Smiths, soliciting a nostalgic reading of the beginning of Morrissey’s fraught love-hate relationship with Johnny Marr” (ibid.: 93).⁵⁹ Through this guitar solo, we are invited to recall signature aspects of Marr’s guitar style. More specifically, we are invited back to a live performance of “The Queen Is Dead” from a concert in London in 1986, where Marr’s extensive use of the wah-wah pedal on his solo parts has replaced the clean sound of the recorded version. While the “Billy Budd” solo might well evoke aspects of Marr’s guitar style, and at a detailed level, Hawkins also frames it as the source of its own immediate effect as well: “Not only does this stylistic code echo the Smiths’ sound, but it also functions as an ironic marker” (ibid.). In fact, I see it as an example of a musical code that can be read as a sonic marker thanks to the specific context in which it is used. In this case, the evocation of Marr’s style becomes ironic because he no longer works with Morrissey.

The guitar playing on “Something Is Squeezing My Skull” does not recall this particular aspect of Morrissey’s musical past, of course, preferring, among other things, to display the production standards of the present. Yet it can also be read as ironic, in light of the ways in which Morrissey’s lyrics and vocal performance interact with the musical codes of the guitars. While the sound of these guitars might suggest a generic shift towards pop punk, Morrissey’s vocalisation suggests, as ever, “Morrissey”. However, as we have seen, those fleeting moments in his vocal performances during the choruses might well come over as ambiguous even in relation to “Morrissey”. What ultimately encourages an interpretation of the song as ironic are the lyrics, which could even be read less in terms of Morrissey’s own past than in terms of recent social and political developments in Western society. Both choruses, for example, culminate in statements about “modern life”. In the first chorus,

⁵⁹ Alain Whyte wrote the music for “Billy Budd”.

Morrissey concludes, “There is no love in modern life”. In the second chorus, which is double the length of the first, he first states, “There is no hope in modern life”. The second time he concludes that:

Something is squeezing my skull
Something I can't fight
No true friends in modern life

The irony here could be interpreted in relation to two notions that dominated socio-political discourse in 2009, at the time this record was released. The first concerns the global “war on terror” and its manifestation in a sweeping sense of fear. According to Jean Baudrillard, Western society is grounded in “a system that operates on the exclusion of death” (Baudrillard 2003: 16). This “zero-death” system was of course profoundly shaken by the events of 9/11, and great social angst came about as an inevitable result of this act. The second notion common to 2009 was the new recognition that Internet-based media platforms like YouTube and Facebook had become mediators of increased freedom—and alienation, according to Morrissey—for the individual. In the opening quotation of this chapter, Morrissey expresses his concerns about the ways in which loneliness and even social immobilisation can result from the growing number of electronic gadgets (and their applications) in everyday life. Together, these two socially constructed notions give rise to what Judith Butler calls a “normative framework” (Butler 2009) for reading Morrissey’s song as an ironic utterance. As Butler argues:

The consequence is that the normative framework mandates a certain ignorance about the “subjects” at issue, and even rationalizes this ignorance as necessary to the possibility of making strong normative judgements. (Butler 2009: 143)

In the mass media’s coverage of the war on terror, the binary oppositions of good/evil, right/wrong, East/West, and with us/against us have all grown stronger. Buttressed by a wide range of images and texts that appear to demonstrate the cruelty and relentlessness of the Other, these binaries have become self-fulfilling prophecies. In

this sense, the notion that a “war against terror” is necessary for protecting democracy gets further reinforcement through these media. So-called terrorists have been known to utilise social media themselves as vehicles for posing their threats against the West, and it is through those media that the West sometimes responds.

Though Morrissey has never engaged overtly with the war on terror in his songs, he is often described as “an effete but acid-tongued champion of outcasts, losers and misunderstood mopers” (Rolling Stone).⁶⁰ “Something Is Squeezing My Skull” accomplishes these ends, at least, through its juxtaposition of the aforementioned larger concerns of the choruses and his strong biographical presence in the verses. For Morrissey as a solo artist, sonic markers seem to play a significant role in maintaining his musical identity, which since his years with the Smiths has been built around a critical stance against a certain ever-present socio-cultural context—that is, the various normative frameworks of Western society. In the first verse, he sings, “I know by now you think I should have straightened myself up”, possibly in reference to his age and occupation—he turned fifty in May 2009 and was still playing in a rock band. In the second verse, he continues, “It’s a miracle I even made it this far”. Morrissey has spoken openly about his own depression, and around the time of *Vauxhall and I*, there was even speculation about whether he might be suicidal. He has also spoken quite frankly about what he thinks of therapy and mood-enhancing medications. In an interview with *Details* in 1992, he confessed that:

I’ve tried them [Prozac and Lithium]. A lot of extreme things happen to you on them, which sometimes cannot seem to be worth it, because I don’t want something that’s going to affect me in any way other than to perhaps cure me. I don’t want anything that’s going to make me different. (Morrissey, quoted in Keeps 1992: 2)

Although medical treatments are applied metaphorically in the lyrics, Morrissey’s own experience with anti-depressive medication also contributes to his biographical

⁶⁰ Available at <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/artists/morrissey/biography> (date accessed: April 27, 2012). This quote has been used many times in different contexts, but because no author is mentioned on Rolling Stone’s web pages, I have not been able to track down its actual source.

presence in this song. Combined, then, with the general lack of love in human life, which he attributes to our increasing dependence upon communication technology, any form of social ambiguity might be seen to lead directly to general instability and unpredictability. The reference to medical treatments in “Something Is Squeezing My Skull”, then, has two concrete links to his musical identity. One is a metaphorical link to certain socio-political aspects of present society; the other is a direct link to his own personal experiences. In addition to his depression, Morrissey has been accused of not conforming to established categories, comes over as different and perhaps even mentally instable. He might even be institutionalised and medicated, a metaphor through which “Something Is Squeezing My Skull” tracks what the artist himself has endured during his musical career. From this perspective, the “something” that apparently squeezes Morrissey’s skull might well be read with reference to a specific normative framework. Ultimately, this juxtaposition reinforces the utterance. This is not to say that he has not expressed similar concerns before, but, considering the socio-political context in which the song appears—centred around the fear of terrorism on the one hand, and the vastly increasing use of social media on the other—perhaps we are more prepared to listen?

Conclusions

The purpose of this chapter has been to develop the concept of sonic markers for comprising the pop song as an utterance according to the aesthetics informing its performance. The relevance of the voice and the lyrics will of course vary according to the music genre in question, and I do not mean to suggest a universal solution, merely one that applies to an artist as expressive and even exposed as Morrissey. In line with the overall aim of this thesis, I have attempted to demonstrate the ways in which the sound specificities of the distorted electric guitar comprise a sonic marker against Morrissey’s voice, lyrics and musical identity and thus impact the larger musical narrative of the song. The main focus of this chapter has been to show how the dialogical relationship between lyrics, vocal performance and production aesthetics is crucial to understanding the communicative power of Morrissey’s music. How, then,

can the concept of sonic markers say anything about what is being communicated, and how does this become relevant in a chapter about Steven Patrick Morrissey?

The most significant sonic marker in “Something Is Squeezing My Skull” is its electric guitar sound, but not for the same reasons that this sound marks the music of bands like Placebo, Foo Fighters, Blink 182 and Green Day—as different as they may seem, all of these bands have simply taken an aesthetic turn in the same direction when it comes to guitar sound. In this sense, the sonic qualities of the guitar would represent a musical *trend* rather than a significant difference in itself. Also, the possibility that Morrissey’s voice may have been exposed to subtle amounts of tuning in parts of the choruses fulfils a vital narrative function and thus becomes a sonic marker. As most voices in popular music today have undergone some form of tuning in order to fit the commercial market, it is not sufficient to simply label these narrative functions as results of technological processing. How, then, can these musical parameters stand out and communicate so strongly when they are probably some of the most typical technological techniques employed in contemporary popular music? My argument has been that in, Morrissey’s case, they assume a narrative function, in tandem with the lyrics and the singing, through a process best viewed in relation to Bakhtin’s dialogical concept of speech communication. The “geno-elements” of the vocal performance, the aesthetic qualities of the instrumental production and the socio-political context of the lyrics and the recording’s release all contribute to the ways in which we perceive a song. Morrissey’s gift is his ability to orchestrate the most compelling exploitation of these elements.

Keeping the lyrics and vocal performance in focus, the sound of the electric guitar and conjectures about vocal tuning provide a basis for a discussion of the ways in which established musical codes impact the meaning of a given song. On the one hand, the aesthetic surface of “Something is Squeezing My Skull” fits well with the contemporary time code. On the other hand, Morrissey’s biographical presence is assured through his voice and lyrics. Ultimately, “Something is Squeezing My Skull” becomes an utterance through the internal dialogue between its lyrics, the vocal performance and the aesthetics of production, as these elements are contextualised within a certain normative framework. As we become more isolated and lonely

through a mix of the abuse of personal technological devices and the fear of an unstable and ambiguous Other, Morrissey's sonic double take becomes a reminder of how such mechanisms might lead us away from love and real friendships in human life.

5. Transmissions: On difference and construction in Joy Division

No language, just sound, that's all we need know
to synchronise love to the beat of the show.

—Joy Division, “Transmission”

Introduction

So far in this thesis I have dealt with numerous issues that relate to musical sound and socio-cultural value and the ways in which technological development has affected music in one way or another. Ultimately my approach is informed by the socio-cultural affects of an array of sonic markers. In the previous chapter, I added a political dimension to my argument, suggesting that two coinciding mechanisms contributed to underpinning the meaning of Morrissey's song “Something Is Squeezing My Skull” (2009). First, in the wake September 11, 2001, a collective fear of the terrorist act gripped Western society. Second, an increasing preoccupation with information and communication technologies, not least through the extensive use of social media such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter, was already evident. My argument was that, thanks to Morrissey's persona and the aesthetics of this particular production, “Something Is Squeezing My Skull” could be read as an utterance with socio-political import. In what follows, my aim is to extend the association of artist, sound and socio-political context to the Manchester band Joy Division, looking in particular at the sonic marker's role in the discursive processes of myth formation.

This chapter has four parts. First, I shall explore the contextual framework through which the myth of Joy Division was shaped. As noted by Mitzi Waltz and Martin James (2009), Joy Division has been “marketed” through two distinct approaches. Originally, Factory Records promoted the band as an authentic, self-

reflexive alternative to punk rock (thereby post-punk) with a focus on the collective: “Factory, an imprint whose owner Tony Wilson revelled in the concept of the whole being greater than the individual, was about the concept in its entirety; individual artists were a part of the concept” (Waltz and James 2009: 370). Later on, the remarketing of Joy Division in the 2000s, most significantly through movies and biographies, played extensively on Ian Curtis’s epilepsy and depression (read: disability) through what the authors of these vehicles saw as a construction of Romantic authenticity (ibid.: 372ff).⁶¹ Here I will argue that the documentaries, biographies and movies about the band that appeared during the 2000s supply a contextual basis for exploring Joy Division’s mythological narrative from a musicological perspective. I will look at myth formation as a narrative construction and consider music’s apparent relation to place (in this case, the city of Manchester) from different angles. The aim of this section is to present the narrative as a foundation for discussing how the myth of Joy Division is heavily intertwined with their music.

Second, building on this contextual framework, I will explore aspects of the band’s production aesthetics. Joy Division bassist Peter Hook, among others, has credited producer Martin Hannett with the formation of their sound, and I will look at his creative use of technology in the studio in relation to the band’s relatively roughshod live performances. Third, I shall explore how sonic markers can also be identified as performative strategies in Joy Division’s music. For although Hannett played a significant role in shaping the band’s sound, their individual performances as formally untrained instrumentalists who were apparently governed solely by a shared creative vision undoubtedly informs that sound as well. Lastly, I shall investigate how markers of Joy Division’s sound can be identified through close readings of their performance and production strategies. I will examine five songs, foregrounding in particular the relationship between Ian Curtis’s vocals, the performative characteristics of the band and the production aesthetics associated with Hannett. Building upon the methodological framework established so far in this thesis, I shall explore aspects of Joy Division’s vocalisation, compositional structures and studio production in a

⁶¹ See also Church (2006) for an analysis of the use of Curtis’s disability as a means of myth construction.

handful of their most popular songs. The overall aim of this chapter, then, is to show the complexity of this particular tale and especially the ways in which sonic markers played a major role in the formation of one of pop music history's sturdiest myths.

“Made for Instant Myth”

For a band as influential as Joy Division has been, its actual recordings were relatively few, and its ending, tragic. On May 18, 1980, just days before the band was to begin its first tour of the United States, lead singer Ian Curtis committed suicide. In a matter of hours, the story of Joy Division, the promising and inventive young group from Manchester, suddenly became the story of Curtis, the troubled lead singer. Fairly or not, people immediately began to locate Curtis's personal turmoil and untimely end in his lyrics (obviously) but also in the *sound* of the band. As Simon Reynolds put it, the band's fate “made for instant myth” (2005: 118). This was, of course, written in retrospect, and, as he maintains in his later book *Totally Wired: Post-Punk Interviews and Overviews* (2010), situating the impact of Joy Division solely in Curtis's tragic demise is insufficient at best, not least because few of his acquaintances in fact knew what was really going on in Curtis's personal life at the time:

It's really only since the 1995 publication of *Touching from a Distance*, the memoirs by his widow Deborah Curtis on which [Anton Corbijn's biopic] *Control* is largely based, that the truth has become more widely known. The foundations of the group's enduring cult were laid during a fifteen-year period in which Curtis truly was an enigma, a mystery man whose reasons for departing this mortal coil remained cloudy. (Reynolds 2009: 363)

Although this “truth” about the troubled side of Ian Curtis's life has become more widely known through Deborah Curtis's memoirs, the mythical aura associated with her late husband's horrible fate still monopolises people's attention. This might be because of the fifteen years of mystery to which Reynolds refers, but it might also have something to do with Joy Division's music. As Reynolds further notes, “The

manner of ending sealed the deal, giving Joy Division's music an appalling gravity and—for better or worse—an undeniable authenticity" (ibid.: 364).

"Truth" and "purity" nonetheless permeate most writings, commentaries and movies about Joy Division. Trent Reznor, for example, says: "There was something pure about them: it doesn't feel like marketing was involved in that sound, or manufactured hype. It was just a pure, simple, brutal, ugly thing" (Reznor, quoted in Waltz and James 2009: 371). In a similar vein, Peter Saville concludes Grant Gee's documentary *Joy Division* with this: "Joy Division in particular, Factory in general: Ian's story is one of the last true stories in pop. There are very few true stories in a business-dominated pop culture" (Saville, quoted in Gee 2007). Alongside Gee's documentary, Anton Corbijn's biopic *Control* (2007) also tells the tale of Ian Curtis first and Joy Division second, while *24 Hour Party People* (2002), based on Tony Wilson's own memoirs of the same title, offers a humorous account of the history of Factory Records, in which Joy Division plays a central part. All of these sources rely upon the narrative transformation of Ian Curtis from band member to perpetual centre of attention. Constantine Verevis (2010) has also observed how these movies focus more on Ian Curtis as the suffering and guilt-ridden protagonist than on the band. Verevis attributes this, obviously, to "the real-life drama behind the performance" (Verevis 2010: 242), but she also remarks upon the bigger picture of that performance itself, and particularly Curtis's signature fits and spasms within it.

Part of this "real-life drama", of course, derives from the fact that Curtis himself was epileptic. This illness haunted him throughout his career and was severely intensifying towards the end of it. It also derives from his lyrics. According to Chris Ott, Ian Curtis wrote the lyrics for "She's Lost Control" while he was working at the Macclesfield Employment Exchange, where an epileptic woman would often turn up: "Curtis wrote the comparatively normal, descriptive lyrics about her, but as his own epilepsy took hold, the song grew to have awful implications, especially after he learned she'd died" (Ott 2004: 70). In this way, Curtis's personal drama is present in the lyrics but not in a directly autobiographical sense. On several occasions, on the other hand, he was forced to leave stage or suffered attacks while onstage, both of which created uncertainty in the band's audiences. As Jason Toynbee writes:

Blurring the line between rock act and real-life affliction, he [Ian Curtis] invested Joy Division's cold presence with a frightening ambivalence. It was never clear whether the singer was having an epileptic fit, or rather simulating an attack as a way of expressing some otherwise undisclosable inner tumult. (Toynbee 2000: 34)

Curtis's presence on stage, Toynbee suggests, was in many ways directly linked to aspects of his personal life. At the same time, if, as suggested by Reynolds (2010) as well as Waltz and James (2009), Joy Division audiences were generally unaware of the underlying "medical truth" (Waltz and James 2009: 372), the frightening ambivalence to which Toynbee refers would have been perceived as almost otherworldly rather than immediate. This had implications for the music and, by extension, the band's sound. In live performances, Curtis's dancing derived from the dynamics of his vocal performances and grew more pronounced as the transcendent moments in their songs arrived.



Figure 5.1. Anton Corbijn's iconic picture of Ian Curtis performing "Transmission" with Joy Division at *Something Else* on BBC, September 15, 1979.

Regarding this last point, it is relevant to briefly revisit a particular live performance of “Transmission” from the BBC2 show *Something Else* on September 15, 1979 (fig. 5.1).⁶² Here Curtis’s vocal and gestural presence appears to be literally directing the musical dynamics (which in turn emphasises musically his navigation between strength and vulnerability). Surrounded by his serious, deeply focused bandmates, Curtis delivers a vocal performance that stands apart, literally and figuratively—a fact that is recognised by the television production team. Following the musicians in order of appearance, the camera begins by zooming out from a close-up on Peter Hook’s Hondo bass as he plays his four-bar intro.⁶³ It then shifts to the drummer, Steven Morris, as he kicks in with a hectic semi-quaver beat, and then the guitarist, Barney Sumner, as he completes his guitar theme. First appearing after about forty-five seconds, Ian Curtis sings with his eyes half closed, proclaiming the opening words “Radio, live transmission” in his slightly unsteady baritone. For about two minutes, the camera devotes equal time to each musician. After a final zooming out on the whole band, however, the camera spends the last minute of the performance focused almost entirely on Curtis. After commanding the audience to “dance to the radio”, and just as Morris plays his first drum fill, Curtis introduces a spastic, shuddering gesture, which he then repeats. These seemingly uncontrollable twitches appear between his vocal lines, forming recurring tension-release patterns. The intensity in his vocalisation builds each time, and towards the end of the song, he is screaming his command. Though his spastic body movements do not correspond rhythmically with the music, they do coincide with the drum fills as the instrumentalists continue the song’s Dm-C chord progression. Curtis’s physical disruption of the band’s steady, driving rhythm and reserved presence monopolises attention. He at once leads and follows, in the sense that he appears always on the verge of losing control as a result of the music and/or his own contribution to it.

⁶² This live performance is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ZwMs2fLoVE> (date accessed: April 25, 2011).

⁶³ Hondo made affordable copies of the famous Rickenbacker 4001 bass, allowing for Hook to buy himself a bass despite a poor economic situation. In the movies, however, Hook’s impersonators play Rickenbackers.

While acknowledging that the mythical formation of Joy Division was contingent on a compelling construction of its singer's authorship, we must also measure that construction against (and in competition with) an equally compelling backdrop—that is, the city of Manchester. What, then, makes Manchester such an evocative context for Joy Division's music? In his book *Manchester: The Story of a Pop Cult City*, Dave Haslam (1999) compares the sonic aspects of *Unknown Pleasures* to life in Manchester in the late 1970s:

Through the first album there was an unsettling battle between the controlling drums, the rippling bass, the downplayed monotone vocals, and the flailing guitars straining in and out of the mix. It was like a soundtrack to the aftermath of some urban disaster; which was presumably why it connected so strongly with life in Manchester, England (Haslam 1999: 125f)

As the myth of Joy Division became conflated with “truths” about the band and its hometown through the media, a host of contextual factors were associated with musical traits in ways that affected the legacy of the band and the story of that place—the latter of which Andy Bennett (2002) labels the *urban mythscape*. Bennett introduced this term to refer to the romanticised notion of place that results from the decontextualisation of cultural signifiers. Empirically focused on the signature sound associated with Canterbury, Bennett illustrates how the transformation of a physical landscape into a mythscape involves a three-stage process that is centred on Appadurai's idea of the mediascape as a “product of the electronic dissemination of information around the world” (Bennett 2002: 89). According to Bennett, the mediascape “offers individuals the potential to construct particular, and often highly romantic, ideas and images concerning the nature of places” (ibid.). The remarketing of Joy Division in the 2000s exists within such a mediascape. As argued above, the movies and documentaries about the band provide different versions of the truth about it. The subsequent transformation from mediascape to mythscape reengages the band's context along the way:

Decontextualized images and information are recontextualized by audiences into new ways of thinking about and imagining places—the result of which is a *mythscape*. The mythscape in turn begins to take on a life of its own—stories, discussions and anecdotes being linked to a place entirely in relation to that place’s representation as a mythscape. (Ibid.)

One example of this process can be found in Grant Gee’s 2007 documentary *Joy Division*, where several connections are made between Manchester and the band’s sound—connections that serve to strengthen both the city and the band’s mythological position. Paul Morley, for example, describes Joy Division’s music as “a science fiction interpretation of Manchester. You could recognize the landscape and the mindscape and the soundscape as being Manchester. It was extraordinary that they’d managed to make Manchester international, if you like, make Manchester cosmic” (Morley, quoted in Gee 2007: 34:04). Here, Morley emphasises the importance of Joy Division’s music in the process of rebuilding Manchester as one of the UK’s main centres for musical innovation.

Jon Savage, journalist and screenwriter for the documentary, goes even further in emphasising how sonic aspects of the band’s performance and production can be related specifically to Manchester:

Joy Division’s spatial, circular themes and Martin Hannett’s shiny, waking-dream production gloss are one perfect reflection of Manchester’s dark spaces and empty places, endless sodium lights and hidden semis seen from a speeding car, vacant industrial sites—the endless detritus of the 19th century—seen gaping like rotten teeth from an orange bus. (Savage, quoted in Gee 2007)

Both Morley and Savage seem to be suggesting some immanent quality in the band’s sound that evokes the city—some necessary connection, that is, between life in Manchester in the late 1970s and the music of Joy Division. The “spatial, circular themes” that Savage regards as characteristic of Joy Division’s sound apparently supply an audible link to the band’s place of origin. While such a distinct way of “soundtracking” Manchester might be relevant to people acquainted with conditions in

the city in the late 1970s, it does not explain Joy Division's global impact, however "international" Manchester became in their wake. Lest we forget, of course, both Morley and Savage were close to the band and well aware of the context in which they operated. In this regard, although Savage makes his claim without further demonstration of it, the fact he is compelled to link music and place in the first place says a lot about the process through which musical characteristics become identifiable as sonic markers of place thanks to particular historical episodes. It is because of the narrative's dependency on Manchester as a contextual backdrop that Bennett's concept of the mythscape becomes applicable to the story of Joy Division. Moreover, while decontextualization works as a basis for Bennett's concept of the mythscape with reference to the Canterbury sound, the myth about Manchester seems to derive instead from a *hyper*contextualization of Joy Division's music.⁶⁴

Peter Webb concludes that a theoretical understanding of the development of particular musical milieus can be achieved only by "tracing their individual histories and movements across and through different spaces of musical, artistic and aesthetic development, and [looking at] how the narrative of each particular milieu became entwined and utilized in their music" (Webb 2004: 80). As argued so far, contextual and biographical factors undoubtedly play a vital role in the story of Joy Division, a story that is *also* continuously linked to aspects of the band's music, largely because their contemporaneous witnesses—designers, producers and writers—instinctively connect contextual factors and biographical details to a specific sonic potential in the music. I am not arguing against any of these observers, but I am keen to demonstrate how this sonic potential converts to sonic markers in Joy Division's music. For, as Reynolds puts it, "Ultimately it's the music that keeps any of us still enthralled, nearly three decades on" (Reynolds 2009: 366). Although historic live recordings are made available on YouTube, it is the studio recordings that enthrall us the most. Bennett's model goes far in suggesting new ways of understanding how music, through sonic markers, plays a role in narrative constructions. As initiated by Haslam, Morley, Reynolds and Savage, the correlation between Joy Division and a local knowledge about Manchester can be traced to a relationship between the spatiality in the music (a

⁶⁴ Thanks to Nils Nadeau for addressing this point.

sonic marker) and the notion of space associated with post-industrial Manchester (the mythscape). In other words, Joy Division's characteristic *sound* has also played a major role in this myth formation. But what is it that characterises their sound and why does it fit so well with the common impression of Manchester at the time? This will be the subject of the next three sections of this chapter.

Temperament and Peculiarity in Performance

In popular music, artists must manoeuvre between the deeply personal and the powerfully idealised, or, as Jason Toynbee suggests, between “being ordinary, typically of the people, and being marvellous, showing what life could be like ‘if only’” (Toynbee 2000: x). As argued so far in this chapter, this form of navigation is very relevant to the story of Ian Curtis and Joy Division. I will now investigate whether it is likewise linked to the way in which Curtis appears to direct the dynamic progressions in the band's songs. The argument in the following section, then, is that Curtis's vocal temperament or vocalisation appears to have a profound effect on the music, both aesthetically and dynamically.

Singers produce particularly contested performances in this regard, because, as Stan Hawkins notes, “It is through the voice that we get in touch with the artist first on an intimate level” (Hawkins 2009: 124). In his book *The British Pop Dandy*, Hawkins conceptualises the “temperamental peculiarities” of the act of vocalisation in order to explain the intimacy that can arise between singer and audience. Morrissey, as discussed in the previous chapter, was an adept manipulator of the *grain* of the voice—that is, traces of “the body in the voice as it sings” (Barthes 1977: 188).⁶⁵ As Hawkins further exemplifies, the woefulness associated with Morrissey's vocalisation has a lot to do with his ability to “stag[e] a fantasy around his own vocal construction” (Hawkins 2009: 142). Hawkins theorises vocalisation as “a prime mediator of identity construction, connoting subjectivity through regularized norms that become the trademark of the artist” (ibid.). At the same time, the aesthetic effect of temperament

⁶⁵ See chapter 4. For an in-depth discussion of the empathy enabled by Morrissey's singing, see Hawkins 2002: 66–103.

must be historically located. Building on the writings of Charles Baudelaire, Hawkins argues that “when artistic originality is rooted in temperament, its aesthetic appeal always stands in relation to a wider historical relativity” (ibid.: 40). Regularised norms in the sense of vocal temperament would thus be identifiable through the ways in which characteristic markers of vocal expressions are appropriated to the extent that they become part of a musical vocabulary. The aesthetic appeal of Ian Curtis’s vocalisation must therefore be interpreted in a historical and biographical context. As listeners today, we are aware of the medical truths behind his problems, and, most importantly, we also know the tragic outcome of his life story.

The sensibility of Curtis’s voice—which I have referred to as the biographical presence in the voice—is, on the one hand, mediated through the singer’s apparent attitude, temperament and degree of presence in that voice. On the other hand, although the voice figures as the prime mediator of the subjectivity of its *owner*, the band matters too. At the same time his primary focus falls on the voice and its peculiarities, Hawkins also demonstrates, with reference to the work of Antony Hegarty, how the affective qualities of vocalisation are also defined through generic choice—that is, the choice of musical genre through which the voice is conveyed. The question of pitch, for example, would seem to be completely dependent upon aspects of the performance and production of the music:

For generic choice is all-defining and . . . Hegarty’s tendency towards “torch song” is significant as it is . . . appropriated by a number of gay singers. Conversely, the tautness of vocality, produced by the stridency of a falsetto tone, in much heavy metal is suggestive of the phallogentricity associated with conventional masculinity. (Ibid.: 122)

Certainly the effect of vocal register (baritone versus falsetto) is more or less overruled by the choice of musical genre: Hegarty’s baritone voice is conveyed through “torch songs,” a choice that reinforces his gendered ambiguity, as torch songs are often considered to be a “female” genre. The falsetto tone, on the other hand, situated well within the domain of the female vocal register, ends up as a marker of masculinity due to its generic placement in heavy metal. Temperament, then, exists in the domain of

vocalisation but is also mediated through a dialogue with the music as a whole, via generic choice. Pop artists use the context of the pop song to frame their pop singing (and, by extension, their pop identities), and this negotiation is as various as the songs themselves.

In addition to Hawkins's model for evaluating how music can serve as a catalyst for gendered ambiguity, other scholars have conceptualised similar relational strategies on a more general level. For instance, in "The Persona-Environment Relation in Recorded Song" (2005), Allan Moore suggests replacing the dichotomy of melody and accompaniment with that of *persona* and *environment*, so as to acknowledge the narrative function of music as a product of *all* of the related sound sources. Through a range of examples, Moore observes how the entire sonic environment, including the production, contributes to the meaning of a song and the persona of its artist. Referring to the sound quality of John Lennon's piano on "Imagine" Moore notes:

The sonically unfocused quality of the production of the instrument's sound supports a similar fuzziness in the singer's ideology, which has contributed to the debates about the degree of realism, and the self-delusion, which surround Lennon's song. (Moore 2005: 9)

Likewise, in the Rolling Stones song "Satisfaction", the non-resolving I-IV chord progression underpins Mick Jagger's inability to feel satisfied. The environment may also contradict the persona, although Moore does not provide concrete examples of contradiction in his article. Yet, as discussed earlier, Hawkins observes a remarkable contrast between the dark narrative of the lyrics and pictures and the euphoric energy of the music in the Cure's "Just Like Heaven" (Hawkins 2009: 83). In this regard, the generic choice, or environment, does not have to simply echo the singer but instead can serve a wide range of narrative purposes in a recording. Temperamental peculiarities, in short, emerge from the *relationship* between singer and song.

In Joy Division's music, such peculiarities emerge from a sort of *untrainedness*. As we will continue to see in the analysis section, this is an overall sensibility that can

be traced to the performances of each band member. But that is not all—the sense of *agency* actualised by such untrained performances must be refracted by an aesthetic framework that allows for such peculiarities to have an effect. These frameworks encompass Hawkins’s *generic choice* and Moore’s *sonic environment*. On this basis, then, I pose the question: how do generic choices provide an environment for conveying Curtis’s persona? With Joy Division, the band’s generic choice must be read against its relation to, but most importantly its departure from, punk.

Turning to Matthew Bannister, it is noteworthy that he insists that both punk and post-punk were reactions to a paradigmatic set of notions that governed the music scene at the time:

Of course, it was these very paradigms—rock as progressive, as art, as “sterile” studio perfectionism—which punk and post-punk music was reacting against with its “back to basics” approach. However, such an approach could easily blend into existing ideologies of artistic distinction; for example the post-punk musician could be represented as being relatively autonomous from market demands, and thereby more of an artist. (Bannister 2006: 36ff)

By decontextualizing some of punk’s characteristic trademarks, Joy Division reshaped them into sonic markers of a deeper emotional sensibility. In other words, the band members transcended punk and created something of greater complexity through their appropriation of musical codes that became identifiable markers of their generic choice. Arguing this point, Wilson notes that post-punk in general, and Joy Division in particular, contributed to a refinement of punk’s DIY attitude:

Punk enabled you to say “Fuck You”. But somehow it couldn’t go any further. It was just a single venom, a one-syllable, two-syllable phrase of anger, which was necessary to reignite rock & roll. But sooner or later, someone was going to say more than “Fuck you”. Someone was going to want to say, “I’m fucked”. And it was Joy Division who were the first band to do that. They used the energy and simplicity of punk to express more complex emotions. (Wilson, quoted in Gee 2007)

Both Wilson and Bannister note that post-punk is often associated with a higher cultural status than punk, despite their common ground. Joy Division would appropriate punk's attitude, energy and simplicity but express something different and perhaps subtler, and the difference is audible. Early songs such as "Warsaw" and "Digital" would serve as examples of punk translated into post-punk through the preservation of generic traits but the alteration of the attitude through voice and lyrics.

Originally released on the Factory Records compilation album *A Factory Sample* in December 1978, "Digital" was the first song Joy Division recorded with Martin Hannett. In many ways, it marks Joy Division's first step away from punk and towards a signature sound. Although the tempo of the song might seem relatively quick compared to later tracks (168 beats per minute), some distinct style traits include its simple, punk-derived I-IV chord progression and its overall structure built upon slight variations of a characteristic bass motif (ex. 5.1).



Example 5.1

"Digital" (165 bpm): Repeating bass motif (00:00–00:03)

The bass varies its line only slightly and the drums keep the same pattern all the way through the song. We see already the dialogic relationship between vocalisation and musical form that creates a specific dynamic in Joy Division's music. Unlike the band's later songs, however, "Digital" is characterised by energetic build-ups at several points during the song, not just towards the end. This represents an example of their departure from punk. The band generally relies upon vocals to shape its songs (and, by extension, its "temperament"). Sonically, then, the most characteristic marker in this song is the dynamic play of tension and release, which to a large extent seems to have been dictated by Curtis's vocal performance. Rather than recurring choruses, Curtis repeats the words "day in, day out, day in, day out" as the guitar plays freely

within the arrangement in counterpoint to the vocals. This would contribute to an intensification of the dynamic progression of the song that produces patterns of tension and release. Also, these are the particular moments in the song where Curtis's vocal performance reveals another link to his personality. Following Reynolds's argument, it was not until Deborah Curtis's biography *Touching from a Distance* came out in 1995 that people outside the band's inner circle was made aware of Ian Curtis's health situation. Yet, as we will continue to see in the following section, Curtis's troubled life would also come to dictate both the sound and the image of the entire band.

Towards constructing spatial markers

Recalling the earlier descriptions of Manchester by Savage and Morley, space seems to be what characterises Joy Division's sound in terms of studio production. Paul Morley elaborates: "Space and doubt were creeping into their music—blocky riff music was transforming into something sly, nebulous and alien" (Morley 2008: 13). The haziness and aura of alienation to which Morley refers are the effects of a spatial sensibility that links text (the song) to context (Manchester), and it derived from the group's collaboration with producer Martin Hannett. According to designer Peter Saville, Hannett "proposed a way to understand Joy Division. He heard something. He saw something. He felt something from them. And was able to project in his mind what it could be" (Saville, quoted in Gee 2007). Yet space is a challenging term in music, particularly with regard to sonic markers. In his article "The Art of Phonography: Sound, Technology and Music" (2009), Peter Wicke emphasises the longtime presence of spatiality in music composition, from the sizes and layouts of church buildings and concert halls to the character of the recording studio. In pop music, it was the development of tape technology that first introduced spatiality as a tool for composition: "With electromagnetic sound storage . . . it became possible to inscribe this dimension in the very medium of sound and, combined with echo and reverb, to fix it there as a design feature" (Wicke 2010: 157). As outlined in the introductory chapter, recording technology went through a tremendous phase of development after World War II. Jason Toynbee (2000), among others, observes how

the idea of a *signature sound* became a viable means of identifying those stylistic traits that were particularly associated with individual studios or producers. Phil Spector's signature "wall of sound", for example, derived from a specific construction (and use) of space during the recording process: "The key factor in Spector productions was precisely a lack of isolation between the discrete sound sources" (Toynbee 2000: 88).

Unlike Spector, Hannett very much favoured discrete sounds. According to Reynolds, "[He] demanded totally clean and clear 'sound separation', not just for individual instruments, but even down to each element of the drum kit" (Reynolds 2005: 184). Steven Morris recalls: "Typically on tracks he considered to be potential singles, he'd get me to play each drum on its own to avoid any bleed-through of sound" (Steven Morris, quoted in Reynolds 2005: 184). This had a significant effect on both performance practice and final product—for one thing, it contributed to the impression that Morris played like a machine, because it was simply not "natural" to the young drummer to play just one drum at the time, without having the rest of the drum kit to stabilise his patterns. On the production side, this sound separation allowed Hannett to add significant amounts of reverb or delay to individual elements, such as the snare drum or the vocals, without affecting the rest of the mix (this, as I will return to later, is particularly evident on songs like "Disorder" and "She's Lost Control").

Thus a particular recording quirk involving the drums adds an affective quality to the aesthetic environment of the entire song. On several tracks, the snare drum is delayed by reverberation, but this delay does not quite connect to the actual snare drum strokes, producing a sense of detachment. In an interview with Jon Savage for the British music magazine *Mojo* in 1994, Hannett emphasised two preconditions, one "human" and one "technological", which defined his role as Joy Division's producer. First, he pointed out that the band members had no knowledge of studio production: "When I did the arrangements for recording, they were just reinforcing the basic ideas. They were a gift to a producer, because they didn't have a clue. They didn't argue" (Hannett, quoted in Savage 1994: 3). Second, he points to the AMS Digital Delay (hereafter simply AMS), a technological artefact upon which he depended (and to which he had even contributed): "The *Factory Sample* was the first thing I did with

them: I think I'd had the new AMS delay line for about two weeks. It was called digital; it was heaven sent" (ibid.).⁶⁶

By refining the band's sonic raw materials, Hannett played a major part in constructing its characteristic sound. Though each band member was both formally untrained and pointedly stylised in their performance practice, Hannett's production brought with it both considerable polish and a technological aloofness that complemented the band's native immediacy.⁶⁷ Through the process of recording, Joy Division's music and sound were purposefully shaped, but without undermining the band's attitude, temperament or presence. As I will demonstrate in the following section, this removes songs like "Disorder", "She's Lost Control", "Transmission" and "Love Will Tear Us Apart" from the realm of punk without situating them anywhere else in particular—musically, Joy Division is just Joy Division—yet filling them with a sense of place regardless. The coldness associated with the effect of one specific technological artefact, the AMS, evokes the socio-political conditions in Manchester in the late 1970s. It also added distance and detachment to the music itself, which resonated with the personal and professional proclivities of Ian Curtis and the other band members.

Having identified sonic markers at the level of production aesthetics, I shall now turn to how this relates to matters of personal style, through close readings of four musical examples.

Constructing Difference—Musical Analyses

Reynolds insists, "Joy Division's originality really became apparent once they slowed down" (Reynolds 2005: 110), referring specifically to the point at which the band started collaborating with Martin Hannett. This statement also evokes the musical parameter through which Joy Division departed from punk acts like the Sex Pistols

⁶⁶ AMS-Neve introduced their digital delay in 1978 as the first microprocessor-controlled delay machine. For more information, see <http://www.ams-neve.com/about-us/History/The70s/70s.aspx> (date accessed: March 16, 2012).

⁶⁷ Stan Hawkins (2009: 135–38), for example, addresses the question of "polished untrainedness" and its potential for mobilising empathy with the audience in his discussion of Pete Doherty's "Albion".

and the Buzzcocks, which in fact transcends tempo alone—compare the tempo of the Sex Pistols’ “God Save the Queen” (about 150 bpm) to Joy Division’s “Disorder” (171 bpm), for example. It is instead a new expressive dimension in performance that makes Reynolds draw this conclusion, as we will see from the following analyses.

“Disorder” (*Unknown Pleasures*, June 1979)

“Disorder” was the opening track on *Unknown Pleasures* and represents another example of the band’s signature repetitive, motivic weaving and a dynamic progression initiated by Curtis’s vocal stylings. At the aforementioned relatively high tempo (171 bpm), the song signals musical untrainedness already from its opening snare double-strike on the second beat, as if the producer had pushed the “record” button a bit too late. Sonically, the drum kit sounds quite dry, but there is a delay on the snare drum that causes it to linger in the right speaker channel. The prolonged sustain, soon both spatially and temporally detached from the original sound source (the snare drum), provides the song with a sense of industrial space right from the beginning. After what could be counted as three-quarters plus three plus one-half bars, the bass commences a driving four-bar motif that progresses from Eb to G, down to Bb for one bar and back to G again.

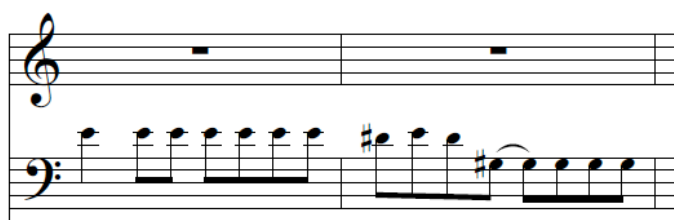
The image shows the first four bars of the song "Disorder" in 4/4 time. The top staff is the vocal line, the middle staff is the bass line, and the bottom staff is the drum line. The key signature has one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 4/4. The vocal line starts with a quarter note F#4, followed by quarter notes G4, A4, and B4. The bass line starts with a quarter note Eb3, followed by quarter notes G3, Bb3, and G3. The drum line features a snare double-strike on the second beat of each bar, with a prolonged sustain on the snare drum.

Example 5.2

“Disorder” (170 bpm): Motivic weaving (00:18–00:23).

Hook’s trebled bass sounds slightly distorted but features a timbre nevertheless that seems to emerge directly from his energetic performance—one that is free of the compression provided by a bass amplifier—which adds to the band’s perceived DIY aesthetic. Accidentally, Hook hits two strings simultaneously at one point, but this “mistake” only adds to the energy of the recording. Rhythmically, the quarter notes that begin every bar in the bass are emphasised to such an extent that the following quavers are slightly pushed together, further contributing to the sense of untrainedness in Hook’s playing. Hannett’s so-called secret weapon, the AMS Digital Delay, appears as a separate effect—almost as an additional instrument of sorts—through a feedback wave in the sixth bar.⁶⁸ This would add to the music’s sense of spatiality, as earlier described by Savage, and thus potentially supply a link to Manchester as the recording’s contextual backdrop.

After eight bars of drums and bass, Bernard Sumner’s electric guitar contradicts the bass line both tonally and timbrally by adding an alternating fifth and octave motif (ex. 5.2) that is heard with a sharp, metallic distortion. In addition, the pattern established between the hi-hat cymbals and the guitar creates a rhythmic tension as well.



Example 5.3

“Disorder”: Bass turnaround (00:52–00:54).

The only major change in the song’s form comes after the first verse, when the bass supplies a two-bar turnaround (ex. 5.3). When the bass returns to the same pattern, the guitar theme starts on the opposite chord from the vocals—almost as by chance. As

⁶⁸ For lack of a better term, I use “feedback wave” to describe the way in which a delay processor generates a feedback loop. On analogue equipment, such as the Roland RE-201 Space Echo and similar devices, this wave can be generated by setting the repeat rate to full in order to generate the feedback; the intensity knob helps in controlling the pitch.

Curtis begins the second verse, then, the guitar motif is positioned contrary to how it was in the first verse. This happens without confusing the harmonic foundation of the song. In general, the impression is that even though each element is in fact carefully prepared, they appear to arrive at random. In this way, even as the motifs remain the same, the slight dislocations among them reinforce the sense of detachment initially suggested by the lyrics and vocal performance. “Disorder”, then, simplistic as it might appear, in fact demonstrates a form that is relatively detailed. While the instrumental motifs in themselves might come across as quite simple, they are brought together in a variety of patterns around Curtis’s voice. In effect, then, this type of *motivic weaving* of these untrained, repeated performances supplies a detached, industrial environment for Curtis’s vocalisation.

“She’s Lost Control” (*Unknown Pleasures*, June 1979)

In “She’s Lost Control”, Moore’s conception of *environment* (Moore 2005) best describes the double dimension of the accompaniment—that is, the band’s post-punk musical aesthetic and Curtis’s uninflected singing and overwrought performance style. The song is built around Peter Hook’s four-bar melodic bass riff (ex. 5.4). In the choruses, the guitar contradicts the bass line by moving upwards from the tonic, and its distorted, sharp sound and contrapuntal motion add to the general instability of the arrangement.



Example 5.4

“She’s Lost Control” (145 bpm): Bass motif (00:11–00:18).

Apart from the signature bass line and the electronically filtered snare drum sound, the most significant sonic marker in this song is the extensive application of delay on the

vocals and its corresponding impact upon Curtis's compelling biographical presence.⁶⁹ Peter Doyle observes, "Echo suggests at once the possibility of a deep, extended reciprocity between the self and the world, just as it indicates a total imprisonment of selfhood" (Doyle 2004: 32). Processing vocals with echo or delay was not a new thing in 1979, of course. In fact, as observed by Doyle (2004), Middleton (1990) and others, the use of echo, and particularly the slap-echo, in the 1950s became a trademark for recording studios such as Sun and Chess. At the same time, altering the voice with various effects has always made a strong impression on audiences. For example, I would argue that delay had a pronounced effect on Ian Curtis's already laconic vocal delivery in the way it practically smears the mix with the sustain of his voice. In particular, the word "control" receives extended treatment, as to dispel any doubt that "she" has, in fact, "lost" it. Sometimes sustain is panned from left to right and back across the soundscape. Other times, Hannett purposely reduces the tempo of the delay, gradually pitching down the voice. In terms of Curtis, then, the effect of this delay is to exacerbate his alienation, from society and even from his own band. In the context of the repeating motivic weaving of the instruments and the eerie narrative presented in the lyrics, the result evokes Doyle's description of a "total imprisonment" of his own selfhood, if not in a literary sense then in a musical and technological sense.

"Transmission" (non-album single, November 1979)

Another example of motivic weaving appears on the non-album single "Transmission" from 1979.⁷⁰ Establishing the tone and tempo for the song in his four-bar bass intro, Hook this time presents a ground note-based bass line. As in "Disorder", Hannett processes the snare drum with a delay that lingers in the right speaker. The delay's attack kicks in on the offbeat, establishing a sense of space in an otherwise dry soundscape. In "Transmission", the bass playing might read as somewhat more

⁶⁹ I am working with the album version of the song, not the twelve-inch version that is included on most compilations. The latter is a bit longer, and the use of effects on vocals and drums has been toned down significantly.

⁷⁰ Joy Division's singles were not included on the full-length albums, and, apart from collector's copies of the original singles themselves, these songs are only available on compilation albums.

“traditional” than the thematic line from “She’s Lost Control”, and the processing of the snare drum is not pushed to the levels of “Disorder”. At the same time, the repetition and intertwining of instrumental motives construct an identifiable sonic marker (ex. 5.5), giving form and dynamic progression a major role once again in this song. As discussed earlier in relation to the television performance, this song’s form is a good example of a long dynamic build-up, which Curtis dictates through his singing and specifically his heated dialogue with the electric guitar (similar to Morrissey in “Something Is Squeezing My Skull”). “Transmission” came out in 1979, and I would argue that it thoroughly establishes the dynamic progression as a tendency, or a sonic marker, in Joy Division’s music.

The image shows a musical score for the song "Transmission" in 4/4 time. It consists of three staves. The top staff is the vocal line, featuring a melodic line with a mix of quarter and eighth notes, some with slurs. The middle staff is the bass line, showing a steady eighth-note pattern. The bottom staff is the drum line, with a consistent snare drum pattern marked by 'x' symbols above the notes, indicating a specific rhythmic motif. The score spans four measures.

Example 5.5

“Transmission” (157 bpm): Motivic weaving of electric guitar, bass and drums (00:14–00:19).

This build-up is introduced by another electric guitar and intensified slightly as a synthesiser pad sneaks in on the ground note. Concluding the second verse with the words “touching from a distance, further all the time”, Curtis leaves the stage as Sumner begins his sixteen-bar guitar “solo”. Based upon a straightforward tonal and rhythmic structure, the solo does feature a particularly distorted sound that underpins the spacious sensibility already established, to some extent, by the delay on the snare drum. Midway through the solo, another electric guitar sound further builds tension by emphasising the first beat of every bar. Then, when Curtis re-enters with his command, the ground has been prepared for an ever escalating moment of

transcendence: “Dance, dance, dance, dance to the radio”, he shouts, first repeating the line twice on the fifth, and then, accompanied by his bandmates, singing it on the ground note above. The third verse stays in this register, a tonal choice that contributes to an intensification of the dynamic progression, not only because the note itself is in a higher register than the previous verses but also because it seems as though Curtis’s voice is gradually reaching its limits. At the end of the verse in the recorded version, as in the television performance, Curtis is actually screaming the words. He seems desperate to command the audience to dance, and at the same time he is almost swallowed up by the band behind him before the song ultimately dies out over a slowing drumbeat.

“Love Will Tear Us Apart” (non-album single, July 1980)

“Love Will Tear Us Apart” (LWTUA) has become the most influential of Joy Division’s songs. Released less than two months after Curtis’s tragic demise, the song peaked at number thirteen on the UK singles charts. Musically, LWTUA is built around Peter Hook’s characteristic two-string bass motif over a drumbeat that is in fact similar to “Transmission” (ex. 5.4). This easily recognisable melody persists in the bass throughout the song, while Barney Sumner plays string synthesiser atop it, altering between doubling the melody in the choruses (ex. 5.4) and supplying a ground-fifth-octave line on the verses. In this way, the song’s dynamic variations are not left solely to Curtis’s vocalisation, as seems to have been the case with the songs discussed earlier.

The image displays a musical score for three instruments: synthesiser, bass, and drums. The score is written in 4/4 time and consists of four measures. The synthesiser part (top staff) begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). It features a melodic line with a long note on the first measure, followed by a series of eighth notes and a final long note. The bass part (middle staff) starts with a bass clef and a key signature of one sharp. It plays a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, primarily moving downwards. The drum part (bottom staff) uses a double bar line and a key signature of one sharp, showing a consistent drum pattern of eighth notes.

Example 5.6

“Love Will Tear Us Apart” (148 bpm): Synthesiser, bass and drums (00:13–00:19).

Despite the clarity of the rhythm section parts, the harmonic progression of the song remains purposely vague, which introduces tension—in particular, its repeated choral cadences do not resolve to a tonic until the end of the song. Likewise, the melody starts on an E in the octave above the open D-string on the bass guitar, implying an open 9 (or sus2) chord. Indeed, this interval creates a tension that appears to demand release at some stage of the song. Rather than providing this release, however, the bass guitar constantly pushes downward via a minor VI chord to the dominant V. The final tonic (I) is in fact not reached until the very end, making the entire song an unresolving cadence. In LWTUA, I would argue, this harmonic structure is the compositional key to its long-lasting success. At the same time, its immediate reception would, of course, be closely related to the tragic events thirteen days prior to its release. In this light, Curtis’s vocalisation also provides the song with an eerie biographical presence.

This presence becomes especially prominent through the crooning manner in which Curtis delivers the vocal line in the choruses. Rather than intensifying the dynamic progression of the song, as was the case in earlier examples, Curtis here does something decidedly different. In light of the contextual circumstances and Curtis’s usual dynamic delivery, however, this stylistic suggestion of crooning becomes a marker of passion rather than an act of homage to a particular singing style. The first

hint of this passionate display comes when he slides up to the melody's starting note from the half note below. "Love, love will tear us apart—again", he sings, reinforcing his impression here through a slight vibrato at the end of each repetition of "love". This delivery recalls Hawkins's concept of pop dandy Morrissey (see also chapter 4): "Crooning is a key aesthetic marker in Morrissey's style, which extracts themes of suffering, misery and despair" (Hawkins 2011: 316). However, while Morrissey uses crooning to evoke empathy (and thereby manipulate his audience), Curtis uses it, like David Bowie and Jim Morrison (two of his major influences—see Curtis 1995:), to set up contrasts within his songs. Yet the sarcasm that inspired Bowie and Morrison, however, is less present in Curtis's performance. According to Hawkins, Bowie's vocal exaggerations always represented a playfulness that displays his subjectivity in a camp fashion: "Often with pointed irony, Bowie lets his fans know why he is assuming a new role, as he revels in borrowed styles, mocking the pretensions of this as something trivial" (Hawkins 2009: 150ff). Curtis, on the other hand, rejects camp for an earnestness that informs his singing (crooned or otherwise), the music (through its sense of untrainedness and its pointed repetition) and ultimately his entire identity.

Taken together, these songs present creative solutions to disparate styles of performance that, in Joy Division's case, result in a whole that is much greater than the sum of its parts. Drummer Stephen Morris sounds relatively frenetic, thanks to his hasty high-hat sixteenths and slightly pushy snare drum over a tight, punchy bass drum. Bernard Sumner favours a raw guitar style characterised by down strokes and a sharp, metallic sound. These elements contribute aesthetically to a sense of coldness in the band's recordings but also contribute to the aforementioned sense of untrainedness that is one of Joy Division's most significant sonic trademarks.⁷¹ Simon Reynolds has described this guitar sound as follows: "Rather than the invulnerable 'Iron Man', Barney Sumner's guitar evokes the wounded, penetrable metal of *Crash*—twisted,

⁷¹ Sumner's main guitars were a Gibson SG and a Shergold Custom Masquerader. As mentioned in chapter 3, these guitars, especially the SG, are known for the combination of lightweight bodies and humbucker pickups. There is less sustain to these guitars than to the Gibson Les Paul, for example. For more information on Joy Division's equipment, see <http://www.joydiv.org/eqpt.htm>.

buckled, splayed, torn” (Reynolds 2005: 180).⁷² Peter Hook’s bass lines perhaps contribute most to Joy Division’s signature sound—at once rhythmically driving and recognisably melodic, they represent prominent instrumental markers of musical identity (ex. 5.5).



Example 5.7

Characteristic rhythmic pattern of Peter Hook's bass playing.

Variations on this pattern usually come in the form of syncopated notes within the bar, while the first note is almost without exception a crotchet or, on occasion, a half note. Syncopations, in addition, usually only occur as the result of melodic or motivic changes. Hook also plays with a plectrum using down strokes. With its roots in punk, this playing style signals the untrained musician, as opposed to more “educated” forms of alternate picking, which demanded a higher level of technical skill. This is not to say that the band was not capable of playing their instruments. Rather it is worth noting how the effect of this playing style signifies untrainedness as a marker of authenticity, and how this, through a range of contextual implications, contributes to mobilising empathy with the audience.

Conclusions

In this chapter I have extracted sonic markers, both technological and musical, that help to construct Joy Division’s musical identity. Joy Division has been mythologised through their utterly unique musical transcendence of punk, their oddly powerful

⁷² James Graham Ballard’s novel *Crash* (1973) has become a cult novel and was also read by Curtis. For further discussion of this novel in relation to Joy Division, see, for example, Oksanen (2007), who describes this book as “an excellent example of how the feeling of the Gothic uncanny pervades late modern societies: the fantasies of dead celebrities, the media presence of accidents and estrangement of the subject to the extent that death becomes a medium of life” (Oksanen 2007: 129).

evocation of their hometown, and the tragic star narrative of their lead singer, Ian Curtis. All of these contributions are traceable in the sonic markers that appear in their music. In order to demonstrate how this works, I have discussed one particular live recording and four studio recordings. What makes Joy Division a challenging case study is that all of these separate elements intertwine so complexly. While the goal of this chapter has not been to break down or destroy the story of the band, I have nevertheless tried to unpack the complex processes at work in the formation of its musical identity, and how this was so strongly linked to their music.

On the one hand, it was particularly challenging to separate life from work here, and thus it was hard to penetrate the carefully constructed mythscape around which the whole narrative has been built. On the other hand, this is exactly what makes Joy Division such a relevant case study for the development of sonic markers as an analytical model. My main argument throughout this thesis has been that sonic markers are constructed thanks to different forms of appropriation or recontextualization of musical codes. In Joy Division's case, the construction and use of sonic markers can be identified in two parts of the band's narrative. First, Joy Division built their sonic image in reference to the preceding wave of punk. In this way, one could argue that the band appropriated sonic markers of punk in order to communicate something more complex, and at the same time keep its relation to punk intact. Second, Joy Division's music has been held by many to represent sonically a specific period in the history of Manchester.

The musical analyses in this chapter reveal a potential for certain criteria to hold clues to identifiable sonic markers:

- ***Tempo***: A relatively high tempo, often between 140 and 170 bpm, characterises most of Joy Division's songs. Tempo is relevant both because of its impact in punk and because other criteria than tempo alone in fact create the sensibility that Joy Division slowed down the pace of punk (see Reynolds 2005: 110).
- ***Characteristic motifs***: Joy Division's music is often built around repetitive instrumental motifs, and the interweaving of these motifs can be identified as a characteristic compositional trait, or a sonic marker.

- **Harmonic centre:** This points to the relevance of Peter Hook's bass playing to the band's music-making process. Hook's motifs often have a melody on top and an open string (often the D string).
- **Instrumentation:** In this case, a conventional band line-up filled out with relatively untrained musicians, as indicated by the "looseness" of their performances.
- **Studio effects/techniques:** The use of studio effects, particularly digital delay, is a crucial element in the construction of Joy Division's sound.
- **Intensity level/dynamic progression:** In particular, this criterion engages Ian Curtis's performance practice.

In this chapter I have tried to extend the manipulation of sonic markers as an analytical model for identifying aspects of musical subjectivity. I have also looked at the ways in which context (in this case, the city of Manchester) could contribute to the identification of the potential sets of meanings that can be found in Joy Division's music.

In the context of this band and its larger myth, Hook's bass lines, Sumner's unpolished guitar style and sound, and Morris's frenetic drumming all announce untrainedness, which in turn becomes an important part of Joy Division's performance strategy. The short, motivic patterns persistently repeated by the band are woven together around Curtis's vocal temperament and manic lyrics. Sometimes he sounds as if he is trapped in these non-resolving, repetitive harmonic and rhythmic patterns, but then he always escapes, propelling the song forward to its semantic climaxes through the quirks and extremities of his performance. In this way, Curtis's temperament alone dictates the dynamic progression of the music, and his subjective peculiarities (and the band's projected untrainedness) come across as markers of intensity. These elements found their way to a larger audience in part thanks to the ways in which Hannett refined the sonic raw materials in the studio. Musically, then, form and dynamic progressions come over as being dictated by Curtis's vocal temperament. The constant repetition (circular themes) of the band then reinforces a sense of emotional detachment. In "Disorder", for example, it only appears to be a coincidence that the different melodic lines supply a form of detached dialogue behind the singer.

Ultimately, all of these factors together contribute to the construction of an exceptionally durable myth.

I will continue this line of argument in the following chapter in relation to Johnny Cash's most recent (and generally posthumous) recordings. Although Cash enjoyed a much longer career in a very different musical genre, he reveals some of the same mechanisms of sonic markers and identity as Joy Division. His signature "boom-chicka-boom" sound was largely the result of untrained musicians (and singer), in collaboration with a producer who could turn those apparent weaknesses into an emotive asset. Illuminating these relational processes is crucial to understanding the potential roles of sound in recorded music.

6. Still Around?: Manly markers of vulnerability and nostalgia in Johnny Cash

If I could start again
A million miles away
I would keep myself
I would find a way

—Trent Reznor

Introduction

In 2002, almost fifty years after his initial breakthrough on Sun Records, Johnny Cash released his fiftieth studio album, entitled *American IV: The Man Comes Around*, which, according to Jake Brown, “drew thematically on Cash’s declining health and channelled his deep religious convictions” (Brown 2009: 148). This album was Cash’s last before his death, and it was his bestselling, at more than 1.4 million units sold. *American IV* in general, and the single “Hurt” and its video in particular, would appear to represent a concluding moment in Cash’s career. At the same time, its success mainly came as a result of all of the new, younger fans who embraced Cash’s series of acoustic renditions. Despite its quiet, concentrated performances and Rick Rubin’s transparent production, “Hurt” was nominated along with commercial pop acts in six categories at the 2003 MTV Video Music Awards and actually won in the Best Cinematography category. Rather than a late contribution to an identity that had already been established, the *American* series, and “Hurt” as a peak moment, actually resuscitated, even canonised, Johnny Cash, through, as I intend to demonstrate, its markers of vulnerability and nostalgia.

As Steinskog reminds us, the performer of a cover version risks becoming a stand-in for anyone else who has ever sung along to the song: “We become the ‘You’

any ‘I’ sings to. We become intimate with the song as well as the singer” (Steinskog 2010: 145). I discussed certain negative aspects to this cover-version intimacy in chapter 3 in relation to Céline Dion and Anastacia’s harshly criticised performance of AC/DC’s “You Shook Me All Night Long”. On the other hand, a cover version can also come to represent a “new original”. This has a lot to do with how compelling the new version is in terms of its vocals; at the same time, as Steinskog argues further, “It is not least in the interaction between voice and arrangements that the differences between the versions are brought forward. The covers bring out the differences by vocal delivery as well as arrangements” (ibid.: 147). In this regard, Johnny Cash’s cover of “Hurt” by Nine Inch Nails represents a particularly poignant opportunity for identifying markers of vulnerability in a pop song.⁷³ The aims of this chapter are threefold:

- To describe the formation and establishment of Johnny Cash’s sonic trademark (what has become known as the “boom-chicka-boom” sound);
- To demonstrate how Cash’s musical identity was constructed around this sound, and moreover how this sound contributed to stabilising an otherwise contradictory media image;
- To investigate the extent to which the *American* series in general, and “Hurt” in particular, reinvented Cash by marking sonically what seems to be a clear-cut break with his established sonic trademark by drawing heavily on markers of vulnerability and nostalgia.

In many ways, as we will see, it is Cash’s vocalisation that foregrounds this song’s evocative potential at the expense of its various, more immediate meanings. The purpose of my analysis, then, is not to pinpoint differences between Cash’s cover and the original by Nine Inch Nails but rather to identify the impact of the former’s sonic

⁷³ Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SmVAWKfJ4Go&feature=related>. When I first visited this particular clip in August 2008, the video had about 10.6 million views. In April 2010, the count had reached over 20 million views. On April 18, 2012, it had 40.8 million views. If nothing else, this would at least indicate that the song and the video continue to affect many people.

and visual performance upon Cash's musical identity. Notably, Cash's collaboration with Rubin represents a definitive break with the signature sound that Cash clung to for close to forty years.

This chapter will be divided into three sections. First, I shall describe the construction of Cash's characteristic sound and its role in forming his apparently consistent musical identity, despite certain thematic contradictions in the songs themselves. Second, I shall explore the ways in which the *American* series of recordings broke from this sound, and how this break both represented something new for Cash *and* revisited what had gone before. Third, based on these observations, I shall provide a close reading of "Hurt" with a focus on the relationship between sonic markers in this song (the intensity of his vocal performance and the aesthetics of the song's production as read against the imagery in the music video) and Cash's musical identity.

Constructing the boom-chicka-boom sound

Few pop artists have experienced a career as long, and as turbulent, as Johnny Cash.⁷⁴ As his musical fortunes changed, so did his identity, which somehow managed to link releases as disparate as the country singles "I Walk the Line" (1956), "Ring of Fire" (1963) and "The Man in Black" (1971) with the gospel records *Hymns from the Heart* (1962) and *The Holy Land* (1969), among many others. On a historical continuum, Cash's career can be divided according to his changing affiliations with four different record companies: Sun (1955–58), Columbia (1958–86), Mercury (1986–93) and American Recordings (1993–2003).⁷⁵ Such a continuum would provide a good basis for describing the formation and establishment of his characteristic sound, and for understanding how this sound became formative of Cash's musical identity.

Cash's Memphis breakthrough at Sun Records happened alongside Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins and Roy Orbison, to name a few of his label

⁷⁴ See Edwards 2009: 16–24. For more biographical details, see also Cash 1975, 1997, and Urbanski 2003.

⁷⁵ Cash died in 2003, though there have been several posthumous releases of new American material as well, including *American V: A Hundred Highways* (2006) and *American VI: Ain't No Grave* (2010).

colleagues. With Sam Philips as his producer, and accompanied by Luther Perkins on electric guitar and Marshall Grant on double bass, Johnny Cash and the Tennessee Two soon developed his characteristic sound.⁷⁶ It derived from Cash's notably dry-sounding acoustic guitar and his signature rhythmic emphasis on the off-beat, which he achieved by placing a dollar bill in the strings to prevent the open ones from ringing when they were not being fretted. Grant stuck mostly to roots and fifths on the bass, grounding the sound harmonically, and Perkins muted the strings of his electric guitar as well, using his palm, because, according to Edwards, he believed himself to be a poor player.⁷⁷ All in all, there was something new and different about the sound of the trio, though as Grant matter-of-factly recalled: "We didn't work on that sound. It was all we could play" (Grant, quoted in Edwards 2009: 46). It gained the band fame and proved remarkably resilient as well—variations over it would serve as the main musical foundation for Cash until he teamed up with Rick Rubin at American Records in 1993. As Edwards observes, this characteristic sound, and especially the role of the electric guitar within it, "remained Cash's touchstone throughout his career" (ibid.).

In 1958, Cash left Sun Records for a profitable new contract with Columbia Records. Lasting until 1986, this contract would allow Cash to produce records within a wide variety of musical genres, ranging from country and rockabilly to blues and gospel, all featuring his signature boom-chicka-boom and muted ground-note/fifth variations on the electric guitar. His most productive period, the 1960s would also be the time in his life when he pushed the boundaries of his identity to its limits. Alongside his major country hit "Ring of Fire" (1963), Cash would also release four records that have since become known as his "concept albums": *Ride This Train* (1960), *Blood, Sweat and Tears* (1963), *Bitter Tears* (1964) and *Johnny Cash Sings the Ballads of the True West* (1965). This series of records represented his reaction to his increasing commercial success. According to Phil Sutcliffe of *Mojo*, Cash "feared

⁷⁶ Philips named the group the Tennessee Two. When W. S. Holland joined on drums in 1960, Cash's backing band became known as the Tennessee Three.

⁷⁷ One can mute guitar strings by laying the back of the hand against the bridge in order to dampen their sustain. This is also known as palm muting, a technique to which I referred in chapter 4. The difference here is the choice of guitar sound. While Morrissey's "Something Is Squeezing My Skull" features a heavily distorted guitar sound, Perkins's sound is clean, which foregrounds its rhythmic function.

that achieving success and wealth was an act of treachery against his impoverished origins. And necking pills as if his real musical ambition was to become a human maraca only made everything worse” (Sutcliffe 2004: 1). In 1966, he left Vivian, his wife of twelve years, for fellow performer June Carter. He also began to abuse amphetamines, in order to maintain a gruelling tour schedule of up to three hundred shows a year. These personal issues would have a profound effect on his professional career. Norman Blake, who played guitar alongside Luther Perkins on the last two concept albums, recalled:

He'd be stumbling around the studio, falling through guitars. Take his knife and rip the furniture. Maybe it doesn't show in what you hear, but nobody knows how many hours went into some of those cuts . . . I suspect he found it hard to accept the fame and fortune he was handed and it was when things got too nice he made these albums, half-expecting them not to do well commercially. (Blake, quoted in Sutcliffe 2004)

Despite his “anti-commercial” deathwish, Cash’s concept albums in fact generated several successful hits, such as “The Ballad of Ira Hayes” (1964), which peaked at number 3 on the American country charts. The concept albums would also provide him with credibility among the folk music audience, culminating in his appearance at the Newport Folk Festival in 1964. In this way, rather than dissolving in a protean kaleidoscope of different identities, Cash’s contradictory media image in fact became his main strength—many thanks, I would argue, to his sonic consistency.

Then, in 1968 and 1969, Cash recorded two of his most successful albums using live concerts in Folsom Prison and San Quentin State Prison. These records, according to Edwards, “cemented his renown and his outsider, rough-hewn persona” (2009: 20). At the same time, he released his third gospel album, *The Holy Land*, whose single “Daddy Sang Bass” reached number 1 on the country charts in 1968. From 1969 to 1971, Cash hosted his own TV show, *The Johnny Cash Show*, favouring guests who were not often on TV. Most notably, he invited Bob Dylan for his first broadcast, on

May 1, 1969, where they performed Dylan's "Girl from the North Country" together.⁷⁸ Due to low sales numbers in the early 1980s—Cash was by then selling only fifty thousand records or so a year—Columbia eventually broke its contract with him in 1986 (Edwards 2009: 41). From 1986 to 1992, he joined Mercury Records, which, according to Edwards, mounted at best "a half-hearted attempt to revive his solo career" (ibid.: 16). Stung by accusations that he was trying to exploit his boom-chicka-boom roots, he did little more than participate in the supergroup the Highwaymen, alongside Kris Kristofferson, Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson. Yet his song was far from sung, as his work with American Records in the early 1990s would prove.

Cash's musical paradoxes

As we have seen, Cash's discography (alongside his biopics, documentaries and biographies) reveals certain apparent contradictions in his media image. Arguing this point, Edwards examines the complexity in the construction of this image. While fashioning himself as the brutally honest champion of the poor and outcast, Cash also cultivated an image of the "good Christian", seeding a potential conflict that speaks to Edwards of Cash's paradoxical Americanness:

Distinctive here is Cash's signature embodiment of saint and sinner, family man and rambler, establishment patriot and outlaw rebel. His manipulation of these opposing images is striking for its longevity and circulation, as he deploys these themes throughout his long career to global popularity. But, again, most distinctive and important about his opposing images is that he does not resolve them. He leaves the diametric poles in productive tension, exploring each side of the opposition and adding a deep sense of complexity and commitment to both sides. (Edwards 2009: 13)

Cash, then, draws a unique performative strength from his liminality of self-image and his potential threat to either side of the various dichotomies he straddles. In keeping with this general profile, he stuck to rockabilly (like the early Elvis) rather than

⁷⁸ Available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bFk8e1Lg_is (date accessed: September 14, 2011).

drifting to “traditional” country music. In the 1950s, rockabilly was regarded as a threat to traditional values in terms of both race and gender. According to Edwards, it is through this complexity of his media image that Cash becomes a prime mediator of what she conceptualizes as a *paradox* of American identity.

Arguably, this conflicting image derives directly from his choice of genre (Hawkins 2009: 122) at an early stage in his career.⁷⁹ Michael Bertrand, for example, has argued: “Any experience with race is ‘automatically inflected’ by other social classifications, such as gender, class, generation, history, and regional identity. To understand the story of rockabilly is to reconcile these various sectors” (Bertrand 2004: 62). By suggesting that reconciliation among different social classifications is necessary to understand rockabilly, Bertrand also implies that these sectors are conflicting in some way. Assuming that this was the case in the United States in the 1950s, then, as Edwards points out, this conflict would in turn become one of Cash’s strongest playing cards, and in truth his appropriation of sonic (and visual) markers from rockabilly gave him more musical exposure with a wider audience. For example, while “I Walk the Line” (1956) reached number 1 on the country charts, it also reached number 17 on the Billboard Hot 100. Cash recalled:

National recognition came with the release of “I Walk the Line”. “Folsom Prison Blues” had become a country standard, but “I Walk the Line” was, and is, my biggest selling record to date. It was a seller, as we like to say, in all fields. (Cash 1975: 80)

This would indicate that Cash himself was open to the apparent contradictions of his music and his image, and even that he recognised the benefit to these contradictions. At the same time, there is also circumstantial evidence that his rebel image was the most appealing to the most people. This becomes evident if we take a brief look at the stories that have been told through movies and record compilations after the fact. James Mangold’s Cash biopic *Walk the Line* (2005), for example, which features Joaquin Phoenix as Cash and Academy Award–winner Reese Witherspoon as June

⁷⁹ See also chapter 5 for a discussion of genre choice with reference to Joy Division.

Carter, favoured one particular version of Cash's life at the expense of all the others (Urbanski's 2003 biography did pretty much the same thing):

Walk the Line and similar biographical narratives do not so much ignore Cash's contradictions as they try to find explanations for them that are ultimately unsatisfying because his ambiguities foil closure. (Edwards 2009: 59)

Also, platinum and multiplatinum compilations such as *The Essential Johnny Cash* (2002) and *The Legend of Johnny Cash* (2005), respectively, narrow the musical story of Johnny Cash as well by leaving out his gospel and Christmas music. Significantly, then, the cultural products intended to present the "real story" of Cash's life deliberately leave out the elements of his career that do not fit with his rebel image.

In 1993, on his own again, Cash started working with producer Rick Rubin on a series of records that has become known as the *American Recordings*. Rubin was renowned for his genre defiance, and the roster of his label, Def Jam Recordings, ranged from Public Enemy and the Beastie Boys to Danzig, Slayer, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Mick Jagger and the Dixie Chicks. Rubin describes his production ideals as quite literally reductive: "When I started producing [minimalism] was my thing . . . My first record actually says, instead of produced by Rick Rubin, it says, 'reduced by Rick Rubin'" (Rubin, quoted in Brown 2009: 3). His collaboration with Johnny Cash derived from Rubin's interest in "rehabilitating" established artists whose fame had faded. "The first person I thought of was Johnny Cash . . . already a legend, but ripe for something different. I knew I could do something great with him" (Rubin, quoted in Hirschberg 2007: 20). Their first record, *American Recordings*, came out in 1994 and featured Johnny Cash alone with his acoustic guitar. Cash himself expressed a sense of relief from the process:

What a load that's lifted from finishing what we feel like is good work. And the frustration of all the years and all the sessions of overproduction and all that jazz, and

to be able to sit down with a tape that I'm proud of. It's just great. This is what I've always wanted. (Cash in Fielding & Rachmell 2007)⁸⁰

This statement also indicates that what was once a characteristic trademark had turned into a type of straitjacket, and that Rubin's ideals of reduction would eventually produce a new sonic space in which to emphasise the communicative power of Cash's ageing voice. Apparently, even Cash had grown tired of his various musical "masks." The *American Recordings* series introduced Cash to a whole new generation and peaked with the massive sales of *American IV*, released in 2002. Cash's career, long as it was, had many facets, contradictory and otherwise. Yet the "Man in Black" navigated them all, however serendipitously:

Although it eventually came to signify his Man in Black persona, he first started wearing black out of necessity: he and his band wore black at their first public performance because they were the only matching clothes they had for their "band outfit". (Edwards 2009: 53)

From Cash's recordings, then, two sonic markers in particular stand out. The first marker is Perkins's reticent accompaniment on the electric guitar—his subtle variations on the double bass's tonic-fifth movement stood out in terms of their muted timbral qualities as well as their rhythmic interplay with Cash's dry sounding acoustic guitar.⁸¹ This particular style of playing is relevant both as a sonic marker of Cash's past (for almost forty years, it was the backdrop to Cash's voice) and as an *absence* on the American recordings. The second marker is Cash's low, baritone voice, which effortlessly cuts through the sparse mix of the instruments. Having nicknamed him "Captain Decibel", Cash's long-time producer Jack Clement described this voice: "You just can't hardly cover it up. It's almost impossible to drown him down. You can put in lots of drums, horns, a roomful of guitars and everything else—he still cuts

⁸⁰ Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E1uxiMHQXI0> (date accessed: 18.08.2011).

⁸¹ "Get Rhythm" is an example where Perkins also pivots around the tonic, altering between I-VI and I-IV-I-II, finding common tones within the harmonic I-IV progression. While this pattern would depart to some extent from his established ground-note/fifth pattern, Perkins's playing style and sound continue to reinforce the Johnny Cash signature boom-chicka-boom.

through. It's powerful. There's few voices I've ever heard like that" (Clement, quoted in Edwards 2009: 45). Cash's singing (and speaking) voice certainly represents the primary sonic marker of his biographical presence, a presence that became all the more distinct as Rubin stripped down the arrangements underpinning it. In the end, though, Cash became a man alone, and his use of his sonic markers in the refinement of this final persona is nowhere better presented than in his cover of "Hurt", to which I will now turn.

"Hurt": Markers of vulnerability and nostalgia

With his rendition of "Hurt", Cash bypasses not only the initial meaning of NiN's original version but also what had become an almost inextricable link to his boom-chicka-boom sound. He does this via the acoustic guitar and his own plaintive, aging voice, both of which are powerful signifiers of vulnerability and nostalgia that also evoke the folk singer tradition in popular music and the travelling minstrel from long before that. Regarding the *American* series in particular, the fact that Cash sings mostly cover songs strengthens the impression that his new claim to authorship pivots on a powerfully realised sense of nostalgia. The displacement of the original singers of these songs by the Man in Black's voice and guitar allows Cash to revisit (and renew) the things that made him Johnny Cash in the first place:

Cash offers more than another link in a long chain of cultural tradition: his texts build on familiar cultural tensions but also present a more multifaceted exploration of these issues because they question gender constructions. Cash establishes a heroic working-class masculinity and then explores the uncertainties in that identity. (Edwards 2009: 12)

In this regard, Freya Jarman-Ivens makes a useful distinction between *narrative* nostalgia ("a nostalgia *within* the song") and *objectifying* nostalgia ("a nostalgia *for* the song"; see Jarman-Ivens 2007b: 4, author's emphasis). In her close reading of various renditions of "Superstar" by the Carpenters, Jarman-Ivens discusses the way in which the musical details, mostly in terms of instrumental hooks in Richard Carpenter's

arrangements, have “determine[d] the presence of the Carpenters’ influence on post-Carpenters recordings” (ibid.: 3). Later appropriations, then, acknowledge the Carpenters’ version as the “original” through their reinterpretation of certain otherwise identifiable sonic markers. In “Hurt”, what is left of the NiN original is only the chords, the lyrics and the melody—although with slight modifications even there.⁸² In this version, it is the way in which Cash’s biography takes hold of this outside narrative, through his intense yet “down-to-earth” performance, that evokes such empathy in his listeners.

The narrative nostalgia mobilised by Cash in “Hurt” is evident from reactions to the cover by several of his younger colleagues. The song’s writer, Trent Reznor, said:

We were in the studio, getting ready to work—and I popped it [the video] in . . . By the end I was on the verge of tears. I’m working with Zach de la Rocha, and I told him to take a look. At the end of it, there was just dead silence. There was, like, this moist clearing of throats and then, “Uh, okay, let’s get some coffee”. (Reznor, quoted in Urbanski 2003: 176)

In general, this video tends to evoke particularly strong reactions in the male audience; producer Rick Rubin admits, “It was beautiful, but it was so unlike any video I’d ever seen before, and it was so extreme that it really took my breath away, and not in a good way. I didn’t know how to handle it” (Rubin in Romanek & Bangs 2005).⁸³ He credits Romanek for its sheer force: “The fact that in a four-minute video, that level of emotion can be brought out of the viewer is incredible. I mean if you felt that much emotion during a two-hour movie, it would be an accomplishment” (ibid.). U2 lead singer Bono declared: “Trent Reznor was born to write that song, but Johnny Cash was born to sing it. And Mark Romanek was born to film it” (ibid.). I have included these

⁸² Originally, the opening chord is an A minor with a diminished fifth (a tritone), while in Cash’s rendition, this chord has been replaced by a clean A minor, which reduces the tension created by the tritone. Lyrically, Reznor’s initial “I wear this crown of shit” has been replaced by “I wear this crown of thorns”, which strengthens the religious connotations in Cash’s performance.

⁸³ Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gg8xYSWOFr8> (date accessed: January 1, 2011)

statements as examples of emotional responses to the song—responses that further underpin the sense of narrative nostalgia at play in this version. Following Bono, it even appears that this particular version displaces NiN’s original. On this account, Erik Steinskog observes: “Not only can cover versions become new ‘originals’—in the sense that they become the matrix for future covers—they may also question the presupposed ‘original’s’ originality” (Steinskog 2010: 140). This points to an important aspect of the *performance* and *production* of a recorded song: while there can only be one original set of lyrics, melody and chord progression in a song, it is the peculiarities of the individual performance, both instrumental and vocal, that give the song its meaning. Cash’s performance of “Hurt” brings to the fore a range of related questions, with regard to both NiN’s original and to the persona of Cash himself at the very end of his life. In effect, Cash reinvents the song, and himself along with it.

As new originals go, then, Cash’s “Hurt” represents a complex interaction between Rubin’s revolutionary production of him and the long cultural narratives that went before. I am not particularly interested in what this song is “really” about, nor is this entirely clear anyway. Cash, after repeated listenings, declared it to be the best anti-drug song ever made. Others have heard it as a lament about self-harm. Here, I simply hope to demonstrate some of the ways in which aspects of production and performance interact in the video to further define and comment upon Cash’s identity. As Bakhtin (1986) argues, and as I have discussed earlier in this thesis, the meaning of an “utterance” must be sought beyond its “grammar”. I will therefore look past the words and chords to the sonic construction of closeness and liveness and their consequent mobilisation of tropes of authorship and nostalgia.


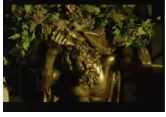
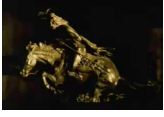

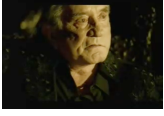


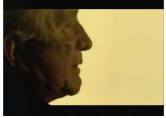

In the article “Music Mediated as Live in Austin” (2002), Thomas Porcello looks at how certain recordings evoke the liveness and sincerity of the Austin sound without “sacrificing the sonic aesthetics expected from a contemporary recording” (Porcello 2002: 73). As the centre of Porcello’s argument is Charles Keil’s notion of processual and textual participatory discrepancies (PDs)—“microvariations in temporal and intentional dimensions of musical performance” (ibid.: 70) that, Porcello observes later, “are integral to the basic psychological and aural experience of humanness” (ibid.: 75). Based on fieldwork in different recording studios, Porcello

finds “roominess” to be the sonic quality that most often signals liveness (and authenticity), and the drum sound is in turn the most important source of this quality. “Discrepancies”, however, raise issues, in that they imply a viable norm from which they then deviate (and signal “humanness”). But what is this norm? Keil himself decides that, “PDs exist. Between players.” (Keil: 1995: 2), presenting them as the result of a relational process. Although I would agree that personal imprints are easier to identify in relation to the musical elements around them, I prefer Hawkins’s (2009) concept of *peculiarities* to Keil’s discrepancies. As argued in the previous chapter, Hawkins’s concept celebrates the idiosyncratic against the sterility of perfection and appears to accommodate subjectivity as a performance strategy in popular music. In “Hurt”, then, the frailness of Johnny Cash’s once powerful baritone, and its counterpoint with his unassuming yet utterly absorbing acoustic guitar playing, represents a peculiarity rather than a discrepancy, and we are on our way to unpacking its profound virtues in this arrangement.

Cash’s voice comes across as the single primary marker of his biographical presence in all of his music. In “Hurt”, it also reveals significant markers of vulnerability, specifically in relation to these lyrics. This becomes evident already in the first line. When Cash sings “I hurt myself today”, we hear a dying man lost to introspection—that is, a geno-song that has utterly upended the words themselves. This grain, or bodily presence, in the voice becomes freshly apparent thanks to Rubin’s technological mediation of Cash’s performance. Atop the reduced instrumental arrangement, Rubin’s careful choice of microphones and preamps allow him to record every creak, from the voice or the guitar’s neck or a chair, and achieve a degree of intimacy that notably transcends even the live. In this performance, Cash becomes bigger than life, through a newfound vulnerability or intimacy that even he may not have anticipated.

Edwards’s observations about Cash’s media image suggest another angle on the details of the musical expression in “Hurt”. Her study, she admits, is not musicological, and this is evident from her brief harmonic examination of “Hurt”, where she suggests that the verses consist of three minor chords, and the choruses turn

Table 6.1: Form, music and visual aspects of “Hurt”

FORM	LYRICS AND THEMES	HARMONY	INSTRUMENTATION					VISUAL NARRATIVE	
Intro (00:00–00:13)		Am C Dadd9 Am C Dadd9 Am	Acoustic guitar 1	Acoustic guitar 2	Vocals	Grand piano	Mellotron	 	
Verse 1 (00:13–00:56)	<p>I hurt myself today To see if I still feel I focus on the pain The only thing that’s real The needle tears a hole The old familiar sting Try to kill it all away But I remember everything</p>	<p> C Dadd9 Am C Dadd9 Am C Dadd9 Am C Dadd9 Am C Dadd9 Am C Dadd9 Am C Dadd9 Am C Dadd9 G </p>						 	
Chorus 1 (00:56–01:36)	<p>What have I become My sweetest friend Everyone I know goes away in the end And you could have it all My empire of dirt I will let you down I will make you hurt</p>	<p> Am F C G Am F C G Am F G G Am F G </p>						 	
								 	

<p>Bridge (01:36–01:49)</p>		<p>Am C Dadd9 Am C Dadd9 Am </p>									
<p>Verse 2 (01:49–02:31)</p>	<p>I wear this crown of thorns Upon my liar's chair Full of broken thoughts I cannot repair Beneath the stains of time The feelings disappear You are someone else I am still right here</p>	<p> C Dadd9 Am C Dadd9 Am C Dadd9 Am C Dadd9 Am C Dadd9 Am C Dadd9 Am C Dadd9 Am C Dadd9 G </p>							  		
<p>Chorus 2 (02:31–03:37)</p>	<p>What have I become My sweetest friend Everyone I know Goes away in the end And you could have it all My empire of dirt I will let you down I will make you hurt If I could start again A million miles away I would keep myself I would find a way</p>	<p> Am F C G Am F C G Am F G G Am F G G Am F G G Am F G </p>						   	   	   	   

to major chords. (She also states that Johnny Cash performs the song alone with his guitar, though there are in fact two guitars present on the recording.) While a darker mode indeed characterises the verses, this is due to the way the harmonic progression is structured in time—that is, to the extra moment devoted to the Am, as opposed to the other two verse chords, which are in fact C and Dadd9.⁸⁴ The vocal line starts on the C chord, releasing the tension of the preceding Am. After a two-bar pause on a G chord, the chorus starts on Am again, but its prompt turn to F, then via C to G, changes the tonal centre from Am to C. The lighter sensibility of the major tonal area could indeed be interpreted as offering some hope, but it is slightly more complicated than a broad shift from minor to major, and this is significant to the star narrative we might be tempted to derive from this performance. Nothing is ever quite as it seems with Johnny Cash, and his rendition of this song takes full advantage of its built-in harmonic tensions and ambiguities.

In “Hurt” the aesthetics of the production are specifically devoted to Cash’s voice and the sound of the acoustic guitars. The goal is to render the strongest possible impression of an old man with his guitar, and the other musical elements are merely effects that underline and strengthen this narrative. As a framework for identifying narrative aspects of the sonic markers in the music through the video, I have included a table (table 6.1) mapping out the interaction between Cash’s vocal performance and the instrumentation, on the one hand, and the sonic markers and symbolism of the video, on the other. Like many pop songs, “Hurt” is built around the straightforward structure of intro-verse 1-chorus-verse 2-double chorus. The harmonic progression responds to this structure, as discussed, and the video uses it as a point of departure as well. These elements are related in significant ways, including prominently their complex negotiation of the past and the present. One musical moment in the song will illustrate this interaction. In the second half of the first verse (ex. 6.1), Cash starts singing on the C major while the guitars build toward their “landing” on Am again, which has the effect of an exhale. The words describe the narrator’s present situation but seem to allude to the past as well, as a potential cause of the numbness he suffers

⁸⁴ I stressed the narrative relevance of harmonic motion and cadences in chapters 2 and 5 as well.

now. The singing style is sombre and plain, and the production is close and intimate. Additionally, a grand piano enters with minor thirds on the first beat of every measure. This bulks up the landing on Am but might also suggest church bells.⁸⁵ As I discussed previously, one of Rick Rubin’s motivations is to think production in terms of reduction, so any sounds that survive must be freighted with meaning—here, the piano/church bells seem to toll grimly for what has gone before (or what, it must be said, awaits).

real The need-le tears a hole The old fam-iliar

Example 6.1

“Hurt”: Vocal, acoustic guitar and grand piano (0:33–0:42).

These musical details are both underlined and nuanced by the video. Carol Vernallis notes, “In music videos, images can work with music by adopting the phenomenological qualities of sound: these images, like sound, come to the fore and fade away, ‘stream’, surround us, and even reverberate within us, and mimic timbral qualities” (Vernallis 2004: 177). “Hurt” video director Mark Romanek pursues a visual dialogue between Cash’s present (filmed at his home and in a closed museum) and his past, via a substantial amount of documentary material from Cash’s private archive as well as movies and documentaries to which Cash had contributed. Romanek recalls:

⁸⁵ Thanks to Philip Tagg for bringing this point to my attention at the Nordic Musicological Congress at Norges Musikkhøgskole in 2008. Yet, rather than calling this a sonic marker, though, I would prefer Tagg’s own term *sonic anaphone*—“the perceived reference to paramusical sound” (Tagg 2004: 99).

[We thought] maybe we should take a look at this archival stuff and see what the hell we have in these boxes. And we pulled out something, and loaded it up into the computer. And I think it happened to be that image of Johnny riding the train . . . I somewhat randomly dropped it into the cut, and we got, chills went up our spine. And there was something about the juxtaposition of Johnny as a young vibrant man and Johnny towards the end of his life. (Romanek 2005)

Indeed, in the music video, the true “present” is not simply the more recent images of Cash but the unfolding interaction between those recent images and the much older images. As Bakhtin argues, “The present is something transitory, it is flow, it is an eternal continuation without beginning or end; it is denied an authentic convulsiveness and consequently lacks an essence as well” (Bakhtin 1981: 20). Cash’s presence in the video is as much a construction as his past, in other words: he is still performing his subjectivity, in this case reinventing a particularly powerful song with the help of an equally powerful producer. Steinskog concludes that “[o]ne might understand subjectivity as a staging. It is about presentation, about making present—not least through the voice—a role, rather than some kind of essential being behind the mask” (Steinskog 2010: 144). With “Hurt”, however, the music is intertwined with Cash’s narrative on a range of levels—a dialogic relationship that makes it challenging not to draw conclusions about his essential being in the music. As we have seen, his clear, baritone voice has undoubtedly been established as a powerful marker of his biographical presence in all of his songs. In the video, the visual framing of his whole life story further intensifies this strong sense of presence.

The first frame presents Johnny Cash alone near a breakfast table laden with food. Both in colour and content, this setting evokes Flemish still-life paintings from the sixteenth century. The symbolic value of these pictures would gain even more power due to the fact that, in Spanish, the still life is called *naturaleza muerta*, “dead nature”.⁸⁶ Even if the viewer is unaware of these connotations, a powerful sense of nostalgia has already been established. During the guitar intro, we see a statue of Atlas

⁸⁶ Thanks to Claudia Azevedo for pointing this out at the Nordic Musicological Congress at Norges Musikkhøgskole in 2008.

(referring to Cash's legendary stoic endurance?), as well as richly filled fruit baskets.⁸⁷ These images, particularly the ones of Cash alone at the table, recur throughout the video to represent the "present tense" of the visual (and musical) narrative. When Cash first appears at the beginning, he is a conspicuously aging Man in Black—even his guitar is black—whose bearing contains strong hints that his end might be near. The next frames then introduce the video's documentary material: collages of old movie clips, private archival photos and concert performances, and short clips from the House of Cash museum. During the choruses, the rate of picture shifts increases from half notes to quarter notes, building tension with the music until we see a couple of clips of Cash in jail. We then re-enter the House of Cash museum. Already, we have been introduced to a range of spaces that contribute to creating a strong, nostalgic picture of who Cash was and a consequent question mark as to who he has become.

In the beginning of the second verse, Cash is back at the table, singing. Old pictures are now intercut with more still-life pictures. During the second half of this verse, we watch Cash visit his old house as a Mellotron sneaks into the soundscape, troubling the relative serenity of the music with its vague, almost backwards-sounding two-note motive. Tension builds even more in the second chorus, which is twice the length of the first. At one point, an obviously affectionate June Carter appears behind Cash with what could be interpreted as a worried look on her face. Knowing that June had in fact already passed away at the release of this video would reinforce the nostalgia (and general sense of vulnerability) of this moment, as would any suspicion that Cash himself had only months left to live at this point. The images then start shifting even more quickly between archival images of June with a child to Cash emptying his wine glass by the table. Glimpses of the crucifixion of Jesus are intercut with equally brief images of Cash as a young man. The pictures switch even more quickly as the intensity of the music builds and the sonic surface begins to teeter on verge of distortion. A final flurry of images of Cash's life, intercut with religious

⁸⁷ There is certainly more to be said about these opening scenes. Due to the sonic focus of this chapter, however, I have chosen not to undertake detailed discussions of this particular symbolism. For more on symbolism in Flemish still-life painting, see, for example, Grootenboer 2005, who takes up the discourse of truth in breakfast painting from a Derridean perspective (pp. 61–97). Examples of such motifs can be seen in Willem Heda's *Breakfast Still Life* (1634) and *Still-Life with Pie, Silver Ewer and Crab* (1658).

symbols and the older Cash at the table, anticipates a final visual and musical release: Cash sitting silently at the piano, then closing it gently as the image fades out.

To a certain extent this video is what Mark Fenster has labelled a “performance/concept combination”, a model derived from many early country music videos in which a filmed performance is combined with “various segments that somehow illustrate the message or the plot of the lyrics” (Fenster 1993: 116). Here the song is more than illustrated, of course: it is propelled, given its unique poignancy and relevance by a particularly musical arrangement of its many freighted images, in the service of a performer that is himself uniquely available to this form of representation. It is a soundtrack, in short, of his life. Locating the song’s entire harmonic underpinning in the acoustic guitar and piano alone heightens our expectations regarding Cash’s singing voice; more importantly, he has nowhere to hide here. Or perhaps we are meant to think that he is past hiding now, whatever his former complexities and performed identities. While the acoustic guitar stands out as a sonic marker of honesty, Cash’s rich yet aging voice, left almost alone, invites as well a type of closeness to the listener.

Conclusions

This chapter sets out to link Johnny Cash’s long career to the musical and visual tropes of nostalgia and authorship so powerfully mobilised by his cover version of “Hurt”. By referring explicitly to Cash’s troubled history, both sonically and visually, this song triggers those tropes on several levels. I wanted above all to explore the role of this particular song in the re-formation of Cash’s musical identity. In order to provide some contextual background for this reading, I found it necessary to provide an overview of the formation and establishment of his musical identity, with specific reference to the boom-chicka-boom sound that originated in his regular backing band, the Tennessee Three, and especially Luther Perkins’s characteristic guitar playing. While these style traits derived from the band’s limited instrumental skills, they also represented something new and different at the time, and they would enable Cash’s

success to such an extent that it would be almost forty years before he tried something different.

Cash's collaboration with Rick Rubin, then, was the first actual break with the sonic trademark that had accompanied his breakthrough in the 1950s. Musically, Rubin's choice to strip down Cash's musical arrangements provided more space for Cash's aging voice. Alongside a careful choice of songs for Cash to perform, this stylistic break undoubtedly played a significant role in renewing Johnny Cash for a younger audience. At the same time, Rubin's studio imperative—to reduce rather than produce—would also prove to expose markers of vulnerability and nostalgia in Cash's performances. By referring explicitly to Cash's own life and, by extension, his abandoned sonic trademark, Rubin's arrangements resolved Cash's lifelong contradictions into a complex but coherent image—a musical identity resurrected through the conscious utilisation of sonic markers.

Turning to “Hurt” itself, I then examined some aspects of the interactions of image, music/lyrics and identity that make this recording such an evocative performance. In this song, the vocal performance and the version's sonic production (or reduction) work together to emphasise the biographical presence of the singer as author. The primary sonic marker in this song is Cash's voice, which is likewise the primary sign of his biographical presence. Its shivery vulnerability indicates that time has even caught up to Johnny Cash and invites us to reckon our own lives against his. The harmonic progression and guitar arrangement start gently but build in the choruses, as the song's “breathing” quickens. The images in the video exploit this tension and release while underpinning the age that is audible in Cash's voice with intercuts of the performer today and in years past. In line with Edwards (2009), I would argue that this video's strength derives from its acknowledgment of the Man in Black's contradictions—from his confession of sorts:

The frail present-day Cash juxtaposed with the virile young star jumping trains, for example, speaks to his charged construction of a Southern white working-class masculinity as it appears in country music, which, again, is in tension in his corpus with a postmodern questioning of identity categories. (Ibid.: 61)

Ultimately this narrative is grounded in the literal closeness of the studio production and the naked arrangements based upon acoustic guitars. Against Cash's biographical presence in the song, which is manifested in the close vocals, the acoustic guitars become sonic markers that propel a sense of vulnerability and nostalgia. In this way, listeners are driven to redeem Cash, even as he reveals himself to be flawed, or possibly broken. It is a momentous statement in an unassuming guise: the Man in Black is still around.

7. Final Comments

This thesis has been concerned with developing methods for interpreting the communicative aspects of musical sound in recorded music—that is, the expressive dimensions of what I have referred to as sonic markers. In order to explore the narrative strategies that presumably govern these markers, I have undertaken close readings of musical texts against a contextual backdrop of journalistic and scholarly writings (articles, interviews, blogs, books), biographies, documentaries, semi-biographical movies (biopics), music videos and social media (YouTube). Sonic markers operate within different discursive formations and supply “evidence” for identity formations as well. My approach here has thus required a careful navigation between the two following positions:

1. Sonic markers as strategies—how sonic markers are used as a means of constructing musical identities in pop production.
2. Sonic markers as constructions—how sonic markers are themselves constructed through different narrative strategies.

Chapters 2 and 3 explored the *use* of sonic markers as narrative strategies in pop production, while the primary focus of chapters 4–6 fell on how sonic markers are shaped by narrative strategies. Yet all along I have sought to demonstrate how the two positions interrelate and constitute a basis for understanding the sonic markers of pop production not merely as relational strategies but also as a dialogical process (Bakhtin 1986). Sonic markers, as I have continually emphasised, need to be understood on a continuum rather than in opposition to one another.

Specifically, I have sought to demonstrate that the voice constitutes a significant marker of biographical presence in recorded music. It is not only a primary site for identification (Frith 1996) but also “the most intimate inscription of identity” (Hawkins 2009: 151). As I have argued, this actualisation of its potential takes place at the juncture where the voice interacts with the aesthetics through which it is conveyed.

This premise alone has led me to search for an analytical model for identifying sonic markers that involves the process of reading musical texts within a specified contextual framework. Sonic markers can only be confidently identified in relation to how vocal, instrumental and technological details inform the identity of the song's protagonist, on the one hand, and how this engagement in turn relates to socio-cultural sets of values, on the other.

Summary and findings

Given the stark contrast that exists between my case studies, it is worth considering the extent to which it is actually possible to draw general conclusions about this complicated issue. Therefore, it must be restated that my aim has not been to find universal truths regarding each of the case studies. Rather I have looked for an analytical concept with which to trace the links among musical details within the text and to navigate these interrelations within a broader socio-cultural framework. The artists presented here simply serve as examples of these mechanisms. I will first recapitulate briefly the aims and objectives of each chapter before presenting my conclusions.

By introducing the term *retronormativity* into my analysis of Beck (chapter 2), I have attempted to demonstrate how his ambiguous utilisation of sonic markers of time de-historicised those musical sounds. Beck's construction of himself as a "slacker", with no apparent core values or direction, does not compromise the purposeful orchestration of so many musical references in his music—an orchestration that benefited from collaborations with very different sorts of producers as well. *Midnite Vultures* (1999) represented a significant break from his past and the slacker construction that had long coloured his musical reception. A close reading of "Sexx Laws" related its play with sonic markers of nostalgia to Beck's performed persona and redeemed his credibility.

Although these musical appropriations asserted Beck's musical good taste and ultimately enabled him to transcend his image, other musical appropriations bring artists down, intentionally or otherwise. In chapter 3, I examined a duet cover of an

AC/DC song by Céline Dion and Anastacia, a Kraftwerk rendition by Senor Coconut and a satirical rap by Promoe in relation to how the appropriation of sonic markers negotiates “bad taste” as well. Almost as a counterpart to chapter 2, this chapter argued that although taste is a social construct (see Bourdieu 1979, Frith 1996, 2004), musical sounds inform it, one way or the other, via specific histories of use that imbue those sounds with socio-cultural value. As Frith (1996) emphasises, even bad taste is not just about taste but also about morality and pleasure, which in turn engage with social conventions.

I approached sonic markers in this light as constructed through certain musical “arguments” within defined sets of conventions. Anastacia and Céline Dion’s cover of “You Shook Me All Night Long” allowed me to explore the manner in which appropriating a given genre’s canonical texts into another genre will evoke what Frith describes as “critical anger” (Frith 2004: 31), regardless of how adept the appropriating performance is. This particular attempt to transpose the sonic markers of rock authenticity into a diva context was roundly criticised and represents an unintentional actualisation of musical “bad taste”. There are also sonic markers of bad taste, of course, that are perfectly intentional and used as part of a deliberate narrative strategy. Senor Coconut’s “Latino” renditions of Kraftwerk are meant to be funny. At the same time, the fact that Uwe Schmidt is German and made this music in Chile raises lots of issues regarding his rendering of “Autobahn” as a cumbia, programmed to sound like a Latin American combo. In a similar vein, Promoe, a Swedish rapper with an outspoken political agenda, applies markers of Eurotrance to underpin a critical stance against generic social notions of normality. Such markers include the slightly detuned, digital character of the main hook and the synth bass on the choruses, as well as the “endless” semiquaver snare drum rolls, apparently taken from a TR-909. It becomes clear in this chapter that sonic markers of taste can derive from ill-advised re-contextualisations, substitutions or appropriations in ways that rewrites the meaning of an existing musical element, to the song’s detriment.

While chapters 2 and 3 focused on the strategic utilisation of existing sonic markers through various forms of appropriation, chapters 4 through 6 looked at how sonic markers are constructed in the first place, thanks to various narrative strategies. I

approached this issue from three angles. Morrissey's association of his singing style with a particular style of electric guitar playing was the focus of chapter 4. In this chapter, the aim was to illuminate how the construction of sonic markers takes place with reference to one specific artist—in this case, Morrissey. In "Something Is Squeezing My Skull" (2009), for example, he exploits the potential of this relationship as a sonic marker by linking distorted pop-punk guitars with his heavily inflected, almost crooning delivery, changing the guitar's earnestness into irony and furthering his own artistic identity. These aspects are carefully intertwined in a pop aesthetic framework that expresses Morrissey's lamentation about the lack of love (and empathy) in modern life. In the course of this chapter, I demonstrate that regarding songs as utterances can tell us much about dialogical processes of performance and production within a contextual framework and in turn contribute a socio-political relevance to sonic markers as an analytical concept.

In chapter 5, I discussed the ways in which Joy Division's music reveals a range of space-related sonic markers—markers that have also been held to represent the industrialised parts of Manchester in the late 1970s. In their songs, space is a construction that works both sonically (with reference to production aesthetics and peculiarities of performance) and contextually (Manchester as a contextual backdrop). It also somehow attaches itself to the suicide of the band's lead singer to shape a coherent, almost mythical star narrative from the interaction of text and context. At the centre of my reading of Joy Division's music are the temperamental peculiarities (Hawkins 2009) of Ian Curtis's singing and performances in relation to the band's relative evenhandedness and raw, unaffected instrumentalism. Refined through Martin Hannett's creative use of studio technology, and most significantly the AMS digital delay, the band preserved their overall performative rawness (and Curtis's idiosyncrasies) despite a technological coldness that might otherwise have subsumed it.

Entering the realm of pop music alongside Elvis Presley and Jerry Lee Lewis and finally leaving Rick Rubin's recording studio for the last time the same year the United States invaded Iraq, Johnny Cash enjoyed one of the longest-lasting careers in the business (1955–2003). In chapter 6, I undertook a close reading of his rendition of "Hurt"

by Nine Inch Nails to explore how voice, music and video can together generate extremely moving sonic markers of vulnerability and nostalgia. Under producer Rick Rubin's influence, Cash was renewed even as he aged almost beyond the recognition of his longtime fans. My reading of "Hurt" consisted of a musicological analysis of the relationship between sound (voice and compositional design), video (as an interpretation of the music) and Cash's lengthy career (as a contextual backdrop). Mapped against a visual juxtaposition of Cash as young (past) and old (present) in tandem with Flemish still-life painting aesthetics, religious symbolism and empty spaces, "Hurt" supplied a powerful journey through Cash's life and career and represented a final confession regarding his contradictory identities.

In total, then, throughout this thesis, I have argued that any interpretation of sonic markers must encompass the song's protagonist, who is first and foremost represented through the biographical presence contained in the voice. As Frith reminds us, "Song, like drama, is about the invention of characters and stories" (Frith 1996: 170). If a performance constitutes a form of role-play, we as listeners are left to determine whether the intention is authenticity (Johnny Cash, Ian Curtis, Morrissey, Promoe) or affectedness—that is, a deliberate construction (Beck, Céline Dion, Anastacia, Senor Coconut). Any evaluation of the music, too, must be based on textual content (including sonic markers) and delivery, in relation to a specific context. By including table 7.1 here, I have therefore sought to specify some of the aspects that I have found useful in understanding the impact of sonic markers on the construction of musical identity. The categories of content, settings and dynamic expression have been borrowed from the work of Burns and colleagues (2008). However, while they simply differentiate between lyrical and musical content, settings and dynamic expressions, I have expanded these categories to accommodate vocals, instruments and music technology as well. This is because one of my main goals has been to find methods for identifying the communicative powers of musical expressions. Indeed, as Burns and colleagues argue, the lyrical expression has a profound effect on the meaning of the music.

Table 7.1. Analytical model for identifying the impact of sonic markers on the formation of musical identity

Pop production					
	Compositional design			Contextual framework	
	Vocal	Instrumental	Technological	Time	Place
Content	Lyrics Topics/themes Melody	Harmony Tonality Rhythm Pitch Arrangements Form	Microphones Preamps Mixers Studio effects	Year Decade (1950s, 1960s, etc.) Generation	District (East/west) City (Manchester, Seattle, etc.) Country (Britain, USA) Continent
Settings	Protagonist Story Biographical presence	Style Genre Sound		Trends Traditions Technological development	Urban/rural Local/global Industrial/non-industrial East/west etc.
Dynamic expression	Degree of resonance (timbre) Register and range Attitude to pitch Attitude to rhythm	Timbre Attitude to rhythm Articulation (trained, untrained, etc.)		Appropriation Re-contextualisation Substitution	
Reception/reading/interpretation					
Sonic markers					

Yet I have found that it is through the vocal delivery, or vocalisation, of these lyrics, and through the pop aesthetic framework conveying it, that the potential for meaning arises. It must be noted, however, that while this table implies a separation of these elements, my intention here is to indicate how these elements *interact*. One cannot search for meaning in one particular musical detail alone; one must frame that detail in relation to the whole. Further, one must analyse how the whole is affected by the detail, and vice versa, and ultimately assess the extent to which this whole affects, and is affected by, the contextual framework in which it operates. For example, in my study of Joy Division, it was necessary to ground the identification of sonic markers of space and place in readings already undertaken by journalists, as these form such an important part of the narrative that is in turn crucial to Joy Division's musical identity. For example, "space" and "alienation" are recurring characterisations of their music that are then used as self-fulfilling prophecies to demonstrate that the "truth" about Joy Division can also be found within the "music itself". The musical qualities that inspire these characterisations, such as the band's repetitive motivic weaving, comparative untrainedness (instrumental), and use of digital delay (technological), thus become sonic markers of Joy Division's authenticity—an authenticity that is "secured" through the mythological formation surrounding their lead singer, Ian Curtis.

With Morrissey, on the other hand, the singer contributes to his own narrative, on stage as well as off, through both his voice and his lyrics. When I identify the heavily distorted electric guitar as a sonic marker, I frame it in terms of Morrissey's larger efforts to tell his own story. While Jesse Tobias's guitar style and sound certainly play a major role in forming the *sound* of "Something Is Squeezing My Skull", this sound's narrative potential is actualised only through Morrissey's persona—his media image, personal history, biographical details and so on—as well as the socio-political context in which the song appeared. In this way, table 7.1 attempts to illustrate the fact that separate aspects of a given sonic marker and its realisation as such can only contribute to a musical narrative through their interaction. In my readings in this thesis, of course, I have not accounted for all these kinds of elements in each and every case study. I have focused instead on the interaction of elements emphasised by the compositional design and contextual

framework in order to demonstrate the relational processes of cultural codification that enable musical details to play a role in the whole—that is, to contribute as sonic markers with a narrative purpose.

Restrictions and further research

There are, it must be said, potential risks associated with separating musical elements in the manner proposed by this project. For example, how does one actually distinguish vocal and instrumental characteristics from technological characteristics, and, more to the point, for whom is this distinction relevant? As I argued in the introductory chapter, this process evokes issues of listening competence (Middleton 1990, Brackett 2000) but also listening *perspective*. For engineers and producers in the recording studio, as I noted in chapters 2 and 5, there is necessarily a different kind of focus upon the musical details than there is for listeners who are merely exposed to the music as a finished (recorded, mixed and mastered) product.

Likewise, as a guitarist, I hear pop music differently than a singer would. The popular musicologist follows the producer to an extent—both must be able to separate different studio effects from the voice or instrument in a “natural” state, in order to control or describe the *amount of effect* and thereby control or describe its *affect* on the vocal or instrumental expression. The musicologist, in the end, like the producer, must further cultivate the ability to “balance between the autonomy of the detail and the discourse that describes the whole” (Hawkins 2001: 4).

Similarly, the process I have adopted in choosing method, theory, case studies and perspectives likewise represent an act of interpretation and even exclusion—what I did do came at the expense of what I did not—could not, given the time available—do. I will therefore attempt to highlight some aspects of this project that merit further research. Despite their disparate narratives of identity construction, my case studies reveal certain similarities: in general, they engage performers who are white men exploring their respective inabilities to fit in.⁸⁸ In a Bakhtinian vein, one could say

⁸⁸ Céline Dion and Anastacia are exceptions; however, as I argued in chapter 3, they “invaded” the domain of masculine rock authenticity while teetering on the verge of

that this *multiplicity of voices* announces one distinct *utterance*: a crisis for white masculinity. As my selection of case studies indicates, this crisis has taken on different guises throughout the history of popular music. Though gender has played little part in this present discussion, it might inform a later one, particularly in terms of the socio-political relevance of the concept of sonic markers. As demonstrated by Biddle (2007), Hawkins (2009), Jarman-Ivens (2006) and others, negotiations of gendered performance in popular culture in general, and popular music in particular, have demonstrated the relevance and viability of the concept of transculturalism. Where multiculturalism has seemingly failed as a model for integration in Western society, transculturalism takes into account the dialogical formations of cultural exchange in a more hopeful way.

The relationship between sound and time has also proven more significant to this study than I first anticipated. I have indicated some inroads into aspects of time, especially by introducing the term retronormativity in chapter 2, where I focused on how sonic markers potentially lose their meaning over time, only to be resurrected anew a decade or two later. However, more work could be undertaken on this issue, particularly with regard to the flattening out of the affective qualities of musical sounds through their overuse or the transmission of sonic markers from peripheral musical styles to the mainstream over time. In chapter 3, for example, I argued that Promoe's mix of hip-hop and Eurotrance in his song "Svennebanan" strengthened the critical foundation of his utterance. On the one hand, one could argue that he plays with codes that are already overused within a specific musical style. On the other hand, through artists such as Lady Gaga and Rhianna, trance-like sounds have taken huge steps toward credibility in the mainstream.

In my chapter on Beck, I explored the ways in which sampling has been used aesthetically as a sonic marker. It would be interesting to apply the concept of sonic markers to a discussion of the juridical issues surrounding sampling as well. Sarah Rambarran has demonstrated how Danger Mouse became a renowned producer

normative femininity, which arguably has been one of the reasons why their performance of "You Shook Me All Night Long" has been regarded by rock fans as one of the worst cover versions of all times.

thanks to his creative (yet illegal) juxtaposition of Jay Z's *Black Album* (2004) and the Beatles' *White Album* (1968) in a mash-up known as the *Grey Album* (2004). This would on the one hand be a display of a widespread use of sonic markers with a creative and narrative purpose. At the same time, as Rambarran points out, it is a form of theft: "The digital sampler is an instrument. The instrument turns existing sounds into new sounds (performing quotations) but maintain their sonic qualities" (Rambarran 2010: 97). Sonic markers, then, could also serve as an interesting inroad into a discussion of pop aesthetics and juridical issues.

In conclusion, then, popular musicology demonstrates that the relationship between musical form and social structure can be approached dialogically and studied from a wide variety of perspectives. If popular music is contingent upon its continuous transformation and development, as I stated in the introduction, the study of its mechanisms demands new tools as well. As Hawkins reminds us: "Albeit from different points of view, the unitary task of the popular music scholar is to decide on criteria for reflection that access the merits of studying music through the rituals of human expression" (Hawkins 2011b: xxvii). Ultimately, what I have proposed and systematically developed throughout this thesis are various analytical models for identifying the role of musical details in the construction of musical identity in pop production. The close readings I have undertaken in each chapter shed light on the relational strategies at play in these constructions. Finally, by building on a range of interdisciplinary criteria for understanding musical identity as a socio-cultural construction (like gender and subjectivity), this study has attempted to pinpoint the impact of musical sound upon this fascinating process of perception.

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