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Revenge of the Boomers: Notes on the Analysis of Rock Music

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ABSTRACT: The increasing interest by music theorists in rock/pop analysis represents a reconciliation of their formative involvement with both classical and popular musics. In striving toward an appropriate analytical methodology, theorists must negotiate between conflicting claims of salience for both musical and extra-musical factors. After commenting on three historically important and representative theorists (Tagg, Middleton, and Everett), the paper presents an analysis of a song by Sting, relating structural features of the music to his appropriation of country music and interpreting "stylistic dissonances" between structure and style as significant to the textual and musical narrative.

[References](#)

[1] I shall begin this talk with two stories, both true. Going through my recent Email, I received messages from two prominent scholars--one in music theory, the other in ethnomusicology--requesting a copy of this paper after having seen the title listed in the program for the New England Conference of Music Theorists. No one had ever asked me for a copy of a paper that I had not even finished yet. This is a reliable sign that the theory and analysis of rock music is, as the song goes, "hot hot hot." Back in November following my return from the national SMT meeting in Atlanta, I was meeting one of my freshman theory students, a guitarist, in office hours. He asked me how the conference was, and I told him that one of the most interesting papers I heard was an hour and a half long analysis of "Enter Sandman" by Metallica, where the author transcribed not only the lead

guitar part but also the progression of the wah-wah pedal, adapting Slawson's theory of sound color to its spectrum of timbres. My student looked at me, rolled his eyes, and said, "You've got to be kidding." Taken together, my two stories suggest something of the odd nature of scholarship on rock and popular music: viewed by some with disbelief that such music is worthy of analytical investigation, and viewed by others as the next frontier, the ocean floor waiting to be mapped.

[2] In surveying the current literature, one reason for the exponential growth in this area is the attempt by a younger generation of theorists to deal with a kind of collective schizophrenia, born from deep involvement with both classical and popular musics. In a recent essay on compositional design in the early music of the progressive British rock band Genesis, Mark Spicer expresses a feeling that many if not most rock music scholars share: "Writing a 'serious' essay about Genesis for this book has been especially significant for me. As I was growing up in the late 1970s and 1980s--and playing in as many rock and pop bands as I did orchestras--this group was one of the main reasons why I came to love music and to love thinking about music. . . . I am sure that there are several others within our discipline who also care a great deal about this music, those whose formative years were similarly shaped by both a classical and a rock aesthetic."^{1}

[3] My talk will be in two parts. Part I will briefly survey some issues of methodology in rock/pop analysis. Part II will present my analysis of a song written and performed by Sting, in which I shall position the analysis within the field in the terms proposed in Part I.

[4] To assess the current state of research, I recently submitted a questionnaire to both the SMT list and the pop music analysis list, asking scholars for a description of their ongoing projects which have not yet been published. I received responses from twenty-eight theorists (many with multiple projects) from the United States, Canada, and England. [Table 1](#) is a bibliography of those projects which you may peruse at your leisure. Given the tremendous variety of subjects and perspectives, I have conceived an admittedly crude schema by which these works--and by extension work within the broader field of rock/pop analysis--may be categorized. [Figure 1](#) shows what I have termed the four "poles of orientation": 1) the composer/performer, 2) the listener, 3) cultural/commercial issues, and 4) the "music itself." For the most part, rock/pop music analysts take a position that gravitates toward one of these four poles, sometimes toward two, and more rarely may be placed in the center as part of a more thoroughly interdisciplinary perspective. Naturally these poles exist for the study of classical music as well. By bringing them to the forefront of popular music scholarship, however, one is forced to consider more closely some fundamental distinctions between repertoires. For example, how is the role of the listener and the listener's musical experience different for rock/pop than for classical music? In what ways may the notion of "authorship" be different for popular music? How do commercial issues influence music production and dissemination? What musical factors take on greater or lesser salience in rock/pop music as opposed to classical?

[5] Indeed, it is this last question--the identity of salient musical factors in popular music and the consequences for an appropriate analytical methodology--that lies at the polemical heart of an ongoing scholarly debate. There is no need to rehearse this debate here. Instead I shall speak briefly about three prominent scholars whose work has been important in shaping the field of rock/pop analysis, and whose approaches are broadly representative.

[6] Historically, Philip Tagg's 1982 article, "Analysing Popular Music: Theory, Method and Practice," represents one of the earliest serious attempts at a musicology of popular music. In it he enunciates several propositions which have become axiomatic for a number of subsequent analysts:

1. "Studying popular music is an interdisciplinary matter."
2. ". . . popular music cannot be analysed using only the traditional tools of musicology."
3. "[Musical] hermeneutics [rigorously and carefully applied] . . . in combination with other musicological subdisciplines, especially the sociology and semiology of music, make an important contribution to the analysis of popular music. In short: a rejection of hermeneutics will result in sterile formalism while its unbridled application can degenerate into unscientific guesswork."^{2}

Significantly, Tagg eschews any music smacking of canonical or masterwork tendencies, instead analyzing in great detail the theme from the TV show *Kojak* and the Abba song "Fernando." While not ignoring structural aspects, he folds them into a semiotic approach that emphasizes the conventional codes underlying relevant musical affects; in this sense Tagg attempts a kind of *Affektenlehre* for popular music. For example, he finds affective correlations between the falling tritone in Abba's "Fernando" and the same interval in Bach's St. Matthew Passion, Gluck's *Orfeo et Euridice*, and the Righteous Brothers' "You've Lost that Loving Feeling."

[7] While clearly influenced by Tagg, Richard Middleton attempts to reconcile in more explicit terms the multiplicity of analytical approaches to popular music. In a 1993 article in the journal *Popular Music*, he proceeds from a fundamental assumption: that popular music differs from classical in its emphasis on rhythm--not only duration and accentuation, but more broadly the patterned movement of musical elements. In striving toward a theory of *gesture*, Middleton thereby tries to address the importance of physicality and the body in the listener's response to this music. In turn gesture represents one part of his tripartite model, complemented by what he terms *connotation* and *musical argument* (or structure). Perhaps oversimplistically he questions music theory's overreliance on structural analysis and aligns his position with the broader project in 1980s musicology questioning the means and ends of "formalist" music theory. Even so, he does offer a pragmatic alternative: "What I would suggest is that these three areas--gesture, connotation, argument--operate in different repertoires in diverse ratios and interrelationships; and analysis needs to reflect that." [\[3\]](#)

[8] At the other end of the spectrum stands the work of Walter Everett, including his recently published magnum opus, *The Beatles as Musicians: "Revolver" through the "Anthology"*. In his preface, Everett addresses head-on the criticism of structural analysis for rock/pop music. "There are those who say that an appreciation of [the Beatles' music] is not enhanced by any intellectual understanding. Others say that any example of popular music is to be evaluated not in relation to its internal musical issues but solely in terms of its social reception, or that popular music cannot be analyzed to useful ends with tools 'created' for the appreciation of classical music. . . . While those with such beliefs are certainly free to limit their own investigations in any desired way, I would hope that the present study would suggest to them that their own endeavors might be enhanced by an objective hearing of the music that they endow with such spiritual and cultural significance." [\[4\]](#)

[9] With respect to an analytical methodology for popular music, the above quotation raises two crucial points. First, by the central position he accords to both structural analysis and source study (in the form of recording sessions and their attendant documentation), Everett knowingly inscribes his project and by extension the music of the Beatles into the canonical mainstream of theory and musicology. Second, the success of such a project depends on the music itself having a degree of structural integrity that can withstand this sort of analytical scrutiny. I would suggest that those musicians about whom the current generation of theorists are devoting "hardcore" analytical studies--the Beatles, Frank Zappa, Led Zeppelin, Pink Floyd, etc.-- fulfill this criterion. (To play on Everett's book, which prospective essay title would make more sense: "The Backstreet Boys as Musicians," or "The Backstreet Boys as Cultural Icons to the Pre-pubescent"?)

[10] Part II of my paper examines the concluding song, entitled "Lithium Sunset," from Sting's 1996 solo album *Mercury Falling*. [\[5\]](#) My pole of orientation is "the music itself," and the analysis will explore the traditional domains of form, harmony, instrumentation, and motive, with some consideration of studio technique as appropriate. My analytical point of departure is not uncommon in rock/pop analysis: the appropriation of musical style. Beginning with the 1985 *Dream of the Blue Turtles* following the breakup of the Police, much of Sting's solo music employs a specific musical style or genre--e.g., reggae, blues, something I call "film noir," Irish folk--for aesthetic reasons having to do with the narrative as communicated by the song lyrics. *Mercury Falling* is no exception and indeed incorporates what for Sting were two new styles: rhythm and blues, and country music. Both are deployed to expressive and ironic effect in representing the cycle's predominating themes of winter, loss of love, willful illusion, and madness. (The association with Schubert's *Die Winterreise* is intentional on my part.)

[11] "Lithium Sunset" appropriates in a radical way not only the musical style of country, but also its penchant for irony--i.e., its use of happy and exuberant music to express broken hearts, betrayals, and other bad things with detachment and the hint of a rueful smile. In Sting's song, the central image, "lithium sunset," signals his trope on this theme. As is well known, lithium is the drug of choice in treating severe cases of manic depression. By bringing together lithium and sunset as a compound image, our conventional associations with sunset--the boundary between day and night, beautiful colors, romantic overtones--become distorted through the filter of lithium to suggest the turn of the soul from day to night, the beautiful colors as hallucinations, and romance as the inconsolable loss of love.

[12] In this context, the stylistic choice of country music takes on the character of an assumed identity, the very simplicity of the music mirroring the protagonist's hope of healing himself in the aftermath of a failed marriage (this part of the story is established in an earlier song). What gives "Lithium Sunset" its resonance is the tension engendered by what I shall term "stylistic dissonance," which reveals the delusory character of the protagonist. This dissonance occurs both in the lyrics and the music, manifesting itself in virtual "spikes" of intensity. Lyrically, these spikes constitute poetic images that dissonate against the "normative" irony of country music lyrics noted above: examples include "lithium sunset," "this heartache of obsidian darkness," and the desire to "fold my darkness / into your yellow light." Musically, these spikes of intensity are perceived as gestures that dissonate against the happy and predictable twang typical of country music.

[13] [Example 1](#) provides a basic formal and harmonic outline of the song. Down the right side of the example, I have shown in greater detail three formal junctures--the end of the introduction and beginning of the song proper, the vocal and harmonic climax concluding the bridge, and the end of the reprise into the coda--that help delineate the process of stylistic dissonance. The introduction features bass, drums, acoustic steel-string guitar, and harmonica sustaining dominant harmony until bar 8. Here all instruments drop out except the bass, which executes a falling glissando against which the voice enters with "Fill my eyes." (The bracketed "x" designates the primary vocal motive for the song.) The abruptness of the textural change and the bass glissando itself suggest a sense of weightlessness, like falling through space in a dream, and it serves as a harbinger of further disorientation. Immediately thereafter the pedal-steel guitar replaces the harmonica and unambiguously establishes country as the musical style. The song proceeds in relatively predictable fashion until the end of the bridge (bar 32). Here on the words "Heal my soul," the harmonic rhythm accelerates and the progression takes a surprising turn, as C-sharp sus4 leads to the chromatic F major, functionally the flat submediant in A major. This clashes strikingly with the vocal F-sharp on "my," and the metaphorical "stylistic" dissonance becomes the literally dissonant cross-relation between F-natural and F-sharp. Moreover, the clash between the desperate "Heal my soul" and the unresolved dissonance dramatically heightens the sense of delusion and futility in the protagonist's plea. Thereafter the reprise (or section A3) introduces the first and only significant break in the regular phrase rhythm of the prototypical 32-bar song form. At bar 38, the vocal timbre is enhanced with reverb, adding intensity to the thrice-repeated line "to another night"; metrically this segment articulates its own eight-bar hypermeasure, thereby markedly extending the phrase. With the corresponding sustaining of the dominant harmony and the concluding falling bass glissando, the phrase extension precisely recalls the introduction, and the glissando becomes literally associated with "mercury falling," still another image of emotional disintegration. On a larger scale, while the "mercury falling" glissando frames the song, the image "mercury falling" frames the entire album, as the first song opens and the final song closes with these words. To summarize, Sting employs textural, harmonic, hypermetrical and timbral means for creating stylistic dissonances against the background of country music, and these dissonances help represent the delusory character of the protagonist.

[14] The coda reinforces the sense of delusion by the further incursion of modal mixture, again via the cross-relation between F and F-sharp. Herein, the acoustic guitar simply repeats A and D major chords, while the pedal-steel guitar sounds F-naturals against it. [Example 2](#) transcribes the pedal-steel guitar part in the coda. Its place in the mix is roughly indicated as "FG" for foreground, "BG" for background, and "MG" for middleground (obviously bearing no relation to Schenkerian

terminology). Interestingly, the pedal-steel part describes a kind of large-scale arch: after two bars of foreground, it continues diatonically in the background; at bar 10 the pedal-steel moves decisively to the foreground, insinuating F-naturals while rising to a registral climax; then following a brief resurgence of F-natural middleground activity, the pedal-steel concludes diatonically in the background to the final fade-out. Whether intentional or not, the shape of the solo could be taken as still another emblem of the protagonist's manic depression, with the false cheer of the major licks of the pedal-steel in the background framing the darker depressive foreground state.

[15] To conclude, this analysis has employed a conventional methodology, featuring such familiar concepts as modal mixture, cross-relation, phrase extension and hypermetrical reinterpretation, and, more basically, consonance and dissonance itself. I would like to think that my choice of methodology and, more broadly, the nature of my discourse, is not merely the product of training and habit. Rather, I have attempted to evaluate the salience of these features as they relate to a specific interpretative strategy, here based on stylistic appropriation and dissonance. It goes without saying that theories both enable and constrain, giveth and taketh away. I hope that, with this burgeoning of interest in rock and popular music, our striving towards a viable methodology will allow for scholarly and critical acumen as well as the sense of fun, unbridled enthusiasm, ontological complexity, and questioning of authority that inevitably and thankfully come with the territory of popular music.

[Allen Forte's response](#)

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