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Listening for History: Studies on Retro and the Temporalities of Popular Music

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Author
Gampel, Jared

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**LISTENING FOR HISTORY:
STUDIES ON RETRO AND THE TEMPORALITIES OF
POPULAR MUSIC**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

HISTORY OF CONSCIOUSNESS

by

Jared Gampel

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The dissertation of Jared Gampel is
approved:

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Professor Eric Porter, Chair

_____

Professor Massimiliano Tomba

_____

Professor Christopher Connery

_____

Professor Banu Bargu

_____

Peter Biehl
Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract

Listening for History: Studies on Retro and the Temporalities of Popular Music

Jared Gampel

This dissertation argues that the pervasiveness of retro in today's popular
music culture is part of a larger story about transformations not just in the music
industry, but in global capitalism. I take up the broad usage of the retro concept
developed in the 2000s by Mark Fisher and Simon Reynolds, for whom retro not only
describes musical revivals and new acts committed to period stylization; retro
designates a larger cultural situation where pop music's very recent past looms ever-
greater over its present. Drawing on Fredric Jameson's concept of the nostalgia mode
and his approach to periodization, they concluded that retro indexes cultural
exhaustion and music's severance from historicity, if not the "end of history" itself.
By contrast, I argue that retro is less about historical closure than a new way of
relating to music *as history*. Across three case studies of retro, I demonstrate why we
are listening to more "old" music than ever before and how the reactivation of music
history can further different cultural and political ends. In a history of rock radio that
culminates in the Classic Rock format, I show how the emergence of nostalgia
formatting heralded a new era for rock's self-commemoration. While the music
industry canonizes the past in order to resell it, distorting our sense of history in the
process, I show how musical revivals "from below" can use music history toward
resistant ends. Rather than simply trying to repeat the past, I argue that revivals carry

history into the present. In an analysis of the 1980s boogie-funk revival known as the modern funk scene, I show how bygone music genres can serve as sites of cultural recovery, continuity, and community building. Though grassroots musical revivals have contributed to a growing interest in music history, the biggest contributor to today's listening habits derives from the growth and popularity of streaming platforms. As I show in a case study of Spotify, financialization has transformed the music industry in ways that bias our listening toward older catalog titles. A materialist account of retro therefore provides a history of the present.

Acknowledgements

No single thinker shaped the course of my graduate studies more than Fredric Jameson. I am grateful to Chris Connery for offering an entire seminar dedicated to Jameson's extensive body of work. Both the dissertation and my teaching is indebted to Chris in significant ways. If the truth of any philosophy is in its effects, few scholars in my time at UC Santa Cruz can be said to have produced so many dedicated (and curious) Marxist militants. Thank you Chris for hooding me at graduation.

Completing the dissertation would have been impossible without my longstanding friendship with Jeb Purucker. Jeb saw the dissertation from its inception nearly to its completion, reading and commenting upon drafts of my chapters along the way. Many of the ideas in the dissertation were sharpened through our long conversations, but the critique of Jameson in particular is indebted to him. In leaving for Burning Man a week away from the dissertation's due date, any errors present in the final draft can be attributed to him.

Thank you to Eric Porter for Chairing the dissertation committee and for commenting thoroughly on my drafts. The funk chapter in particular is much stronger because of your hard work. Thank you to Max Tomba and Banu Bargu for serving on the committee and for all your encouragement. Our meetings went a long way toward helping me reach the finish line. Thank you Banu in particular for letting me audit your course on Louis Althusser. It contributed immensely to the conceptual framework of the dissertation.

INTRODUCTION

> How do you get people *to want to live in time*, to have a sense of the importance of time for growth, development, of the need for ups-and-downs, of non-homogenized development? Almost all the great artists in the past were first of all apprentices. They went to school with the masters of the time and knew everything that these masters knew before they began to discover what was new about themselves. They not only accepted this, but enjoyed it; they expected to undergo a kind of recapitulation of the past in order to gather the momentum to leap into the future… A revolution in the U.S. is only going to be led and made by people with some sense of the thickness of time, of time as duration, of time as heterogeneous, of development through contradiction, not in a straight line.
>
> —James Boggs and Grace Lee Boggs, Lyman Paine and Freddy Paine

"At home he feels like a tourist / At home he feels like a tourist / He fills his head with culture / He gives himself an ulcer." These are the lines that open Gang of Four's first single after controversially signing with EMI. Their jump to a major label drew criticism but how else could they reach the masses? In its time, "At Home He's a Tourist" (1979) was a sharp critique of the leisure industry, which lumped music in with more recreational forms of amusement that had no pretense of "art." But this was how punks understood the music industry in the late 1970s: "Down on the disco floor / They make their profit / From the things they sell / To help you cover / All the rubbers you hide / In your top left pocket." The criticisms Gang of Four leveled against disco, which they framed as both brazenly commercial and as a prelude to potentially predacious sex, were common amongst punks. Yet, the band also turned their gaze inward. In Brechtian fashion, they exaggerated the extent to which their own music was a product, "Damaged Goods," *Entertainment!* The desired effect was to alienate their listeners as well as to persuade them that social criticism comes from

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within the capitalist system, not from some Archimedean point outside of it

(Reynolds 2006, 62). In their hands, pop was elevated to a form of immanent critique.

In the 1980s, Gang of Four were known to implicate themselves and their

audiences in their songs. Two decades later, "At Home He's a Tourist" interpellated

me. I recognized myself in the song's protagonist, who retreated into culture as a

reaction to feeling out of place. Though I did not consider my own obsessions with

music and record collecting to be responses to social alienation, they were certainly

responses to feeling *out of time*. After all, my initial interest in punk and post-punk

had always been coupled with a feeling of belatedness. As a millennial, I was too

young to have experienced the music in its own era. And as a musician, it seemed like

every sonic move that could still be legible as punk had already been made. The

sounds, styles, and politics of punk mutated over the decades, splintering into a

multitude of subgenres, each with its own conventions. Yet by the 2000s, the sense of

musical impasse was widely shared. Punk's heyday was behind us.

These sentiments that first made their way to me through punk turned out to

be a prevailing structure of feeling. Arriving at UC Santa Cruz in 2006, I was

surrounded by other sonic time-travelers. Some dressed the part. These were

specialists who obsessed over one bygone musical subculture or another—the

hippies, the punks, the indie rockers. But most of my friends were "hip" generalists,

people who scoured the internet for the best and the most overlooked of everything

from the 1960s through the 1990s. There were of course established canons to

familiarize oneself with, but the effect of networked culture was to produce new ones.

Records once considered "rare" or obscure circulated freely, overcoming the barriers of cost, space, and insider knowledge that used to contain them in small circles of record collectors. With high-speed internet in my dorm, I downloaded albums at a pace that utterly exceeded my ability to listen to them. There was an anxiety that propelled the whole process—"He fills his head with culture / He gives himself an ulcer"—where the more I accumulated, the less I could absorb. Every day there were new posts on the music blogs, and every day I rushed to download their accompanying files before the hyperlinks expired. So while making music often felt like a dead end, collecting and listening took on great compensatory significance. My undergraduate experience was defined by the *absence* of a generation-defining music, where pop's past filled the void.

As a student, my passion for music remained independent from my scholarly interest in economics for some time. If the Financial Crisis of 2007-8 provided an ideological opening for Marxism's resurgence, UC Santa Cruz provided ample avenues to develop one's foundations in the tradition. Though I continued to pursue my degree in economics, I supplemented my formal Keynesian training with classes on Marx and the history of political economy, neither of which were offered in the Economics Department. In 2012, I left for Toronto to deepen my Marxism at York University, where I learned to find my way through contemporary debates in Marxist economics. My Master's thesis on the origins of the Financial Crisis provided closure about the conjuncture that changed the trajectory of my intellectual and political life. The following year, I was accepted into the History of Consciousness program under

its Crises in the Cultures of Capitalism initiative, thinking I would continue my work on structural crises. However, my coursework opened up new ways of using my economics background and applying it to other fields. Those closest to me anticipated the turn in my scholarship long before I made it.

A course-long engagement with Fredric Jameson's extensive body of work forced a convergence in my thinking about capitalism and popular culture. Jameson functioned as a guide through Marxism's long history of cultural criticism and provided a powerful interpretive hermeneutic. "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture" became central to my understanding of how ideology operates—not by outright manipulation, but by tapping into liberatory desires residing in our unconscious that cannot be fulfilled within the world as presently constituted. In resolving those contradictions fictitiously, we are offered a fantasy bribe as compensation for our buy-in to a worldview that dominates us. As a critic not only of literature, but also of film, architecture, language, and art, Jameson is unrivaled in locating remarkable aesthetic similarities across cultural fields. And as a Marxist, his writing is as generous as it is wide-ranging, committed to the notion that insights from other disciplines should be assimilated into historical materialist analysis and that Marxists do a disservice to ourselves when we treat our own tradition as composed of rival schools.

Jameson's impact on my scholarship is second only to that of Marx himself. If the explanatory power of *The Communist Manifesto* lies in how it anticipated a global capitalist future we now occupy—rather than the world it described in its

time—Jameson's *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* has proved similarly prophetic. He describes how postmodern temporality is characterized by historical dislocation, where the present is marked by its aesthetic unrepresentability and the past returns as dead styles. Although Jameson's tome on postmodernism contains only scattered fragments about music, it seemed to describe what was happening there too. Suddenly popular music appeared more closely related to all the other cultural fields, catching up with a process that already played out elsewhere. I felt a pressing need to take up an analysis of pop to fill out Jameson's story. Yet as my research deepened, I discovered that others already used Jameson's problematic to theorize the impasse in popular music.

Reading Mark Fisher and Simon Reynolds was nothing short of revelatory. These two writers captured the standstill in pop, amassing a substantial amount of evidence to prove the point. Unlike so many music critics tied to the past, they were attuned to the contours of a more contemporary conjuncture, one that Fisher termed *Capitalist Realism* and Reynolds termed *Retromania*. The problem with retro was not strictly musical; it was economic, technological, ideological, and political. Their interventions demonstrated that critics had a role in the struggle against retro. Yet, there was a negativity in their writing that never sat well with me. As champions of pop's critical abilities, their critique differed from the familiar pessimism of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who were the first to link the repetition of popular musical forms with the Left's temporary political defeat. In fact, bleak and sometimes catastrophic thinking was a wider problem for Marxism during the 2000s. There were

of course real problems that grounded that sensibility—the Iraq War, the Financial Crisis, and a climate crisis looming ever-greater—but it always struck me as out of step with the fighting spirit of the tradition. This project helped me pinpoint those contradictions that shot through a structure of feeling that Fisher and Reynolds theorized through music.

Graduate students in the humanities often write about historical matters that are far removed from their own lives. But too often whatever is gained as a consequence of scholarly distance is a loss from the perspective of immanent critique. Instead of reproducing the journalistic fiction of objectivity, I decided (in contrast to what I regularly tell my students) that an autobiographical opening was the most fitting one. As much as pop music itself, our lives are composed of non-synchronous temporalities. And as much as any other work of criticism, this project was overdetermined by historical and personal circumstances. At a certain point, the two became inseparable. The dissertation provided an opportunity for prolonged engagement with the thinkers who helped me make sense of my own cultural situation. Coming to terms with their limits led me to an alternative problematic (Chapter one). Even so, the concept of retro that was developed by Fisher and Reynolds—which derived from Jameson's work on nostalgia—will endure as an intellectual touchstone for anyone concerned about the direction of popular music today. The only way out is through them. The future of music is what's at stake.

So what happened to pop?

In contrast with accounts that treat nostalgia as a Rosetta Stone for understanding contemporary social life[1]—as if "Make America Great Again" and Greta Van Fleet's "Highway Tune" could be understood as different expressions of our zeitgeist—this dissertation provides a materialist account of retro in popular music. At the economic level, it shows how concrete transformations in the music industry resulted in the increasing commodification of pop music's recent past. But it does more than this. In connecting the work of historians of the music business with the Marxist traditions of critical theory and cultural studies, I demonstrate how a long arc of curatorial practices has transformed the temporality of musical experience. Those practices have their own histories, emerging in relation to larger economic, technological, political, cultural, and musical developments. Sometimes they are generated by the most powerful actors in the music industry—broadcasting corporations, consultants, major labels, music retailers, and streaming platforms—but they are also produced by everyday people. By now, we've all heard countless playlists assembled by algorithms. But that hasn't stopped music fans all over the world from creating playlists for themselves and their friends. A similar dynamic is at work in the commemoration and revival of bygone music genres.

The tug of war over the meanings of music history has played out differently across genres. Much attention has been paid to rock's commemoration through highly capitalized institutions like *Rolling Stone* and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame museum, but scholars have paid less attention to the ways that canonization also takes

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[1] For an example of such an account, see cultural critic David Berry's recent *On Nostalgia*.

place "from below." If rock's former centrality in the music industry made it ripe for corporate memorializing on the Classic Rock radio format (Chapter two), the 1980s boogie-funk revival flourishes in the present largely because popular music can also function as a site of cultural heritage and historical memory (Chapter three). As Amiri Baraka once wrote of the blues: "The Music, The Music, this is our history" (Jones 1999, ix). For Baraka, the blues held a musical mirror up to African-American life. Just as the people themselves were transformed by changing social circumstances, their music sounded those shifts. It is in this sense that Baraka sees music *as* history. It's all there, so long as we know how to listen for it.

Since the development of what Jeremy Wade Morris terms the digital music commodity, scholars and pop critics alike argue that it has become harder and harder to listen for history. While some highlight production techniques made possible by the digital audio workstation, where in contrast to the analog studio, "sounds are saved separately from the operations performed on them" and "history is undoable," others focus more on the architecture of streaming platforms, which have stripped albums of the histories once contained in liner notes and on back covers (Krukowski 2017, 168–69). Contemporary theories of retro must be understood within this larger trope about music becoming unmoored from history in the digital age. Yet, the cultural pervasiveness of retro, as much as the digital technologies that are its conditions of possibility, bears traces of its own historical situation. It is one best understood as *differently historical* from the analog era, thereby requiring concepts

adequate to our present. A materialist analysis of retro must begin from this central premise.

This dissertation argues that the pervasiveness of retro in today's popular music culture is part of a larger story about transformations not just in the music industry, but in global capitalism. In what follows, I take up the broad usage of the retro concept developed by Mark Fisher and Simon Reynolds, for whom retro not only describes revival genres and new acts committed to period stylization; it designates a larger cultural situation where pop music's recent past looms ever-larger over its present. However, in contrast to their shared conclusion that retro indexes music's severance from history, if not the end of history itself, I am concerned with how the reactivation of music history is put towards particular cultural and political ends. This does not mean abandoning the notion that retro has cumulative effects, not least of all on aspiring musicians, but it does suggest that we need not afford retro such a catastrophic significance. The uses of music history are complex, contradictory, and point in multiple directions, speaking as much to needs in the present as to the pasts they draw upon.

Chapter Outline

Chapter one provides an intellectual history of the Fisher-Reynolds thesis. In addition to tracking their immense contributions toward a theory of retro, I show how retro became a cipher for popular music critics to express anxieties about the lack of political and cultural resistance to capitalism in the 21ˢᵗ century. A central objective of this chapter is to critique the Fisher-Reynolds problematic, exposing its limits and

pinpointing its contradictions. A second objective is to replace it with an alternative

problematic. The first procedure historicizes how retro became a dominant aesthetic

tendency in popular music and how Jameson's body of work was taken up by Fisher

and Reynolds to make sense of it. I argue that while this brought Jameson's insights

into their critique of retro, they also inherited the limits of Jameson's problematic.

Overcoming those limits requires abandoning Jameson's use of periodization and

advancing an alternative theorization of retro from the vantage point of the present.

Drawing on George Lipstiz's scholarship on collective memory and popular culture, I

develop a dialogic approach toward retro that emphasizes how the uses of our musical

past are always context- and site-specific.

The three chapters that follow examine different sites of musical culture where

pop's past hangs heavily over our present. These are not a series of neat declension

narratives. Rather, each chapter demonstrates how the meaning of music is always an

ongoing and negotiated process. As counterintuitive as it may seem, music never

"speaks" for itself. It makes its way to us in commodified forms, mediated by a

multitude of media apparatuses. Those apparatuses tend to establish the dominant

narratives that circulate about music, in turn conditioning the ways we think about the

world. Indeed, how music is presented always tells a story about our history. Nowhere

is this clearer than when the music business functions as a nostalgia industry and the

past is what's for sale. Alternative narratives tend to emerge from elsewhere. We

produce them in everyday contexts through conversation, sharing opinions, and

debate. Talking about music is one of the quotidian pleasures of being a fan but

cultural judgments also carry traces of ideas about politics and history (Frith 1998, 4).

Other times counter-narratives are strategically forged through revivalist projects,

where the reactivation of established musical forms can force public reevaluations of

the past. A richer engagement with retro is pressing then not only to correct the

one-sidedness of existing accounts but to open up new possibilities for cultural and

political intervention. In different ways, each chapter contains deeper engagements

with Jameson, Fisher, and Reynolds, whose work still provides immense resources

for thinking about retro as a historical and political problem. But in drawing attention

to the limitations of their problematic and their conclusions, my work offers

alternative ways of listening both *to* and *for* history.

My second chapter provides a history of the symbiotic relationship between

rock music and commercial radio that culminated in the Classic Rock format. Long

before the popularity of pastiche-rock in the 2000s, tribute songs and nostalgia

formats heralded a new era for rock's self-commemoration. Yet, scholars have largely

overlooked commercial radio's role in keeping old hits in contemporary popular

culture. I argue that the emergence of Classic Rock is an important moment not only

for rock's canonization but also for the history of retro. Throughout the 1970s, rock

radio formats were increasingly rationalized according to the dictates of market

research and profitability. With each format innovation came a further loss of

autonomy for DJs and an ever-greater emphasis on past hits. These processes reached

their apex in 1982 with the introduction of the Classic Rock format. Though initially

a way to resell rock's past to the generation that grew up with the music, the format

11

effectively manufactured a new canon by incorporating rock from distinct eras into a single sonic identity. I argue that by imposing a temporality on rock that leads from the 1960s directly to the 1980s, Classic Rock distorts our sense of rock history while evacuating the music of the 60s of its radical visions of the future.

Chapter two theorizes nostalgia as an ideology. As a mode of representing an imaginary relationship to a real past, nostalgia always carries a commentary on the present. This is as true of nostalgia formats as it is for the tribute songs of the 1970s and 1980s that celebrate rock's history. In contrast with studies that situate retro within an expressive totality, where rock merely reflects its material circumstances, I stress how rock music splintered into a diversity of styles rather than conforming (either homologically or analogically) to economic developments. In other words, rather than emphasizing a formal unity between rock, radio, and global capital, I highlight the political antagonisms, ideological contradictions, and paths not taken within rock and radio formatting. Following Jameson, Fisher, and Reynolds, this chapter asks: How can the persistence of pop's past result in a loss of historicity rather than its reclamation? In answering this ostensible paradox, I show how Classic Rock radio anticipated an experience of temporality that would become dominant after the emergence of widespread file-sharing. In short, my analysis of Classic Rock provides a prehistory to the onset of retro as a cultural dominant.

Chapter three examines the history and cultural politics of the 1980s boogie-funk revival, otherwise known as modern funk. Boogie is the sound of stripped-down but technologically advanced funk during popular music's first digital

age. Once panned by critics and record collectors alike, renewed interest in the music began in the early 2000s and has since expanded into a global club culture. Although boogie was a worldwide phenomenon in the early 1980s—a product of capital, commodities, and musicians crossing national borders—the origins of the music's revival are located in Los Angeles, California. L.A. was home not only to SOLAR Records, whose in-house producer Leon Sylvers III was an architect of the boogie sound; the city's urban geography fostered forms of cultural syncretism and exchange that grounded the music's resurgence. Though funk is a black[2] musical form, working-class Chicanos[3] in Orange County have become the music's chief conservators. Boogie's characteristic "bounce" is nearly synonymous with lowrider car culture and its grooves have been sampled on countless hip-hop records. For many Angelinos living in black and brown neighborhoods, boogie is a matter of cultural heritage. But others have made their way to the music through more circuitous routes, less clearly situated in a shared nexus of place, ethnicity, and cultural memory. The modern funk scene demonstrates how musical revivals can cut across the boundaries of class, race, and even the nation-state, while still offering opportunities for asserting both local and ethnic forms of identity. At the same time, it shows that nostalgia for a bygone era in music can engender new points of

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[2] I have chosen not to capitalize racial categories to foreground the ways that race is historically constructed and contested, rather than biological and/or transhistorical.
[3] I use the term Chicano/a rather than Chicanx or Latinx because I wanted to remain faithful to the way my interviewees describe themselves. I hope they see themselves reflected in this dissertation.

cross-cultural interaction, syncretism, and identification. Given all this cultural complexity, can revivals reasonably be reduced to a failure of the imagination?

The history of the modern funk scene challenges widely held prejudices against retro. Certainly, the internet has expanded our exposure to musics across time and space, making it possible to "revive" sounds far removed from their original contexts. But to understand genre revivals as post-historical and post-geographical is unwarranted. When we shift our focus from music as an object in a catalog to the social life of musical forms, revivals suddenly appear saturated with history. Revivals do not develop by accident; they contain hidden cultural histories that bias communities and individuals toward specific genres. But they also generate *new histories*. As revivalists negotiate the tension between tradition and originality, the meaning of history itself becomes a site of contestation. Not only can revivals engender critical reevaluations of neglected or undervalued pasts, but history can also take on new significance when mobilized for specific cultural ends. As sites of cultural recovery, continuity, and community building, revivals carry history into the present while positioning the present as history.

My final chapter explores why we are listening to more old music than ever before. In tracing the history from digital storage culture through streaming culture, I demonstrate how changes in music distribution have been the driving force of this phenomenon. While digital storage culture was organized around the distribution of mp3s on peer-to-peer networks, iTunes, and music blogs linked to online storage lockers, streaming culture is controlled by platforms. Platforms, like Spotify and

Apple Music, not only eliminated the need to build a personal audio library; they radically transformed music distribution and listening cultures by making the playlist their primary form of music curation.

Crucially, the shift from storage culture to streaming culture occurred within a larger period of ongoing capitalist financialization. Although Reynolds and Fisher both saw logical correspondences between financialization and retro, it is with the hegemony of streaming platforms that we can most closely track the material effects of financialization on music distribution. Financialization was a condition of possibility for the rapid capitalization and growth of streaming services. It also shapes the corporate structure and behavior of platforms all the way down to how playlists are curated. From the perspective of finance capital, the triumph of streaming services has been to convert listeners from commodity owners into renters, thereby generating predictable income streams for their shareholders. As I show in a case study of Spotify, the playlisting of old music must be understood in relation to this infrastructural shift and the institutional tug of war between platforms' differently positioned stakeholders. While venture capital firms are pressing Spotify to reduce its payouts to rights holders by acting like a record label, the major labels have applied pressure to showcase more of their "content." As the majors have drawn down their investments in new acts in order to assert greater control over publishing rights, the effect has been to intensify our consumption of older catalog titles.

Much confusion has been generated as a result of periodizing categories like postmodernism, capitalist realism, and retromania, which tether financialization and

retro to narratives of historical closure. While financialization has contributed to the persistence of pop's past, this does not mean that its logic is being expressed everywhere across the music industry. In contrast to such negative and totalizing accounts, my wager is that by treating financialization as a process, we may instead understand developments within it less as a matter of closure than as a way of producing futures. In other words, retro is not a symptom of living *after history*; it registers some of the cultural consequences of financialization and technological change, signaling a new relationship to musical materials *as history*.

CHAPTER ONE

Retro After *Retromania*: Popular Music as *Posthistoire*

The end of history is the nightmare from which I am trying to awake.

—Mark Fisher

If Marxism is an absolute historicism, it is because it historicizes even what was peculiarly the theoretical and practical negation of history for Hegelian historicism: the end of history, the unsurpassable present of Absolute Knowledge. In absolute historicism there is no longer any Absolute Knowledge, and hence no end for history.

—Louis Althusser

If the situation of popular music today can still be characterized as one where pop's past weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living—and data on contemporary listening habits suggests this is the case—then a materialist account of retro provides us with a history of the present. The non-synchronicity of the past has historically been a problem for Marxism, reasserting itself at pivotal moments in the development of Marxist theory and political practice. Not coincidentally then, it was critics working within the Marxist tradition that first perceived retro as a historical and political problem.

The 2000s witnessed a historic low point for the Left and a new digital conjuncture where the history of recorded sound was made publically available in exciting and unforeseen ways. But while changes in music distribution were nothing short of revolutionary, popular music itself became increasingly retrospective and self-referential. Over the past decade, trends that began in the 2000s have become

even more pronounced: vinyl's popularity overtook CD sales, the number of reissue labels exploded, comeback albums and reunion tours flourished, and revival scenes multiplied across the globe. Newer developments have also contributed to retro's pervasiveness: streaming algorithms are biased toward the familiar, major labels are spending less on developing new talent, and publishing rights for hit songwriters have become investment vehicles for high finance (Gioia 2022). There is simply more musical past in the present than ever before.

The dominant paradigm around retro was forged in the 2000s by Mark Fisher and Simon Reynolds, two British music critics whose digital correspondence was a product of the same networked conjuncture they sought to understand. Drawing extensively on the work of Fredric Jameson, they argue that retro is a cultural symptom of our inability to imagine the future. In their major works, *Capitalist Realism* (2009) and *Retromania* (2011), they characterize the 2000s as an era marked by cultural exhaustion, where popular music was dominated by the sounds and styles of its own immediate past. With the music industry's canonization of bygone sounds, and the internet making back catalogs readily available to download, "old" music refused to exit the sphere of popular culture. At the same time, new acts were either imitating older groups—what Fisher referred to as pastiche-rock without anxiety—or they were characterized by an ahistorical mash-up of temporalities and influences. For both thinkers, retro was not only a register of our inability to represent the present in music; it signaled the victory of capitalism over our cultural unconscious and evidence that we were living through the end of history. The problem with Fisher and

Reynolds' account of retro has less to do with their analyses of individual groups or songs than with the historical narrative in which they were enlisted. Indeed, the Fisher-Reynolds thesis is tethered to a Jamesonian concept of periodization that positions it as the mark of historical closure.

In this chapter, I argue that in order to grasp the present as history—and to open up other meanings for retro itself—retro must be understood not as a matter of closure but as a process of *becoming*. On this point I follow Georg Lukács, who in *History and Class Consciousness* (1972) argues that to know one's own situation is to see "in it the tendencies out of whose dialectical opposition he can make the future" (Lukács 1972, 204). In other words, to perceive the present as history is to identify possibilities for cultural and political intervention. Musicians fighting for their future already know this, and what follows is my small contribution to that struggle. It is one already in motion, taking place *in* music, *about* music, and *through* musicians' organizations. The outcomes are anything but predetermined. Paradoxically then, perhaps the reevaluation of retro signals the beginning of a new history.

The Encounter Between Fisher and Reynolds

The encounter between Fisher and Reynolds began unknowingly almost a decade before they became one another's primary interlocutors. In 1994, Reynolds authored a piece in *Melody Maker* about Fisher's group D-Generation, a Manchester trio that described their sound as "psychedelic futurism, techno haunted by the ghost of punk" (Reynolds 2018a, 13). Though the group was "highly influenced by '60s mod and freakbeat"—the name D-Generation was a punk-parodic nod to The Who's

"My Generation"—today's listener would be hard-pressed to hear the 60s in their music at all. Rather than using standard rock instrumentation, D-Generation's modernist ethos led them to experiment with the latest technologies like samplers and sequencers. Their sound drew on contemporary forms such as ambient, techno, and jungle, then the leading edge of Black British musical futurism. Reynolds championed them at the time not least because their musical philosophy conformed with his own. "We need real modernism, not mod revivals. So let me introduce: d-generation," he wrote (Reynolds 2018b).

Looking back at the *Melody Maker* article in 2018, one short year after Fisher's tragic suicide, Reynolds observed that D-Generation anticipated so many of Fisher's "signature fixations" as a critic: "the centrality of punk in his worldview," "the love-hate for Englishness," and a "virulent contempt for retro" (Reynolds 2018a, 13–14). In its own way, the music was just as prophetic, criticizing *in advance* the musical situation that would preoccupy the bulk of their writing over the coming decade. The first track on D-Generation's sole EP *Entropy in the UK*, "73-93," contains lyrics starkly at odds with its form. If this was the music of the future, "73-93" points toward terminus. There are two primary repeating lyrical samples. The first, "Are you hung up?"—the end of progress, stagnation. The second, "eroding structure, generating entropy… No future"—a sample culled from Dr. Who but which has the Sex Pistols as its musical referent (Reynolds 2018b). If punk responded to an overwhelming sense that rock's potential to transgress was exhausted, D-Generation drew on punk to sound a warning shot aimed at the future.

Reynolds met Fisher for the first time in 1998 when he was researching for an article on the Cybernetic culture research unit (Ccru), "a para-academic organization loosely tethered to Warwick University's Philosophy Department," where Fisher was pursuing his PhD (Reynolds 2018a, 15; Ambrose 2018, 21). Ccru was founded by an eclectic group of thinkers that included Nick Land, Sadie Plant, Kodwo Eshun, Steve Goodman (Kode9), Robin Mackay, Luciana Parisi, and Mark Fisher. Their work was frenetic, experimental, and concept-rich, indebted as much to William Gibson as to Deleuze and Guattari. In a piece for the academic magazine *Lingua Franca* titled "Renegade Academia," Reynolds details the turbulent history of the institute as well as its projects that collapsed theory and fiction, lectures and audio-visual installations (Reynolds 2014). In 1999, Fisher completed the dissertation "Flatline Constructs: Gothic Materialism and Cybernetic Theory-Fiction," which bears the imprint of his experience in Ccru (Ambrose 2018, 21).

By the end of the century, Reynolds was already a long-established music writer. After joining the staff at *Melody Maker* in 1986, he became known for a series of concept-laden articles about modern British groups (The Young Gods, Throwing Muses, and A.R. Kane, etc.). Many of these pieces were compiled in his first book *Blissed Out* (1990), which was as much a commentary on rock's return to "glorious incoherence and Dionysiac gratuitousness" as an indictment of the contemporary music press, which seemed to lag behind rock's own development (Reynolds 1990, 11–12). During the 1990s, he turned his attention to rave culture, incrementally tracking its sonic development. That endeavor reached maturity as a massive tome on

club history published as *Energy Flash: A Journey Through Rave Music and Dance Culture* (1998). There were other projects in between, including a co-edited collection on sex and gender in rock titled *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion, and Rock'n'Roll* (1995). After 1994, Reynolds split his time between New York and London, spending the early 2000s largely in the former until finally settling in Los Angeles. Though he and Fisher would cross paths a dozen-odd times, the period that witnessed their most intense exchange of ideas found them on different continents. Their friendship was always largely intellectual, the product of the same digital conjuncture that their work on popular music in the 2000s attempted to address.

The Blog Network

Although Reynolds and Fisher were both early contributors to Hyperdub, a "post-rave music theory site… founded by Ccru member Steve Goodman," their relationship was cemented on the music blog network, which developed in the wake of Napter's 2001 collapse (Borschke 2017, 114). In October of 2002, Reynolds launched *blissblog*, lovingly named after his first book of criticism. Shortly after, Fisher started *K-Punk*, which established him as the decade's foremost new music

writer.[4] For both, blogging provided an alternative to academic[5] writing as well as conventional music journalism. If by the 2000s the old British music press, so central to Reynolds and Fisher's literary formation, more closely resembled tabloids, the University had its own formal limitations. After all, Warwick had short-circuited the Ccru experiment. In contrast with academia, the informality of "publishing" online allowed for testing ideas *without* having to stake one's career on them. Music blogs became a place both for "renegade academia" and "the music press in exile, a reactivation of all its bygone best aspects that you could no longer find in the surviving print remnants… except for the getting paid part" (Reynolds 2018a, 16).

By all accounts, the blog network facilitated some of the most spectacular music criticism of the 2000s. As music writers recognized early on, blogs constituted a new form of multimedia criticism centered around the rapid circulation of information. And while some bloggers illicitly distributed digital music, others were

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[4] Readers referred to Fisher as "K" as a shorthand. In his first post, "why k?," Fisher explained, "The term k-punk came out of Ccru. 'k' was used as a libidinally preferable substitution for the California/*Wired* captured 'cyber' (the word cybernetics having its origins in the Greek, Kuber). Ccru understood cyberpunk not as a (once trendy) literary genre, but as a distributive cultural tendency facilitated by new technologies. In the same way, 'punk' doesn't designate a particular musical genre, but a confluence outside legitimate(d) space: fanzines were more significant than the music in that they allowed and produced a whole other mode of contagious activity which destroyed the need for centralized control" (Mark Fisher 2018, 32).
[5] Reynolds was never employed as an academic. After serving as an editor for *Melody Maker* in the 1980s and later at *Spin* magazine in the 1990s, he made his living through freelance writing and his books during the 2000s. For his part, Fisher moved in and out of the university system. When he began *K-Punk*, Fisher was an educator at a Further Education college. He left that position in 2007 to focus on drafting his first book, *Capitalist Realism*. During this time, he too survived by writing freelance articles for news outlets and music magazines like *The Wire* and *Fact*. After this period, he taught philosophy courses at the University of East London until eventually secured a permanent position at Goldsmiths (Ambrose 2018, 25).

primarily dedicated to the exchange of ideas. Fisher stressed, "The web has a

distributional reach, a global instaneity, whose unprecedented scale is easy to take for

granted. But its vast potential far outstrips anything that fanzines or records could

have achieved in the Seventies" (Fisher 2018, 302). For his part, Reynolds noted how

blogs afforded:

> incredible speed of response, flexibility of format (you could blog extensive
> think-pieces or explosive thought bombs), and the ability to illustrate the
> writing using images, audio, video. Best of all was the interactive and
> collective aspect to blogging that had only ever been glimpsed in the music
> press (with the readers' letter page, writers arguing amongst each other week
> by week, and the regular uptake of malcontents from the fiery fanzines). The
> blog circuit was a true network. (Reynolds 2018a, 16)

The medium pressed many critics into the habit of writing, where the rapidity of

communication added pressure not only to produce but to maneuver (17). In the

comments section of posts, bloggers sparred with one another over the interpretation

of music. This typically went well beyond matters of personal taste—likes,

dislikes—and into the terrain of assessing music's cultural value.[6] In endowing

popular music with a wider political and cultural significance, the stakes of criticism

itself were raised.

The Role of the Critic

The new digital conjuncture catalyzed bloggers to reflect on the purpose of

music criticism and its relation to social theory. At one level, music blogs drew on an

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[6] Of course, personal taste and assessment of a work's cultural value can be wildly at
odds. Punks have long reveled in the pleasure of loving "bad music." The Cramps'
tongue-in-cheek *Bad Music for Bad People* (1984) provides one well-known
example. The Cramps were also collectors of rare rockabilly 45s and curated
numerous compilations of their favorite singles.

older British popular music criticism, which unlike much of its U.S. counterpart, had always experimented with concepts borrowed from philosophy and psychoanalysis. Figures like Paul Morley, Ian Penman, and Barney Hoskyns began this kind of work at *NME* in the late 1970s, the same moment that Simon Frith almost single-handedly inaugurated popular music studies in the academy with *The Sociology of Rock*, later expanded into the widely read *Sound Effects*. These authors had informed Reynolds' writing even in his early career at *Melody Maker* (Reynolds 1990, 9–14). Though Fisher was perhaps more immediately influenced by Ccru's stable of theorists, they informed Fisher's work too.[7] At another level, the emergence of the blog network anticipated and then converged with the popularization of select social theorists, particularly Slavoj Žižek. After the release of Astra Taylor's 2005 documentary *Zizek!* (A. Taylor 2007)—the same year that YouTube launched, making his speaking events and interviews available to new audiences— Žižek emerged as "the hipster's philosopher," straddling the line between public intellectual and celebrity. For many newly politicized people coming of age in this conjuncture, Žižek provided a gateway into Lacanian psychoanalysis and Marxism. In *K-Punk* and later in *Capitalist Realism*, Žižek was one of Fisher's main intellectual touchstones.

Social theory provided bloggers with an arsenal of concepts for interpreting popular music, but a consensus emerged that the point was to change it. If the Ccru functioned as a "conduit for continuing trade between popular culture and theory," the writing it produced was "a way of doing theory through, not 'on', pop cultural forms"

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[7] In "Why K?," Fisher acknowledges his intellectual debt to Reynolds (Fisher 2018, 31).

(Fisher 2018, 31). As Fisher explained, "what we all concurred upon was that something like jungle was already intensely theoretical; it didn't require academics to judge it or pontificate upon it—the role of a theorist was as an intensifier" (31). The idea was to locate the cutting edge in popular music in order to make an incision in the present.[8] Though they use different mediums, both kinds of cultural production are inherently partisan. If for artists, to make one kind of music is to *not* make another, the same is true for critics. To write about an artist or an album is to *not* write about another. It was this taking of sides, what Fisher referred to as "nihilation"—"producing new potentials through the negation of what already exists"—that gave music direction (Fisher 2018, 321, Reynolds 2018a, 17). Acerbic writing was cast as a virtue if not a necessity.[9] Fisher and Reynolds saw criticism not only as a struggle over interpretation; they believed that criticism could work its way back to the point of production. As Reynolds puts it, "If music-making can be a form of 'active criticism', then criticism could equally be a sort of soundless contribution to music" (Reynolds 2018a, 17–8). In other words, criticism has the power not only to clarify, advocate, and condemn but also to influence where music is going.

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[8] In this formulation, what separates the work of critics from that of historians is less a matter of method than one of temporality. While historians write about the past, critics share a temporality with their objects.

[9] Writing about the release of Reynolds' *Rip It Up and Start Again*, Fisher blogged, "Stirring up the ghost of post-punk cannot but be an act, an intervention in cultural politics—since post-punk not only judges contemporary pop culture (harshly), it brings back the legitimacy, the *necessity* of being judgmental, of having some criteria (non-musical criteria, non-hedonistic criteria) for enjoyment. Such a position is not repressed by contemporary pop culture (=the cultural logic of late capitalism), it is made unthinkable by it" (Fisher 2018, 297).

Major Concepts on the Blogosphere

Fisher and Reynolds used *K-Punk* and *blissblog* to analyze the new digital

conjuncture in music. Although they wrote independently, the greater blog network

turned conceptual experimentation and the use of neologisms into collective efforts.

More than any other concept, Derrida's *hauntology* assumed a new significance in

music criticism. In his introduction to Fisher's *Ghosts of My Life*, Matt Colquhoun

traces the first use of the term to a January 2006 post by Mike Powell, which

suggested that new bands and record labels were unified by an affect, in contrast to

20th-century music that coalesced around genres (Colquhoun 2022, xiv). For

example, the affinity between The Focus Group and Ariel Pink could be heard in the

way that both acts seemed less invested in writing conventional songs—an "absence"

that Powell contrasted with their more fragmentary approaches—than exploring the

"tracks and traces" left by the music of the 20th century. In other words, the fact that

The Focus Group repurposed old library[10] LPs and that Ariel Pink tapped into the

Beach Boys and German psychedelia was less significant than the way music history

was being stitched together as a collage, or nostalgically distorted as a "degraded

ideal" (Powell 2006). Reynolds responded to Powell that very same day with his own

post, agreeing that "a whole new genre or network of shared sensibility, comparable

perhaps to 'isolationism'" emerged in the 21st century. "'[H]auntology' is my early

bid for a name," he wrote, recognizing the need to give this new affect its own

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[10] Library music is "the term for incidental music from the sixties and seventies
originally made for use in radio, cinema adverts, industrial films and other
non-glamorous contexts which was sold by subscription, not in shops, and issued in
uniform sleeves complete with track descriptions" (Reynolds 2011, 324).

appellation. Though he thought the category would only be a placeholder, for better or worse, hauntology stuck.

Before it was appropriated by music critics, hauntology was already circulating in academia.[11] The concept derives from Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, an edited and revised transcription of two lectures given at the University of California Riverside following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Through the figure of haunting—by Marx (the person), by Marxism (the theoretical-political tradition), and by communism ("the real movement that abolishes the present state of things")—Derrida severed the link between "the end of communism" and that of Marxism. Paradoxically, after "the end of history"—Fukuyama's infamous characterization of liberal capitalism's final triumph—Marxism still haunted us. In both "being and non-being" and "in the opposition between what is present and what is not," the figure of the ghost enabled Derrida to clarify the bizarre temporality of the post-Soviet conjuncture. Citing *Hamlet*, he explained that "the time is out of joint": "time is disarticulated, dislocated, dislodged, time is run down, on the run and run down [*traqué et détraqué*], deranged, both out of order and mad" (Derrida 2010, 20). A decade later, hauntology reappeared in popular music criticism because it seemed to describe how new music sounded "out of joint," after "the end of history," haunted by the ghosts of its own past.

Reynolds and Fisher employed hauntology as a genre concept that named a small subset of electronic music in the early 2000s. Hauntological music used the

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[11] For a discussion of hauntology's use across academic disciplines, see *Retromania* (329).

"archeological" and creative techniques pioneered by hip-hop—crate-digging,

sampling, and looping—but put them in service of a different project (Reynolds 2011,

324). If hip-hop drew on the creative legacies of the black diaspora—transforming the

genre into a site of cultural preservation that served as a check *against*

postmodernism's "loss of historicity"—hauntology *dwelled* on the loss of a bygone

Britain. Hauntology was unique in its distinctly British relationship to its source

material. But the wider significance lay in its "lost utopianism" and its "confrontation

with cultural impasse: the failure of the future" (Reynolds 2011, 24; Mark Fisher

2012, 16). In contrast with older electronic music's ability to give definition to a

present's cultural imagination of the future, hauntology sounded the disappearance of

futurism. It was characterized by the past's vision of a future that failed to materialize.

It was in electronic music's grappling with history that Fisher and Reynolds first

diagnosed the present's inability to imagine a future.

Hauntology's "lost future" invoked the legacy of British postwar social

democracy. From roughly 1958 through 1978, social democracy raised expectations

for workers—who had good reason to believe that the future would be better than the

past—and sustained a "cultural ecology" that Fisher referred to as popular

modernism:

> the music press and the more challenging parts of public service
> broadcasting… were part of a UK popular modernism, as were postpunk,
> brutalist architecture, Penguin paperbacks and the BBC Radiophonic
> Workshop. In popular modernism, the elitist project of modernism was
> retrospectively vindicated. At the same time, popular culture definitively
> established that it did not have to be populist. Particular modernist techniques
> were not only disseminated but collectively reworked and extended, just as the

modernist task of producing forms which were adequate to the present moment was taken up and renewed. (Fisher 2022, 21–22)

The BBC Radiophonic Workshop became of particular importance to hauntologists. The state-funded Workshop created sound effects and scores for popular radio and television programs, including *Doctor Who*. Reynolds describes the Workshop's creative process in *Retromania*:

Toiling with tape and scissors, they edited together sound collages whose quirky sonic treatments paralleled the music concrète being made in Europe at that time… the vast bulk of the department's output was bespoke sound tailored to an ancillary function in other people's creations (radio dramas, TV series, etc.). But it was this very subordinate, craft-not-art status that enabled the Workshop to infiltrate the consciousness of a mass audience… (Reynolds 2011, 340)

As new groups culled samples and production techniques from the Workshop's incidental music, sounds that hauntologists subconsciously absorbed in their youth now carried a critique of the present. Not only did social democracy's imagined future fail to materialize, but what we got was worse: Thatcherism, neoliberalism, financialization, and capitalist globalization. In originating from and addressing those who came of age in the era of popular modernism, hauntology indicated that youth was no longer the vanguard of pop music, if such a thing even existed anymore.

Hauntology drew its power from a well of cultural memory. As Reynolds explained, UK hauntologists like the Ghost Box groups, Mordant Music, and Moon Wiring Club "all [used samples of] exclusively British voices: often creaky thespians and plummy poets from spoken-word LPs, or dialogue snippets from vintage mystery and horror programs" (336). These speech samples raised the specter of nationality, locality, and class through speakers' accents, which in their own way, measured the

distance between a (both real and imagined) national British past and a more homogenous, globalized, and "Americanized" present (337-8). The ways that these samples were sourced deliberately betrays their origins in residual mediums. One hears the hiss of the tape or the noisy imperfections of a worn LP, degraded by some combination of overuse and poor storage. Reynolds stressed that foregrounding imperfect analog media was symbolic of "memory's fragility"—"destined to become distorted, to fade, then finally disappear" (335). For Fisher, "The fixation on materialised memory led to what is perhaps the principle sonic signature of hauntology: the use of crackle, the surface noise made by vinyl. Crackle makes us aware that we are listening to a time that is out of joint; it won't allow us to fall into the illusion of presence" (Fisher 2022, 21). Indeed, the new digital conjuncture appeared to be haunted not only by musical ideas from the past but also by the ghosts of analog media. Yet, in contrast to some contemporary retro acts—like the referential blues stylings of the Black Keys or the contradictory corporate "garage" sound of The Vines or The Hives, whose rehashed ideas lacked any sense of musical urgency—hauntology succeeded because it "contain[ed] the ache of longing… for history itself" (Reynolds 2011, 356). For both authors, analyzing the cultural particularities of hauntology provided a way into understanding the larger historical forces that were shaping popular culture in the 2000s.

Fredric Jameson and the Fisher-Reynolds Thesis

Fisher and Reynolds ultimately subsumed the hauntology genre concept within a larger problematic about nostalgia and retro. In addressing these themes, they

converged in expanding Fredric Jameson's ideas into a pop musical register. In the afterword to *Ghosts of My Life*, Reynolds explains that he and Fisher drew primarily on Jameson's magnum opus *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, but also on *A Singular Modernity*, and *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (Reynolds 2022, 247). Citations of essays in *Valences of the Dialectic* and *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern* also appear in their writing during this period.

While Fisher and Reynolds' examinations of music and popular culture employed concepts from literary theory, philosophy, and psychoanalysis, Jameson's work provided a system—a unity of concepts. Yet, reconstructing that unity required interpretation. In reworking Jameson's problematic under new historical conditions and adapting it to popular music—one of the few cultural terrains that remained largely unexamined by Jameson himself—Fisher and Reynolds necessarily transformed it. The problematic allowed them to pose new questions about temporality and anachronism in pop, leading to some of the sharpest music criticism of the 21st century.

The basic contours of the Fisher-Reynolds thesis are as follows: Retro is a cultural symptom of our failure to imagine the future. Following the onset of the Iraq War—an invasion spearheaded by the United States with Britain's support—popular music became dominated by the sounds and styles of its immediate past. Thus, the capture of our imaginations by capital could be registered not only in the deficit of an organized Left but by pervasive cultural nostalgia. With the music industry's ongoing

canonization of old music—especially but by no means exclusively, rock—and the

internet making the entirety of pop music history available for digital download, time

and space collapsed into pure presence. Paradoxically then, that present was

unrepresentable. With the end of temporality, genre innovation ground to a halt. And

as old music refused to exit contemporary popular culture, new groups began to

resemble older ones. The term *influence*—in the way we normally think of artists

being influenced by predecessors—is not strong enough to get at what was going on.

Unmoored from history, new rock bands became trapped in a curatorial logic of

imitation and pastiche, unable to reproduce the urgency that defined the music of their

inspiration. Decades of popular music seemed to be happening simultaneously

without any sense of historicity. Certainly, this described our listening experience

drifting through YouTube or hitting shuffle on our iPods. But it also worked its way

into contemporary musical forms, where contextless sonic signifiers were stitched

together at will by musicians.[12] For both thinkers, the 2000s were marked by musical

exhaustion, which itself was a symptom of the end of history—one not characterized

by spectacular collapse but by gradual erosion (Fisher 2009; Reynolds 2011). We

were already living through it, or so they said.

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[12] From its inception, hip-hop recontextualized sonic signifiers to assert black cultural
and political priorities (Rose 1994, 2, 79). Though Fisher largely ignored what was
happening in American hip-hop at the time, Reynolds stressed how it too was
becoming increasingly commemorative. Evidenced by publications like *Wax Poetics*
and reissue labels like Stones Throw, hip-hop was not immune from the general
pattern that was playing out across the pop spectrum. However, Reynolds also argued
that producers like the late J-Dilla were creatively using black sonic history in similar
ways to the hauntologists. Thus, while the cultural spotlight on hip-hop's golden age
(1987-91) grew during the 2000s, the genre nevertheless avoided repeating its past in
the form of period stylization (Reynolds 2011, 352–53).

Grasping the contours of the Fisher-Reynolds thesis requires a detour through Jameson's concept of the nostalgia mode and its relationship to postmodernism as a period. In "Periodizing the 60s," Jameson argues that the Long 60s was inaugurated before the decade literally arrived, beginning with Third World decolonization movements in the late 1950s. The First World 60s was influenced by and even depended upon "Third-Worldism." This was not only because activists drew inspiration from revolutions happening elsewhere—for example, in the various First World Maoisms—but also because their own countries were embroiled in imperial wars abroad (Jameson 1988b, 180). These global developments were coterminous with a "crisis in the institutions through which a real class politics had however imperfectly been able to express itself" (181). In the U.S., McCarthyism and the expulsion of communists from labor organizations in the 1950s resulted in the settlement between capital and labor, where many unions shifted away from earlier class struggle tactics and toward class collaboration. While this retreat secured certain privileges for older white male workers, it largely excluded women and minorities, propelling them to develop new kinds of collective politics (181–2). Thus, the 60s were characterized by new political identities that burst onto the world stage: the colonized, minorities, women, students, and so on. And because the scope of the political grew, the politics of the 1960s looked qualitatively different from those of the past.

According to Jameson, the political 60s ended between 1972 and 1974 with the exhaustion of these movements. In the United States, the antiwar and student

movements waned as the Vietnam War wound down. Radical black politics faltered as the nationalist challenge was neutralized by state repression and political incorporation. The women's movement fractured into distinct political orientations: liberal, socialist, and radical feminism. While the Third World 60s concluded with corruption in newly independent African countries and the militarization of Latin American regimes, what was left of First World radicalism was largely redirected inward, divorced from revolutionary struggles happening elsewhere, as with the Eurocommunist movement.

Crucially, for Jameson, these political developments were ultimately overshadowed by economic crisis and a new phase of global financial hegemony, led by the American state and enforced through international monetary institutions (184, 205). Thus, the closure of the 60s was characterized by what Marx calls "real subsumption"—i.e. the deepening penetration of capital into the labor process and social relations as a whole. In the Third World, the Green Revolution transformed peasant agriculture into industrialized capitalist agriculture, forcing millions to migrate to urban centers in search of wage labor (185). As Jameson understood it, this marked the expansion of the global proletariat that was so powerfully anticipated by Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*. In the First World, the growth of multinational corporations, finance, outsourcing, media industries, and computerization engendered novel kinds of reified experience. Jameson argued that the 60s closed with the dual "colonizations" of Nature and the

unconscious—formerly the last zones of human life not fully conquered by capital—inaugurating a new period of a vastly expanded global capitalism.

My abbreviated reconstruction of "Periodizing the 60s" deliberately stresses the essay's political dimensions, which receive less attention elsewhere in Jameson's writing. My analysis also brackets the cultural dimensions of his argument, which receive a richer theorization in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. There, the implications of understanding "the 60s" as a break between the cultural coordinates of consumer capitalism and globalization are more developed. Jameson argues that the onset of postmodernism, which corresponded with capitalism entering this new phase, constitutes a qualitative shift in the function of culture. During the epoch of consumer capitalism (roughly 1910-1950) high culture and mass culture were defined by their mutual opposition. If high modernist cultural production was motivated by a "purposefulness without purpose"—i.e. a non-economic purpose, be it play, beauty, etc.—mass culture was designed for sale. While this ensured the standardization of forms in the domain of mass culture, the high modernists' distance from market imperatives allowed them to make "oppositional" art that was "scandalous, ugly, dissonant, amoral, antisocial" and offensive to the mores of middle-class Victorian culture (195).

Postmodernism (roughly 1973-present) then designates a new historical situation with its own dominant "cultural logic," where high and mass cultural forms fuse and the high modernist impulse against commodification has disappeared alongside oppositional art in this older sense. Whatever the content of postmodern art,

production for the market is presumed from the outset. While modernism drew on the pre-modern in its critiques of consumer society, postmodernism is characterized by its historical depthlessness and its waning of affect. Postmodernism therefore registers the disappearance of the old modern subject, the formal artistic consequence of which is the foreclosure of personal style. Beginning in the late 1950s, the institutional canonization of high modernist works cleared the way for their revival as dead styles, removed of their once subversive associations. Thus, in place of individual greatness stands "the well-nigh universal practice today of what may be called pastiche"—imitation without affect or the ulterior motives of parody (Jameson 1991, 16).

The "omnipresence of pastiche" can therefore be read as a new relationship to historicity, where the spatialization of time engendered by global communication technologies transforms the experience of temporality into one of pure presence. Where history has been reduced to images and stereotypes, cultural works that plunder the past become an index of postmodernism's prevailing symptom, the inability to think historically. Or put another way, when the present can no longer be represented as history, pastiche becomes nostalgia. This is not the old modernist nostalgia that longed for a genuine historical past, but a postmodern mode where features that would signify a work's contemporaneity are eclipsed by stereotypical markers from another era, genre, style, and so on (19). So if the nostalgia mode signals our inability to experience history in some more active way, then it also reveals our inability to imagine a future beyond capitalism; both are effects of the

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system's prodigious expansion and its capture of our political unconscious (286).

Thus, the nostalgia mode corresponds with capitalism entering its third

phase—multinational capitalism, globalization, financialization, neoliberalism,

etc.—where postmodernism is its dominant cultural logic.

Major Works

Across their major works, Fisher and Reynolds reworked Jameson's

problematic while emphasizing different dimensions of their own cultural

conjuncture. Fisher tended to work across cultural fields, drawing remarkable

connections between film, music, literature, and politics. By contrast, Reynolds honed

in on music, amassing mountains of evidence that detailed the slowdown of pop's

metabolism. In spite of these differences, Reynolds acknowledged that:

> in broad strokes the arguments of [*Retromania* and Fisher's *Ghosts of My Life*]
> are near identical. Innovation in popular culture has slowed to a standstill; the
> music scene in particular (but not in isolation—this was a culture-wide crisis)
> had gotten tangled in entropic cycles of recycling and reenactment, resulting
> in a kind of frenzied stagnation. (Reynolds 2022, 238)

Arguments that began on their blogs eventually made their way into book-length

publications about contemporary capitalism's morbid cultural symptoms.

The first of their major works to emerge was Fisher's *Capitalist Realism: Is*

There No Alternative?, published in 2009. In it, Fisher theorizes cultural stagnation as

a symptom of "capitalist realism," "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism

the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even

to imagine a coherent alternative to it" (Fisher 2022, 2). Taking off from Jameson's

provocation (also attributed to Žižek) about it being easier to imagine the end of the

world than the end of capitalism, *Capitalist Realism* is Fisher's affirmation that we can no longer imagine a future. Although the term[13] is not Fisher's own, he expands its application beyond the field of advertising, where it originated, into the defining feature of a historical conjuncture: "It is more like a pervasive *atmosphere*, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action" (16). Though *Capitalist Realism* has often been mischaracterized as a Left-pessimist manifesto that reproduces the problem it attempts to overcome, no book has contributed more to mapping the ideological contours of the Left's depoliticization from the War on Terror up through the immediate aftermath of the Financial Crisis of 2007-8.

Fisher offers three reasons capitalist realism is a terminological advance over postmodernism as theorized by Jameson (7). First, Fisher argues that when Jameson theorized postmodernism in the 1980s, "...there were still, in name at least, political alternatives to capitalism. What we are dealing with now, however, is a deeper, far more pervasive, sense of exhaustion, of cultural and political sterility" (7). The 1980s were the decade "when capitalist realism was fought for and established, when Margaret Thatcher's doctrine that 'there is no alternative'... became a brutally self-fulfilling prophecy" (8). Capitalist realism names the success of that project in the 21st century. Thus, the historical coordinates of Jameson's periodization more

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[13] "[Capitalist realism] was used as far back as the 1960s by a group of German pop artists and by Michael Schudson in his 1984 book *Advertising, The Uneasy Persuasion*, both of whom were making parodic references to socialist realism" (Fisher 2022, 16).

accurately describe a post-Soviet world than the one Jameson inhabited when he published "Postmodernism and the Consumer Society." So too, Jameson's argument about retro and revivalism as failures of the political imagination is more completely fulfilled in the present.

Second, if the concept of postmodernism implies a kind of "confrontation" with modernism, capitalist realism "takes the vanquishing of modernism for granted: modernism is now something that can periodically return, but only as a frozen aesthetic style, never as an ideal for living" (8). Though this point confirms Jameson's schema more than it updates it, returning to the argument enabled Fisher to recover modernism's imperative of the new as a check against revivalism.

Third, capitalism's colonization of the unconscious was *total*. There was now an entire generation that grew up after the fall of the Soviet Bloc that never knew an alternative to global capitalism. Having expanded to the ends of the world, capital had nowhere left to go but inward. Fisher writes, "For most people under twenty in Europe and North America, the lack of alternatives to capitalism is no longer even an issue. Capitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable" (8). If this Jamesonian theme once functioned as a provocation, Fisher argues that the reality it described had been naturalized to the point "that it is no longer worthy of comment" (8-9). So while Jameson theorized postmodernism as a cultural dominant, leaving space for residual and emergent phenomena, Fisher proposes a total system where political and cultural resistance was neutralized before it could even be registered as

desire. Here, pop music was exemplary. The power and clarity of his argument makes it worthy of quoting at length:

> the old struggle between *detournement* and recuperation, between subversion and incorporation, seems to have been played out. What we are dealing with now is not the incorporation of materials that previously seemed to possess subversive potentials, but instead, their *precorporation*: the pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture. Witness, for instance, the establishment of settled 'alternative' or 'independent' cultural zones, which endlessly repeat older gestures of rebellion and contestation as if for the first time. 'Alternative' and 'independent' don't designate something outside mainstream culture; rather, they are styles, in fact *the* dominant styles, within the mainstream. No-one embodied (and struggled with) this deadlock more than Kurt Cobain and Nirvana. In his dreadful lassitude and objectless rage, Cobain seemed to give wearied voice to the despondency of the generation that had come after history, whose every move was anticipated, tracked, bought and sold before it ever happened. Cobain knew that he was just another piece of spectacle, that nothing runs better on MTV than a protest against MTV; knew that his every move was a cliché scripted in advance, knew that even realizing it was a cliché. The impasse that paralyzed Cobain is precisely the one that Jameson described: like postmodern culture in general, Cobain found himself in 'a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, [where] all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum'. Here, even success meant failure, since to succeed would only mean that you were the new meat on which the system could feed. But the high existential angst of Nirvana and Cobain belongs to an older moment; what succeeded them was a pastiche-rock which reproduced the forms of the past without anxiety. (Fisher 2022, 9-10)

Fisher's analysis of popular music goes no further in *Capitalist Realism*. The rest of the text is dedicated to mapping the *topoi* of the ideology: in education, in the media, in logics of consumption, and in the affect that united ironic distance with cynical reason. Even the most militant forms of anti-capitalism were trapped by capitalist realism. For example, in substituting the "staging of protests for political organization, there was a sense that the anti-capitalism movement consisted of making a series of hysterical demands which it didn't expect to be met" (14). In other

words, underlying the spectacular tactics of the Left was a latent belief in the

impossibility of meaningful change. Breaking the stranglehold of capitalist realism

would therefore require some shared political horizon as well as a new collective

subject that could overcome neoliberal individuation (78).[14] So too, it depended upon

being able to cut through "the postmodernist suspicion of grand narratives" and

"reassert that, far from being isolated, contingent problems, [ours] are all the effects

of a single systemic cause: Capital" (77).

To this end, Fisher argues that the 2007-8 Financial Crisis and the bank

bailouts that followed had effectively discredited neoliberal ideology (78). Indeed, the

massive transfer of public money into the collapsing private banking system exposed

the ideology for what it always was, "a *political* project to re-establish the conditions

for capital accumulation and restore the power of economic elites" (Harvey 2007, 19).

Yet Fisher contends that in the absence of some kind of coordinated political response

to the regressive redistribution of the bailouts, "capitalist realism [would] continue to

rule the political-economic unconscious" (78). What the crash provided was an

opening for the Left to reestablish itself on new foundations *without* the weight of its

own history of failures limiting its capacity for experimentation. Paradoxically, there

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[14] "What is needed is a new struggle over work and who controls it; an assertion of
worker autonomy (as opposed to control by management) together with a rejection of
certain kinds of labor (such as excessive auditing, which has become so central a
feature of work in post-Fordism). This is a struggle that can be won—but only if a
new political subject coalesces; it is an open question as to whether the old structures
(such as the trade unions) will be capable of nurturing that subjectivity, or whether it
will entail the formation of wholly new political organizations. New forms of
industrial action need to be instituted against managerialism" (Mark Fisher 2009, 79).

was a utopian dimension to a world after history: "From a situation in which nothing can happen, suddenly anything is possible again" (81).[15]

Fisher's engagement with Jameson deepened in his second book, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology, and Lost Futures*. *Ghosts of My Life* built upon his argument about cultural stasis in *Capitalist Realism*, but dealt more systematically with its consequences in popular music. In his provocative opening essay, "The Slow Cancellation of the Future," Fisher draws on Jameson to explain the ways that "21st-century culture is marked by… anachronism" (Fisher 2022, 6). He provides two musical examples. The first is his experience of watching the Arctic Monkeys' 2005 music video for "I Bet You Look Good on the Dance Floor." Upon initial viewing, Fisher "genuinely believed that it was some lost artifact circa 1980. Everything in the video—the lighting, the haircuts, the clothes—had been assembled to give the impression that this was a performance on BBC2's 'serious rock show' *The Old Grey Whistle Test*" (9). What was significant here was not so much period stylization in itself. After all, retro and musical revivalism existed long before the 2000s. What was meaningful about the Arctic Monkeys—whose 2006 *Whatever People Say I Am, That's What I'm Not* became the fastest-selling debut album in British music history—was that they were *not* marketed as a retro group. Retro had

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[15] While we shouldn't accord the release of *Capitalist Realism* the status of an event, it did introduce Marxist thought to a whole new generation of radicals politicized by the crisis, becoming an intellectual touchstone in the British student movement of late 2010 and the global uprisings of 2011 (Occupy Wall St., Arab Spring, the anti-austerity movement in Athens, etc.) (Niven 2022, xxv–xxvi). Seen in this light, it is significant that *Capitalist Realism* became *the* best-selling book of Marxist cultural critique from the 2000s. Since its publication in 2009, it has sold over 100,000 copies in English alone (xvii).

become so ubiquitous that "there was no 'now' with which to contrast their retrospection" (Colquhoun 2022, xvii; Mark Fisher 2022, 10). Fisher's second example is Amy Winehouse's "Valerie," which he first heard while strolling through a shopping mall. Fisher writes:

> Up until then, I had believed 'Valerie' was first recorded by indie plodders the Zutons. But, for a moment, the record's antiquated 1960s soul sound and the vocal (which on a casual listen I didn't at first recognize as Winehouse) made me temporarily revise this belief: surely the Zutons' version of the track was a cover of *this* apparently 'older' track, which I had not heard until now? Naturally, it didn't take me long to realise that the '60s soul sound' was actually a simulation; this was indeed a cover of the Zutons' track, done in the souped-up retro style in which the record's producer, Mark Ronson, has specialized. (Mark Fisher 2022, 11)

Both songs exemplified how popular music was being crowded out by forms from the past. But the significance of this was even greater. If music once functioned as a way to locate oneself in history, then the 2000s sounded *out of time*.

Fisher uses Jameson's concept of the nostalgia mode to examine such experiences of temporal dislocation. Here, Jameson's widely-cited readings of *Body Heat* (1981) and *Star Wars* (1977) provide a conceptual framework for understanding how contemporary pop songs "perform anachronism" (11). *Body Heat* is a paradigmatically postmodern film in the way it is unable to aesthetically represent its own historical context. Though its setting is contemporary, the characters' use of language and behavior recall the already familiar tropes of noir. So while the film is set in the 1980s—visible in the fashion and consumer goods depicted on screen—*Body Heat* feels as if it is taking place in another time, "in some indefinable nostalgic past, some eternal 1930s, say, beyond history" (Jameson quoted in Fisher

44

2022, 12). Thus, in contrast to a period film, *Body Heat* blurs historicity through "its disavowal of any explicit reference to the past" (12). *Star Wars* has a similar relation to form and temporality. Of course, *Star Wars* takes place "A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away," rather than in any real historical time. But what makes *Star Wars* a nostalgia film is its form, which belongs to a much older era. For Jameson, the reactivation of any particular form is less significant than the nostalgic desire that undergirds postmodern culture's recycling of old forms. He writes,

> …*Star Wars* satisfies a deep (might I even say repressed?) longing to experience them again: it is a complex object in which on some first level children and adolescents can take the adventures straight, while the adult public is able to gratify a deeper and more properly nostalgic desire to return to that older period and live its strange old aesthetic artefacts through once again. (Jameson quoted in Fisher 2022, 13)

In both films, postmodern culture performs anachronism through its nostalgic longing for familiar forms.

Fisher also applies this concept of postmodern temporality to his musical examples. Although the Arctic Monkeys and Amy Winehouse tap into different musical eras, there is something about them both, especially upon repeated listens, that sounds *out of time*. If the recuperation of dead styles ultimately resulted in a "blurring" of historicity, this was partly because musical technologies were being put to new ends. Fisher writes, "Discrepancies in texture—the results of modern studio and recording techniques—mean that they belong neither to the present nor to the past but to some implied 'timeless' era, an eternal 1960s or 1980s" (11). This marked a major departure from the modernism of electronic music, where groups like "Kraftwerk used technology to allow new forms to emerge" (13). Instead, like *Star*

45

Wars—whose cutting-edge special effects overshadows its formal agedness—"the nostalgia mode subordinated technology to the task of refurbishing the old" (13). This resolves the ostensible paradox of how the appearance of the new could be subsumed within the cultural coordinates of retro. Fisher concludes, "The effect was to disguise the disappearance of the future as its opposite" (13).

Although the arguments in *Ghosts of My Life* rest on Jameson's problematic, Fisher argues that Jameson failed to explain why the waning of historicity was equivalent to the cultural logic of late capitalism (14).[16] What was missing were the sociopolitical transformations in everyday life that might ground a culture of retrospection and pastiche. Fisher offers two possible explanations. First, he suggests that "neoliberal capitalism's destruction of solidarity and security brought about a compensatory hungering for the well-established and the familiar" (14). While neoliberalism ushered in a shift toward longer hours and precarious employment, it also precipitated new forms of cybernetic culture that make increasing demands on our attention. Drawing on Franco "Bifo" Berardi's *After the Future*—from which the phrase "The Slow Cancellation of the Future" is taken—Fisher argues that this dialectic of overwork and overstimulation produces generalized exhaustion. This marks a shift in emphasis from the argument of *Capitalist Realism*, where cultural exhaustion is primarily an ideological symptom. By contrast, here it is a material

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[16] Reynolds makes the same point in *Retromania* (Reynolds 2011, 421). However, in contrast with Fisher's more sociological speculations, Reynolds argues that the "one crucial factor" that unified all the musical trends of the 2000s was "technology: the digitizing of culture, the internet as archive, giving us instant and near-total access to the stockpiled past" (Reynolds 2022, 247).

effect of neoliberal capitalism. When we are "desperately short of time, energy and attention, we demand quick fixes" (15). Retro, then, becomes one of culture's "quick fixes"—a homological response to lived conditions of exhaustion.

While this first explanation is aimed at the whole of society, the second emphasizes neoliberalism's impact on cultural producers. He writes, "Despite all its rhetoric of novelty and innovation, neoliberal capitalism has gradually but systematically deprived artists of the resources necessary to produce the new" (15). While the postwar welfare state subsidized popular modernism, its rollback contributed to its collapse. Mirroring Jameson's argument about the passage from modernism to postmodernism, Fisher argues that social democracy's support system, both in the form of welfare payments and in direct funding for the arts, granted artists some distance from having to produce for mass markets. Not only did this distance allow musicians to partially withdraw from the temporal demands of waged labor and focus on their art; it limited the consequences of commercial failure, thereby opening up space for musical experimentation and social critique. However, neoliberalism transformed the relationship between artists, markets, and the state. As the rollback of the welfare state dovetailed with rising costs[17] of reproduction, artists were pushed into more traditional forms of wage labor, allowing them less time for art, or they became specialists forced to cater to mass markets. And because mass markets punish the avant-garde and reward the familiar, neoliberalism generated a conservatizing effect on culture.

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[17] "If there is one factor above all else which contributes to cultural conservatism, it is the vast inflation in the cost of rent and mortgages" (Fisher 2022, 15).

As in *Capitalist Realism*, Fisher's periodization departs from Jameson's. While Jameson charted the shift from parody to pastiche in the early 1980s, Fisher argues that "perhaps it was only with the arrival of digital communicative capitalism that this [culture of retrospection] reached terminal crisis point" (16). The internet not only provided contemporary musicians access to the whole history of human culture; "the currently dominant form of socially networked cyberspace, with its endless opportunities for micro-contact and its deluge of YouTube links, has made withdrawal more difficult than ever before" (16). For Fisher, creativity required some amount of distance—both from established forms and from other people—that the internet had obliterated (16).

Though he maintained a certain ambivalence about retro's sociological causes, Fisher was resolute that popular music was deadlocked in formal nostalgia. What *was* changing was the music industry: "the old paradigms of consumption, retail and distribution [were] disintegrating, with downloading eclipsing the physical object, record shops closing and cover art disappearing" (16). What impact were these monumental shifts having on popular music culture? Fisher ultimately only gestured toward their consequences. Simon Reynolds, however, made it his project to explore them at length.

Reynolds's first formal publication on these themes was a 2004 essay titled "Lost in Music: Obsessive Record Collecting." The essay abounds with pointed psychoanalytic observations about record collector neuroses, but the thrust of his argument concerns the onset of a new musical conjuncture. As a result of digital

downloading and the proliferation of mp3s, the nostalgic sensibility inherent to record

collecting had worked its way into the whole of popular music culture. Reynolds

affirms that there is an inverse relationship between our access to the past and musical

creativity by providing a prehistory of this digital conjuncture. Long before the

development of the mp3, CD-reissue programs in the 1980s induced a shift in how

many contemporary bands related to rock history. What emerged was what he termed

"record-collection rock," "where a band's total sonic identity is reducible to its

members' listening habits" (Reynolds 2004, 299). He writes:

> The first examples of this syndrome were groups like the Jesus and Mary
> Chain and Spacemen 3, who disengaged punk from its outside-world
> imperatives and set themselves up as custodians of a canon of mavericks and
> marketplace failures: Velvets, Stooges, Love, MC5. As the CD reissue and
> box-set boom escalated, and retro culture made the past accessible like never
> before, this mode of creativity became more common. (Reynolds 2004, 299)

If musicians once drew primarily from a world beyond music—be it politics,

literature, poetry, etc.—their influences became more exclusively musical as our

sonic past was liberated from scarcity (300). Record-collection rock was more

curatorial than expressive, treating citation as the mark of distinction for others in the

know. Digital file-sharing dramatically expanded this sensibility by creating "an

infinitely vast communal record collection" that allowed bands to "assemble their

identity along a flat plane, ahistorical and postgeographical" (307, 301, 300). In

effect, the collectors' desire to "renew the old world," as Benjamin put it, became a

generalized social condition (Benjamin 1970b).

     "Lost in Music" laid the foundations for Reynolds' major work on nostalgia in

popular music, *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past* (2011). The

magnitude and breadth of *Retromania* is colossal, demonstrating the erudition of a

critic who had metabolized many lifetimes' worth of music. Yet, this is no

sentimental paean to pop's formidable past. *Retromania* is nothing short of an attempt

to historicize the present, taking stock of how the end of temporality has played out in

the sonic field. Reynolds writes, "The 2000s were dominated by the 're-' prefix":

*re*vivals, *re*issues, *re*unions, *re*-enactments, and *re*cycling; "bygone genres *re*vived

and *re*novated, vintage sonic material *re*processeed and *re*combined" (xi). At one

level, Reynolds' project is documentarian, meticulously cataloging a decade of pop

commemoration that reached astonishing heights. From the opening of pop museums

(the Smithsonian's Rock 'n' Soul Museum in Memphis, the Experience Music Project

Museum in Seattle, etc.), to a long series of biopics (*24 Hour Party People*, *Ray*, *Walk

the Line*, *Control*, etc.); from reunion tours even without original members once

understood as irreplaceable (Queen's world tour without Freddy Mercury, The Jam's

tour without Paul Weller, etc.) to the performance of classic albums in full (My

Bloody Valentine's *Loveless*, Sonic Youth's *Daydream Nation*, Public Enemy's *It

Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, etc.) and the explosion of reissue

projects far too numerous to list, Reynolds compiles enough evidence to convince

even the most skeptical reader that we had reached a tipping point (ix-xxiii).

At another level, *Retromania* charts developments in contemporary music that

seemed unable to express its own moment. The 2000s were without

generation-defining genres—something akin to the significance of "the psychedelic

sixties, the post-punk seventies, the hip-hop eighties and the rave nineties" (x) Yet,

Reynolds is careful to analyze the "micro-trends, subgenres and recombinant styles" that characterized the decade: freak-folk, hauntology, garage rock, hypnogogic pop, mash-ups, etc. (xxi). Nearly every retro scene, musical revival, and niche mixture of pre-existing forms receives their due, but the larger historical point is that "The sensation of moving forward grew fainter as the decade unfurled" (x). The combination of pop's canonization and the cannibalization of long-dead genres were features of a "present… ever more crowded out by the past" (x). Reynolds writes, "Instead of being about itself, the 2000s has been about every other previous decade happening again all at once: a simultaneity of pop time that abolishes history while nibbling away at the present's own sense of itself as an era with a distinct identity and feel" (x-xi). Paradoxically, this provided the 2000s with its own structure of feeling, one of living "after the Future arrived" (404).

One of Reynolds' major contributions was to sharpen the concept of retro. The definition he put forth in *Retromania* contains four points that clarify how retro is a mode of relating to history. First, "Retro is always about the relatively immediate past, about stuff that happened in living memory" (xxx). In contrast to antiquarianism, where the interest in historical artifacts can date back centuries or even millennia, retro in our moment is overwhelmingly organized around popular culture from the second half of the twentieth century. Second, "Retro involves an element of exact recall" (xxx). The widespread availability of archival documentation is therefore one of retro's conditions of possibility. Retro, then, reflects a democratization of knowledge on the one hand, and a reduction in the potential for

51

creative misrecognition of the past on the other. Third, retro fixates on popular forms and objects, rather than those of high culture. More specifically, it draws on past commodity cultures; records and fashion styles from distinctive eras are retro's raw material. And fourth, "the retro sensibility... tends neither to idealise nor sentimentalise the past, but seeks to be amused and charmed by it. By and large, the approach is not scholarly and purist but ironic and eclectic" (xxx-xxxi). Yet, its "playfulness is actually more about the present than the past it appears to revere and revive" (xxxi). As an increasingly popular means of "extract[ing] subcultural capital" and demonstrating one's "hipness," retro had as much to do with transformations in global capitalism as it did with a cultural failure to imagine the future (xxxi). But since these political-economic shifts and their ideological symptoms had already been worked out by Fisher, Reynolds honed in on how digital technology was shaping their musical conjuncture.

For Reynolds, digital technology was what linked the discrete phenomena examined in *Retromania*. The dematerialization of culture liberated us from the limits formerly imposed by financial cost and physical space, transforming the ways we produce, store, share, buy, listen to, and write about music. While the devastating impact that illicit file-sharing had on CD sales received widespread attention, Reynolds was one of the first music critics to assess how changes in online retail led to the growth of catalog sales (recordings older than 18 months) relative to new music sales. Warehousing in low-rent areas allowed inventories to increase exponentially due to reduced storage costs. This effect was even more pronounced with digital

music retail, where the cost of storing each additional item approached zero. Once stocking titles no longer depended on a certain rate of sale, reissue campaigns surged alongside our growing consumption of old music (63-70).

If this new economy of music distribution stacked pop's history against its present, it paled in comparison to the "crisis of overdocumentation" that was playing out on YouTube (56). Rare footage of performances that only circulated among hardcore collectors was now made available to everyone with an internet connection. Users uploaded music of all kinds, expanding what was ostensibly a video platform into a "public library of recorded sound" (60). Yet, YouTube was different from the expertly organized archive (62). Anything and everything seemed to reside there: home movies, "vlogger" confessionals, clips from movies and television, sports highlights, etc. Even on a musical level, YouTube's quantitative abundance was defined by its qualitative disorganization. Multiple uploads of the same song with audio of varying quality accumulated on the platform. For Reynolds, the mp3's affordances were representative of the era as a whole, where "every gain in consumer-empowering convenience has come at the cost of disempowering the power of art to dominate our attention, to induce a state of aesthetic surrender" (71). Thus, if YouTube dramatically expanded our resources of memory, it also undermined our capacity to use them. Reynolds writes, "YouTube, based around excerpts, is already in the business of fragmenting larger narratives (the programme, the movie, the album), but this function actually encourages us, as viewers, to break cultural fragments into even smaller sub-units, insidiously eroding our ability to concentrate

and our willingness to let something unfold" (61). Not only did the platform promote a certain content "drift" through its sidebar of (sometimes totally unrelated) video recommendations, it fractured the works themselves.

This crisis of overdocumentation extended to the iPod, where the dialectic of musical excess and attention deficit reached a fever pitch. iPods allowed us to carry our entire collections of digital music with us at all times, wedding mobility, storage, and personal memory in a fundamentally new way. If record collections once functioned as the soundtrack to our personal lives, "the iPod represent[ed] the ultimate extension of [the record collecting] mindset: the compulsion to hunt, stockpile and endlessly reorganize" (116). Similar to YouTube, the iPod's design encouraged a kind of frantic skipping ahead to the next track, eroding our capacity to immerse ourselves in music. Watching the time display made the listener anxious and impatient while the iPod's popular "shuffle"[18] feature eliminated the burden of choice entirely. What would the next track be? Would it be better? In his phenomenological description of using his iPod, Reynolds found himself "listening to just the first fifteen seconds of every track; then, not listening at all" (120). The iPod's ability to play songs at random incited a certain desire for surprise in the listener, but a surprise always bounded by what was already familiar to us. After all, we put the music there in the first place. Ultimately, Reynolds understood the iPod as the latest iteration of how digital technology "spatialized time"—that is, how it made music from different historical eras available for instant recall in the present. The consequence of

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[18] The feature was so popular that in 2005 Apple released the iPod Shuffle, which had no screen display and played the songs uploaded to its hard drive at random.

convenience was that music itself was decontextualized as listening became non-immersive and ahistorical (114-22).

The effects of digital technology also made their way into musical forms. As one example, Reynolds describes Flying Lotus' *Cosmogramma* (2010) as having "too much time... squeezed into it" (76). In one sense, time is understood in terms of musical labor. No longer subject to the financial costs of professional studio time, the digital audio workstation allows for endless tweaks to be made in a home studio context. Indeed, while listening to *Cosmogramma*, one feels like they are being flooded with discontinuous information. But Reynolds is also thinking in terms of cultural time. Flying Lotus' music frenetically incorporates different styles, each representing a musical "tradition that evolved and mutated over decades, that in some sense contains embedded historical time" (76). These two temporalities coexist in FlyLo's productions, but what gives his music a sense of contemporaneity is its networked sensibility (77). Reynolds writes:

> FlyLo is made by and for nervous systems moulded by online culture; this music is drifting, distracted, assembling itself according to an additive logic of audio greed... FlyLo music seems to contain its own hyperlinks (multiple stylistic jump-cuts can occur within a single track) and windows (up to eighty layers in a single *Cosmogramma* track). It's the skittering scatterbrain sound of networked consciousness, repeatedly interrupted by cutaways, freeze-frames and zooms in and out of focus. (77)

Reynolds was not alone in suggesting that FlyLo represented some of the best and most challenging music of the 2000s, worthy of the attention it requires to hear how its component parts fuse, only occasionally resolving into what we conventionally think of as "song."

In contrast to the innovative formalism of Flying Lotus, Reynolds understood the mash-up phenomenon as the ultimate (bad) end of the Web 2.0 conjuncture in music. Mash-ups, where two or more songs are stitched together in ways that add as little original music to the assembled product as possible, represented the latest regression in listening and the highest failure of imagination (356-7). Only conceivable in the digital era, the pleasure of the form derives solely from the listener's ability to identify the song's constituent parts. Reynolds explains, "Most mash-ups worked through superimposition; for instance, the topline vocal of one song over the groove/arrangement of another. Very occasionally, you got a collage where the slicing was 'vertical'… [where] you had a segue of song segments, each of which was whole and intact" (358). Though mash-ups depend entirely on music history—as with *The Grey Album* by Danger Mouse, which mixed the a cappella from Jay-Z's *The Black Album* with samples from The Beatles' *White Album*—mash-ups themselves are not for posterity. In other words, there is no future possibility for a mash-up of a mash-up. It is hard to imagine Flying Lotus getting the mash-up treatment either. Yet Reynolds identified a similarity between artists like Flying Lotus and Danger Mouse; both were homological responses to recent transformations in digital music technology and distribution. These were the sounds of music after the end of temporality.

Reynolds poses important questions about the future of popular music *and* the future of retro. These questions cut to the core of the conjuncture, but also to the problematic that frames *Retromania* as a whole. If nearly all popular music in the

56

2000s is characterized by retro, "what in today's musical landscape is rich enough, nourishing enough—which is to say, sufficiently non-derivative—to sustain future forms of revivalism and retro?" (424). If the music of today remains dependent on old styles, how could it be worthy of imitation twenty years from now? Reynolds' argument follows a logic of diminishing returns *on culture* and his prognosis is bleak: "Surely, at a certain point, recycling will just degrade the material beyond the point that further use-value can be extracted" (424). Eventually we will run out of possible combinations of already established styles. But what about returning to more conventional musical revivals? Even this he thinks is unlikely. Reynolds argues that revivals once "involved a mixture of anguish and reverence: the true believers really thought that music was better back then; they genuinely wished they could go back in time" (425). But he contrasts this older revivalism with "the way that so many [contemporary] artists revisit past styles without much apparent affect, least of all nostalgia" (425). Even nostalgia's critical impulse has been eliminated by digital culture's total access to pop music's past.

The book closes on perhaps the most important question: "*Is retromania here to stay or will it prove to be a historical phase?*" (426). Reynolds concludes that he "still believe[s] the future is out there" (428). But the optimism of the book's final words stands in stark contrast to its overall argument. If digital technologies are the linchpin of retromania, it follows that retro will be with us for the foreseeable future. What would it require to produce a different musical relationship to time? Here, Reynolds having posed the question is far more significant than his answer to it. We

must interpret this closing provocation symptomatically. What kind of "historical phase" is retromania? What is the theory of history that undergirds the Fisher-Reynolds problematic?

Periodization in the Fisher-Reynolds Thesis, or, Jameson at His Limits

Neither Fisher nor Reynolds wrote directly about periodization as a concept, but the operation itself is always foregrounded in their writing.[19] This is because their polemic against retro—which draws a stark line of demarcation between past and present—is concurrently an argument about history. While retro entails a certain *continuity* of cultural forms, its onset registered a radical *break* with historicity. The function of periodization in this problematic derives from Jameson. Curiously, the adaptation of Jameson's system led Fisher and Reynolds toward a concept of history that the great Marxist cultural theorist spent decades of his career criticizing. In mobilizing a notion of the end of history, the Fisher-Reynolds thesis reveals a conceptual and methodological limit within Jameson's own problematic and approach toward periodization. While their exercises in Left *Posthistoire* evacuate Jameson's problematic of its nuance, they are not primarily misreadings or simplifications of his system; they are its consequence.[20] Thus, to understand the limits of the Fisher-Reynolds thesis, and to arrive at a differently historical

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[19] Jameson argues that "all isolated or discrete cultural analysis always involves a buried or repressed theory of historical periodization" (Jameson 1991, 3). Elsewhere, he argues that periodization is an "essential feature of the narrative process itself" (Jameson 2009a, 81).

[20] Fisher's *Capitalist Realism* oscillated between criticizing the concept of the end of history and taking it up. Conspicuously, he writes, "Fukuyama's position is in some ways the mirror image of Fredric Jameson's" (Fisher 2009, 7).

understanding of retro cultures, we must first return to the role of periodization in Jameson's thought. How is it that Jameson, who wrote extensively about the end of history as an ideological distortion of capitalist globalization, and as a "blockage of the historical imagination," provided a system that in the end could not overcome the trope (Jameson 2009b, 91)?

In *A Singular Modernity*, Jameson argues that the problem of periodization presents itself as a paradox. At first glance, periodization appears to be an "intolerable and unacceptable" operation because "it attempts to take a point of view on individual events which is well beyond the observational capacities of any individual, and to unify, both horizontally and vertically, hosts of realities whose interrelationships must remain inaccessible and unverifiable" (Jameson 2009a, 28). And yet, Jameson argues, we must do it: "We cannot not periodize" (29). Without periodization, and without a robust concept of historical causality, history can only be grasped in the form of chronicle, where one unrelated event is followed by another. Periodization is therefore what forces us to "think the totality"—that is, to identify the various elements or "levels" that constitute society and pose complex relations between the parts and the whole. Or, put another way, periodization enables us to posit meaningful homologies at work between society's constituent levels, which together bring the never fully-representable totality into focus.

Periodization thus *presupposes* a concept of totality. If abandoning the concept of totality leads to an understanding of cultural works as wholly autonomous from social life, it also forecloses the possibility of treating culture as *semi*-autonomous

from the mode of production. However, if we retain some notion of totality, as Jameson says we must, we also require a theory of causality that mediates between the parts and the whole. Thus, the question of causality ultimately pivots around the categories of base and superstructure.[21]

One version of the base-superstructure model posits their relation as one of "mechanical causality" (Jameson 1982, 24–26). According to this model, the base *determines* the superstructure in the sense that "A causes B." This simple cause-effect model is the one we are familiar with in Newtonian physics; when someone takes a shot in a game of pool, the force of the shooter's stick *causes* the movement of the cue ball. Althusser critiques this model, insisting that the kind of causality it evokes is not fitting to the objects whose relationship it attempts to describe. The relationship between base and superstructure is one between economy and institutional and cultural relations, not between physical objects (Dowling 1984, 61–63).[22] Therefore, we cannot reduce the "cause" of cultural phenomena to economic structures. For us, the point is that an economic situation is always present in a cultural work, not that a mode of production can write a song.

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[21] Jameson systematically works through the conceptual problems posed by the categories of totality and causality in *The Political Unconscious*, where he draws on concepts from Louis Althusser and Raymond Williams to advance a his own interpretive hermeneutic.

[22] While Althusser dismisses mechanical causality altogether, Jameson argues that it "retains a purely local validity in cultural analysis where it can be shown that billiard-ball causality remains one of the (nonsynchronous) laws of our particular fallen social reality" (Jameson 1982, 25). In other words, Jameson holds on to the category insofar as it allows us to get to the "truth" of a misrepresentation of reality.

A second approach to the base-superstructure relationship posits that an abstract economic essence is behind all the concrete surface appearances of the superstructure. Althusser designates this model of causality as "historicism" or "expressive causality." Here, what is at work is not the causality of the billiard-ball model, but one akin to Hegel's conception of Absolute Spirit, where history is but the self-development and manifestation of the Idea (Althusser, Balibar, and Fernbach 2016, 240). For Althusser, such a model transforms Marxism into Hegelianism, where heterogeneous contradictions are reduced to those in the economic base as their determining "internal principle" (Althusser 2005, 100–104). The consequences of expressive causality are evident in criticism that periodizes haphazardly, transforming all kinds of disparate phenomena into a seamless web whose meaning ultimately resides in the mode of production *as a concept*. Althusser explains, "the Hegelian whole has a type of unity in which each element of the whole, whether a material or economic determination, a political institution or a religious, artistic or philosophical form, is never anything more than the presence of the concept itself at a historically determined moment" (Althusser, Balibar, and Fernbach 2016, 241). If the levels of the totality do not express one another, such a unity can only be conjured up by the critic who has presupposed it from the outset. In other words, there need not always be an identity between economy and culture (Dowling 1984, 64–65). After all, cultural works can both support and criticize the world from which they spring.

Althusser's solution to the question of causality is to displace the centrality of the mode of production in the Marxist theory of totality and to reframe the problem of

determination as one of overdetermination. Such is to do away with the typical conceptualization of the relation between base and superstructure, where the former "causes" the latter in various ways. In its place is what Althusser calls "structural causality": the determination of the totality in and by itself. Althusser explains that "the effects are not outside the structure, are not a pre-existing object, element or space in which the structure arrives to *imprint its mark*: on the contrary... the structure, which is merely a specific combination of its peculiar elements, is nothing outside its effects" (Althusser, Balibar, and Fernbach 2016, 344). Structural causality is not a one-way determination where the totality "causes" the instances of its elements. Rather, the elements now possess relative autonomy from one another and the whole is understood as greater than the sum of its parts. While these elements are shaped by the totality and relate to one another within it, a transformation in any one part or in the relationship between parts in turn affects the whole.

The concept of overdetermination has consequences for how we think about the relationship between culture and periodization—i.e. thinking about culture *in time*. If culture is relatively autonomous from the political and the economic, this suggests that the levels of the totality can develop at distinct tempos. A historical "break" at the economic or the political level then, does not immediately entail a concomitant (or homological) break in the aesthetic fields. For example, a central thrust of Jacques Attali's *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (1985), for which Jameson authored the introduction to its English translation, is that popular music can reflect, lag behind, or anticipate forms of social life. If there are overlapping

temporalities occurring across the different levels of the totality, the "forwardness" or "backwardness" of this or that level can only be assessed *in totality*, not against some ideological base time but in their relation to the structure of the totality, which can only be grasped in its effects. For Althusser, their unification can only be analyzed in the conjuncture (Althusser, Balibar, and Fernbach 2016, 251–53). Jameson, however, expands this conceptualization to that of a period, arguing that periodization does not impose some homogenous conceptual order upon the world, but rather identifies tendencies within it.

Jameson crucially introduces Raymond Williams' categories of dominant, residual, and emergent when analyzing the aesthetic tendencies of postmodernity.[23] This was to avoid the implication that all contemporary cultural production could be characterized as postmodern and to evade the pitfalls of expressive totality. At the same time, these categories allowed him to establish a "hegemonic norm" around which "genuine difference could be measured and assessed" (Jameson 1991, 6). Jameson writes, "If we do not achieve some general sense of a cultural dominant, then we fall back into a view of present history as sheer heterogeneity, random difference, a coexistence of a host of distinct forces whose effectivity is undecidable" (6). For radical politics, cultural or otherwise, to successfully intervene in history "in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place," a cognitive map

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[23] Residual cultural phenomena form in the past, but maintain an active presence through their incorporation into contemporary practices. They may be counterhegemonic, but they can also be incorporated into the dominant cultural practices as a kind of "alternative" version of the hegemonic (Williams 2009, 122). Emergent phenomena, by contrast, construct new meanings, values, and practices within a social formation (123).

of the dominant aesthetics of global capitalism would be essential (ix). Producing this

map was the monumental task Jameson set himself to in *Postmodernism, or, The*

Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.

There are two intertwining narrative features of Jameson's periodization

schema that reappear in the Fisher-Reynolds thesis: *depth narrative* and *narrative*

closure. For Jameson, postmodernism emerges with the colonization of the

unconscious (the aesthetic, culture) and capitalism's total capture of the earth (both in

a territorial sense and in the loss of meaningful socialist alternatives). Thus, the

deepening of capitalist social relations converges with the *end* of any constitutive

"outside" to capital. However, rather than these processes culminating in the end of

culture, the consequence is its "prodigious expansion": "its old semi-autonomy lost,

its isolation a thing of the past… it now becomes coterminous with the social field as

a whole and everything becomes in that sense 'cultural'—politics, economics, law,

ideology, religion, daily life, sexuality, the body, space, et cetera, et cetera" (Jameson

2007, 19). The problem lies not in Jameson's insistence on a relation between capital

and cultural works but in the way he relates them. Gone are the countertendencies

immanent to capitalist development, the semi-autonomy of cultural fields, and the

antagonistic array of forces whose effects become legible in a conjuncture. In their

absence, Jameson's periodization reintroduces the problem of expressive totality,

where postmodernism (i.e. the nostalgia mode) fuses with the mode of production in

its third phase (financialization, globalization, etc.) which is now characterized by its

totalization (i.e. capital at its limits). So, in contrast with his express project of

locating class in collective fantasy—that is, "in the ongoing stories and images people tell themselves about history, [and] in their narrative anxieties about their future and their past"—what most often emerges in Jameson's (undeniably thrilling) interpretations of cultural works is the *reappearance of a formal logic of capital without class* (i.e. finance capital, global capital, etc.) and therefore one *without* contradiction and class struggle.

The Fisher-Reynolds thesis takes up these narrative features of Jameson's periodization while carrying its logic to its conclusion. While Jameson says that his project is to outline a cultural dominant, of which the nostalgia mode is a constitutive cultural effect, he theorizes residual and emergent phenomena out of existence. Similarly, Fisher and Reynolds *begin* from the premise that the historical processes and aesthetic tendencies Jameson identified have deepened to the point of totalization. As a consequence, residual and emergent phenomena drop out of their *framework* altogether. In a 2010 interview, Fisher explained:

> the very persistence and ubiquity of the processes that Jameson identifies—the destruction of a sense of history, the supersession of novelty by pastiche—meant that they have changed in kind. Postmodernism is now no longer a tendency in culture; it has subsumed practically all culture. Capitalist realism, you might say, is what happens when postmodernism is naturalized. (Fisher 2018, 631)

As we have seen, the effect of such a totalization is to reintroduce the problem of expressive causality into their problematic. History—or in this case, the end of history—is presented without contradiction, where all phenomena exist as a constellation of seamless analogies and homologies.

Nowhere is this seamlessness clearer than in the analogies drawn between retro and the business cycle. With global capitalism still reeling from the Great Recession, Reynolds saw financialization's logic playing out everywhere in music. As financial speculation became unmoored from the "real" economy, it produced a debt-driven crisis caused not least by instruments called derivatives.[24] Pop music too was suffering from derivativeness and over-indebtedness. Rather than developing new and innovative sounds, old genres were spliced and combined like repackaged mortgages. Neither the generation of new wealth nor that of new music was based on sound fundamentals. In this formulation, retro was the equivalent of capitalist crisis, the cultural recession after the musical boom-time (Reynolds 2011, 419-20). Base and superstructure were unified in their stagnation, if not their terminus.

Reevaluating Retro

While the Fisher-Reynolds thesis has become the dominant framework for thinking about retro cultures, we need not afford retro such catastrophic significance. Indeed, we can productively trace the problem back to the category of postmodernism itself. Drawing on an important essay by Derrida about the "Apocalyptic Tone Adopted in Recent Philosophy," Warren Montag emphasizes postmodernism's obsession with ends: of history, of art, of style, of literature, of meaning, of the university, of the subject, etc. Thus, the postmodernism debate mistook "for the end

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[24] This is Reynolds' characterization of the Financial Crisis, not my own. For a survey of Marxist debates about its origins, see my M.A. Thesis, "The Specter of Crisis: Rethinking Marxist Approaches Toward the Great Recession." (2013)

of art what is in reality a crisis of its own theory" (Montag 1988, 99).[25] From this

perspective, retro names the theoretical impasse at the center of the Fisher-Reynolds

thesis. How else might retro be conceptualized? What other kinds of significance

might it take on?

In answering these fundamental questions, it is critical that we reintroduce the

categories of dominant, residual, and emergent phenomena into our thinking about

retro. Retro remains one dominant aesthetic trend in musical production today but it is

not all that exists. In terms of genre, the complex and sedimented temporality of the

present is clearest within hip-hop, which traveled from an emergent form of cultural

production in the 1980s to become the dominant form of popular music in America

today. The genre itself goes back decades, but continual formal innovations have

made hip-hop the sound *of the present*. While other genres like indie rock have

plodded along with little sonic variation, no one could mistake a Kendrick Lamar or

Frank Ocean song from the past decade for an early 1980s cut on the Sugarhill Label.

Beyond the turn away from more overt sampling, contemporary rappers work in sonic

and emotional registers that were uncharacteristic of hip-hop's golden age. At the

same time, hip-hop has not been immune to retro. For example, there has been a

meaningful return to 1990s house music within the genre (Beyoncé's "Break My

Soul" sounds like her voice was digitally spliced atop a 30-year-old Robin S.

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[25] Montag's scathing polemic against Jameson a is incisive but wholly ungenerous. One need not adopt Jameson's periodization schema, which Montag correctly characterizes as "a succession of expressive totalities separated by radical breaks," to work productively with his concept of the nostalgia mode (Montag 1988, 99).

instrumental). But even if retro has its place in it, hip-hop has nevertheless overcome the musical impasse that preoccupied Fisher and Reynolds during the 2000s.

There is also the lingering issue of method that we must address before we go further. Long before retro became a dominant tendency in musical production, George Lipsitz issued an important challenge to Jameson's emphasis on nostalgia in popular culture. In *Time Passages*, he refines the concept of dialogism to examine the complex ways that popular music engages with the past. He writes, "Popular music is nothing if not dialogic, the product of an ongoing conversation in which no one has the first or the last word" (Lipsitz 1990, 99). For Lipsitz, musical forms offer ways to recover history and reactivate it toward new ends. On the one hand, generic structures and conventions contain historical traces that bias them toward the cultural politics of their origins. On the other, genres are not static and their meanings cannot be located in the musical forms themselves. Dialogic criticism is always contextual, emphasizing the ways that forms are "put into play at any given moment to re-articulate or dis-articulate dominant ideology" (102). In assessing any work of popular culture, the question becomes "how [a form] arbitrates tensions between opposition and co-optation at any given historical moment" and how it "mediate[s] between past and present for their audiences" (102). Like Jameson, Lipsitz is well attuned to the ways that media industries contribute to a "crisis of memory," distorting history as they provide us with spectacular and compensatory substitutes for earlier forms of collective expression and ritual. However, Lipsitz is far more attendant to how cultural works engage history from perspectives that reflect different social locations,

cultural backgrounds, and competing interests. If Jameson's approach is an imperfect

synthesis of Lukács, the Frankfurt School, and Althusser, Lipsitz is more indebted to

Bakhtin, Gramsci, and the British Cultural Studies tradition, especially Stuart Hall.

Theirs are not entirely incompatible approaches, but primarily matters of relating

specific objects under investigation to particular methods.

From this perspective, the absence of a sustained engagement with popular

music in Jameson's near-encyclopedic body of work is significant. His major study

on postmodernism contains chapters on architecture,[26] literature, museums,

economics, film, and social theory—forms and sites which, by nature of their capital

requirements or their institutionalization, have a greater distance from participatory

culture than popular music.[27] After all, most of us know far more musicians than we

do architects, novelists, curators, economists, filmmakers, or social theorists. If

Jameson's objects of analysis seem to permit his methodological formalism, where

the commodity form's reproduction in cultural works is presumed from the outset, an

object like popular music reveals the limits of such a one-sided approach. In viewing

culture through the prism of capital, Jameson's interpretations are biased toward

seeing the negative and the repressed, the repetitive and the standardized, the

ideological and the ahistorical. This is not to suggest that Jameson ignores mass

culture's utopian dimensions. On the contrary, his hermeneutic stresses that in order

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[26] "Of all the arts, architecture is the closest constitutively to the economic, with which, in the form of commissions and land values, it has a virtually unmediated relationship" (Montag 1988, 5).

[27] Angela McRobbie makes a similar point. She argues that Jameson "fails to engage with… [audience] reception" because "the bulk of his analysis of the 'postmodern condition' is focused towards art rather than popular culture" (McRobbie 2003, 20).

for us to be manipulated by mass culture, a work must first arouse a utopian desire in us that it ultimately represses and reroutes into the dominant ideology. Nevertheless, his capital-centric approach deemphasizes the social life of forms.

By contrast, Lipsitz's scholarship on working-class history and diasporic musics examines cultural production "from below." As much as the global circuits of capital upon which their production and distribution depend, popular music's conditions of possibility reside in deep cultural histories of lived relations. From this perspective, the arrival of new cultural forms tells us not only about the moment of their appearance; genres contain "hidden histories" to be uncovered, forms in which accounts of power and place are (however subtly) embedded. Thus, even in "our age of simultaneity," the popularity of various musics—often across times and places well beyond their points of origin—"reflect real historical connections and affinities, not just a serendipitous exchange of signs and symbols across cultures" (Lipsitz 1997, 18). Not coincidentally then, Lipsitz raises the specter of nostalgia only to bracket it. For example, in his brilliant study of rock 'n' roll in *Time Passages*, Lipsitz concludes that "the presence of the past… has meaning beyond the lure of nostalgia and the persistence of artistic clichés"—those generic and formal features explained so powerfully by Jameson's conceptual apparatus (Lipsitz 1990, 100).

Lipsitz was principally concerned with how popular music could function as a form of cultural memory. Because the traces of the past in the present are understood as an index of lived relations, Lipsitz argued that music could stimulate the recovery of history in addition to distorting or erasing it. In contrast to Jameson's emphases on

standardization and repetition, Lipstiz saw opportunities for unleashing individual

creativity amidst established formal conventions and for constructing

counter-hegemonic cultural politics in the face of capitalist globalization. Not long

after Jameson provocatively asked if we can still imagine a future, Lipsitz was

suggesting that popular music recorded forms of cultural resistance not yet possible

on the terrain of politics.[28] Indeed, Lipsitz was less concerned about analyzing the

formal contours of globalization's dominant ideology—i.e. "the cultural logic of late

capitalism"—than the ways that music could function as cultural opposition to it.

From a dialogic perspective, retro cannot be reduced to a single meaning, let

alone one that announces the end of history. Instead of understanding retro primarily

as a register of cultural exhaustion—an interpretation that we can now reframe as a

permutation of the old theme of "the end of art"—we must open retro up to other

possibilities. In other words, we cannot presuppose the significance of old music's

popularity today. Because musical genres have their own histories, we must pose

site-specific questions to understand how those histories are reactivated in the present.

Nevertheless, to understand the broader relationship between retro and historicity, we

must also pose more sweeping questions. How does the industry's canonization of

popular music work to shape our perception of the past? Can dominant narratives

about history be challenged by musical revivals "from below?" Have technological

developments like streaming stacked music's past against its present? To what

political and cultural ends can retro be put?

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[28] Jameson also made this point in his Introduction to Jacques Attali's *Noise*.

CHAPTER TWO

Classic Rock Radio and the Ideologies of Nostalgia Formatting

It's 11:13 PM on a Sunday and I'm tuned into KLOS, Los Angeles'

longest-running AOR (Album-Oriented Rock) station. AC/DC's "Dirty Deeds Done

Dirt Cheap" is playing on the stereo in my living room and Malcolm Young has been

dead for just over two weeks. If you tune into any Classic Rock station for an hour,

you're likely to hear "Dirty Deeds" or another one of AC/DC's hard rock hits from

the mid-70s through the early 80s. But you will also hear songs from a very different

moment in rock music—say Jimi Hendrix's "Purple Haze" or CCR's "Fortunate

Son"—both of which conjure images of the Vietnam War and its resistors in the

collective American imaginary.[29] If we have come to associate "Purple Haze" and

"Fortunate Son" with the political 60s, AC/DC usually evokes images of stadiums,

groupies, hard drugs, and individualized rebellion—not to mention Angus Young's

schoolboy uniform. There is no doubt that a shift in musical culture occurred

sometime after Hendrix's death in 1970 that paved the way for the hard rock of the

mid-70s, but how we perceive these shifts—or how we do not—is just as significant

as the shifts themselves. This is particularly true for those that did not live through

them, but who are nevertheless overwhelmed by the musical culture of past

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[29] To see how the music of the 1960s counterculture shaped the experience and
politics of American soldiers fighting in Vietnam, see Doug Bradley and Craig
Werner's *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: The Soundtrack of the Vietnam War* (2015)
and Michael J. Kramer's *The Republic of Rock: Music and Citizenship in the Sixties
Counterculture* (2013).

generations.[30] Even as background music, listening to Classic Rock serves to familiarize young people with the history and structure of feeling of a bygone era. Classic Rock is therefore an important site to study "acoustemology"—Steven Feld's term that connotes "one's sonic way of knowing and being in the world"—even when we are talking about the past rather than our cultural present (Feld and Brenneis 2004, 462). But what version of the past does Classic Rock portray?

What follows is an argument that the Classic Rock radio format prefigured, inaugurated, and facilitated cultural practices of both production and reception that we now associate with retro. If the loss of historicity is retro's predominant symptom, as both Mark Fisher and Simon Reynolds suggest, retro's prehistory as an emergent phenomenon in popular music remains underdeveloped. But to frame the problem this way is to trouble the category itself. In other words, in order to conceptualize and historicize the relationship between retro and popular music, we must attend to the dialectical tension produced by how retro plays out in the sonic field, and how this dynamic troubles the temporality of retro's arrival itself.

My argument comes in four parts, each of which looks at how developments in rock music and those in radio formatting were mutually constitutive. In part one, I argue that while the introduction of Top 40 and later Free Form radio provided openings for counter-hegemonic interventions within American popular culture, the institution of the format system in the 1970s functioned to contain those energies. As

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[30] I follow Stuart Hall's usage of generation, for whom the term is "symbolic rather than literal, relating as much to a shared experience, a common vision, or thinking within the same 'problem space' as it does to a mere date of birth" (Hall 2017, 44).

competition grew on the FM band, formats were rationalized in order to target specific demographics. This dramatically curtailed diversity within rock and dethroned rock from its place at the center of the music industry and American popular culture. And with the greater influence of capital and market research on programming, rock radio became increasingly backward-looking and ideologically tethered to its past. Paradoxically, the effect of this retrospective gaze was to scramble the temporal coordinates of the genre. These processes culminated in the Classic Rock format.

In part two, I show how parallel developments were happening within rock music. As rock was "mainstreamed" and canonized during the 1970s and the early 1980s, tribute songs played an important role in rock's self-commemoration. These songs demonstrated how musical forms can become dislodged from their original contexts and put toward new ends. This makes tribute songs an important forerunner of retro, but in contrast to Fisher's and Reynolds's use of the concept, it hardly makes them post-historical. In reactivating older rock 'n' roll forms, tribute songs communicated more than a love of music history; as a mode of representing an imaginary relationship to a real past, nostalgic tribute songs included commentary on

the present.[31] They distilled contradictions within rock ideology and announced

anxieties about rock's new position in a changing musical environment.

In part three, I compare two nostalgia formats, Oldies and Classic Rock. Both

of these formats are designed to produce nostalgia, but of different orders. While

Oldies harkens back to a clear (if fictionalized) moment in rock 'n' roll history,

Classic Rock incorporates music from multiple rock eras. I argue that the format's

dislocated temporality is what exposes it as an ideological project to rewrite rock

history and reposition rock at the center of American popular culture. The format's

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[31] The reader will notice that my use of nostalgia has a particularly Althusserian valence. This is because nostalgia emphasizes the ways that the past is distorted, misrepresented, misunderstood, etc. In other words, nostalgia has an ideological structure. Following Althusser, I understand nostalgia as something not simply experienced by subjects but actively produced by them, always deployed within specific historical and institutional contexts. In stressing the temporality of nostalgia, Stuart Tannock's usage of the term is particularly helpful for understanding nostalgia formats. He argues that nostalgia is a "periodizing emotion" that "invokes a positively evaluated past world in response to a deficient present world" (Tannock 1995, 454, 456). He writes, "In the rhetoric of nostalgia, one invariable finds three key ideas: first, that of a prelapsarian world (the Golden Age, the childhood Home, the Country); second, that of a 'lapse' (a cut, a Catastrophe, a separation or sundering, the Fall); and third, that of the present, postlapsarian world (a world felt in some way to be lacking, deficient, or oppressive)" (456–7). While nostalgia is always ideological, it is not necessarily conservative. In other words, nostalgia can be mobilized toward different political ends. Althusser recognizes this as well. He writes, "In ideology the real relation is inevitably invested in the imaginary relation, a relation that *expresses* a *will* (conservative, conformist, reformist or revolutionary), a hope or nostalgia, rather than describing a reality" (Althusser 2005, 233–34).

Before I am accused of approaching history nostalgically, I want to clarify that I do not understand the rock 'n' roll of the 1950s or the rock of the 1960s as some kind of musical "Golden Era," and I am inclined to see the radical possibilities for commercial radio having always been severely limited by their profitability requirements. In what follows, I highlight the social antagonisms, ideological contradictions, and political shortcomings of rock radio as much as its oppositional dynamics, resistant possibilities, and paths not taken. In short, we need not desire to return to the past in order to learn from it or be inspired by it.

temporality evidences how the persistence and recompilation of the past paradoxically produce a "loss of history" rather than its reclamation. Classic Rock therefore prepared us for the kinds of listening we engage in today when we use Pandora or Spotify Radio,[32] whose algorithmic recommendations sound little more orderly than when we used to hit "shuffle" on our iPods. In fact, radio's digitization spurred the development of nostalgia formats on commercial stations.

In part four, I show that the effect of radio formatting has been nothing less than the transformation of our sense of aesthetic perception, whose most salient feature is our inability to be surprised by the *flow* of music on commercial outlets. As new regulations collided with radio's digitization, both terrestrial and satellite radio became saturated with nostalgia formats. Therefore, this chapter concludes with reflections on the relationship between digitization and temporality after the emergence of retro rock.

The Origins of Modern Formatting: Radio, Rock, Rationalization

Radio formatting began in the 1920s, though in a much different form than we know it today.[33] From then until the early 1950s, format "referred to a station's

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[32] It is important not to treat all music streaming services as a singular object of analysis. For the purposes of this chapter, the most relevant distinction is between those that offer radio functionality, where the platform produces a playlist based around an artist selected by the user, and those that offer on-demand service, where users can choose individual tracks and build their own playlists. While on-demand services cost users money, Spotify Radio and Pandora are similar to terrestrial radio in that they are free to users and are supported by advertisements.

[33] Though it is hard for us to imagine today, the presence of advertising was minimal in the early days of American radio, when the medium's future was hotly debated among the public. By the 1930s, however, radio had become a lucrative business and programming strategies became increasingly geared toward that end (Douglas 2004, 56).

program schedule, which was usually filled in a patchwork manner, hour by hour"

with a mixture of pre-recorded and live blocks (Simpson 2011, 8). One hour might be

filled with church services, the next with music played on a phonograph (though

record-centric programming was marginal in this period).[34] Both within individual

stations and across the AM band as a whole, programming was characterized by a

great deal of variety. This was particularly true for independent

(non-network-affiliated) stations, where significant portions of content often came

from outside sources. This is because independent stations tended to operate on an

"airtime-for-sale" model, where revenue was generated out of "an agreement with the

program provider to buy the station's airtime to run the show and the provider's

commercials" (Fatherley and MacFarland 2013, 25). However, this put programming

content largely under the control of advertisers. The consequence of this business

model was that there was little consistency in program content and quality varied

widely (25).

Modern formatting marked a shift from an "airtime-for-sale" model to an

"audience-for-sale" model. This transformation first took hold at what are known as

the Storz Stations—those stations owned by the Mid-Continent Broadcasting

Company (MCBC became Storz Broadcasting Company in 1958) that pioneered the

Top 40 format (3, 195). At KOWH in Omaha—the first station acquired by MCBC:

> [Todd] Storz made the decision to expand the availability of the most popular
> programming, in effect "super-serving" a narrow but growing segment of the
> audience [that tuned in to hear recorded popular music]. In an era when

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[34] In 1939, the FCC listed playing "too many" records as a "programming taboo"
(Eliot 1993, 13).

network radio, local radio, and emerging television stations were all offering a growing variety of short programs to appeal to a certain slice of the available audience for a finite amount of time, Storz began to offer one program type—recorded popular music—that soon would expand to be heard in all day parts. (Fatherley and MacFarland 2013, 26)

Though differently mythologized in the annals of radio lore, Storz's decision was not that of a programming genius so much as that of a station manager who trusted audience surveys and early ratings services' reports.[35] Because the data showed that popular recorded music programs outperformed all others, Storz changed KOWH's business model[36] in order to provide more musical content.[37]

The function of modern formatting is not to sell music directly. Rather, its purpose is to "convince sponsors of the link between a mediated product and its never fully quantifiable audience" (Weisbard 2014, 9). In other words, formatting is used to sell radio time to companies that want to advertise their products to specific demographics. By segmenting audiences, consumption habits can be more competently predicted, and advertising more persuasively sold. Radio programmers choose songs based on perceptions about the demographic that their station is targeting (Simpson 2011, 1). In the selection process, programmers imagine

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[35] According to Marc Fisher, "In 1950, a University of Omaha researcher brought Storz the results of an industrial testing project that asked people what they listened to on the radio. Storz eagerly read that KOWH's only top-rated programs were music shows and that listeners wanted to hear their favorite songs, over and over" (Fisher 2007, 9).

[36] William Barlow suggests that Top 40 was also a consequence of Storz's desire to reroute payola money from DJs into the coffers of station owners. Stripping DJs of the power to choose their own songs and transferring this responsibility to general managers and program directors was not only grounded in market research; it was a decision to redirect existing revenue streams (Barlow 1999, 192).

[37] By September of 1953, all outside programming had been dropped from the station (Fatherley and MacFarland 2013, 25).

connections between members of their predicted audience, which they segment "explicitly by age and gender and tacitly by race and class" (Weisbard 2014, 13). As Eric Weisbard rightly points out, this practice is as much a "formatting of publics" as it is a formatting of music (1).

The proliferation of the audience-for-sale model had three major consequences for American radio. First, programming became a station's internal responsibility rather than that of advertisers who purchased airtime. Second, all-day programming of popular recorded music became the norm. And third, radio stations began to use the same format during all hours of the day, making formats identical to the stations themselves. These changes turned formatting into an all-encompassing operation, where formatting became a station's primary means of differentiating itself from its competitors:

> Every format follows a complex set of rules for programming, including the style and range of music selections, size and origin of playlist, quotas for musical repetition, relative numbers of current and past hits and their usual sequence, conventional relationships between music and speech, and so forth. A major change in any one of these is inconceivable without a subsequent change in all of them and in the relationships amongst them. (Berland 2005, 107–8)

The introduction of modern formatting thus fundamentally alters the relationship between musical content and its apparatus of distribution. The task of the rock historian then is to trace the symbiotic development of musical production and commercial radio formatting.

Possibilities: Top 40 and Rock 'n' Roll

Top 40 was the first modern format, developed in the early 1950s by radio

station manager Todd Storz.[38] Storz brought the logic of the jukebox to the radio by

programming an entire day's schedule with only the most popular songs. Like

jukeboxes, Top 40 incorporated many genres and styles of music with only a limited

number of possible selections (Weisbard 2014, 5).[39] In its early years, Top 40 playlists

consisted of roughly 12 songs and almost never surpassed forty (Sterling and Keith

2008, 70). Playlists were kept "tight" because it was assumed both that listeners

prefer a more popular song to a less popular one and that the predictable rotation of

short songs would keep listeners tuned in, anticipating the hit they were waiting for.

Top 40 facilitated a dramatic shift in the American music industry by

standardizing the record/DJ structure in radio formatting.[40] Many radio stations opted

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[38] Contrary to Top 40's origin myth, the format was developed gradually. It was not until 1953, that WITX, New Orleans named one of its programs *The Top 40* (Fatherley and MacFarland 2013, 40). For a detailed history of Top 40's emergence and development, see Richard W. Fatherley and David T. MacFarland's *The Birth of Top 40 Radio: The Storz Stations' Revolution of the 1950s and 1960s* (2013).

[39] The jukeboxes of the late 1930s contained limited selections of music because they played 78 rpm 10-inch records, which took up far more space than 45 rpm 7-inch records (Weisbard 2014, 5). RCA Victor introduced the 7-inch record in 1949 (Bartmanski and Woodward 2015, 70).

[40] Even before radio became a commercial mass medium, there was precedent for playing records over the airwaves (Barlow 1999, 55). However, in 1922 "the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) began to demand that radio stations pay an annual fee for the use of recorded music that had been copyrighted by ASCAP members" (21). Radio station owners responded by establishing their own trade association, the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB), and by refusing to play songs under ASCAP copyright. Recorded music remained marginal on the airwaves for the rest of the 1920s, but things began to change in the early 1930s. Because "race records" were not protected by ASCAP, black DJ pioneers like Jack Cooper were able to play black jazz records without having to pay royalties (55). Although legally creative and technically innovative for

for this structure because it enabled them to cut costs associated with producing

scripted content, which often involved higher-cost union workforces (Berland 2005,

106). The result was to make local radio programming increasingly record-centric.

Unlike in the 1930s, when record companies thought that radio play discouraged

consumer purchases, labels began providing their musical commodities for free to

stations as promotional material (Eliot 1993, 13; Sterling and Keith 2008, 71). This

new advertising strategy engendered close relationships between labels and radio

stations, altering the structure of the American culture industry (Gillett 2017, 49).[41]

More precisely, it played an important role in fracturing the culture industry into

industries by reintroducing a logic of competitive capitalism into formerly

oligopolistic markets. The standardization of commercial radio as a promotional

vehicle for vinyl records[42] challenged the hegemony of nationally syndicated

programming, which dominated the airwaves throughout the 1930s and 1940s:

> Since there were many more records to choose from than network shows,
> localized Top 40 fed a broader trend that allowed an entrepreneurial
> capitalism… to compete with corporations like William Paley's Columbia

its time, Cooper's programming remained on the airtime-for-sale model (56). At the
height of his career in the 1940s, he produced over 50 programs that were broadcast
on four different stations in the Chicago area (58).

[41] In *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music*, David Suisman
corroborates a central thesis of Adorno and Horkheimer's argument in *Dialectic of
Enlightenment*. Suisman argues that by the 1940s, "once music fused with cinema and
radio, the substantial distinction between the music business and other entertainment
industries ceased to exist" (Suisman 2012, 270). However, he clarifies that "it was
interlocking corporate ownership, not intellectual or aesthetic affinity, that bound
them together" (270).

[42] The physical properties of vinyl were economically preferable to shellac. As
Reebee Garofalo explains, "These records were lighter and less breakable than the
78rpm records and were well suited to the rapidly changing pop market because they
could be shipped faster and more cheaply" (Garofalo 2002, 119).

Broadcasting System, the so-called Tiffany Network, which included
Columbia Records. (Weisbard 2014, 6)

These changes, alongside the introduction of magnetic tape recording[43] and
the explosion of independent radio stations between 1946 and 1956, were conditions
of possibility for the proliferation of independent record labels between the years of
1956 and 1963. Small independent labels were critical to popularizing early rock n'
roll (Douglas 2004, 223; Gillett 2017, 67).[44] As Charlie Gillett points out, "The
overwhelming majority of both the best (musically and artistically) and the most
successful (commercially) rock 'n' roll records were produced by independent
companies" (Gillett 2017, 67). By contrast, most major labels initially thought that
rock 'n' roll was little more than a fad, something not worth seriously investing in. A
certain conservatism was similarly embedded in their business model: standard
five-year recording contracts made the majors slow to catch up with contemporary
trends. While independent labels were able to take chances on new talent, the majors
were more constrained. To the extent that they were able to experiment with newly

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[43] The introduction of magnetic tape greatly improved sound quality while reducing
the capital requirements for recording. As Reebee Garofalo explains, "Prior to this
innovation, quality recording was tied to elaborate studios, cumbersome equipment,
and a substantial capital investment. Recording facilities were located in a relatively
few city centers and were firmly under the control of established corporate powers.
Magnetic tape and its more versatile hardware changed that. Aside from bringing the
obvious technical advantages of editing and better sound reproduction, magnetic tape
made it possible for anyone to record anywhere" (Garofalo 2002, 119)
[44] For an extensive account of the independent labels of the 1950s and the ways that
they competed against the majors, see Charlie Gillett's foundational scholarly study,
The Sound of the City: The Rise of Rock and Roll (2017).

popular styles, the majors' long-term contracts compelled them to do so with their

existing rosters of artists, who were a poor musical fit for the task (49).[45]

As new independent labels and local radio stations wrested power from the

majors and the chain broadcasting system, an opposite movement was at work inside

many radio stations, where power was becoming increasingly concentrated with

management. In the early 1950s, DJs had a considerable amount of autonomy to

choose the records they played, but by the end of the decade the success of Top 40

transferred that power from DJs to program directors and station administrators

(Douglas 2004, 245; Garofalo 2002, 120; Simpson 2011, 12).[46] Top 40's reliance upon

record sales, jukebox plays, and chart figures thus encouraged a more top-down

institutional structure within radio stations at the same time as it homogenized

playlists (Douglas 2004, 246).[47] The formula was successful almost immediately,

spawning hundreds of similarly formatted stations throughout the U.S. within only a

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[45] Black rhythm and blues performers often suffered disproportionately from the opposite problem: high turnover. Reebee Garofalo writes, "In the fifties one of the factors that kept rhythm & blues from expanding in popularity in its original form was the rapid turnover of artists working in the field" (Garofalo 2002, 122). He continues, "Groups like the Chords, the Spiders, the Spaniels, the Crows, and the Four Tunes, all of whom had pop hits in 1954, could not be found on the year-end pop charts one year later… black musicians seldom had access to good advice about record contracts, royalty payments, marketing, promotion, or career development. As a result, they were routinely swindled out of their publishing rights and underpaid for record sales" (123).

[46] This trend was encouraged by the payola scandals of 1959, which forced rock 'n' roll DJs to leave their jobs *en masse* in a McCarthy-style purge. Top 40 formats, whose playlists were determined by management, often took their place (Douglas 2004, 248–51; Marc Fisher 2007, 91).

[47] As Douglas notes, "What this often meant was that DJs simply chose what to play from *Billboard's* list of rankings… "Refined" Top 40 was something else—the repeated playing of the biggest hits much more often than the other songs on the list" (Douglas 2004, 247).

few years after its introduction (Sterling and Keith 2008, 71).[48] Initially, executives

measured success by the format's ability to capture the novel "teen" market.[49] This in

turn propelled the development of other formats to reach different demographics.[50]

Top 40 presented new possibilities in American popular culture, particularly

for young people. For the first time, youth had their own form of popular music.

Many of rock 'n' roll's biggest stars were young and working class, representing the

demographic they were performing for (Frith 70).[51] This produced a tighter

identification between the producers and consumers of popular music compared to

any earlier moment. And although the link between musicians and audiences has

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[48] According to Fatherley and MacFarland, "the 1957-1961 time span was the period
in which the format spread virtually throughout the radio industry (Fatherley and
MacFarland 2013, 130). They write, "One outcome of Storz's trade magazine
advertising was that the Storz programming success story was in the consciousness of
many of the broadcasters who subscribed to those publications. A significant number
of them decided that it was time to make a visit to Kansas City, check into a hotel
with a radio and a tape recorder, and start making airchecks of the Storz Sound so that
they could go back home and attempt to put the format on their own station… In
effect, Storz's trades advertising helped to drive the dissemination of the Top 40
format to cities and towns across America" (68–9).
[49] "In a 1956 survey, *Scholastic* magazine's Institute of Student Opinion calculated
that there were thirteen million teenagers in America, with a total income of $7
billion a year, and an average income of $10.55 a week—a figure close to the average
disposable income available to an average American *family* just fifteen years before"
(Miller 2000, 144).
[50] "It is incorrect to think that Top 40 radio stations in the 1950s and 1960s primarily
played rock 'n' roll records. On evenings and weekends, when teens were most
available to listen, rock 'n' roll artists did get a lot of airplay. But during the rest of
the week, so did country singers, rhythm 'n' blues bands, ballad crooners, full
orchestras, jazz bands, even 'chipmunks'" (Fatherley and MacFarland 2013, 141).
[51] However, many of rock 'n' roll's earliest stars were slightly older than their teen
audiences. James Miller writes, "Little Richard was twenty-three years old in 1955,
when he suddenly emerged as a rock and roll star; Fats Domino was twenty-seven;
Chuck Berry was twenty-eight; and Bill Haley was over thirty. Frankie Lymon was
only thirteen—which made him that rarity among rock performers, a kid the same age
as his core audience" (Miller 2000, 113).

always been mediated by a complex business apparatus, for many young people it felt

otherwise because they were finally represented in commercial media. But Top 40 did

not cater exclusively to youth. Its programming incorporated music by men and

women, by African Americans, by Latin Americans, as well as by whites. In other

words, despite the material inequalities that persisted throughout the United States,

Top 40's diversity projected a moment in popular music that was nominally integrated

and hybridizing (Douglas 2004, 253).[52] Rock 'n' roll itself arose out of working-class

urban communities characterized by new forms of cohabitation and cultural exchange

between blacks and whites, and between Southern[53] and Northern traditions (Lipsitz

1990, 116–24). Nevertheless, the representation of that integration on the radio was

not automatic. Its condition of possibility was that Top 40 operated according to a

logic of mass culture, aiming to reach the largest possible audience by representing

and appealing to a diversity of popular tastes, styles, and publics.[54]

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[52] Diversity characterized performers and audiences far more than the ownership and management of record labels and radio stations (George 1988, 29).

[53] Reebee Garofalo shows how many of rock 'n' roll's most significant "white singers had grown up in an environment that mixed black and white cultures to a degree unknown in the North" (Garofalo 2002, 134). He cites a young Elvis Presley watching Old Charlie Burse in a Beale Street honky-tonk, Jerry Lee Lewis listening to blues musicians outside of Haney's Big House in Ferriday, Louisiana, and Carl Perkins growing up on a plantation in Lake Country, Tennessee, where he sang alongside African Americans in the cotton fields (134–5). None of these examples are meant to evoke a racially harmonious Southern past. They point to sites of cultural exchange that help explain how rockabilly's syncretic form was forged out of—as much as in spite of— conditions of legal segregation and racial violence.

[54] According to Bud Connell, a programmer hired by Storz Broadcasting in 1961, "No one, regardless of age, escaped the influence of Top 40 Radio. The over-65s listened and put it down; the 50-64s listened and tolerated it; 25-49s listened habitually especially in the drive times, midday, and overnight; 18-24s listened in the afternoons and evenings; and the under-18 crowd were devotees whenever they were awake" (Fatherley and MacFarland 2013, 189).

Still, Top 40 was *not* a rock 'n' roll format; it was a musical catch-all format

that featured nearly anything that charted. This meant that for rock 'n' roll songs to

make their way onto Top 40 playlists, they depended on prior success outside the

format: on jukeboxes, in record stores, on rhythm and blues radio stations, or on *Alan*

Freed's Rock and Roll Party[55] (George 1988, 48; Miller 2000, 60).[56] It also meant that

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[55] Alan Freed's late-night rhythm and blues radio show began on July 11, 1951 as *The Moondog House*, named after a blind New York City street-musician whose "Moondog Symphony" was used as the show's theme song. *The Moondog House* operated on the older airtime-for-sale model. Leo Mintz purchased airtime on Cleveland's WJW, hiring Freed to host a show that would bolster sales at Mintz's record store. Freed's fast success as a radio personality and concert promoter quickly raised his profile in the music industry. In 1954, Freed accepted a job in New York at WINS but a lawsuit brought by Louis "Moondog" Hardin forced him to change the name of his radio show. It was rechristened as *Alan Freed's Rock and Roll Party*. Freed's early listeners were mostly black teenagers, but his audience became increasingly diverse while he was at WINS (Miller 2000, 60). James Miller argues that this prefigured the shift in rock 'n' roll itself, which was initially a placeholder for black rhythm and blues but by 1956 became "a genre in its own right, associated with a new matrix of musical sounds, and a new cluster of emblematic cultural values" (97). By 1957, *Rock and Roll Party* was a nationally syndicated program (Marc Fisher 2007, 55).

[56] This posed many challenges for rhythm and blues records that strove for crossover success. For example, the introduction of vinyl records required audiences to purchase new turntables that spun at different speeds. As Reebee Garofalo explains, "Because of a simple lack of money, the black audience was slower to make this switch than white. Victor and Columbia were marketing three-speed record changers by 1952, but as late as 1956, rhythm & blues records were still sold in the black community as shellac-based 78s. Independent distributors evolved formulas for predicting when a song would cross over into the white market on the basis of the demand for the disc in the 45rpm configuration. Of course, to go into a separate 45rpm pressing, a rhythm & blues record would have to show evidence of very strong sales potential. The dual technology had the effect of delaying mainstream exposure for many rhythm & blues artists" (Garofalo 2002, 128). He concludes, "Even with these contradictions, however, the vintage rock and roll years were generally good for black musicians. From a low point of three percent in 1954, the percentage of black artists on the year-end pop charts rose to an unprecedented twenty-nine percent in 1957" (137).

Top 40 shaped the trajectory of rock 'n' roll. As George Lipsitz points out, Top 40's

hegemony over American airwaves was not without its drawbacks:

> With fewer records on the air, marginal, innovative, or controversial music
> tended to be squeezed out. This practice rationalized production and
> minimized risks of new styles by saturating the air with the blandest common
> denominators of mass taste. When top 40 radio came in, much of the rougher,
> wilder, blacker, and more working-class music disappeared from the radio.
> (Lipsitz 1990, 124)

A related assimilationist cultural logic was imposed upon Top 40 DJs. In *Something*

in the Air: Radio, Rock, and the Revolution that Shaped a Generation, Marc Fisher

writes:

> Most Top 40 deejays were white, and the few black deejays were often
> racially "neutralized." Jocks such as the legendary Frankie Crocker, later a
> pioneer in black FM radio, were encouraged to speak "white" when they
> worked in Top 40. In some cities, black deejays' photos were left off the
> survey sheets that Top 40 stations distributed at record shops. But for twenty
> years, because of Top 40's racially mixed audience, radio had been the most
> integrated place in the pop culture. (Marc Fisher 2007, 202)

These racist dynamics of mass culture would be challenged by subsequent

developments in radio formatting.[57]

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[57] When the major labels finally entered the market for rock 'n' roll, they did so with
bland, safe-sounding cover songs performed by white, middle-class, teen heartthrobs.
These cover records were "often released within the expected chart life of the
original" and had the effect of limiting the crossover potential for black performers
(Garofalo 2002, 124). The major labels' established connections to the radio industry
gave them a competitive advantage over the independents. Nonetheless, royalties
derived from publishing rights helped the independents survive (Lipsitz 1990, 124).
For this reason, independent labels regularly pitched their rhythm and blues releases
to the majors, especially prior to 1956. While George Lipstitz emphasizes the major
labels' negative impact on rock 'n' roll, James Miller argues that in certain cases,
their bland cover songs actually served to raise the profile of rock 'n' roll songwriters
and performers on independent labels (Miller 2000, 101). Miller writes, "The trick
was to pull a 'switch,' as record men called it, aiming a new version of an established
song at a fresh segment of the pop music market, for example by having a country

Experiments: Free Form and Countercultural Rock

By the mid-to-late 60s, youth began to lose interest in Top 40. Its

commercialism—charactarized by hysterical promotions, frequent advertisements,

and call-letter jingles—combined with the seemingly limitless repetition of songs

made the format sound sterile, prompting radio listeners to rediscover FM (Douglas

2004, 254). Though FM technology had been around since the 1930s, Depression

conditions, corporate efforts to undermine it, and the rerouting of institutional

resources toward television resulted in longstanding legal battles and a slow start for

the band. But when AM became increasingly crowded in the early 1960s, the FCC

issued a non-duplication ruling[58] that prohibited stations from broadcasting the same

programming across both AM and FM bands (Sterling and Keith 2008, 118–22).

Though the ruling was designed to "promote more aggressive commercial

exploitation of the FM band," the initial openness of FM facilitated experimentation

in programming and allowed for the expression of ideas hitherto excluded from

American radio and commercial culture (Douglas 2004, 263). Left politics converged

with genre-diverse but rock-dominant[59] musical programming on a new format

known alternately as Free Form or Underground Radio.[60]

artist do a pop hit, or a pop singer do a country song, or a vocal group do a ballad
made popular by a crooner" (76).

[58] The FCC ruling dictated that "program duplication was to be phased out in stages.
Still, a rule making begun in 1961, formally proposed in 1963, and adopted in 1964
(to be effective the next year) was finally in effect only at the start of 1968" (Sterling
and Keith 2008, 122).

[59] Free Form DJs did not exclusively play rock music. Jazz, blues, folk, and even
Hindustani ragas were regularly broadcast on Free Form radio (Donahue 1967, 14).

[60] Many DJs objected to the terms Free Form and Underground Radio because these
stations were businesses, many of whom were owned by large broadcasting

Free Form was FM's emergent format, defining itself in opposition to Top

40's corporate and stylistic hegemony on the AM band.[61] With Free Form, DJs

regained their independence on the airwaves, eschewing the kinds of conventional

market research that determined Top 40 programming. In stark contrast with the

"firecracker delivery of AM disc jockeys," Free Form DJs tended to talk more slowly

and smoothly, conveying an aura of thoughtfulness and intimacy (Douglas 2004,

270–71).[62] They spoke passionately about contemporary political issues, binding rock

music to progressive and/or radical politics on the radio. For listeners, including those

employed by the American state, this made FM a battleground in the struggle for

political and cultural hegemony. Many Free Form DJs became known for choosing

corporations (Keith 1997, 36). According to Susan Krieger, *Billboard* settled on
calling the format "Progressive Rock" in December of 1967 (Krieger 1979, 55). Some
early Free Form stations did opt for this term (Keith 1997, 93). Nevertheless, I restrict
myself to referring to this format as either Free Form or Underground Radio in order
to meaningfully distinguish it from the more structured Progressive Rock format of
the late 1960s and early 1970s.

[61] See Free Form pioneer Tom Donahue's article in the second issue of *Rolling Stone*,
provocatively entitled "A Rotting Corpse, Stinking Up the Airways…" In 1967, he
argued that Top 40 had alienated its listeners because it was unable to incorporate
new trends in popular music. Donahue writes, "When faced with the fact that the
Byrds' LP, or the new Bob Dylan album was outselling the single records on their
play lists, in most cases Top-40 programmers chose to ignore them rather than
attempting to determine cuts to play" (Donahue 1967, 14).

[62] Although Tom Donahue began as a Top 40 jock, he is more widely known for
developing "the West Coast's first full-time commercial underground station"
(Sterling and Keith 2008, 131). Yet, his impact on rock culture extends well beyond
the world of radio. Donahue founded Autumn Records signing San Francisco
musicians including the Beau Brummels (who were produced by Sly Stone, then a
local DJ) and The Great! Society (whose singer Grace Slick would later join Jefferson
Airplane) (Callahan 2017, 72). Donahue was also responsible for opening Mother's,
an important countercultural bar and venue in San Francisco. The first psychedelic
light show was held there, "projected by Del Close of the Committee, a
political-satirical theater company" (45).

music that was sonically diverse, intellectually challenging, and anti-commercial in a

double sense: the songs that were selected were not necessarily charting and many

carried an anti-corporate or anti-capitalist message (257). The music was also

presented in nonconventional ways. KMPX's Larry Miller, for example, became

known for playing full albums back-to-back (Callahan 2017, 122). While Top 40

placed advertisements and announcements between each song, Free Form DJs

featured songs and advertisements[63] in sweeps, which allowed for the musical

elaboration of a theme and/or social commentary (Keith 1997, 56). In contrast with

Top 40's regular rotation of singles, Free Form DJs generally favored album-only

tracks, many of which lasted four to five times as long as the conventional pop song

(Douglas 2004, 271).[64] Indeed, if Top 40 disciplined rock 'n' roll into a formula,[65]

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[63] Many Free Form DJs took their advertising "spots" as seriously as the music they
played. As Susan Krieger describes in *Hip Capitalism*, DJs at KMPX, San Francisco
(later KSAN) objected to running advertisements by Pepsi, Standard Oil, Bank of
America, and other national accounts deemed harmful to the public. They preferred
advertising dollars from small businesses that catered to countercultural lifestyles,
like waterbed companies or local head shops. It was also important that spots were
aired in the style of the station and that corporate-sounding commercials could be
rewritten or poked fun-at. However, compromises were regularly made to keep sales
accounts, which sometimes produced tension between sales staff and DJs (Krieger
1979, 44, 65, 118, 202, 207). Similar dynamics played out at WBCN, Boston during
its Free Form years. Sometime between 1973-4, WBCN began to accept advertising
dollars and prerecorded commercials from accounts that were previously deemed
politically unacceptable (Alan 2013, 67,92).
[64] Simpson writes, "Standard practice in the popular record industry was to release all
songs with radio potential on 45, while LPs generally served as hastily made
companion pieces for the 45" (Simpson 2011, 24–25). But by the late 1960s, rock
musicians were writing increasingly challenging music that defied the pop
conventions of rock 'n' roll.
[65] "Producers and bands created songs to fit the Top 40 sound. A hit song had to be
instantly recognizable, like station jingles. The new songs were repetitive, with catchy
hooks taking precedence over longer melodies. Hits came with instrumental lead-ins,
so deejays could talk over the introductions. And songs were written to be perishable,

Free Form's openness encouraged the musical experimentation already taking place

within rock as it became articulated to the emergent counterculture. This movement

began in coastal metropoles, chiefly California's Bay Area and New York, later

spreading across most of the Western world and parts of the East.[66]

Countercultural rock[67] reactivated the rebellious sounds of urban,

working-class, black America after they were filtered through the British Invasion.

But America's indigenous musical traditions of rock 'n' roll and blues returned home

to a U.S. in the throes of heightened political, economic, and racial turmoil. As

middle-class white youth increasingly found their immediate cultural environments

both conservative and boring, they too looked to black and working-class American

traditions to express their frustration (Lipsitz 1990, 116–24). Yet this new rock music

was grounded in emergent values and politics that were specific to the Long 60s.

Whereas prior to the 60s, class, nation, and religion "were the main lines along which

with a shelf life of a few weeks or months; they no longer aimed to be the kind of
standards that had emerged out of Tin Pan Alley in the 1930s and '40s. Above all,
songs were shorter, a result not only of the pace of Top 40 radio but also of the latest
technology from the record industry, the 45 rpm single, which premiered in 1949 and
won wide acceptance in the mid-'50s" (Marc Fisher 2007, 69).

[66] For information on the Vietnamese counterculture see Michael J. Kramer's *The
Republic of Rock: Music and Citizenship in the Sixties Counterculture* (2013). For a
history of the Japanese counterculture, see Julian Cope's *Japrocksampler: How the
Post-War Japanese Blew Their Minds on Rock 'n' Roll* (2007).

[67] Charlie Gillett points that, "Although these San Franciscan bands purported to
stand for an alternative to the traditional structures of the entertainment industry and
were better placed than any of their predecessors to record for independent
companies, only two of the leading seven [Country Joe and the Fish and Big Brother
and the Holding Company] chose indies, and one of those [Big Brother] jumped ship
to a major after one album" (Gillett 2017, 353). Many decried these decisions as a
betrayal of the counterculture's principles and politics. Others understood them as a
means to get the counterculture's message out to the largest possible audience
(Callahan 2017, 175).

art and politics were organized," the counterculture articulated its politics primarily

along the lines of youth, race, and war (Callahan 2017, xxvii).[68] They celebrated

leisure, resisted work, spoke out against the war in Vietnam, challenged gender

norms, and as Matt Callahan shows in his study of the San Francisco counterculture,

sometimes had intimate links to revolutionary political projects (Lipsitz 1990, 128;

Callahan xxii; Alan 2013, 51).[69]

The emergence of Free Form FM encouraged new listening practices. In the

rock 'n' roll era (roughly 1956-64), the recently invented transistor made mobility an

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[68] I am not suggesting that class politics disappeared in this era or from the counterculture. Many "members" of the American counterculture belonged to political organizations. Others came into contact with those organizations in their everyday lives. Here two points must be made. The first is that in capitalist social formations all politics *are* class politics. In other words, all political projects are forged by people situated within classes and are subject to the current state of an ongoing class struggle (Miliband 2009, 6–7). Second, and more to the point, is that the matter is merely one of emphasis. Throughout the 1960s, socialist organizations dealt with questions of class composition and class struggle in novel ways that attempted to map out the conjuncture and draw out its revolutionary possibilities. For example, the Weather Underground developed their political tactics around the idea that the American working class had been domesticated by high wages and high levels of consumption, which foreclosed the possibility for their revolutionary subjectivity. This premise received a more sophisticated theorization by Herbert Marcuse in *One-Dimensional Man*, albeit with much different political conclusions drawn. Others, like the Black Panthers, focused their organizational efforts on the black "lumpenproletariat" that moved in and out of formal employment. Their politics were firmly committed to building coalitions with "white mother country radicals" and their organizations, particularly those in the anti-war movement. By contrast, the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement organized black workers on the shop floor at the Chrysler Assembly Plant, emphasizing the power of the strike to win demands not only from Chysler but from United Auto Workers' "labor aristocracy."
[69] For example, the San Francisco-based KMPX (and later KSAN) "gave generous airtime to the Black Panther Party" (Simpson 2011, 133). Bo Burlingham, briefly the news director at WBCN, Boston was a member of Students for a Democratic Society and the Weather Underground (Alan 2013, 51). There are many other examples. However, the revolutionary character of countercultural rock was exceptional and should not be overstated.

important determinant of where and how listening was taking place. For the first time, teenagers could bring their handsets with them to school and social gatherings. And as AM radios became a regular feature in automobiles over the course of the 1950s, rock 'n' roll cemented its articulation to car culture.[70] By contrast, Free Form's use of FM technology emphasized fidelity (Douglas 2004, 252, 258). But because of the high cost of quality audio components, automobile manufacturers were slow to install FM radios in their cars (Sterling and Keith 2008, 151).[71] Consequently, the home once again became the space for more focused "fidelity listening"—to use Susan Douglas' term. FM's clarity and stereo capability propelled listeners toward investing in higher-quality sound systems (Douglas 2004, 267). The centrality of home listening for the new rock music of the counterculture—which experimented not only with songwriting and recording techniques but also with psychedelic drugs that enhanced the listener's "experience"—reinforced a budding desire for high-fidelity audio.[72]

The short-lived Free Form experiment was possible because it was minimally constrained by the demands of advertisers and the logic of profit maximization (Douglas 2004, 276). Expectations of profitability were low when Free Form was in

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[70] Douglas writes, "The explosive growth in car sales in the 1950s, and the industry's emphasis on planned obsolescence meant that by the early 1960s there was a plethora of used cars, and many of these were sold or handed down to teenagers… Those who [did not own cars] used their parents' cars" (Douglas 2004, 252–53)..

[71] Sterling and Keith write, "Only by 1976 did even half the new cars come equipped with FM receivers" (Sterling and Keith 2008, 151). The percentage of cars equipped with FM stereo sound, referred to as FM penetration, did not reach over eighty percent until the 1980s (172).

[72] Drug culture also promoted fidelity listening. The countercultural articulation of listening practices to drug use, specifically of marijuana and LSD, is explored at length in Nick Bromell's *Tomorrow Never Knows: Rock and Psychedelics in the 1960s* (2000).

its infancy. In contrast with the corporate competitiveness that characterized the AM band, "the FM spectrum in the late 1960s was inhabited by nonprofit college stations [and] by independent [though still commercial] underground stations" that had relatively minimal operating costs (Douglas 2004, 276). But as their ratings grew, market research quickly discovered a large, comparatively affluent, and mostly untapped youth market. Owners of existing commercial Free Form stations responded by imposing new constraints on their DJs, following the recommendations from consultants. New rock stations quickly sprung up throughout the United States, aiming to capture an audience of white males between the ages of 12 and 24 (Simpson 2011, 111).[73] While these new stations drew on the style of Free Form, playing similar music and employing smooth-talking DJs, they lacked its broad left-wing commitments and experimental playlists (Douglas 2004, 277). What emerged became known as the Progressive Rock format.

Incorporation: Progressive Rock and Playlist Rationalization

The Progressive Rock format was less a repudiation of Free Form so much as an attempt to recuperate it. According to Kim Simpson, Progressive Rock "penned in hard rock's coarser sonic elements, its attendant sex and (especially) drug references along with its teenage male audience, keeping playlists relatively hard rock-free at Top 40 and MOR [Middle of the Road] stations where adult audiences were rising in

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[73] "By late 1968, there were over five dozen commercial underground radio stations in operation around the country. The following summer, San Francisco alone could claim a half dozen, while New York could boast only half that figure. One company (Metromedia) owned the stations that *Billboard* magazine ranked as the two top underground stations in the country—KSAN and WNEW" (Keith 1997, 29).

value" (Simpson 2011, 92).[74] The format was developed in the late 60s, soon after the FCC's non-duplication ruling went into effect and in the early phase of President Nixon's War on Drugs.[75] As commercial stations applied for broadcasting licenses on the FM band, stations that were willing to air anti-drug commercials were given preferential treatment. In 1971, then FCC Commissioner Dean Burch "sent a public notice to radio stations reminding them of their duty to screen all songs for lyrics that tended to 'promote or glorify the use of illegal drugs'" (110). Free form stations resisted and in response the FCC denied them new licenses (111). Combined with already existing profitability constraints, the ruling was the death knell for the format on commercial stations.

Progressive Rock stations rationalized their playlists, implementing what the renowned KLOS DJ Jim Ladd called "the format." Ladd writes, "The format is a plan or a blueprint, drawn up by either the program director or a 'radio consultant'… the purpose of which is to dictate what music will be played on the station and when" (Ladd 1991, 47). Before going on air, DJs were given blank play sheets with a list of letters running vertically down the left-hand side. Each letter was followed by empty lines in two separate vertical columns designated "Artist:" and "Title:" Ladd recalls:

> The letters at the beginning of each line directed you to a category of music, which you were to look up in a card file. This was a long metal box filled with hundreds of three-by-five cards, each one containing the name of

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[74] Simpson writes, "the emergence of hard rock and progressive rock formats shifted the white teenage male demographic's focus almost entirely away from politics and over to issues of personal identity" (Simpson 2011, 93). Again, this could not have occurred if rock itself did not undergo significant changes.
[75] Now well-documented, Nixon's War on Drugs was conceived largely as a way to discredit the movement against the War in Vietnam.

an artist and the title of a song. The cards were divided into categories which corresponded to the list in front of you.

A, for example, might refer to a current hit single, B a track from a current hit album, C a new record, D an oldie, and so on.

On the back was a place for you to initial and date the card to indicate when you played it at last. After doing the required paperwork, you would then be allowed to play the song and move down the list to the next category, then start the process all over again.

You were not supposed to vary at any time from the order of categories on the play sheets, and you were required to play only the first card that presented itself in the box. All this was to ensure the proper balance and rotation of music, from which to achieve the maximum amount of people listening to the station. (Ladd 1991, 48–49)

Both DJs and historians have compared this development as analogous to introducing an assembly line on the airwaves. For example, historian of American radio Susan Douglas writes, "the assembly line had come to FM, breaking down free-form programming into its component parts, robbing the disc jockey of autonomy, and making the final product—the show—more predictable" (Douglas 2004, 278). While Free Form DJs imagined building set lists as a creative and expressive process, Progressive Rock reduced DJs to an appendage of "the format." Ladd clearly understood the irony of playlist rationalization: "No longer could we mix songs together into thematic sets, using lyrics to tell a story, or to try to make a point. This music, this vibrant, rebellious, magical, poetic rock 'n' roll, these songs from Dylan, the Beatles, and the Doors, were now merely random cogs in the great format wheel" (Ladd 1991, 49). Although many DJs in this era were ambivalent about unions, not least those unions in radio broadcasting, the assembly-line metaphor recast their tug-of-war with programmers and consultants as a shop floor struggle.

What Kim Simpson refers to as the American format revolution can also be understood through other concepts. Consider commodification, a "social fact" that complicates rock ideology's manifest anti-commercialism (Frith 1978, 166). Here I am referring less to the imposition of a price on a pre-existing artistic work than to the way prices transform objects of fundamentally different characteristics into exchangeable goods. As Marx explains, "As use-values, commodities differ above all in quality, while as exchange-values they can only differ in quantity, and therefore do not contain an atom of use-value" (Marx 1990, 128). Thus, from the perspective of exchange value (or prices), commodification produces an equivalence between qualitatively distinct things. This equivalence describes what happens to music selection when set lists become the responsibility of radio consultants rather than DJs. When songs are categorized along the lines Ladd describes, an abstraction is made that suppresses their particularities and renders them functionally equivalent to all the others in their category. The quantitative methods of market research and playlist rationalization dominate the formerly qualitative selections of the DJ.

Reification provides another conceivable frame for theorizing developments in formatting. Insofar as reification is understood as "the effacement of the traces of production from the object," formats obscure their own process of playlist selection—though this is truer for rock radio than Top 40 (Jameson 2010, 264). On rock formats, on-air DJs were required to perform as if they were in control of a station's musical selections even when they were determined elsewhere. Here the contradictions between the ideology of rock and the reality of business were

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heightened—not least in the tensions between the self-expression of performers and the entertainment of audiences, and between the autonomy of DJs and the control of management (Frith 1978, 163).[76]

Another usage might stress the ways that formats engender the reification of social relations, which gives new significance to Eric Weisbard's argument that the format system established "a particular model of commercialized cultural pluralism: a formatting of publics" (Weisbard 2014, 1). Here it is people rather than songs that are the primary objects of statistical abstraction, where imagined communities of shared tastes are imposed on potential listeners of the same "race," gender, class, and age. Real relations between people become imaginary relations between homogenizing identity categories and numerical figures. Crucially, these abstractions do not take place simply in thought; reification works its way back into to the real lives of the American public, who become accustomed to what we might call *formatted listening*.

All of these frames reveal important features of modern radio formatting, though they remain partial analyses insofar as they are understood independently from their larger historical context. Indeed, the emergence of the format system as well as rock's own development must be historicized in relation to the larger dynamics of the Long Sixties. Following Chris Connery among others, I understand the 60s:

> as the global explosion of world making lasting from the midfifties through
> the midseventies, including decolonization and national liberation struggles;

[76] Simon Frith argues that this tension was not present during the rock 'n' roll' era because performers understood themselves as entertainers rather than artists (Frith 1978, 163).

anticapitalist antisystemic revolt; counterculture in the overdeveloped world; and new political energies in the socialist world, from the Cultural Revolution to the Prague Spring… (Connery 2009, 184)

If the American 60s was marked by new forms of political and musical expression within popular culture, the emergence of the format system served to contain those energies by way of the increasing penetration of corporate capital into the apparatuses of radio broadcasting and music distribution.[77] Formatting developments initiated a process of rationalization and "mainstreaming" that disciplined rock's development, in turn generating various counter-reactions in the form of punk and other subcultures that flourished from the mid-70s well into the 80s.[78]

By the early 1970s, five radio formats dominated hit radio: "Top 40, MOR (middle of the road), "progressive rock," soul, and country" (Simpson 2011, 6). The result was the segmentation of what was formerly a mass audience (Douglas 2004, 280). Now, there were different formats for newly designated demographics, each with its own aesthetic contours, but all of them operated within the constraints of profit maximization (Simpson 2011, 123). The format system opened up the airwaves to groups that the 60s made "visible," populations previously excluded or

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[77] While Connery and Jameson both treat the 60s as a global situation—not least by demonstrating how First World developments hinged upon revolutions and wars happening in the Third World—they also largely bracket the ways that the American 60s was brought to an end by immanent developments (though this is truer of Connery, whose explicit goal is to provincialize the First World 60s). Explanations are particularly lacking at the "level" of popular culture. I aim to rectify this here with a materialist account of how American rock music was shaped by larger economic and social forces.

[78] Both U.S. and British punk positioned itself against a perceived unity between the music business and the current state of rock. Punk was also the first postwar musical subculture to emerge within a recession (Worley 2017, 18).

underserved by commercial radio stations. It also geared programming in more business-friendly directions in order to raise advertising revenue. While Weisbard, in his recent *Top 40 Democracy: The Rival Mainstreams of American Music*, champions this production of different formats as a "democratization," insofar as each demographic segment is provided with its own station, others have mourned this as a loss of creativity. As detailed in Michael C. Keith's *Voices in the Purple Haze: Underground Radio and the Sixties*, no one felt rock radio's constrictiveness more acutely than those DJs fortunate enough to have been on the air during the few short years of Free Form.[79]

Capture: Album-Oriented Rock Radio

Formatting proved to be a self-reinforcing process. With more listeners, stations were able to sell more advertising, hire more staff, buy the latest equipment, and move into more expensive facilities. But increased costs required revenue growth. This meant integrating evermore market research into programming decisions to capture more listeners (Douglas 2004, 277-8; Alan 2013, 78-80). On the one hand, these were strategic choices that stations made in order to grow and increase their market share. On the other, competition from other stations incentivized and often required changes that put profitability before aesthetic concerns.

The Album-Oriented Rock (AOR) format was developed while this process of economic concentration was in full swing. AOR was designed by program director

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[79] In addition to Jim Ladd's previously cited autobiography *Radio Waves: Life and Revolution on the FM Dial* (1991), also see Michael C. Keith's interviews with Free Form DJs and radio consultants in *Voices in the Purple Haze: Underground Radio and the Sixties* (1997).

Michael Harrison and refined by consultants Lee Abrams and Kent Burkhart to compete with the Progressive Rock format—specifically, to capture the market of white males from 13 to 25 (Simpson 2011, 121; Sterling and Keith 2008, 136). As the name suggests, AOR emphasized album tracks rather than singles, which distinguished it from Top 40 and kept it within the lineage of Free Form and Progressive Rock. However, AOR's more neutral appellation was chosen to distance itself from the left-wing politics associated with Free Form, and to a lesser degree, Progressive Rock (Neer 2001, 164; Simpson 2011, 121). The music played on AOR stations reflected these decisions.

The arrival of AOR signaled the onset of a new moment in rock whose significance is still debated. Some radio veterans welcomed AOR's tighter playlists. For many who worked outside of the studio, Free Form blurred the line between challenging audiences and antagonizing them. Indeed, the format's openness left few checks to DJs' long-winded diatribes or solipsistic musical selections (Simpson 2011, 122; Keith 1997, 170-4). "More rock, less talk"[80] became a guiding principle across AOR stations as market research showed that continuity, musical and otherwise, was crucial to building a long-term audience (Alan 2013, 106). This became a formula for success not only for radio stations but also for promoting what became commonly described as arena rock. In contrast with Progressive Rock radio's struggle to break new acts, AOR developed the "ability to 'nurture and enclose entire careers' without having to exploit other mass culture media such as television and the movies"

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[80] This included cutting new from rock programming (Alan 2013, 121).

(Simpson 2011, 122). Radio historian Kim Simpson argues that AOR was therefore responsible for "the advent of 'faceless bands' like Styx, REO Speedwagon, and the like," which "marked the complete standardization of commercial FM rock" (122, 121).

Much of the rock press shared these sentiments. For example, in an article championing the burgeoning New York punk scene centered around CBGB, Detroit's *Creem* magazine described these faceless bands, along with rock's aging stars, as akin to "ponderous middle-aged labor unions" (*Creem* quoted in Cowie 2012, 324, 18). This perception mirrored what was playing out in the labor movement, where capacities for resistance and multi-racial solidarity had been stymied by an economic downturn and a corporate offensive as much as by organized labor's own political miscalculations (Cowie 2012, 324, 18). Indeed, AOR's demographic isolation was widely understood to be draining rock of its capacity to transgress. As Simon Frith characterized rock's development by the end of the 1970s, "far from being 'counter-cultural', rock articulated the *reconciliation* of rebelliousness and capital" (Frith 1988, 2). What was once a collective expression of youthful frustration became one of individual angst, which Frith suggests paralleled how rock distanced itself from blackness. As black musical elements were purged from rock along with black performers themselves, the new arena rock bore few traces of rock's origins as dance music (Frith 1978, 182). Women were also nearly absent on AOR stations, both as radio personalities and musicians (Simpson 2011, 122).

Yet some programmers were able to buck the trend, at least temporarily. For example, longtime radio host Carter Alan describes how WBCN, Boston succeeded by spotlighting the diversity happening in rock:

> The breadth of music heard on the air rivaled that of any FM station of the time, and the many live concert broadcasts the station presented from 1971 to 1975 demonstrated that diversity. There was blues from Canned Heat and the reggae of Bob Marley, while former Frank Zappa member Lowell George and his new outfit Little Feat brought the funk/rock. (Alan 2013, 97)

There were other exceptions both on the airwaves and in rock. From the mid-1970s through the early 1980s, no rock artist received more critical attention than Bruce Springsteen. Springsteen was unique in his ability to fill arenas while maintaining support from rock's most prolific writers like Greil Marcus (Marcus 2014). As rock was becoming whiter and more middle class, Springsteen and the interracial collaboration[81] of the E-Street Band were able to nimbly navigate the political anxieties circulating among America's diverse working class. Yet with the labor movement in retreat, Springsteen's breakthrough album *Born to Run* was more a fantasy of flight from worsening circumstances than a call to arms. As labor historian Jefferson Cowie argues in his monumental *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class*, "Springsteen's message [in *Born to Run*] was simple: get out. Find the psychic wherewithal to leave it all behind" (Cowie 2012, 208). While Springsteen's first two albums were commercial failures, *Born to Run* was launched to multi-platinum status with support from AOR stations across the country.

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[81] Springsteen's close friendship with saxophonist Clarence Clemons featured on the cover of *Born to Run* (1975).

What makes AOR an important forerunner to the Classic Rock format extends beyond musical continuities. Both formats play songs by Led Zeppelin, Pink Floyd, Jethro Tull, and other similar bands, but the most significant feature of AOR that anticipates Classic Rock is the deliberately unstructured sound of its rotation of songs (Simpson 2011, 121). This may seem contradictory given that AOR was the product of intense market research and playlist rationalization. However, as explained in the collectively authored *Radio Format Conundrum*, "The sequence of music may be planned very carefully, for example, but it is supposed to sound as though the jock is simply expressing his current mood with the music played" (Routt, McGrath, and Weiss 1978, 88). Indeed, in addition to introducing "unstructured" set lists, AOR stations competed with incumbents by hiring established rock radio personas known for their "rebelliousness" on the air (Alan 2013, 99). However deceptive, the success of AOR demonstrated that tight formats brought higher ratings than creative DJs or playlists constructed only of Top 40 singles (Simpson 2011, 122).

Canonization: The Classic Rock Format and Tribute Songs

In the second half of 1979, the music industry entered an economic recession that led major labels to reinvest in rock. Long-established acts appeared to be a safer bet than "faceless" disco productions that oversaturated the market (Lawrence 2003, 386). But reinvesting in older rock also reflected the changing composition of music buyers. As Will Straw explains, "Demographic studies showed a long-term shrinking of the primary audience for rock recordings (males aged 18-24); wooing back the older so-called casual buyer was instituted as the challenge of the 1980s" (Straw

1997, 60). While this research informed a multitude of industry strategies, each

designed to capture a demographic with supposedly distinct tastes, the cumulative

effect was the growing economic importance of popular music's recent past. As the

proliferation of nostalgia formats on the radio converged with Sony's introduction of

the CD in 1982, major labels rushed to reissue their back-catalogs on the new

medium. As nostalgia formats bolstered the market for reissues, radio became a less

powerful promotional tool for selling new music (61-62).

During the early 1980s, younger listeners were drifting away from AOR and

tuning back in to Top 40, largely due to the success of MTV in its early years. Indeed,

how to deal with the MTV phenomenon became a central question for radio stations

at this time. The Classic Rock format was one industry-led response to these changes.

Interestingly it was Lee Abrams, the prominent radio consultant and pioneer of the

AOR format, who developed the first Classic Rock format at San Francisco's KFOG

in late 1982 (Sterling and Keith 2008, 199). Initially called "Timeless Rock," the

format was designed to capture older audiences that grew up with music from the late

60s and early 70s. However, programming extended well beyond those brief years.

As *The Concise Encyclopedia of American Radio* explains, "Classic Rock… focuses

on harder rock music from the late 1960s through the 1980s" (Leigh 2010, 152). It is

"classified as part of the vintage rock category that also includes the Oldies format

[but] Classic Rock is different from Oldies in that it features rock hits with a harder edge and generally does not include music from the early 1950s and 1960s" (153).[82]

The arrival of the Classic Rock format signaled another new moment in rock. Although the genre's depoliticization had been underway for a decade, Classic Rock rewrote rock's radical past by selectively canonizing certain songs, now shorn of the political context of their production. On the one hand, this was part of a more general trajectory in commercial radio during the 80s, which witnessed a "rapid growth in the percentage of airtime devoted to 'oldies' or 'classics', to the teenage music of the grownup listener" (Bennett et al. 2005, 102). On the other hand, this trend alone does not account for the effect of amalgamating countercultural rock and 70s arena rock hits into a single format. Classic Rock was primarily about selling "the 60s," which had become a cottage industry of its own by this time. By imposing a temporality upon the 60s that led directly to the 1980s, the ideological effect of the format was to evacuate the 60s of its radical visions of the future and of its sense of possibilities—in other words, of its defining political characteristics.[83] Classic Rock thus becomes an instrument of the larger political project of containing the radicalism of the 1960s.

The degree to which Classic Rock has been naturalized within American popular culture is evidenced by how the radio format is commonly used as a genre designation. For example, many record stores have a section labeled Classic Rock to

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[82] "Classic Rock typically served its music in two- and three-song sweeps like its predecessor AOR, whereas Classic Hits stations frequently emulated the faster pacing of the bygone Top 40 sounds" (Sterling and Keith 2008, 164–65).
[83] On this point about temporality and futurity, I am indebted to Chris Connery's essay "The End of the Sixties" (2009).

distinguish older major-label rock from more modern "indie" bands. People typically describe the music they enjoy in terms of genre, referring to a musical culture that extends beyond sound.[84] Genre categories evoke ideas about community, experience, and authenticity, which include styles of dress as well as norms of behavior. They signal expectations both for audiences and musicians. According to musicologist Franco Fabbri, genre refers to "a set of musical events (real or possible) whose course is governed by a definite set of socially accepted rules" (Fabbri 1982, 1). In other words, genres are social forms encompassing musical conventions that are produced collectively and develop over time. Genre names like rock or disco crystallize sonic conventions into a category. This is why musical developments *precede* their generic designation. Genre is therefore always a temporal category, unfolding over time in ways that respond to larger social contexts (Williams 2009, 187–88).

As we have seen, radio formats also develop in relation to musical and socioeconomic events. But the larger story of commercial radio from the 1970s through the 1990s is one centered around the incorporation of genres by formats, which in turn have shaped genres themselves (Weisbard 2014, 14). When formats become representatives of musical genres, they too lay claims on their meaning. Nostalgia formats are therefore participants in a larger struggle over the significance of music history. One way they achieve this is through forming new canons. In other words, canonization cannot be understood independently from the goals of a given

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[84] Eric Weisbard writes, "Ordinary people don't proudly identify with formats, but some do identify with genres" (Weisbard 2014, 3). Classic Rock is an important exception to this general rule.

format. In the case of Classic Rock, canonization took the form of collapsing over a decade of rock history into a single format, thereby obscuring the temporal distinctions that would otherwise signify rock's development. The conceptual elision of format and genre by the category of Classic Rock points toward the successes of the ideological project of repackaging the radicalism of the 1960s for consumers in the 1980s.

Yet, even before the introduction of the Classic Rock format, rock's self-canonization rock was already underway.[85] In *Time Passages*, George Lipsitz concludes his excellent history of rock n' roll with a commentary on how arena rock musicians like Bob Seger and George Thorogood drew upon rock 'n' roll's past with "stylistic and lyrical tributes" (Lipsitz 1990, 131). For Lipsitz, these tributes suggested that "rock and roll in the 1980s carrie[d] an extraordinary awareness of its own history" (131). Lipsitz's concern in *Time Passages* was to develop alternative ways of thinking about popular culture as history amidst the "crisis of memory" produced by electronic mass media. He writes, "Instead of relating to the past through a shared sense of place or ancestry, consumers of electronic mass media can experience a common heritage with people they have never seen; they can acquire memories of a past to which they have no geographic or biological connection" (5). Popular culture is at once responsible for this kind of historical dislocation, but also

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[85] This prepared the ground for retro.

"one of the main vehicles for the expression of loss and the projection of hopes for reconnection to the past" (12). No doubt, rock music has been one such vehicle.

However, Lipsitz overlooks the larger context of rock music in the 1980s when he champions tribute songs as representative of historical awareness in rock (100). The soundscape of American popular music had changed and rock was no longer at its center, not least due to the segmentation practices of the format system. And while Lipsitz rightly argues that "the presence of the past in rock and roll music has meaning beyond the lure of nostalgia and the persistence of artistic clichés," arguably no song better exemplifies rock nostalgia than Bob Seger and the Silver Bullet Band's "Old Time Rock and Roll": "Just take those old records off the shelf / I'll sit and listen to 'em by myself / Today's music ain't got the same soul / I like that old time rock 'n' roll."

While tribute songs reconnect with the past, they are also commentaries on their present.[86] In "Old Time Rock and Roll," Seger uses nostalgia to express anxieties about the situation of rock in 1979; the lyrics, however, allow us to pinpoint the latent contradictions in rock ideology that survived after its countercultural moment. Rock's hegemony over the airwaves and in the music business was being challenged by new genres and musical styles, but none more than disco: "Don't try to take me to a disco / You'll never even get me out on the floor / In ten minutes I'll be late for the door / I like that old time rock 'n' roll." Seger was not unique in taking

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[86] To see how prominent rock critics responded to this conjuncture, see Mark Mazullo's excellent article, "Fans and Critics: Greil Marcus's 'Mystery Train' as Rock 'n' Roll History" (1997).

aim at disco, which became representative of unabashed commercialism within rock

ideology. And yet, anti-commercialism had been almost entirely purged from rock by

the late 1970s. The appearance of new terms like "arena rock" and "corporate rock"

highlight this reality.

From its beginnings, rock 'n' roll was tethered to the idea of youth but rock

itself was aging. Some older rockers like the Rolling Stones and Rod Stewart

assimilated new trends—albeit with differing degrees of success. "Miss You" and

"Da' Ya' Think I'm Sexy?" both showed that even rock pioneers were not immune to

disco's power, both musically and in the marketplace. Others like Seger looked

backward for inspiration: "Call me a relic, call me what you will / Say I'm

old-fashioned, say I'm over the hill / Today's music ain't got the same soul / I like that

old time rock and roll." At the same time, the compulsion to return to rock's origins

pointed toward its own deficiency in the present.

In raising the specter of race without addressing it head-on, "Old Time"

addressed rock's long and complicated relationship with blackness and black musical

forms.[87] As Eric Weisbard characterizes that relationship:

> The white rock and roller, dancing at the altar of "Shout," had always been a
> problematic figure—loving an abstraction of black culture but living
> separately. Within countercultural rock, a related dynamic arose: whites who
> no longer shared the present with black culture, revering older variants of

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[87] There is an extensive literature about rock's complicated relationship with
commercialism and class, and with blackness and black musical forms. For examples,
see Jack Hamilton's *Just Around Midnight: Rock and Roll and the Racial Imagination*
(2016), Steve Waksman's chapter "Black Sound, Black Body: Jimi Hendrix, the
Electric Guitar and the Meanings of Blackness" in *Instruments of Desire: The
Electric Guitar and the Shaping of Musical Experience* (2001), and Shuja Haider's
short but powerful article "Why Culture Matters" in Jacobin Magazine (2017).

African American music, from jazz to blues, but castigating contemporary material. (Weisbard 2014, 60)

"Old Time Rock and Roll" seems to follow in the mold set a decade earlier, drawing on rock's legacy as a black form in order to consciously distance itself from contemporary black music. After all, the AOR format contributed significantly to rock's identification with whiteness over the course of the 1970s: "Won't go to hear 'em play a tango / I'd rather hear some blues or funky old soul / There's only one sure way to get me to go / Start playin' old time rock and roll." Indeed, rock's critiques as much as its anxieties were distilled in how it positioned disco, whose excesses made it an easy target for AOR's demographic of young blue-collar rockers facing a protracted recession. Within rock ideology disco stood principally for commercialism, but it was also symbolic of gay nightlife, assertive female sexuality, and contemporary black culture—which meant that rock's critiques carried greater implications.

Disco Demolition Night has become representative of rock's conservative backlash in the late 1970s. The event was organized by 24-year-old rock jock Steve Dahl, along with Lee Abrams and Kent Burkhart, two veteran radio consultants who would develop the Classic Rock format just three years later (Echols 2011, 27). On Christmas Eve 1978, Dahl was fired from WDIA, Chicago after the station switched from rock to a disco format. The following year he joined AOR station WLUP, building his radio persona around mocking both disco and his former employer. On July 12, 1979, WLUP held a promotional event at Comiskey Park, where during game two of the White Sox's doubleheader against the Detroit Tigers, Dahl planned

to blow up a crate full of disco records in the middle of the field. Tickets were discounted for anyone who brought a disco record destined for destruction. But many of the records brought by white Chicagoans that night were not disco; they were just albums by black artists. Tens of thousands of Dahl's listeners filled the stadium with the chant of "disco sucks!" before he detonated the blast. But the explosion triggered fans to rush the field, forcing the White Sox to forfeit the game. Rockers were dispersed by riot police only after large portions of the field were damaged.

The significance of the event goes beyond its thinly veiled racism and homophobia, which has been widely discussed by historians of American popular culture. As Kim Simpson argues, Disco Demolition Night "represented a physical clash of the radio demographics," demonstrating the power of radio formatting to link genres, politics, and publics (Simpson 2011, 123). It also exemplifies the hypocrisy of how rock discourse reserved its critiques of commercialism for other genres. As historian of disco Tim Lawrence puts it, "'disco sucks' equaled rock 'n' roll bucks" (Lawrence 2003, 376). At the same time, few critics have been sympathetic to the situation of America's white working class, whose worsening economic standing is generally left out of analyses of the backlash against disco. As Jefferson Cowie convincingly argues, the anti-disco movement was both a "populist grab bag of resentments based on region, race, economics, and sexuality" *and* "a raised middle finger to the decadence of those who would party through double digit unemployment and the deindustrialization of America" (Cowie 2012, 323). It's not hard to see how the Detroit-based Bob Seger spoke directly to those downwardly mobile workers.

113

Yet "Old Time Rock and Roll" contains a hidden history. Though rock

ideology collapses songwriters and performers in its definition of authenticity, Seger

did not write the song. In fact, it was written by George Jackson and his collaborator

Thomas Jones. Jackson was a veteran songwriter of what Charles L. Hughes terms

the country-soul triangle, a southern recording nexus that linked songwriters,

producers, studio musicians, and record executives in Memphis and Nashville,

Tennessee and Muscle Shoals, Alabama (Hughes 2015, 3). Born in Indianola,

Mississippi, Jackson wrote and sang for studios inside the Triangle throughout the

1960s, placing dozens of songs on the R&B charts. His "big break" came in the late

1960s after moving to FAME studios in Muscle Shoals, where he wrote for soul

singers including Clarence Carter, Wilson Pickett, and Candi Staton. Jackson had

minor hits in the 1970s but his greatest commercial successes came in the early 1980s

with Seger's "Old Time Rock and Roll" and Z.Z. Hill's "Down Home Blues."

Though marketed toward different audiences—the former for AOR's white rockers

and the latter for southern black listeners—the songs had nearly identical themes. As

Hughes puts it, they both "shared a nostalgic rejection of disco and pined for the

halcyon days of the country-soul triangle" (184). From this perspective, the cultural

politics of "Old Time Rock and Roll" appear differently. Rather than voicing coded

racial resentments in its nostalgic dismissal of disco—a critique that now can be

understood as also coming from *within* African American culture—the song pines for

the days of black and white collaboration in American popular music. Though racial

tensions were never altogether absent from southern recording studios, at its best,

114

southern soul helped Americans imagine that such a world was possible. While Hughes argues that "Seger's performance of ["Old Time Rock and Roll"]… symbolized the increased use of the Muscle Shoals sound by white artists and the accompanying decline in Shoals sessions with black performers," the song also demonstrated that black songwriters were still contributing to rock long after its whitewashing.

Though its anti-commercial impulse faded during the 1970s, rock carried on and with it some of the ideological baggage from its countercultural past. This is partly what allowed rock to remain a vehicle for popular criticism, albeit often a hypocritical one. The contradictions surrounding rock's commercialism reached new heights as the genre was canonized in tribute songs and the Classic Rock format, both of which asserted that rock's (black and anti-commercial) past was preferable to the degraded musical present. While tribute songs worked backward to rewrite 1950s rock 'n' roll as anti-commercial while repressing its own commercial aspirations, Classic Rock drew a line of continuity from rock's countercultural moment to its situation in the 1980s, even as it exclusively programmed songs that had *already* achieved commercial success: "I reminisce about the days of old / With that old time rock 'n' roll."

Bob Seger was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2004. "Old Time Rock and Roll" continues to be a staple on Classic Rock stations throughout the United States.

Nostalgia Formats, Formatting Nostalgia

How does a format generate collective nostalgia? The experience of temporality produced by Classic Rock can best be understood when compared with Oldies, which is arguably the first nostalgia format. Understanding both formats within the specific cultural contexts of their introduction illuminates the kinds of nostalgia connected to each.

Oldies, alternately known as "Golden" or "Solid Gold" radio, was developed in the early 1970s to target 18 to 34-year-old baby boomers, the generation that grew up with rock 'n' roll (Simpson 2011, 65; Sterling and Keith 2008, 166). At that moment, American popular culture was experiencing a 50s revival, both in terms of contemporary cultural production (for example, George Lucas' *American Graffiti*) and in the literal return of its cultural past (for example, the popularity of the soundtrack to the film). Oldies stations typically play music from the mid-50s through the early 60s, stopping just before countercultural rock emerged. As radio scholar E. Alvin Davis notes, "The [Oldies] format's core artists include such 1950s standouts as Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry, Buddy Holly, and the Everly Brothers and 1960s superstars such as the Beatles, Supremes, Beach Boys, and Four Seasons" (Davis 2010, 539). Oldies harkens back to a moment in popular music and radio *prior* to the niche segmentation practices that characterized the music industry in the 1970s. Indeed, the term itself dates back to at least 1959—nearly contemporaneous with the terminology of rock 'n' roll. No figure symbolizes Oldies more than the man who coined the term, Art Laboe. A staple on Los Angeles' airwaves for over fifty years,

Laboe was one of the first DJs in California to play rock 'n' roll. In addition to desegregating dance floors by promoting mixed-race concerts, he developed the first compilation album, named "Oldies but Goodies." He was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2012. Building upon Laboe's concept, early Oldies stations operated on the AM dial and ran non-local network or syndicated programming. But beginning in the late 1980s, many stations began to specialize and localize their Oldies programming. As a result, Oldies transformed from a niche AM format to a popular format on the FM band (540).

Insofar as Oldies elicits nostalgia, the format's design produces the impression of a temporally unified referent. While for those who grew up with this music, the kind of nostalgia Oldies stimulates is the ordinary recollection of one's past personal associations, but for some time, the music has taken on a wider intergenerational significance, functioning both as mass culture and as the music of the Mexican American "cholo" subculture that has its roots in East Los Angeles barrios.[88]

Though it occupies a contradictory place in the American cultural imaginary—conjuring images of white teenagers drinking malted milkshakes and Chicano gangbangers—Oldies is an important site to listen for history. Here I want to bracket the ideological valences of these associations in order to stress how the format deals with temporality. Even if the past Oldies evokes is one of stereotypes, they are ones loaded with temporal signifiers: "teenagers," "greasers" with leather jackets and tight-fitting jeans, cars with wide tailfins, "blue suede shoes," jukeboxes

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[88]For information on the significance of oldies in East Los Angeles, see *The East Side Story Project* at http://www.eastsidestoryproject.com.

with neon lights, pink poodle skirts embroidered with images of musical notes, "sock hops," and so on. Like Oldies songs themselves, all these images invoke a "moment" in American popular culture. When we listen to Oldies, we are listening to the rock 'n' roll *era*.

In contrast to Oldies, the Classic Rock format does not have a single musical era as its referent. Rock music and its politics changed dramatically in the decade following the Long Sixties, even when it was produced by the same musicians.[89] In obscuring this development, the Classic Rock format privileges *style*—a limited repertoire of sounds made by loud guitars, bass, and drums—over context. Classic Rock built upon AOR's highly rationalized but manifestly "unstructured" playlists, but with this format what sounds unstructured is our experience of time. As a consequence, the format produces an experience of temporal disorientation for the listener. A song from 1967 might be followed by a song from 1973, then 1969, then 1979, and so on. In this sense, Classic Rock paved the way for the kinds of listening practices associated with the era of the mp3. Indeed, there is a line of sonic continuity that links developments in radio formatting, the "shuffle" feature on Winamp[90] and then on the iPod, and the experience of listening to streaming algorithms today. With

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[89] For example, Bob Seger's career began when he was just a teenager, playing rock 'n' roll and psychedelic rock in different groups. He hit it big in 1976 with the first Bob Seger and the Silver Bullet Band LP, *Night Moves*.
[90] Introduced in 1997, Winamp played a significant role in acclimating people to listening to music on the computer. Likely the first program to enable users to compile their own digital playlists, the software simplified practices of playlist construction and playback that were limited, time-consuming, or impossible with physical media (Morris 2015, 32). Jeremy Wade Morris explains, "Users could add songs to the 'playlist' window, which allowed for reconfigurable lists of songs to be played back in sequence or 'shuffled' into a random order" (50).

all of these listening technologies, songs become fungible and detached from their

historical contexts. This is very different from the Oldies format, where all of the

musical elements work in service of evoking a structure of feeling that is inseparable

from a particular moment in American history. Indeed, from Classic Rock onward,

the temporality of nostalgia formatting makes music history increasingly hard to

recover.

Rather than accepting the Classic Rock canon on its own terms, how else

might we conceptualize rock history? While prominent rock scholars like Charlie

Gillett, Simon Frith, George Lipsitz, and Theodore Gracyk argue that rock 'n' roll

and rock must be analytically and conceptually decoupled, I am suggesting that a

similar move must be made to distinguish rock's countercultural moment from what

came after, even if the counterculture generated the rock ideology that outlasted its

own era (Gracyk 1996, 2–8). In other words, I want to denaturalize the way we "hear

together" certain eras and insist upon the need for the rehistoricization of rock.[91]

Disaggregating the Classic Rock canon is a precondition for that work. After all, the

way music is presented tells a story about our history.

Even if Classic Rock does not bring listeners back to a specific era, it is

designed to produce a yearning for the time when rock was at the center of American

popular culture. For an increasing number of people then, the kind of nostalgia the

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[91] Recent scholarship on rock 'n' roll attempts to "hear together" musics and musicians that "have long been thought of as disparate but who weren't necessarily thought to be so at the time, least of all in their own minds" (Hamilton 2016, 6). For one example, see Jack Hamilton's *Just Around Midnight: Rock and Roll and the Racial Imagination*.

format generates is not one of past personal associations but a cultural and generational nostalgia that was never experienced for the first time. It is an "ersatz nostalgia"—to use Arjun Appadurai's term—a "nostalgia without lived experience or collective historical memory" (Appadurai 1996, 78). Classic Rock therefore anticipated where we are today not only in the sense that commercial radio has become saturated with nostalgia formats; it foreshadowed an experience of musical temporality where the persistence of past forms generates a "loss of historicity" rather than its reclamation. Indeed, Classic Rock provides a prehistory to the onset of retro as a cultural dominant.

Digitization, Reregulation,[92] and the Consequences of Nostalgia Formatting

By the mid-80s, most FM radio was receiving its programming via satellite. In effect, this meant greater possibilities for syndication. As Sterling and Keith note, "Nearly sixty program services (syndication networks for all practical purposes) were soon available to stations, including ten digital, forty analog, and another seven using both" (Sterling and Keith 2008, 175). The transition to satellite services and digitization proved an irreversible process. By the early 90s, over 90 percent of stations were using digital technology, both inside and outside of the studio (176). But while digital syndication certainly enabled a homogenization of programming across space, facilitating the control of local programming by administrative centers located in urban metropolises, homogenization also expanded by way of reregulation. In

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[92] Recent literature on the history of FM Broadcasting reproduces a common misunderstanding about neoliberalism. While deregulation implies a lack of regulation, the term reregulation suggests a rewriting of the laws that govern markets. It is undoubtedly the latter that has taken place.

1986, the FCC eliminated the non-duplication ruling that governed commercial radio since 1967, allowing stations to once again air the same programming across the AM and FM bands. Nevertheless, formatting was the most significant contributor to FM's standardization in the long run. With increasingly sophisticated market research, formatting became more technical and specialized (Berland 2005, 107, 114). Specialization, however, did not result in greater diversity on the airwaves. Rather, it reflected a situation of increased competition between stations vying for the same advertising dollars (108).

For many scholars of American radio, FM's death knell arrived with the Telecommunications Act of 1996. In addition to extending licenses for existing stations, the act "eliminate[d] its existing limits (caps) on how many radio stations could be owned (they stood then at twenty for AM and twenty for FM), opening the option of one entity buying up dozens or even hundreds of stations" (Sterling and Keith 2008, 179). In other words, a broadcasting corporation could own far more stations in a single market. As Sterling and Keith explain,

> Congress now decided that market size would dictate how many stations could be controlled. In the largest markets, one owner could now have up to eight stations (no more than five of either AM or FM)—more than the FCC rules before 1982 had allowed any owner across the whole country. (Sterling and Keith 2008, 179)

The predictable result of this legislation was the appearance of radio conglomerates in an industry formerly characterized by a relative diversity of ownership. While the mid-70s through the mid-80s witnessed increasing entrants and competition, causing profits to dramatically decline by the end of the decade, the Act ignited a mergers and

acquisitions boom that came later to commercial radio than other sectors of American industry (180). Corporations began housing multiple stations (read: multiple formats) within the same building, enabling them to cut costs and reduce staff while expanding demographic offerings to advertisers (181, 184). In both popular and scholarly histories of American radio, post-1996 FM is typically represented as the age of the oft-maligned Clear Channel, whose lobbying efforts succeeded in bringing about the 96 Act, and whose subsequent purchases of stations made them the largest radio conglomerate in history (181).

A less predictable result of reregulation was that consolidation led to *more* stations and *more* formats rather than less—growing by 20 percent from 1996 to 2004 (187). Indeed, the splintering and hybridizing of formats characterized the era. Hybrid formatting was largely a continuation of existing patterns in FM radio, though they reached new heights: for example, with the iPod-inspired "Jack" format (which will be dealt with later). Hybridization was coterminous with the decline of rock-oriented formats, both in terms of their prevalence on the FM band and in terms of listenership (188). While the number of young people listening to radio declined overall during these years, the trend was especially pronounced among white males, the demographic once most coveted by radio stations and record labels. Rock radio was now overwhelmingly retrospective, a trend that continues into the present (Bennett et al 2005, 102). Today, SiriusXM digital radio features approximately 30 formats categorized under the rock "genre" with only four committed to incorporating contemporary music. Eight of these formats are labeled "Classic." Thus, digitization

exacerbated existing trends within rock radio more than it engendered new ones.

Indeed, corporate radio's profit maximization requirements nearly predetermined that

the proliferation of digital radio formats would be more similar than different,

perpetuating the ever-changing same that has defined corporate radio since the

emergence of Classic Rock.

A significant consequence of this situation is that listeners are no longer

capable of being surprised by formatted playlists. One reason for this—a point often

made by critics of corporate radio—is that radio formats are designed for "distracted

listening." As Jody Berland explains:

> [Format radio's] primary goal is to accompany us through breakfast, travel
> and work without stimulating either too much attention or any thought of
> turning it off. In this respect it is mutually interdependent on the daily life for
> which it provides the soundtrack; more specifically, [formats are] designed to
> harmonize the contradictions of domestic and working life that radio could
> illuminate and transform. (Berland 2005, 104-5)

Under such conditions, where radio operates as a "secondary medium" equipped for

all settings, it is hard to imagine a situation where one might be genuinely surprised.

To be surprised requires a certain degree of attentiveness and anticipation, but the

mobility of FM radio has encouraged programmers to assume it away.[93] Playlists

reflect this decision, but the problem runs both ways. On the one hand, we are

distracted because format radio often accompanies other activities. On the other,

formatted playlists themselves assume, are designed for, and encourage practices of

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[93] This does not mean we need to idealize early radio history in order to make the
point that mobility has shaped radio formatting. As Jonathan Sterne writes, "Radio
historians have revised the romantic memory of families in the 1930s crowded around
radio sets, insisting that distracted listening—listening while doing other things—was
just as prevalent as listening with rapt attention" (Sterne 2012, 5).

distracted listening.[94] By the 1990s, we had traveled a great distance from the era of Free Form radio, which encouraged a practice of concentrated fidelity listening where listening was one's primary activity.[95]

Now a further point can be made about how these highly rationalized yet seemingly unstructured nostalgia formats have refashioned our experience of surprise. The experience of surprise is one that resists standardization. To anticipate a surprise is to deaden its impact, but this is precisely what rock radio formatting has accomplished: the regularization of surprise. When we listen to music on the radio, we anticipate what song might come next. But the expansion of "unstructured" playlists has transformed our sense of anticipation: we anticipate unpredictability. Or, to use Mark Fisher's term, surprise has been *precorporated* into our listening experience. If this were not enough, our capacity to be surprised is further diminished by the fact that whatever the next song is, it will be a hit and we will have heard it before. Nostalgia formats therefore generate the appropriate disposition for listening to commercial radio, where a station's primary concern is to keep its listeners tuned in rather than educate or challenge them. One is never so surprised by the next song so as to draw attention to it. After all, displeasure might encourage the listener to change the station, or an authentic surprise might produce diminishing returns on enjoyment.

[94] To be clear, I consider distracted listening to be a mode of listening, but not a context in itself. We listen distractedly in different contexts for different reasons, and often this is entirely appropriate.

[95] We need not treat concentrated or fidelity listening as if it were ever the dominant form of listening in order to make this point. Indeed, it may have always been exceptional, "since distracted listening is already a category in early radio research" (Sterne 2012, 250). What is a relatively recent phenomenon, I argue, is the way that radio formats assume and encourage practices of distracted listening.

The dialectic of playlist rationalization and unstructured listening would reach its apex with the development of the "Jack" format. Jack began in 2002 as an internet-only format based in Vancouver, B.C., but quickly spread to terrestrial Canadian stations before making its way to U.S. airwaves. The format was inspired by the recent popularization of Apple's iPod, which launched in 2001. Jack pivots around 80s music, but the format also features hits from the late 60s up through the present. With a database of over 1,200 songs, its playlists are considerably more expansive than most radio formats (Sterling and Keith 2008, 188–89).[96] If Top 40 brought the logic of the jukebox to the radio, fifty years later Jack turned the iPod's shuffle[97] feature—which selects songs from one's digital music library at random—into a format. But there is also another sense in which Jack is similar to the "shuffle" feature. While Jack's slogan, "Playing What We Want," conjures the image of an impulsive DJ choosing songs based on a whim, the format is in fact entirely automated: "Jack is just music—no weather, no traffic, no song IDs"—no DJs. This was the logical culmination of commercial FM in the age of digital radio: full automation.

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[96] Most radio stations construct playlists from databases with around 400 songs (Sterling and Keith 2008, 189).

[97] The attractiveness of the "shuffle" feature on mp3 players must be understood in the larger context of commercial radio formatting. In short, it reintroduced an element of contingency and surprise that had been gradually purged from commercial radio. In Michael Bull's ethnography of iPod users, *Sound Moves*, he notes that "American iPod users frequently complain about the quality of radio programmes, both current affairs and music channels" (Bull 2008, 98).

The Future of Retro

Though retro emerged in rock before other genres—not least because rock's

outsized impact on American culture made it ripe for corporate commemoration—the

arrival of retro did not happen all at once. And yet, there are two "moments" when its

constitutive features appear to congeal, which interestingly parallel Fredric Jameson's

account of the emergence of postmodernism. The first is in 1973[98] when the

crystallization of the format system signaled the closure of the Long 1960s on the

airwaves, whose institutional character I am convinced carries more influence upon

the development of rock music than the symbolism that critics have attached to the

deaths[99] of Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, and Jim Morrison, the violence at the Altamont

Speedway Free Festival, or even the end of the Vietnam War.[100] The second moment

of retro's crystallization was in 1983, which witnessed the introduction of Classic

Rock and the founding of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Foundation.[101]

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[98] In addition to the onset of economic crisis, 1973 also marks a precipitous drop-off in American working class militancy and the beginning of a long period of wage stagnation (Cowie 2012, 12).

[99] As David Hepworth has recently argued in *Uncommon People: The Rise and Fall of the Rock Stars*, we live in a post-rock star age, where the rock star has been "consigned to the wardrobe of anachronistic stereotypes" (Hepworth 2017, 6).

[100] In *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* Jameson writes, "both levels in question, infrastructure and superstructures—the economic system and the cultural 'structure of feeling'—somehow crystallized in the great shock of the crises of 1973 (the oil crisis, the end of the international gold standard, for all intents and purposes the end of the great wave of 'wars of national liberation' and the beginning of the end of traditional communism)" (Jameson 1991, xx). By contrast, in *Time Passages* George Lipsitz argues that postmodernism emerges just after World War II with the development of electronic mass media. For both authors, postmodernism signals transformations in electronic media where an "infinitely renewable present" generates "a crisis for collective memory" (Lipsitz 1990, vii).

[101] 1983 also witnesses the end to the economic crisis of the 1970s. Beginning in 1983, the rate of profit steadily tracked upward—albeit at a lower rate of growth than

If the temporality of retro first emerged on rock radio, it eventually made its way into the museum. Robert Santelli explains how he and the other curators of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Museum took a "postmodernist view of representation and narration" when curating the museum, which opened to the public on September 2, 1995:

> As opposed to presenting a chronologically linear history of rock 'n' roll with exhibits outlining the music's origins in the early fifties and culminating with ones pertaining to rock in the nineties, the Rock Hall exhibits instead subverted the visitors' expectations of an easy-flowing, nonchallenging walk through rock history. An exhibit on the nineties Seattle music scene sat across from one on the blues, a fashion exhibit followed one on antirock reactions from the establishment in the fifties. An exhibit on the Allman Brothers Band demonstrated its importance as a musical unit minus theatrical histrionics, like those that made Alice Cooper's shows so exciting in the early seventies; yet an Alice Cooper exhibit, complete with stage props and costumes, was positioned just a few feet away, as if the two were somehow thematically linked. (Santelli 1999, 243)

The curators' reasonable desire to challenge rock nostalgia disappointed many of its early visitors, who wanted confirmation of their own "experiences" and understandings of rock history—which by the 1990s were hardly inseparable from the ways rock had been mythologized and commemorated by the music, television, and film industries (241). Yet, the Rock Hall's own curatorial approach dislocated rock from any pattern of development. Instead, on offer were heterogeneous fragments without a "grand narrative" that could otherwise anchor them. While the format system constrained rock's future, Classic Rock radio and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Museum operated on its past. The museum's paratactic logic abandoned grand

during the postwar period (1945-1973). On this point, see Sam Gindin's "Turning Points and Starting Points: Brenner, Left Turbulence and Class Politics" (2001) and Anwar Shaikh's "The First Great Depression of the 21st Century" (2011).

narratives of rock history. By contrast, Classic Rock amalgamated the entire history

of rock 'n' roll and rock into a single continuous story that ideologically inscribed

rock's trajectory into its beginnings, foreclosing *in thought and in sound* the musical

and political paths not taken.[102] Both, however, register a broader de-temporalization

at one pole of the retro spectrum. If rock is to have any future that is not eclipsed by

its resale value, it lies in imagining other uses of its history in the present.

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[102] "Precisely because the truth about the past is created by inquiry in the present, history is not just an inert body of facts from the past constraining the present. Instead, history can be a way of opening up the present, of seeing its multiple possibilities by exploring the "roads not taken" from the past" (Lipsitz 1990, 30).

CHAPTER THREE

More Bounce: The Sound of Boogie and the Modern Funk Revival

We're all funksters. We're all children of James, George, and Sly…

—Steve Arrington

I stand for funk... I'm proud to say I stand for the genre of funk.

—Dâm-Funk

The sounds of early 80s boogie-funk were bumping at Original Mike's in

Santa Ana, California. As I waited in line for Funk Freaks' 10-year anniversary party,

I could hear a pitched-up version of Syreeta's "Quick Slick" (1982) blaring from the

club's courtyard. "Quick Slick" typifies what you'll hear at a Funk Freaks party:

up-tempo electronic funk as fit for a lowrider car show as it is for the dance floor, the

song's bouncy synth-bass sounds serving as the musical corollary to the hydraulic

systems that make for "hopping" lowriders. In addition to approximately one

thousand mostly Mexican-American dancers, members of different DJ crews had

come from all over California to celebrate a milestone, to party, and to drop guest

sets. Some I had already met through the party circuit. Others were familiar to me

from their mixes, their recordings, or their social media accounts. On a small stage,

just a few feet high, two members from the Memphis group Kick performed. Like in

the disco era, these vocalists did not have a group of live musicians behind them.

Instead, they sang atop their recordings from the 1980s. Kick never had mainstream

success, but two of their three singles have become classics amongst contemporary funk aficionados.

The crowd at a Funk Freaks party is known for their fanaticism. After Kick's performance, almost a dozen record collectors formed a line and patiently waited to get original copies of their records signed by the band. These 45s weren't for sale at the show. Rare and highly sought after, "Lollie Pop" (1983) and "Right Thing" (1984) fetch over $300 per single. DJs joked about there being a million dollars-worth records on the premises. Ironically, it was the music of acts like Kick that was once ignored by funk collectors, who focused almost exclusively on rare 45s from the 1970s. But 1980s funk is now getting its due thanks to the modern funk scene, and to the Chicanos in the greater Los Angeles area who have reclaimed the music as a matter of cultural heritage.

Musical revivals are often thought of in terms of their contradictory relationship to history. By expanding a musical moment indefinitely, potentially lasting longer than the era of their inspiration, revivalists' effort to freeze time betrays the temporality we typically associate with popular music. Indeed, pop is defined in some sense by its immediacy—a product of the music industry's attempt to generate a simultaneity of experience amongst dispersed listeners. Over the last two decades, the internet has provided us with near-infinite access to pop music's past, opening the potential for nostalgic identification with musical eras we did not live through. But if from one vantage that affect appears as a reflection of our severance from history, the ways it is lived reveal something more complex. When we shift from approaching

music as an object in a catalog to the social life of musical forms, revivals suddenly appear saturated with history. Revivals do not happen as a matter of chance. As bygone genres reappear far removed from the contexts in which they emerged, musical revivals serve as sites of cultural recovery, continuity, and community building. They contain hidden cultural histories that orient communities and individuals toward specific genres while engendering new points of cross-cultural interaction, syncretism, and identification.

In a musical present inundated with revivals, these cultures have become an important site for interrogating how we think about history. Not only do they produce new meanings about the past; musical revivals put history in service of a critique of the present. In facilitating collective acts of artistic creation through the reactivation of musical forms, revivals complicate historical narratives proclaiming the end of history and cultural stagnation. The temporality embedded in revivals cannot be reduced to the experience of historical dislocation highlighted by Reynolds and Fisher.[103] Rather, revivals draw lines of continuity and difference between past and present, carrying history into the present and positioning the present as history.

One of the most active musical revivals today centers around early 1980s funk—what is now popularly known as the sound of *boogie*. This is not the

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[103] The present fell out of focus in Reynolds' analysis of musical revivals. While he powerfully identified how different revival scenes relate to history, all of the musical cultures he criticized began before the onset of widespread file-sharing. He argued that while Northern Soul and the Deadheads attempted to stop time and keep a brief moment in music going forever, the mod (short for modernist) and rave revivals were at odds with the future-oriented aesthetics and discourses that defined these musical movements in their original contexts (Reynolds 2011, 202–39).

confrontational funk of James Brown, which spoke to the radicalizing black working

class of the 1960s, or that of the large collectives of the 1970s like

Parliament-Funkadelic, whose notoriously expensive tours filled stadiums in order to

sustain the group's fifty-plus members. Boogie is the sound of stripped-down but

technologically cutting-edge funk during popular music's first digital age. Once

panned by critics as a deracinated development in relation to funk's black and

working-class origins, or as the mere musical reflex of neoliberalism's ascendancy,

boogie's recent re-popularization testifies to the need for a critical reevaluation of the

genre that has yet to emerge in popular music scholarship. Examining electronic funk

from a global perspective reveals that the significance of the music does not lie

primarily in its form or its instrumentation, but in the contexts where they are

deployed. As boogie was reworked in nationally specific contexts with their own

musical and political histories, the meaning of the music changed along with the

sounds themselves.

A global and conjunctural analysis of the music, from its initial emergence to

its reappearance at the heart of a networked club culture, enables important

correctives to the existing accounts of boogie's history. It also challenges the

dominant paradigm around retro, which understands musical revivals as a symptom

of cultural exhaustion and historical closure. Whereas my evaluation of Classic Rock

radio established how the music industry shapes historical narratives toward its own

ends—neutralizing rock's utopianism through profit-seeking forms of

commemoration—an analysis of the boogie revival demonstrates how canonization

from below can generate resistant counter-narratives. While a history of boogie

exemplifies both the utility of the diaspora concept and its limits, the music's revival

shows how nostalgia for bygone genres can be produced cross-culturally, traversing

racial, ethnic, and national borders. Modern funk is now a global taste culture, but it

maintains a symbiotic relationship with more localized, ethnic forms of subculture.

Together, funk's past and present demonstrate how far music can travel from its

origins,[104] and how the reactivation of music genres can stimulate genuine historical

inquiry as a way of overcoming the temporal dislocation that characterizes so much

postmodern culture.

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[104] In "Funk Music as Genre: Black Aesthetics, Apocalyptic Thinking and Urban
Protest in Post-1965 African-American Pop," Matthew P. Brown also uses the
diaspora concept to frame the "funk impulse" as a "culturally specific idiom
developed in African and African-American contexts." While I am skeptical about
conceptualizing funk as a product of the "apocalyptic imagination," I agree that
funk's genre structure constitutes "a basis on which the study of funk's migration
patterns can be assessed, as it hybridizes the sound of pop genres and subcultural
idioms and as these uses concomitantly raise questions about appropriation,
assimilation and affiliation" (M. P. Brown 1994, 486). Indeed, boogie is one such
development within funk that has largely escaped the interest of scholars.

     Paul Gilroy frames the problem of origins succinctly. He writes, "once the
music is perceived as a world phenomenon what value is placed upon its origins,
particularly if they come into opposition against further mutations produced during its
contingent loops and fractal trajectories? Where music is thought to be emblematic
and constitutive of racial difference rather than just associated with it, how is music
used to specify general issues pertaining to the problem of racial authenticity and the
consequent self-identity of the ethnic group?" (Gilroy 1994, 75–76). And elsewhere:
"How are we to think critically about artistic products and aesthetic codes which,
though they may be traceable back to one distinct location, have been changed either
by the passage of time or by their displacement, relocation, or dissemination through
networks of communication and cultural exchange?" (Gilroy 1999, 80).

The Politics, Economics, and Origins of the Boogie Era

The boogie era, which I date from 1979 to 1985, both contains and responded to the music industry's spectacular crash in the second half of 1979. As a consequence of the crash, disco was pronounced dead by the industry and critics alike. But many of the musical and cultural changes disco wrought persisted, mutating under new economic imperatives and technological possibilities. As disco converged with funk on the dance floor, on the radio, and in the studio, boogie registered the onset of a new conjuncture in black politics. Its musical form, its instrumentation and timbres, its lyrical themes, and its album covers index a historically specific situation for Afro-diasporic peoples—but like all black popular music, there are important contributions that come from outside the diaspora. It is in the dynamic of continuity and change, in both music and history, that the question of boogie's cultural meaning arises.

The sound of boogie emerged during the transition toward neoliberal globalization—a shift whose consequences can be traced in the trajectories of black cultural production in general, and funk in particular. Critics and scholars have argued that neoliberal economic restructuring made its effects felt on the size of funk bands, and on the sounds of funk itself. By the end of the 1970s, the cost of maintaining large collectives, like the massive Parliament-Funkadelic led by George Clinton, had become prohibitively expensive at the same time that new musical technologies began to make their way into the recording studio, perhaps with predictable effects. As Scot Brown puts it, "Horns, bass guitars, congas, and timbales were displaced by

the dominance of the synthesizer and drum machine" (Brown 2008, 84). Comparing these developments to trends in the US economy writ large, Brown continues, "The downsizing of big bands in black music mirrored the economic calamity of deindustrialization that downsized jobs and wages of workers in cities like Dayton to catastrophic proportions" (Brown 2008, 84). Rickey Vincent makes an adjacent point, noting the impact on the class character of the music itself. He writes, "The economics of the city made the fielding of music bands a prohibitive enterprise, thus leaving the development of black bands to a more middle-class generation that was removed from the mayhem of the streets and the racial confrontations of the sixties and early seventies" (Vincent 1996, 268). According to these critics, the shift toward digital instrumentation in funk arises from this political-economic context.[105]

Black nationalist music critics like Vincent and George understand these technologies to have been artificially imposed on funk by corporate capital as a result of austerity and the popularity of disco. Both causes are coded as white impositions on black cultural expression.[106] Because the introduction of drum machines and synthesizers into funk serves as an index of decline—one simultaneously musical,

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[105] "Uprootedness" is also a central theme in Mark Anthony Neal's *What the Music Said*, where he argues that the corporate capture of black music contributed to the erosion of institutions that once sustained a vibrant black public sphere, resulting in black popular culture that had lost its organic ties to black communities (Neal 1999, 126). Although he writes very little about funk, Neal's book is similarly structured as a declension narrative.

[106] Black nationalist critics described disco as a deracinated, emasculated, mechanical, middle class, diluted form of black funk. For example, *Village Voice* music critic Greg Tate used the term "disCOINTELPRO" to suggest that disco was doing to black music what the FBI had done to the Black Panther Party (Echols 2011, 112–13; Shapiro 2009, 90–92).

cultural, political, and economic—boogie takes on a specific function in these authors' declension narratives, not simply as a gauge to measure funk's development and difference from its origins in the 1960s and its heyday in the 1970s, but as evidence of a racially diluted culture that has been uprooted from tradition.[107] It is perhaps symptomatic that the use of drum machines is framed as a retreat from blackness in the funk of the 1980s but as an innovative affirmation of it in hip-hop.[108] The contradiction is even more conspicuous when we reflect on how boogie-funk offered up so many grooves that were sampled in early hip-hop.

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[107] Vincent writes of the era, "The mechanical aspects of disco music production swept the popular music industry, and accelerated the destruction of the live recording session, live bands, and the soulful recording experience." (Vincent 1996, 25). "Only the *chanking* guitars survived relatively unscathed in black dance music. The new-sounding tones of the synth-bass made even simple rhythms sound funky when accompanied by a high-pitched, chopping rhythm guitar lick and an artificial clap track. The first efforts of the naked funk artists used these new instrumental arrangements (which P-Funk introduced), but fell short in the arena of vocals, lyrical themes, complexity, range, and historical continuity" (Vincent 1996, 274). While Vincent and George see funk in the early 1980s having been taken over by "integrationist" tendencies associated with disco, Peter Shapiro frames boogie not only emerging out of disco, but as a return to a more clearly identified black music. He argues that "boogie," alternatively known as "street music," "articulate[d] a more defiantly R&B sensibility and broke away from the rainbow coalition that defined New York in the immediate post-disco era, feeding into R&B styles like the Minneapolis funk of Jam & Lewis and the New Jack Swing of Teddy Riley that severed any connection to disco or 'white' music" (Shapiro 2009, 269). Disco historian Tim Lawrence offers a similar point: "Grounded in the recessionary moment, which witnessed budgets that might have been used to hire an orchestra or to fund an elongated studio session shrink, the sound was stripped of its flourishes and even its make-believe fantasy. The stripped-down result brandished disco's rhythm and blues heritage" (Lawrence 2016, 203).
[108] A similar contradiction appears in these black nationalist critics writing about synthesizers. When Stevie Wonder used synthesizers in the early 1970s it was innovative, but when 80s funk groups used them, this was understood as a retreat from blackness.

At the same time that hip-hop was beginning to give a voice to the Bronx's black lumpen-proletariat, funk was transforming in ways that illustrated the diversity of the black experience. Framing 1980s funk as evidence of racial dilution therefore says more about static black nationalist notions of racial authenticity than it does about the music. Paul Gilroy has written extensively about how the mutual opposition of dilution and progress is a hallmark of black nationalist criticism. In his trenchant critiques of racial essentialism, Gilroy develops the concept of syncretism as the basis for an alternative framework that can account for black music as a historical and multicultural phenomenon (Gilroy 1999, 96). Following Gilroy, I argue that boogie was open enough to encapsulate multiple styles, stances, and politics, which together bring larger political and economic shifts in American capitalism and black politics into focus.

As economic inequality dramatically increased over the course of the 1970s and early 1980s, the fracturing of the black diaspora in the United States reached new heights. At one level, this was a consequence of real political gains. Desegregation made it possible for the emergence of a small but significant black middle class, as well as new black political and economic elites. However, with the neutralization of Black Power's socialist wing and the incorporation of the cultural nationalist challenge into the mainstream of American economic and political institutions, the successes of the civil rights movement led in contradictory directions. Desegregation's timing with capitalist restructuring and attendant deindustrialization meant that financial gains would be made for a fraction of the diaspora, rather than

137

for African Americans in general. This restructuring of capital would devastate urban

centers, and its consequences were particularly dramatic for urban African-American

communities that had been "dependent on stable, unionized working-class jobs"

(Brenner 2000, 312). The disappearance of these jobs had a tremendous impact on

black cultural production in the late 1970s and the early 1980s.

Consider the case of funk in Dayton, Ohio, where the contradictory successes

of the civil rights movement and deindustrialization undercut the economic and

institutional basis for funk's flourishing. Arguably no city contributed more to the

development of funk music in the 1970s and early 1980s than Dayton. Referred to as

"The Land of Funk," Dayton produced nearly a dozen of the most popular funk

bands, including the Ohio Players, Slave, Lakeside, and Zapp (S. Brown 2008, 73).

Historian Scot Brown explains how the provision of ample employment for African

Americans was a precondition for funk's development in Dayton. Brown writes:

> From the World War II years to the 1970s, Dayton's black working class
> found abundant and relatively high-wage employment at McCall's Printing,
> Frigidaire, General Motors, Chrysler, Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, and a
> number of service sectors and small businesses. Though many of these jobs
> were located outside of the black residential community, the income earned by
> black workers supported a thriving entertainment district located on West 5th
> Street in West Dayton, with numerous businesses, theaters, clubs, and taverns.
> (S. Brown 2008, 75)

In addition to bolstering Dayton's leisure sector, these jobs provided families with the

means to support their children's musical endeavors (81).[109] Young musicians who

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[109] Brown explains that this included purchasing "instruments, vehicles for
transportation, and sound equipment" (Brown 2008, 81). Most of Dayton's bands
were composed of young musicians, often "either recent graduates or still attending
high school during the mid-1970s" (Brown 2008, 77).

came from musical families often received informal training from parents, grandparents, or extended relatives, but it was Dayton's public school system that provided them with the formal training and social environment that encouraged forming funk bands.[110]

What emerges from Brown's rich history of Dayton funk is the way that music was nurtured within a black community composed not only of people, but of interconnected institutions, both public and private, that mutually supported one another. Public school music teachers and staff took on extracurricular mentorship roles with young performers, which connected them with the families of their students and to the local businesses that showcased live acts. While some school personnel took on managerial roles, others functioned more as promoters. Local talent shows, school dances, and "battle of the bands" competitions were popular among black youth, and they served as an important source of external funding for school marching bands and choirs. They also informally linked the school system to local nightclubs and roller rinks, which set aside designated evenings for teenage performers and audiences. Even outside the school system, young funk acts were provided with publicly funded opportunities to perform at parks and recreation facilities (80–1).

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[110] Many of funk's most significant figures, both from Dayton and elsewhere, received their initial musical tutelage inside American public schools. Brown writes, "Funk artists from diverse places in the United States—such as Rick James (Buffalo, NY), Fred Wesley (Mobile, AL), Maurice White (Memphis, TN), Prince (Minneapolis, MN) and a host of others—learned instruments, participated in bands, choirs, and studied music theory in school, sometimes as early as in the elementary school level" (Brown 2008, 77). The techniques they learned in choir, marching band, and drum corps made their way into funk.

These educational and social networks started to disintegrate shortly after they were established. In the early 1970s, Dayton became a focal point in the national debate surrounding mandatory school busing.[111] In an attempt to redress segregation in public education, the United States Supreme Court granted federal judges the authority to order comprehensive desegregation plans and busing across the entire school system, rather than restricting them to racially imbalanced areas (83). Black schools in West Dayton closed, leading black students and teachers to be transferred to predominantly white schools in Dayton's eastside neighborhoods. The decision to move people rather than resources would undermine the forms of mentorship that connected young black funk musicians to their communities' institutions. And as the contradictory success of civil rights legislation weakened The Land of Funk's musical infrastructure at the institutional level, deindustrialization eroded its economic base. The effect of plant closures and outsourcing dramatically reduced the types of employment that sustained West Dayton's nightlife and provided its youth with musical resources. While this did not stop already existing bands from changing with the times, it did dramatically curtail the formation of new groups.

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[111] "Extending the separate-is-not-equal logic of *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954), the Supreme Court decided in *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* (1971) that integrating school children through mandatory busing was an appropriate remedy for racial segregation in the public schools" (Cowie 2012, 4). Though most African Americans supported busing, many also viewed community control and increased funding as meaningful alternatives to the social consequences of busing.

The Black Middle Class

      While the effects of economic downturn and restructuring were devastating on urban centers with high concentrations of African Americans, the 1970s and 1980s also witnessed the growth of the black middle class in small but meaningful numbers. After all, it was during the 1970s that the gains of the social movements of the 1960s were most strongly felt (Echols 2011, xxiii). The expansion of government employment was central to the growth of America's black middle class. Although the Civil Rights Act of 1964 made discrimination in employment illegal, enforcement was another matter.[112] As Robin D.G. Kelley explains, "Because such policies were more strongly enforced at the federal, state, and municipal levels, African Americans employed in the public sector gained the most" (R. D. G. Kelley 1996, 60). By 1970, "26 percent of African Americans worked for the government" and by 1974, "64 percent of all new federal employees came from minority groups" (K.-Y. Taylor 2016, 81). There were also new opportunities for African Americans in higher education and professional-managerial employment as a direct consequence of affirmative action and anti-discrimination legislation (Brenner 2000, 312). These policies enabled a small percentage of African Americans to become professionals in banking, commerce, law, education, and medicine during the 1970s and 1980s (K.-Y. Taylor 2016, 81). Although the diaspora was becoming increasingly economically stratified,

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[112] While there were multiple high-profile cases where the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) filed discrimination lawsuits against major American corporations and labor unions, it remained understaffed relative to the number of cases it received each year (R. D. G. Kelley 1996, 58).

a considerable proportion of African Americans were lifted out of poverty into the ranks of the middle class.

With newfound wealth came residential mobility, leading many middle-class African Americans away from rapidly deindustrializing urban environments for the suburbs. According to Robin D.G. Kelley, "between 1970 and 1986, the black suburban population grew from 3.6 million to 7.1 million" (Kelley 1996, 64). Many were able to leave behind the expanding drug economy, gang violence, and over-policing that had become constitutive features of life in American inner cities (64). Of course, African Americans still faced prejudicial treatment after migrating to white neighborhoods, leading many to black suburbs on the outskirts of cities. Nevertheless, "black flight" reflected a growing chasm in African American life, uniquely felt by younger generations that never knew the forms of social cohesion that segregation paradoxically produced. As Nelson George writes, "Musicians, of course, have been caught up in the 'flight' syndrome, but so have salesmen, concert promoters, record-store owners, and most crucially, deejays and their employers" (George 1988, xiii). Yet black popular music became both a register of this disjunction and a point of connection. As Mark Anthony Neal explains:

> While dance halls and house parties have historically stimulated communal exchange, the dance hall's role in such exchanges intensified during the decade of the 1970s, as the dance hall represented one of the primary institutions which attracted the black middle class back to the very urban spaces that they abandoned. (Neal 1999, 120)[113]

This was true in the early 1980s as well.

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[113] Neal argues that "This phenomenon was largely inspired by the inability of the black middle-class to create and maintain social and cultural institutions" (Neal 120).

The album covers of many boogie records capture how many middle-class

blacks moved out of the city and into suburban homes.[114] For example, T.S. Monk's

House of Music (1980) and Bill Summers and Summers Heat's *Call It What You Want*

(1981) index a turn away from the public spaces of the street and the dancefloor

toward the private space of the home—a curious development for dance music.[115] The

T.S. Monk album features the group's three members inside the living room of a

middle-class home, signaled not least by the grand piano behind them. The house

appears too small for them, which communicates that the music might be better suited

for spaces outside the living room. T.S. Monk's household is indeed a musical one.

The group was formed by the son of legendary jazz pianist Thelonious Monk—also

symbolized by the piano. Both women on the cover are wearing stylish suits that

designate their status as professionals more fit for the boardroom or a dinner party

than the club. Professionalism and middle-class lifestyle are similarly communicated

by Bill Summers' outfit on the cover of *Call It What You Want*. Also with a grand

piano staged behind him, rows of books showcased in Summers' living room link his

class status to his education. While education as a road to financial success was a

prominent trope in 1980s popular culture, sometimes operating as a conservative

"common sense" to explain why the poor deserve their lot, covers like these pushed

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[114] Boogie also drew upon aesthetic themes and cultural representations opened up by disco, which articulated blackness to sophistication, elegance, and professionalism.
[115] This is not to deny the popularity of house parties in the 1970s. My point is to emphasize how these albums covers portrayed everyday domestic situations rather than parties.

against racist stereotypes that associated African Americans with ignorance and poverty.

The most widespread fashion on boogie records of the 1980s is leisure sweaters. The look preceded Bill Cosby's popularization of Coogi-brand sweaters on *The Cosby Show*, which debuted in 1984. On George Benson's *Give Me the Night* (1980), Rene & Angela's *Wall to Wall* (1981), Lionel Richie's *Self-Titled* album (1982), and countless others, artists wearing causal sweaters are superimposed on empty backgrounds consisting of a single blocked color. If the sweaters signaled a middle-class lifestyle, the blank backdrops—first used on Prince's *Self-Titled* album (1979)—wrench the artists from any context whatsoever. At first glance, they appear as a historical break from when album covers functioned as "a medium through which diasporic conversations [were] conducted" (Gilroy 1994, 238).[116] As Paul Gilroy points out, LP jackets took on greater cultural significance for the black diaspora because "they offer[ed] one of the very few opportunities to see and enjoy images of black people outside the stereotyped guises in which the dominant culture normally sanctions their presence" (Gilroy 1994, 243).[117] Unlike the elaborate and esoteric paintings that graced so many 1970s funk records, these covers have an obvious corporate sheen, appearing more like advertisements for clothing than album jackets. In the larger historical context of major label consolidation and the economic

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[116] As Gilroy elaborates, "Its users have sometimes managed to combine the strongest possible sense of fashion with a respectful, even reverent approach to the historical status of their musical culture which values its longevity and its capacity to connect them to their historical roots" (Gilroy 1994, 238). In the 1990s, he concluded, "That era is now over" (240).

[117] Curiously, then, they have received little scholarly attention.

downturn, they reflected marketing's attempt to overcome the "faceless" quality of disco, which was blamed by some for the music's lack of long-term viability, by emphasizing the artist. At the same time, these corporate representations of black domesticity and middle-class lifestyle need to be understood as a response to the discourses about the black family that were circulating in the early 1980s.

Negative stereotypes about the black family have circulated within American popular culture at least since minstrelsy, but they became politically useful in new ways for neoconservatives during the Reagan years. As a result of the black liberation struggle in the 1960s and early 1970s, it became popularly understood that the primary problems African Americans faced were not due to individual moral failings or collective cultural ones. Indeed, an important measure of the movement's success was how it inserted the notion of structural racism into American political culture.[118] But as the political mobilizations waned and economic crisis set in, the notion of institutional racism fell out of American political discourse. In its place was a return to the discourse of personal responsibility articulated to a new liberal ideology of "colorblindness" (K.-Y. Taylor 2016, 8). Although overt racism had become politically inexpedient even within American conservatism, tapping into economic and cultural anxieties in racially coded ways became an effective means to mobilize a white conservative electorate. As a part of this strategy, single motherhood was

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[118] "Institutional racism, or structural racism, can be defined as the policies, programs, and practices of public and private institutions that result in greater rates of poverty, dispossession, criminalization, illness, and ultimately mortality of African Americans. Most importantly, it is the outcome that matters, not the intentions of the individuals involved" (K.-Y. Taylor 2016, 8).

targeted as a cultural failing supposedly unique to African Americans. President Reagan's invention and popularization of the "welfare queen" made a coded argument about race through the language of class (K.-Y. Taylor 2016, 52). Although he was careful not to explicitly identify the welfare queen as black, there was little ambiguity as to who he was talking about. As black women were coded as welfare cheats and insatiable sexual deviants, black men were characterized as hyper-masculine, drug-addicted, and irresponsible "deadbeat dads" (52). These stereotypes worked on one another not only to explain the causes behind black single motherhood but to justify public austerity amidst increased spending for the disastrous War on Drugs.

In this context, many Afro-diasporic funk records in the 1980s did indeed respond defensively, if not conservatively. At first glance, many albums appear to continue the familial concerns that soul voiced in the 1960s and 1970s. In *Soul Music: The Birth of a Sound in Black America*, Michael Haralambos illustrates how "soul songs advocate family stability and parental responsibility"—lyrical themes that register the genre's distance from the individualism of the blues and the historical conditions that birthed them (Haralambos 1974, 113). While the blues arose out of the hardships of segregation, soul's optimism was grounded in the black liberation struggle and the postwar boom, which together raised expectations for the diaspora as a whole. Thus, the discourse of racial siblinghood that became so strongly associated with soul music—i.e., "soul brother"—took on historically specific political

146

dimensions.[119] By the 1980s, popular images of African American families and the terrain of struggle over their meaning had shifted. Funk records that depicted black middle-class lifestyles replaced soul's communal aspirations with representations of personal success and responsibility, which nonetheless challenged the negative stereotypes about African Americans that served the Republican agenda.

Although boogie-funk's perspective on African American life was predominantly middle class, some artists developed an urban, working-class aesthetic.[120] No funk musician in the 1980s symbolized this stance more than Rick James, whose *Street Songs* (1981) celebrated a lifestyle that became a focal point of debate in American politics. From one perspective, songs like "Ghetto Life" appeared cliché for reproducing tropes about teenage sex, drug abuse, and young black boys singing doo-wop on street corners. But the song was a true enough reflection of James' upbringing. Born James Ambrose Johnson Jr., Rick James grew up in Buffalo's public housing projects as one of eight children to a single mother who worked as a cleaner by day and ran numbers for the Mafia in the evening. When his family moved into a predominantly white neighborhood, they endured intense racially motivated violence. In his youth, James' two musical passions were jazz and doo-wop. As he refined his vocal abilities in a doo-wop group called the Duprees, James also became an in-demand session drummer in Buffalo's small jazz scene. If

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[119] For example, during the uprisings of 1965, black-owned businesses that scrawled "soul brother" on their windows were spared from arson and looting, as were other institutions that were understood to serve the black community (Sitkoff 2008, 192).
[120] This is not to suggest that all middle-class African Americans moved out of cities or that *urban* and *working class* are synonymous. Many, if not most, black middle class people in the 1980s were still living in cities.

his autobiography *Glow* is to be believed, James was having sexual relations with an older teenage girl well before he was a teenager himself. Among other crimes, drug abuse would land him in and out of prison throughout his career, which gives an added autobiographical dimension to the back cover of *Street Songs*, where he is being frisked by an older white policeman. While some critics interpreted the personae of "King of Punk Funk" as shallow and narcissistic—charges James himself would not dispute, and which mark a major stylistic departure for a Motown artist—he nevertheless advanced a hedonistic and pleasure-seeking philosophy that remains consistent with Afro-diasporic critiques of the law (Gilroy 1991, 199).

Message Music

The dominant narrative about funk in the 1980s is that the music turned away from collective struggle and toward possessive individualism. For example, Ricky Vincent writes, "Black popular music in the early 1980s shied away from the 'message' song and zeroed in on issues of sex and style" (Vincent 1996, 268). Undoubtedly, there's plenty in the catalogs of Rick James and Prince to support Vincent's argument, but even hedonism has never been without its utopian political dimensions. Taking a position opposite to Vincent, Paul Gilroy argues that in black cultural traditions, "hedonistic themes… celebrate non-work activity and the suspension of the time and discipline associated with wage-labour" (Gilroy 1991, 202). Therefore, "work is sharply counterposed not merely to leisure in general but to a glorification of autonomous desire which is presented as inherent in sexual activity" (202). While Gilroy's corrective perhaps goes too far, risking the interpretation that

black musical forms are always counter-hegemonic, Vincent's argument about cultural capitulation contradicts his own reflections on black sexuality in funk, which serves as a pretext for ignoring the message songs of the era.

Many artists that came to boogie from an older soul tradition continued to record politically committed music in the 1980s. For example, the O'Jays' "Put Our Heads Together" (1983) is about the collective power that can only be built through organizing. Without any inkling of nostalgia for the 1960s, "Put Our Heads Together" linked soul's political urgency and its soaring vocalism with a melody driven by fat synthesizer bass. More common were songs that commented on economic hardship due to rising rents, unemployment, and public austerity. Zapp's "We Need the Buck" (1983) and Richard Carl Watson's "It's Hard to Make It" (1984) are exemplary here. But perhaps the most numerous message songs of the boogie era were produced in support of Jesse Jackson's 1984 run for president. Jackson was more than a movement veteran; he had linked black music to racial politics in the 1960s through Operation Breadbasket and famously performed his "I Am—Somebody" poem at the WattStax music festival in 1972.[121] During his presidential campaign, songs with titles like "Jesse" and "Run, Jesse, Run" were issued by different artists that championed Jackson's candidacy, many of which incorporated rapping atop boogie grooves.

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[121] In the late 1970s, Jackson expressed selective outrage toward disco. As Alice Echols explains, "In the wake of [Donna] Summer's success, Jesse Jackson's Operation PUSH convened several conferences on disco, which he condemned as "garbage and pollution," although the preacher had shown no qualms about Isaac Hayes's bedroom music" (Echols 2011, 109).

It is therefore an exaggeration to say that boogie turned away from politics entirely, even if the political character of funk did change. With the movements of the 1960s and 1970s definitively in the past, political hopes in the 1980s were often channeled through elected officials and the Democratic Party (K.-Y. Taylor 2016, 92). Sometimes they were expressed through funk music. More often, however, funk in the 1980s sang about the familiar themes of love, partying, and dancing. After all, these pleasures cut across class differences, as did the openness of the funk form itself.

The Funk Form: Musical Continuity and Change

By comparing James Brown's "Cold Sweat" (1967) with Zapp's breakthrough boogie anthem "More Bounce to the Ounce" (1980), we are provided an introduction to the vocabulary of funk and a basis for assessing funk's transformation in the early 1980s. Like "Cold Sweat," "More Bounce" employs a rhythm-centered approach to music making, contains a repetitive groove, incorporates improvisation, displays antiphony (call and response dynamics), and uses "impure" tones and the bending of notes modeled on the human voice. With the incorporation of a drum machine, synthesizer bass, and Roger Troutman's signature use of the talk box, a layer of technological and cultural complexity is added to the music. Boogie retained funk's Afro-diasporic form even as it incorporated outside influences and the latest musical technologies.

The figure of repetition in Afro-diasporic music takes specific formal features in funk. Funk is built around grooves—short, repeatable musical phrases that

150

maintain the rhythm and tempo of a song. In contrast to Western classical music, where pieces develop in teleological fashion—for example, in movements—the temporality of a groove is one of extended presence (Tagg 2012, 590).[122] James Brown's "Cold Sweat" (1967) used repetition as its core principle, defying pre-existing formulas of American popular songwriting while setting a template for a genre in formation.[123] With "no perceptible starting or stopping points," much of Brown's music lent itself to semi-improvised performances of variable length, only to be trimmed down to meet the stylistic requirements of radio and album formatting (Vincent 2008, 55; M. P. Brown 1994, 494). Though it was recorded 13 years after "Cold Sweat," "More Bounce" retains these formal features.

The tension produced by the repetitive structure of the groove and the openness of improvisation is an effect of funk's rhythmic approach to songwriting. It is the way that funk emphasizes the rhythm section—the drums and the bass—that gives the music its propulsive feel. It is also with these instruments that Zapp turned to the latest technologies, drawing heavily on the sonic innovations of Parliament-Funkadelic.

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[122] Christopher Small makes a similar point. He writes, "The repetitions of African music have a function in time which is the reverse of (Western classical) music—to dissolve the past and the future into one eternal present, in which the passing of time is no longer noticed (Small quoted in (Small quoted in Rose 1994, 67).

[123] Again, the nationalist critics who held up James Brown as the sound of black authenticity reserved their criticisms of musical repetitiveness for disco. George writes, "But between 1976 and 1980, two musical forces combined to de-funk disco and turn it into a sound of mindless repetition and lyrical idiocy that, with exceptions, overwhelmed R&B" (George 1988, 153). I understand George to be referring to disco's repetitiveness both at the level of form and in terms of the quantity of similar releases.

While "Cold Sweat" broke ground with its emphasis on rhythmic repetition, Zapp pushed repetition even further. "Cold Sweat" is patterned A-B-A-B-A, separated by cuts that transition from one groove to the next.[124] In eliminating the cuts and stripping the song down to a single groove, "More Bounce" foregrounds repetition consonant with the diasporic funk tradition. And by exaggerating the figure with the use of a drum machine, repetition takes on a technological dimensionality and feel. "More Bounce" is composed of a single four-beat groove that repeats unabated for a total of 9 minutes and 25 seconds. The song's lean compositional structure offered opportunities for unexpected creativity. Funk grooves emphasize the downbeat of a four-beat bar—what James Brown called "The One." In "More Bounce," Roger uses the other beats to experiment and improvise around it, or to play slightly different versions of the song's primary riff.[125] Hence, improvisation in funk is not limited to the number of times a groove repeats; improvisation takes place within the groove itself.

"Cold Sweat" contains antiphony, commonly known as call-and-response, between Brown and "funky drummer" Clyde Stubblefield. In live performances, this back-and-forth was as much between Brown and the audience as it was between himself and his band. "More Bounce" mirrors "Cold Sweat" in this regard. Roger

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[124] As Matthew P. Brown explains, "These cuts are often announced and recognizable, and they can introduce a new key or tempo, or simply a solo that is layered on top of the earlier beat. Other familiar Brown cuts are 'take it to the bridge' or 'Maceo' (signaling the JBs' sax player); but they can be instrumental as well, descending bass lines or snaky percussive accents" (M. P. Brown 1994, 494).

[125] The term riff implies variation and improvisation when used as a verb.

calls out "More Bounce to the Ounce" on the talk box and he's answered by the guitars, or by faint sexual whispers.

In the 1980s and 1990s, scholarship on black music sometimes positioned black culture and technology as antagonistic forces. But "More Bounce" explodes the dichotomy between economic and technological (mode of production) determinations on the one hand and cultural (superstructural) determinations on the other.[126] It speaks to the syncretic character of black music during globalization's first digital age. As Roger explained: "I consider the voice box… like an African robot… It says logical things that a computer says, but instead of saying them very drab and disgusting as a robot would say… I can sound computerized and I can also sound real funky" (Troutman quoted in S. Brown 2013, 120). Roger used his talk box both to make his voice sound mechanical—"g-g-g-g-g-get on the dance floor"—and to make the MiniMoog sound human.

By melding his voice with the machine, Roger collapsed the distinction. African American musicians have long modeled their instrumental techniques on the human voice, aiming to replicate tonal speech patterns.[127] In contrast with the clear

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[126] Though he writes very little about black cultural politics, Jameson nevertheless pointed to such a dynamic. He writes: with the eclipse of culture as an autonomous space or sphere, culture itself falls into the world, and the result is not its disappearance but its prodigious expansion, to the point where culture becomes coterminous with social life in general: now all the levels become 'acculturated,' and in the society of the spectacle, the image, or the simulacrum, everything has at length become cultural, from the superstructures down into the mechanisms of the infrastructure itself (Jameson 1988a, 201).

[127] As George Lipsitz explains, "African languages characteristically vary meaning by changing tone register and that continent's musics draw upon the entire range of sounds open to the human ear, rather than merely upon the precisely measured vibrations that count as notes in the West" (Lipsitz 1990, 110).

and definite pitches associated with Western classical music and tonal harmony, Roger's use of the talk box incorporated the "bending" of notes characteristic of African-American musical forms. These vocal maneuvers situate Zapp in a much longer tradition of black music. In George Lipsitz's "Against the Wind: The Dialogic Aspects of Rock 'n' Roll," he examines the *Africanisms* that carry on from the blues into rock 'n' roll. He describes how in "Good Golly Miss Molly," Little Richard uses "leaps of register into high-pitched falsettos as well as an assortment of slides and growls down the scale" (Lipsitz 1990, 110). Lipsitz's description of Little Richard's vocal delivery could have just as accurately been describing Roger's use of the talk-box. Thus, the technology allowed for the creation of something both traditional and innovative.

While much of the disco and funk made for the dance floor in the late 1970s was relentlessly uptempo, "More Bounce" dropped the groove down to 105 beats per minute. Boogie's slower tempo derives partly from the popularity of roller discos. Roller disco required a tempo fitted to the long strides and glides of skating. While the disco beat is characterized by steady four-on-the-floor kick-drum thumps, "More Bounce" accentuates beats two and four in a thump-clap-thump-clap pattern—a rhythm that typifies the sound of boogie. The electronic drums stand out not only for their simplicity but because the clap track is high in the mix. This technique was pioneered by Funkadelic on "Flashlight" (1977) and became widespread not only in funk but across pop music genres in the early 1980s. (Today many funksters refer to this sound as the "slap," as if you are being slapped across the face with the clap

track. Songs with particularly bouncy basslines and loud clap tracks are referred to as "slappers.") But while Funkadelic primarily used acoustic drums on their recordings, Zapp was an early adopter of the drum machine. The incorporation of drum machines is one prominent marker of the transition into the boogie era.

"Flashlight" also foreshadowed the sound of the boogie era in the way the synthesizer bass performs the song's melody. This was made possible by the technological affordances of the MiniMoog Model D synthesizer. As Vincent explains, "The Moog synthesizer was capable not only of playing low notes, but of stacking a number of bass tones onto one key… [Bernie] Worrell's bass tones sounded louder than any other bass track heard on the radio because of this stacking effect" (Vincent 1996, 246). The stacking effect produced the fat and punchy synth-bass timbre that is a hallmark of boogie-funk. On "Flashlight," Worrell plays the MiniMoog in a walking style characteristic of jazz, but on "More Bounce" Roger draws out the percussive possibilities of the instrument. In his hands, the synth bass takes the sonic texture of an explosive thump. Key features of these synthesizers are wheels for pitch bending and modulation, which enable them to perform the *Africanisms* that characterize black music. The pitch wheel allows for the exaggerated bending of notes well beyond the affordances of the bass guitar, while the modulation wheel enables a vibrato effect, imitative of the human voice. Roger used both of these technologies on every Zapp song, including "More Bounce." Listen to the pitch-bending when Roger's falsetto slides between notes as he sings "ooh-wee!" before using the modulation wheel on "yay-yeah!"

155

The vague lyrics to "More Bounce" are open to a multitude of interpretations, but even so, the song encodes appeals to working-class black and brown audiences. Roger described how "More Bounce… deals with checks that bounce and I mean what else do you do when your checks bounce but just forget them and have a good time until you can make them good" (Roger quoted in S. Brown 2013, 121). Scot Brown offers a musicological interpretation of the "bounce." He argues that even the song's title is "a declaration of sonic progress—obviously, the fattened Minimoog Bass line offered much more bounce than the standard four-string bass guitar" (S. Brown 2013, 121). Barely veiled double-meanings like these are ubiquitous throughout black music in general and funk in particular (Gilroy 1991, 203). In keeping with the genre's use of sexual themes, "More Bounce to the Ounce" can just as easily be read as being about voluptuous butts, both explicitly on the dance floor and, implicitly, in the bedroom.[128] Likewise, "More Bounce" can be interpreted as an ode to potent marijuana. The United States is one of the few countries that uses the British Imperial system of measurement as opposed to the metric system. While small amounts of pot are measured in grams, larger quantities are measured in ounces or pounds. "More Bounce to the Ounce" suggests that "a little goes a long way."

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[128] Funk never shied from sexual themes and "nastiness," not least of all "because of its auditory proximity to the word fuck" (Vincent 1996, 24). Vincent argues that funk is "a deliberate reaction to—and rejection of—the traditional Western world's predilection for pretense, formality, and self-repression" (4–5). While his nationalist problematic reproduces the trope of associating blacks with the body and with nature (and therefore, at least implicitly, whites with the mind and with modernity), he nevertheless shows how funk helped to legitimate public forms of sexuality within American popular culture. Of course, disco also made important contributions here. While funk generally privileged straight male perspectives on sexuality, disco was attentive to the desires of women and gay men.

Roger and Zapp: A Boogie Biography

Roger and Zapp's biography further illustrates in microcosm the social history we have covered thus far, showing how boogie was grounded in a historical and musical relationship to earlier funk, while also serving as a bridge to the later development of G-funk, a hip-hop subgenre.

Roger Troutman and his nine siblings grew up in a large working-class family in Hamilton, Ohio, located between Dayton and Cincinnati. Their father Rufus was a truck driver and was employed at a paper mill, while their mother Addie Ruth worked from home. Although they were not musicians themselves, Rufus and Ruth fostered a musical household by encouraging their children to play instruments. In a 1987 interview, Roger described how the music his parents played in the home provided a foundation for the approach he took toward funk: "They always listened to blues and black music that had a lot of bass in it… I guess because of that I always understood about the heavy bottom" (CaptainFunkOnTheRADIO Radio Béton 2015). After playing together in different groups, Roger and his brother Lester formed Roger and the Human Body. Eventually they were joined by two of their other brothers, Larry and Terry. All of them would go on to play in Zapp, which was Terry's nickname. The Human Body self-released their first single "Freedom" on Troutman Bros. Records in 1975. The song became a regional hit largely due to WDAO, a Dayton radio station that showcased local bands in addition to playing nationally successful records. The group's debut LP, *Introducing Roger* (1976), was released the following year. Both musically and lyrically, the songs were closer to the styles of James Brown or the

Jimmy Castor Bunch—the assertive "street" funk of the Black Power era—more than they foreshadowed the techno-futurism of Zapp. As Scot Brown explains, "The only hint of the forthcoming electronic Roger and Zapp brand was a short guitar solo connected to a talk box, which sounded more like a distant effect than anything that could ever materialize as a principal instrumental voice" (S. Brown 2013, 120). While the majority of the instruments were played by the four brothers, the album also included background singers from their local high school choir.

After changing their name to Zapp the following year, the band began performing around the greater Ohio area. They impressed William Earl "Bootsy" and Phelps "Catfish" Collins, veterans of James Brown's band and the P-Funk empire. In 1978, Roger joined Funkadelic on their "Anti-Tour" promoting *One Nation Under a Groove*. After helping them sign to Warner Brothers, Bootsy would go on to produce Zapp's first LP.

Zapp's debut album was tracked at Detroit's United Sound Studios, where George Clinton and his empire of musical projects had recorded since the late 1960s (Clinton and Greenman 2014, 58). Likely at Bootsy's request, Clinton was brought into the studio to work on a song called "Funky Bounce." In his autobiography, Clinton writes:

> I didn't love it. I didn't hear where it was going. One section, though, really appealed to me. I thought that if I isolated that and then had Roger add his trademark talk-box vocals and organ, it could really be something. I looped the section, called Roger, and told him that I had made a new song. He wasn't thrilled, but I had some leverage—I was trying to finalize his Uncle Jam solo deal—so he went along with it. That song became "More Bounce to the Ounce," which was a monster hit. (Clinton and Greenman 2014, 238)

158

Clinton used the same studio technique of cutting and looping tape that the engineers

recording the Bee Gees' *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) developed just two years

earlier. After Bee Gees' drummer Dennis Bryon unexpectedly had to leave the studio

in Miami and return to England to take care of a sick parent, the recording engineers

made a pragmatic decision to loop a two-bar phrase from "Night Fever" (Echols

2011, 173). That drum loop was put to use on both "Stayin' Alive" and "More Than a

Woman." Clinton adapted their innovation to the funk tradition.

This decision raises questions about artistic agency and the relationship

between the cultural and the economic, the historically contingent and the necessary.

Did Clinton's decision reflect black cultural priorities or was it merely his personal

preference? Was this evidence of standardization latent in the commodity form

working its way into funk? Or was this funk's formal diasporic repetitiveness taking

advantage of the latest studio technologies? Was disco's producer-led process

eclipsing funk's collectivity? Or was the tension between producer and band inscribed

in funk since its inception?

While the first recorded drum loop was born out of exceptional

circumstances—at the time, it was thought to be a temporary solution while Bryon

was out of the studio—for Clinton, it was a stylistic choice. Clinton's Parliament

lampooned disco as "The Placebo Syndrome"—"aka funkless black music"—for its

"synthetic," producer-led production process (George 1988, 156). But in the boogie

era, even Clinton came to accept that the studio could be creatively used to assemble

a first-rate dance record, rather than simply to capture the sound of a live performance.

Zapp and "More Bounce" had a remarkable afterlife in hip-hop. The song went on to be sampled on hundreds of rap records, something Roger appreciated not only because he was paid residuals for each use but because it demonstrated the kind of appreciation for musical history that he championed in his own songwriting (Tiffany Bacon 2014). Zapp's unique style of slowed-down electronic funk provided a template for the hip-hop subgenre known as *G-funk*. Short for Gangsta-funk, G-funk was a testament to the genre's influence on hip-hop and a nod to Parliament-Funkadelic, also known as P-Funk. Theorist of hip-hop Adam Krims classifies G-funk as "a style of generally West Coast rap whose musical tracks tend to deploy live instrumentation, heavy on bass and keyboards, with minimal (sometimes no) sampling and often highly conventional harmonic progressions and harmonies" (Krims 2000, 74). In contrast to many of the groups that sampled "More Bounce" right off the record, G-funk producers like Dr. Dre re-recorded classic boogie grooves with live instrumentation.

Dayton funk had an inordinate influence on the G-funk sound. In addition to reworking many Dayton grooves, G-funk became synonymous with Junie Morrison's high-pitched keyboard squiggle used on the Ohio Players' "Funky Worm." Roger Troutman's talk box became equally representative after Dr. Dre brought him to record the opening lines and chorus of 2Pac's "California Love" (1995).[129] As the

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[129] The song introduced Zapp to a new generation, including white suburban youth.

metaphor of "crate digging" for samples implies, hip-hop production techniques grew from practices of musical archeology. But the use of Roger's talk-box in "California Love" was less about historical recovery than it was a confirmation of how Zapp remained so strongly associated with the black populations of California cities: Long Beach, Oakland, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Pasadena, Inglewood, Sacramento, Watts.

Globalization of Funk

If boogie's history ties it to specific American locales—Dayton, Detroit, New York,[130] Los Angeles—the music nonetheless traveled. Across social formations, and under connected but differing conditions, boogie became a global cultural form. The music developed within a phase of capitalist globalization that witnessed the increased spread of musicians and cultural commodities across national borders.[131] Included in those commodities were vinyl records and cassettes, but also musical technologies that produced the timbres that would define the genre. Consequently, the continuity that can be heard in boogie across the world is as much a product of a global capitalist conjuncture as it is of diasporic cultural imperatives.

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[130] The sound of boogie was also pioneered on independent New York-based disco labels like P&P, Prelude, Sam, and West End Records. Tim Lawrence argues that the impact of the economic downturn was more acute on these small labels, who cut studio expenses in response. For example, operating without an in-house production team, Prelude's newly stripped-down arrangements had their own economic rationale. The stark effects of musical streamlining were captured on D-Train's scene-defining 12-inch, "You're the One for Me" (1982), which many commentators at the time understood as disco returning to its roots in R&B (Lawrence 2016, 203). This pattern, however, does not apply to the music recorded on major labels in the early 1980s.

[131] "These means of distribution are capable of dissolving distance and creating new and unpredictable forms of identification and cultural affinity between groups that dwell far apart" (Gilroy 1999, 194).

As records crossed borders, they served as musical and visual points of

connection, identification, and difference. The music's global "appropriations" make

it tempting to understand boogie's popularity as an instance of cultural imperialism.[132]

However, as Josh Kun powerfully argues, such a model incorrectly assumes that

"cultural traffic is one-way and that the sounds of the core aren't 'always already'

saturated with the sounds of the periphery" (Kun 2005, 201). As we have seen, funk's

form was constituted by *Africanisms* even as it incorporated digital instrumentation.

For Kun, musical imitation—both as parody and as pastiche—is an active rather than

passive process that has culturally specific significations that extend beyond a genre's

place of origin. In other words, imitation paradoxically also produces difference

(201-6).

A global perspective on funk in the 1980s therefore troubles the dominant

narrative about its political and cultural significance. From this perspective, its

importance cannot be reduced to its relationship to the history of a black "nation" in

the United States. As boogie became a global musical form, it developed

regionally-specific sonic contours and meanings. For this reason, the music took on

distinct genre names in different countries. In the UK, amidst its diverse and

cosmopolitan dancefloors, *Britfunk* affiliated black British identity with the diaspora

in the United States. In South Africa, *bubblegum* became the sound of a coded

struggle against apartheid. And in Japan, *city pop* emerged alongside a rapid

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[132] Cultural imperialism suggests that "the unidirectional flow of First World cultural
products… has homogenized the diversity of the world's cultures into a single global
monoculture that it has shaped in its own image" (Kun 2005, 201).

162

economic expansion, catering to the cultural imaginaries of wealthy financiers and the country's growing class of white-collar urbanites. When analyzed as part of the same musical matrix, these genres highlight the complex cultural politics of globalization, class, and diaspora in the 1980s. By treating boogie as the sound of a global conjuncture, we capture the diversity of its political valences.

London's cosmopolitan dancefloors were quick to incorporate the latest American imports, but musicians adapted the sounds to their own national context. Britfunk distanced itself from the assertive and masculinist posture of reggae, which drew lyrically and affectively from African-American Black Power politics of the late 1960s (Gilroy 1991, 172). Indeed, because British reggae so thoroughly dealt with the cultural politics of diasporic dispersion and black proletarian experience, funk was predisposed toward a less militant stance. With few notable exceptions—such as Light of the World's "London Town," which critiques racist policing practices—Britfunk generally traded in universal lyrical themes of love and loss that have long circulated on the disco dance floor. This stance reflected "London's multicultural urban milieu" from which the music emerged. As Robert Strachan explains:

> Those involved in Britfunk did to some extent come from a broad range of ethnicities and included not only first and second-generation West Indian musicians but also African, Asian and white participants. Prominent figures such as Jean-Paul 'Bluey' Maunick of Incognito (Mauritius), Sade (Nigeria), Joe Mensah of Hi Tension (Ghana) originated from the former British colonies whilst there were white British members of numerous acts (although all-white acts such as Level 42 were rare). (Strachan 2017, 75)

Although bands were often integrated, "the majority of musicians involved… were British people of Caribbean descent" (Strachan 2017, 75). Britfunk allowed for a diversity of performance styles contemporaneous with but not necessarily derived from those in the United States. From the high-fashion sensibilities of Linx (UK) and the on-the-nose High Fashion (US) to the camp of Imagination (UK) and Breakwater (US), to the middle-class professionalism of Central Line (UK) and Change (US), articulations were being made in both sound and style that testified to the shared circumstances between both countries.

In contrast to the notion that electronic funk signaled depoliticization,[133] it provided South African artists with a popular musical form through which coded critiques of apartheid could evade state censorship. Critiques of racism were often subtly embedded in lyrics about interpersonal relationships, labor, poverty, and unemployment (Durbach 2015, 112).[134] In this way, South African pop musicians were able to criticize the state without referencing it directly, while also linking itself to American funk that made similar critiques of Reaganomics (Gilroy 1991, 155,182). Although South African disco and funk were recorded in the 1970s, it wasn't until the

[133] Similar debates about the cultural significance of black pop were happening contemporaneously in the United States and South Africa in the 1980s. Bubblegum was sometimes criticized for its producer-led production process, its use of synthesizers and drum machines, and for being (supposedly) depoliticized party music (Durbach 2015, 89). For this reason, the South African jazz musician Hugh Masekela described disco as a "social tranquilizer," inadequate to fomenting the consciousness necessary for fighting against apartheid (16). However, Masekela would go on to record the synthesizer and drum-machine-laden "Don't Go Lose It Baby" in 1984. The song appeared as the first track on his *Techno-Bush* LP, whose title conveys a message parallel to Roger's "African robot."
[134] For one example, see Vernon Molefe's "Shame" (1984).

early 1980s, with the introduction of synthesizers and drum machines, that the music

took on its own generic appellation: bubblegum.[135] According to Johannesburg-based

DJ David Justin Durbach, "The label was initially intended as a derogatory term to

suggest that the music was disposable and/or mass-produced. It is credited with

beginning in 1983 with the hit song 'Weekend Special' by Brenda & The Big Dudes"

(3). Indeed, "Weekend Special" was highly imitative, taking its bassline from BB&Q

Band's "All Night Long" while its chorus drew from Sharon Redd's "Never Give You

Up" (Szatan 2019). However, bubblegum's imitative qualities were neither instances

of American cultural imperialism nor the passive reproduction of pop clichés. Rather,

reworking African-American music enabled South African artists to challenge tribal

stereotypes that reinforced the ruling National Party's racial ideology. Additionally,

by choosing to sing in English—though sometimes incorporating one or more

indigenous languages such as isiZulu or Sesotho—bubblegum crossed the racial,

ethnic, and linguistic boundaries codified by apartheid (Durbach 2015, 3, 21, 90).

Bubblegum's "crossover" from black to white audiences had significant

cultural consequences and political implications for a society where racial and ethnic

segregation was law. Although bubblegum was a form of black pop enjoyed primarily

by black South Africans, white identification with black culture served to

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[135] The generic term *bubblegum* is a contested one. As Durbach explains, "It reportedly first came from the media to differentiate certain commercial acts from more serious or cerebral music, such as Stimela and Sakhile" (Durbach 2015, 88). He continues, "Because the label bubblegum is considered to be derogatory, many in the industry never used it, instead preferring labels like township pop, disco or Afro-pop" (89). I treat bubblegum similar to how I treat Britfunk and city pop—that is, as a regionally specific name for music that includes but is not limited to boogie.

delegitimize racism and the institutions that maintained apartheid (94). Whereas the apartheid regime actively recorded and promoted "ethnic" music to naturalize the idea of racial and cultural hermeticism, bubblegum was typically produced collaboratively across the color line. White producers and engineers were central to the bubblegum sound, and many album covers featured black musicians and white engineers working together in the studio. What's more, "many bubblegum stars came from multi-ethnic families in and around cosmopolitan Johannesburg, particularly Soweto" (90). The very existence of these musicians challenged the demographic categorizations of the South African Broadcasting Company, whose radio formats were designed to advance the racial ideology of "separate development."[136] Since there were no "coloured" stations, these musicians functioned as crossover acts. Neville Nash, Supa Frika (Henry Maitin), and Al Etto are examples of musicians of mixed-race that recorded bubblegum hits enjoyed by black and white audiences alike.

Neither the music industry nor musicians themselves acted as a unified force against apartheid.[137] While some musicians violated the UN-sanctioned cultural boycott, others joined the international fight against apartheid. In the United States, SOLAR Records owner Dick Griffey "work[ed] closely with Rev. Jesse Jackson and Push/Rainbow Coalition, the NAACP and Athletes against Apartheid" (S. Brown

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[136] "The idea behind the separate language services of the SABC was to convince the South African population, in general, that separate development was self-development through the medium of their own language and that, by this means, there would be progress in all spheres of life" (Durbach 2015, 42–43).

[137] Some American performers toured South Africa in the 1980s, violating the UN-sanctioned cultural boycott. This included the O'Jays—a group that never shied away from "message music"—who were swiftly criticized and issued an apology (Beaubien 1982, 14).

2010, 277). Others wrote songs in support of the anti-apartheid movement. For example, Kashif's "Botha Botha (Anti-Apartheid Song)" (1985) is both a call to action and a critique of Pieter Willem Botha, South Africa's last Prime Minister (1978-84) and first president (1984-9). The chorus uses dancing as a metaphor for freedom: "Botha, Botha, Botha / We can't dance / Cause you're standin' on our feet." Here I want to bracket the musical merits of the song only to point out that in using the possessive pronoun *our,* Kashif identifies with the black population struggling in South Africa, while the music he pioneered served as a foundation for bubblegum. This two-way traffic between the U.S. and South Africa confirms the need for the diaspora concept to make sense of "the differences and the continuities in black experience" (Gilroy 1994, 54). Or, as Robin D.G. Kelley puts it, "'blackness' has been—and will continue to be—multicultural" (Kelley 1996, 105). As boogie-funk became a global form of diasporic communication, but also one that extended beyond black populations, it becomes clear that the genre's counter-hegemonic potential lies less in its musical form than in its larger context.

In contrast to the notion that electronic funk was merely a sonic consequence of an economic slump, in Japan it emerged amidst a great economic expansion. Concurrent with its growing class of affluent urban professionals, the emergence of *city pop* captured the short-lived idealism associated with rapid economic growth as well as the social isolation that paradoxically accompanied the gains of capitalist

globalization (Blistein 2019).[138] More than any definitive set of sounds, city pop was the name given to an era of Japanese pop from roughly 1975 through 1990 (Cunningham 2020). Boogie became one of many Western musical forms incorporated within the catch-all genre label. Although city pop musicians made overt sonic, lyrical, and visual references to American culture, it was committed to making music for Japanese audiences. Song titles and choruses sometimes appeared in English but city pop lyrics were sung primarily in Japanese, marking a break from Japan's earlier English-language rock tradition. In adapting an African-American musical form, Japanese funk illustrates the syncretic and cross-cultural production of popular music that capitalist globalization made possible.

Japan's economic prosperity extended to its music industry, but that same prosperity also imposed unique constraints upon it. In contrast to American, British, and South African boogie-funk, which includes an outsized number of independently released singles and LPs, city pop was issued almost exclusively on major labels and their subsidiaries. Because costs of recording and vinyl pressing were comparatively high, the structure of Japan's music industry privileged major labels over independents, as well as already popular artists over up-and-coming ones. For this reason, city pop tended to come from established performers and songwriting teams who could produce a high quantity of releases. With major label support, top session players were regularly brought into the studio, where the latest musical technologies

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[138] Both of these movements are captured by the Sony Walkman, renowned simultaneously for its economic impact on the music industry and for its capacity to privatize listening in public space.

168

accompanied (rather than replaced) live performers. Many of these technologies, like the Yamaha DX-7 synthesizer, were as widely used in the United States as in Japan. In fact, boogie was already suffused with the sounds of Japanese-manufactured electronics before the form was "exported" to Japan.

City pop was unabashedly postmodern in celebrating its fusion with consumer culture. Many songs—or at least portions of them—were integrated into television advertising campaigns, used simultaneously to sell branded products and as vehicles for music promotion (Zhang 2021). This collapse of art and commerce partially reflected the cultural prestige associated with Japan's advertising industry (Blistein 2019). In fact, many visual artists who worked for Japan's leading multinational corporations also designed city pop's most iconic album covers.

City pop fused the economic, musical, and visual connections between the U.S. and Japan. According to Michael K. Bourdaghs, city pop reflected the dominant geopolitical imaginary of Japan in the postwar period, constituted as it was by a Japanese—U.S. relation (Bourdaghs 2012).[139] City pop album art depicted Californian coastlines as often as urban city centers, united by their pop art representations of cosmopolitan luxury and travel as much as their sense of place. The Pacific Ocean that mediates between Japan and the United States was a regular

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[139] A consequence of U.S. occupation (1945-52) and its role in rebuilding Japan's postwar economy was that American popular music was broadcast on Japanese airwaves. From the Yokota Air Force Base just outside Tokyo, a U.S. military radio station known as the Far East Network (FEN) programmed the latest American popular music for over five decades (Blisten 2019, Cunningham 2020). FEN had a tremendous impact on Japanese musicians born in the first generation after World War II, who appropriated and hybridized Western musical forms as they were developing.

referent in both music and album art. Yet, urban skylines function as the dominant visual signifier of city pop. Cityscapes of downtown Los Angeles, New York, and Tokyo—composed as they are of massive skyscrapers and "mega-structures"—are suffused with the symbolism of high finance; many such buildings were speculative outlets for Japanese capital during the 1980s.[140]

Although city pop traded in the imaginary of financial elites, the music captured the heightened economic expectations of Japanese in general. Underlying depictions of Californian endless summers, rising incomes, and a strong yen (relative to the dollar) were encouraging Japanese tourism to the United States (Bourdaghs 2012; Schumann 2017, 19). In songs like Toshiki Kadomatsu's "Airport Lady" and Yasuko Agawa's "L.A. Night," city pop expressed the pleasures of consumption in the form of travel and sightseeing. "L.A. Night" is interesting for how it condenses so many of city pop's central lyrical themes—travel (both flight and car rides), vacation, urban nightlife, the beach/ocean, Japan's link to California—and for how it stages them through the groove of Britfunk group Light of the World's "London Town." Both "L.A. Night" and "London Town" were produced by Augie Johnson, the creative force behind the African-American disco group Side Effect.[141] Although

[140] I borrow the term "mega-structures" from Mike Davis, whose unrivaled history of Los Angeles, *City of Quartz* (2018), powerfully captures the impact of globalization and the influx of Japanese capital on downtown L.A.'s built environment.
[141] He was also a backup vocalist on Michael Jackson's "Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough" (1979) and Boz Scaggs' "Lowdown" (1976). Scaggs' *Silk Degrees* clearly had a major impact on the sound, visual style, and bourgeois sensibility of city pop. On the cover, a suit-clad Scaggs is sitting on a bench that overlooks the ocean from California's Channel Islands. It has been widely referenced by city pop album art as well as by Bobby Caldwell's 1978 self-titled LP.

"L.A. Night" displaces "London Town"'s criticism of racist policing—lyrics unfit for a country without a sizable black diaspora—it also points us beyond the U.S.—Japan relation toward a more global situation of funk.

Boogie's popularity in Japan reminds us that capitalism is a global system in which music is never the product of hermetic ethnic groups, and that it always contains the potential to traverse the boundaries of the nation-state. The extent to which an African-American musical form would serve as raw material for musicians both within and beyond the black diaspora took shape within this global situation. A materialist account of boogie-funk must trace the connections between musical sounds, performers, and commodities across the world. It is only on these foundations that we can appreciate it as a musical form adaptable to different political and cultural contexts—one that engendered forms of cross-cultural identification and difference as much as it resulted in a transcultural music made possible by a global conjuncture.

The critics of boogie, I have suggested, have ideologically limited and overly general historical narratives that have led them to overlook the globalization of funk and the political and social heterogeneity it implies. But perhaps a condition of possibility for telling this history, for perceiving it as such, is the fact that record collectors have given a name to these sounds after the fact. They have formalized them in a network of institutions, simultaneously canonizing funk's history and reviving the music from below. In other words, it may be the existence of a modern funk scene, which looks back for historical influences and forward to new musical possibilities, that makes my telling here possible. My narrative may be seen as a

171

cultural movement's telling of its own history through the research and analysis of one of its members. It is to the modern funk scene and its significance that we now turn.

Revival: The Modern Funk Scene

For all its current popularity, *boogie* is not a term that was used as the music was being produced in the 1980s. In other words, boogie was not distinguished categorically from the diversity of styles that emerged in disco's wake. As Sarah Thornton emphasizes, we cannot "take the existence of genres for granted (as if music organically evolved into kinds and categories)" (Thornton 1996, 152). Part of the effect of naming sounds—which by no means automatically brings them into popular circulation—is that they generate "lines on people's aural, aesthetic and social maps" (156). Genre construction, sometimes retroactively produced by compilations, concerts, and publications, gives "meaning to identifiable sounds and [places] them in a genealogy" (156). We've already seen that boogie circulated globally in the 1980s, generating new music and new meanings in the process. In fact, the very appellation *boogie* derives from this transnational circulation, specifically in the cultural exchange between the U.S. and the UK. A brief genealogy demonstrates how the process of retroactively naming sounds is bound up with the act of canonization, bringing us closer to the present.

Into the late seventies and early eighties, boogie was still being used primarily as a verb. To boogie meant to dance. In the United States, where the stigma associated

with disco was the most pronounced, most people called it soul, funk, or RnB).[142] In Northern England, the music was typically referred to as either "disco funk" or "electro funk," depending on whether an acoustic drum kit or a drum machine was used (Wilson 2006). In the mid-80s, boogie began to circulate as a genre category among black British youth and record dealers in the London club scene. According to British DJ Greg Wilson, "The sub-genre really came into its own around 1985, when Kiss FM (named in tribute to the seminal New York dance station) took to the air" (Wilson 2006).[143] The music became "such a big deal in London that Kiss would even release two volumes of their 'Boogie Tunes' compilation on Graphic Records in the late 80's, making a number of highly sought after tracks available on vinyl at an affordable price" (Wilson 2006). *Boogie Tunes* (1988) brought the category into semi-popular use in the United Kingdom. Although these British compilations contained mostly American tracks, they effectively "exported" the category back to the United States.

Still, treating boogie as a genre remained the province of insiders until the next century. The term's wide reach today is largely a result of the modern funk scene, a musical revival that began in the 2000s and centers on the sounds of early

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[142] Kirk Harper, interview with author, June 16, 2018.
[143] Wilson locates two flyers for London-based club nights, one from 1981 and another from 1982, that appear to use boogie as a genre category. However, he notes that these were exceptional cases. He writes, "During the early 80's, specialist club nights would list the music featured as Jazz, Jazz-Funk, Soul, Funk, Disco, and later Electro or Electro-Funk, but never Boogie – the Electric Ballroom was unique in this respect. The only exception I'm aware of was a little known venue called 'Gemas New Caprice Club' in Watford, which, in London's Groove Weekly magazine, advertised 'Up-Front Jazz-Funk and Boogie' in August 1982, having previously used 'Jazz-Funk' on its own)" (Wilson 2006).

1980s funk. The club culture is composed of a complex network that connects DJs, record collectors, independent labels, internet radio stations, musicians, YouTube channels, social media accounts, and dance parties in cities across the world. Nevertheless, its origins and epicenter are in Los Angeles, California. L.A. was not only home to SOLAR Records, whose in-house producer Leon Sylvers III was an architect of the boogie sound in the 1980s; the city's urban geography fostered (and continues to foster) black and brown cultural syncretism. While funk is an Afro-diasporic musical form, boogie has become synonymous with Mexican-American cultural heritage. Working-class Chicanos are now the music's chief conservators. At the same time, boogie's revival illustrates how nostalgia for a bygone musical era can become a more universal condition, crossing racial, ethnic, and national borders. In contrast to the formatted nostalgia fostered and capitalized upon by radio stations and record companies, this is a nostalgia produced and circulated from below as a means of carrying history into the present.

While modern funk refers to a scene,[144] it also designates music made over the last two decades that stylistically draws from the boogie era. In addition to taking up funk form, it foregrounds the musical instruments and technologies of the 1980s that gave boogie its unique timbres: drum machines, synthesizers, talk-boxes, vocoders, etc. Still, there is some debate about what qualifies as modern funk music. For Randy

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[144] Richard A. Peterson and Andy Bennett explain that music scenes "designate the contexts in which clusters of producers, musicians, and fans collectively share their common musical tastes and collectively distinguish themselves from others" (A. Bennett and Peterson 2004, 1). For an earlier academic elaboration of the concept, see Will Straw's influential essay "Systems of Articulation, Logics of Change: Communities and Scenes in Popular Music" (2006).

Ellis, cofounder of the Modern Funk Fest (MFF) held yearly in Echo Park, modern funk is only made by active musicians writing original music.[145] According to this criteria, edits of songs from the 1980s do not qualify, even when they are released by labels that also issue modern funk.

The term "modern funk" was coined by Damon Riddick, better known by his stage name Dâm-Funk. Amiably referred to as "the ambassador of boogie," the black Pasadena-born musician, DJ, and record collector has been essential to the recent canonization of boogie and its revival in Los Angeles. Before modern funk became a definitive movement, Riddick used the category as a means of describing his own music, which, in an era of proliferating micro-genres and sub-classifications, placed it firmly in the funk tradition. However, he distinguished himself from those simply trying to replicate the past. In a 2009 interview, Riddick explained: "boogie is what I spin out at the clubs. I'm not into doing boogie revival, I'm not trying to re-create old sounds, I consider it modern funk" (Weiss 2015). While "modern funk" might seem an obvious or intuitive way to classify Riddick's music, the term is rooted in record collector culture. It is a spin on "modern soul," a category first used by British record collectors to distinguish 1970s and 1980s soul from the northern soul club culture built around the "unpopular and long forgotten" sounds of the American 1960s (Thornton 1996, 69).[146]

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[145] Randy Ellis, interview with author, May 13, 2018.
[146] Thornton argues that "Northern Soul's appeal was not nostalgia but rarity" (Thornton 1996, 70).

Like the category of modern funk, Riddick's musical biography connects funk's past to its present. As with most of the "hip-hop generation," Riddick had a passion for music but little formal training. Nevertheless, in the early 1990s, he landed an apprenticeship with SOLAR Records producer Leon Sylvers III, which he parlayed into studio work playing keyboards for MC Eiht, Mack 10, Ice Cube, and others in the L.A. rap scene. Before the 2000s, most funk record collectors in the United States obsessed over rare breakbeat 45s from the late 1960s through the mid-1970s, but Riddick gravitated toward the then underappreciated boogie era, spotlighting the music with a DJ night aptly called "1983." 1983 was started by DJ Billy Goods, who brought Riddick on to co-host the night at Culver City's club Carbon. In 2006, Riddick and Goods relaunched 1983 as a weekly event called Funkmosphere—later incorporating DJs Laroj, Randy Watson, Matt Respect, and Eddy Funkster—which laid the groundwork for what would become the modern funk scene.

In contrast to the prevailing norms of DJ culture, where prestige and bookings derived as much from exclusive knowledge and ownership of rare records as the ability to get a dance floor moving, Riddick became known for announcing the artists and song titles of the records he was playing. Relatedly, the mix CDs he made as promotional material for the party contained track lists. In an era before smartphone apps like Shazam could identify songs in real-time, and where information about boogie records was still scarce online, Riddick's inclusive gestures set a precedent for

sharing knowledge in the modern funk scene.[147] At the same time, the presentation of

rare and obscure records for others continued a long-standing practice of both

collecting and DJing, where individual prestige accrues through display. As theorist

of collecting Russell W. Belk explains, "collecting is usually a competitive activity…

As with more general consumption, success in competition with others brings the

collector heightened status (within his or her collecting sphere) and feelings of pride

and accomplishment" (Belk 2006, 68). While access to knowledge about rare records

and the ability to hear them has been significantly democratized since the advent of

digital file-sharing, ownership of original vinyl records remains tethered to older

logics of collecting and storage culture. While we often think about canonization

happening "from above"—in museums, universities, and other "elite"

institutions—Dâm-Funk and Funkmosphere helped inaugurate the process "from

below." As DJs, dancers, and record collectors made their way to Funkmosphere, they

began to start their own nights dedicated to the sounds of the boogie era.

Though Riddick had been recording at home since 1988, his first formal

release, *Toeachizown*, came out in 2009 on Christopher George Manak's Stones

Throw label. Manak, better known as Peanut Butter Wolf, "discovered" Dâm-Funk

through his Myspace page before Funkmosphere boosted his profile throughout Los

Angeles. *Toeachizown* was Riddick's music, but Wolf's concept. The idea was to

issue much of Riddick's unreleased back catalog as a massive 5LP set, making his

first album appear as if it were a retrospective for an established artist. As expanded

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[147] Melissa Dueñas, interview with author, May 13, 2018.

vinyl reissues of classic albums were crowding out new releases in L.A.'s record

stores, *Toeachizown* didn't so much parody the nostalgia boom as exploit it. The

cover features a close-up of Riddick's face sporting wrap-around sunglasses and a

neatly groomed goatee, cast in red and blue hues. The articulation of his

G-funk-inflected boogie with the cover image implies that the red and blue glow

could be the flashing lights of a police car. Rap has of course always maintained a

confrontational stance toward law enforcement in its ongoing critique of racialized

state violence. His wrap-around sunglasses mimic the style worn by Afrika

Bambaataa, the Bronx-based Afrofuturist hip-hop pioneer. In this reading, the

aesthetic of 1980s retrofuturism casts the red and blue colors as that of 3D glasses,

reminiscent of the science fiction film *Tron*'s color scheme. Indeed, retrofuturism is a

popular aesthetic of modern funk album art.[148] As a nostalgic way of representing the

past's imagination of the future, it functions paradoxically. By highlighting the

technologies that once anticipated a utopian future, it taps into our shared desire for

that sense of anticipation, drawing attention, by contrast, to the present's apparent

lack of futurity.

Like the cover of *Toeachizown*, the blending of 1980s boogie, 1990s G-funk,

and 2000s recording techniques characterize Riddick's sound.[149] In contrast to much

of the modern funk that would be released on the album's heels, Riddick's music

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[148] For another example, see Dabuell's *DX7* (2017).

[149] "The G-funk template that we got from Dre and Quik and others mostly had to do
with emcees," Dâm-Funk says. "But there were record diggers and producers who
liked G-funk but didn't necessarily want to have a rapper on top. Modern funk created
a lane in the underground that wasn't being explored in the mainstream" (Riddick
quoted in Weiss 2015).

sounds like it passed through the early 80s, but it does not sound *of* them. His preference for the tempos of G-funk, notably slower than those of most boogie, and his use of 2000s home recording equipment and production techniques distance his music from the past, even if his recordings do not carry obvious signifiers of presence. Riddick has been upfront about avoiding the use of samplers and sequencers. Instead of looping instrumental passages, he plays every instrument "live" for the duration of each track, allowing space for improvisation and human imperfection (Weiss 2015). Because of the temporal diversity of his influences, Riddick often refers to his music as "timeless." Seen in light of the problematic offered by Fisher and Reynolds, one might be tempted to understand this layering of temporalities as a symptom of *Retromania*. But is this the sound of a musician living after history, culling from different eras of black music as a sign of historical dislocation in the present? Or, is this *particular* music irreducible to a generalized condition? Might it instead be the culmination of living history?

Timeless or not, Riddick's music has an unambiguous sense of place. In the video for "Hood Pass Intact" (2010), lyrical clichés about the dangers of fame and the importance of staying connected to one's roots are visualized as Riddick travels around his Pasadena neighborhood. But as Tricia Rose points out in her landmark study of rap, *Black Noise*, "The hood is not a generic designation" (Rose 1994, 10). Wearing a Pirates hat with a large yellow "P," the letter's meaning is recoded from Pittsburgh to Pasadena as Riddick connects with locals at a diner, in the park, at the record store, and at the pawn shop. Flashes of street signs interject the video's day in

the life narrative arc, which begins at home and ends at the club. In "Hood Pass Intact," the black trope of rootedness unites the video with the song's form and lyrics. Clearly modeled on the repetitive groove of "More Bounce to the Ounce," its final lines echo: "Bounce, bounce, bounce, bounce / Rest in peace to Roger Troutman y'all." Indeed, Riddick's modern funk raises the question: When does a trope become a cliché? When does an appreciation for history overshadow or conflict with our sense of the present, and when, by contrast, can it ground conscious departures into uncharted territory?

To answer the question as Nelson George once did in the late 1980s—that is to say, blacks innovate and whites canonize—does not capture the cultural dynamics of musical revivals after the year 2000.[150] By overstating racial differences, George's notion of "retronuevo"—which he defines as a black cultural "embrace of the past to create passionate, fresh expressions and institutions"—does not reflect the cultural complexity and hybridity of modern funk. As Riddick himself explains:

> People wanna work together and cross-pollinate. The Internet has diversified things. In the '70s and '80s, it wasn't as close-knit. Now black-white-Filipino-Asians-Middle Easterners whatever—we all hang out in the same places. We all communicate. So why not have the music come together and feed this grand experiment? (Riddick quoted in Zeigler 2009)

While Riddick's music is clearly driven by an appreciation of funk history, his influences extend well beyond it. His sound can be triangulated by looking at his

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[150] George writes, "The black audience's consumerism and restlessness burns out and abandons musical styles, whereas white Americans, in the European tradition of supporting forms and style for the sake of tradition, seem to hold styles dear long after they have ceased to evolve." He continues, "Blacks create and then move on. Whites document and then recycle. In the history of popular music, these truths are self-evident" (George 2003, 105).

collaborations. Riddick produced Higher (2013) with Steve Arrington of Slave, 7 Days of Funk (2013) with Snoop Dogg, and Invite the Light (2015) with his former mentor Leon Sylvers III. Unlike his connection with Sylvers, Riddick had no previous relationship with Arrington before working together. Social media enabled him to reach out to the funkster-cum-pastor, effectively bringing him out of retirement. Social media has been critical not only for sharing music and promoting events but also for fostering these collaborative projects. Riddick's collaborations on Invite the Light evidence the way he brings together funk (Junie Morrison of the Ohio Players, Leon Sylvers) and hip-hop (Q-Tip, Snoop Dogg), with an eclectic mix of sounds from multiracial Los Angeles (Flea, Nite-Jewel, Ariel Pink). Mike Davis once wrote that "despite the claims of some theorists of the 'hyperreal' or the 'depthless present'—the past is not completely erasable, even in Southern California" (Davis 2018, 337). Modern Funk's conditions of possibility include a strong sense of place in Los Angeles as much as they depended upon global communication technologies.

Digital Infrastructure

While Funkmosphere and the circulation of Riddick's mixes were central to boogie's revival throughout California, the role of online media has also been indispensable. Red Bull Music Academy has been one of the few institutions that have put resources toward preserving funk history. Their interviews with Arthur Baker (2007), Bernie Worrell (2013), Bootsy Collins (2011), Dâm-Funk (2010), Greg Wilson (2006/2014), Leroy Burgess (2004), James Mtume (2014), Patrick Adams (2013), Steve Arrington (2013), and others are vital for understanding boogie from

181

the perspectives of its most renowned sonic architects and DJs. In the first decade of this century, solarradio.com, soul24-7.com, and danceclassics.net, now defunct online forums based in the UK, provided a space for collectors to discuss and share knowledge about the music. In 2012, boogie80.com launched in France. Its founders Marwan Menouer and Albin Pi have interviewed artists from the 1980s and continue to host a show called Crate Diggers, where current DJs show off their collections of rare boogie-funk. The website's online mixes have collectively received hundreds of thousands of streams.

Online radio has also provided important infrastructure for the modern funk scene. While some programs are affiliated with licensed stations that operate out of professional studios, others broadcast out of garages and bedrooms through platforms like Mixlr and Twitch. Listening to DJs live-mixing vinyl records and watching them carefully select their songs are an attractive human alternative to the algorithms that dominate today's listening habits. These programs also provide DJs with a regular opportunity to get together, share knowledge, perform, and connect with fans and friends who text when they are tuned in. In short, they form community in a scene that is dispersed not only throughout Los Angeles or even California but globally.

DUBLAB was one of the earliest stations to spotlight the boogie era. Founded in 1999 at the end of the Dotcom Bubble, dublab is Los Angeles' longest-running online radio station.[151] Not beholden to the legal restrictions, profitability requirements, and formatting logics of commercial radio, the station features a

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[151] DUBLAB currently has independently run satellite stations in Japan, Germany, Spain, and Brazil (Rihn 2019).

changing cast of eclectic DJs that play what they choose. Its survival has depended upon committed DJs that have been with the station from its early days as much as its ability to consistently draw in younger people. A similar ethos has informed the modern funk scene, where music history, rare records, and DJ skills get passed down generationally. Though listenership was low in its early years when the internet was far less populated and more horizontally organized, dublab has become an indispensable part of the city's musical infrastructure. Since 2007, dublab has operated as a non-profit with 501(c)(3) status, financially supported by its listeners. While there is a short list of paid staff, most of its operations are run by volunteers. With its slogan "future roots" operating as a loose guiding principle, dublab's eclectic programming connects past to present while pointing the way toward what's to come (Rihn 2019, 22–25).

The approach stands in stark contrast to commercial radio's polarization between its formatted temporalities of novelty and nostalgia. Over the last twenty years, as L.A. generated a host of distinct but overlapping dance music scenes, they maintained connections with the station. In a recent retrospective of the station's history, music journalist and host of the dublab show Audio Days, Joe Rihn, outlines some of those connections. He writes:

> At one point, dublab shared an office with Plug Research, an influential label known for putting out Flying Lotus' first record, among a long list of important releases. And for a time, the bar downstairs from dublab—then called Little Temple—hosted Sketchbook, a DJ night organized by Kutmah, which laid the groundwork for LA's famed beat scene. (Rihn 2019, 23)

But the connections extend to the modern funk scene as well. East Hollywood's Little Temple is now The Virgil, where Funkmosphere had its residency.[152] Not only have Funkmosphere's DJs performed guest sets on the station; others including Megan "Mamabear" Pattison of the Sweaterfunk crew, MoFunk's Moniquea, and Randy Ellis of CQQL Records have all hosted their own shows on dublab dedicated to boogie's past and present. Touring DJs often prioritize playing on the station while they are in Los Angeles. In 2016, the London-based NTS opened its own studio in Highland Park, about eight miles northeast of Downtown L.A. Some DJs that cut their teeth at Dublab have since left for NTS or split their time between both stations.

While dublab and NTS operate out of professional studios, other DJs run their shows independently out of bedrooms and garages. Christopher Requejo—better known as C-Funk—started the *Funk Mondays* radio show in 2016, broadcasting live and pre-recorded mixes just outside Camp Pendleton where he was stationed as a marine. Alongside his friend and fellow Chicano DJ FlacoFunk, the weekly program grew as they made connections with other DJs through Instagram. One year in, crews that were initially guests on the show began to host their own monthly Monday slot. Today *Funk Mondays* is split between three different DJ crews: Boogie Bunch based in Costa Mesa, CA; Phoenix Funkeros based in Phoenix, AZ; and the Soul Driverz based in Watsonville, CA. These live broadcasts are all recorded and cataloged on their SoundCloud, which now contains over 350 mixes. Although less than 100

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[152] For a brief period in 2012, Funkmosphere DJs were hosting two weekly events. Funkmosphere West was held every Monday at Carbon in Culver City and Funkmosphere East was held every Thursday at The Virgil on the edge of Silver Lake. In 2013, Funkmosphere permanently moved its residency to The Virgil.

listeners might be tuned in during a live broadcast, their mixes have collectively received over 400,000 streams. In contrast with terrestrial radio, which unites listeners in a single moment of broadcasting, online radio acts more like an archive, allowing it to reach a much wider audience. While most *Funk Mondays* listeners are based in the greater Los Angeles area, tens of thousands of streams have come from France, Japan, and the United Kingdom. Such are the connections that platform capitalism has made possible.

Old Sounds, New Sounds, New Labels

Even if the modern funk scene is built around a genre from a bygone era, much of what keeps things fresh is hearing music that is new. While boogie as a genre is "old," nostalgia is paradoxically expressed in the desire for new old sounds. It's this desire that ultimately links boogie from the 1980s to the contemporary productions of modern funk music. While many DJs dwell exclusively in the past, Modern Funk Fest co-founders Randy Ellis and Matt Hudgins (better known as XL Middleton) make a point of incorporating new releases into their sets. They argue that if the culture is going to continue growing, it will require new music and live performers.[153] To this end, both own and operate record labels. Ellis currently issues records on the CQQL label, which he co-runs with Alaia Pareja, while the multi-instrumentalist and producer Hudgins releases music on his MoFunk label. While Ellis has worked at different record shops throughout Los Angeles over the years, Hudgins owns and

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[153] Randy Ellis, interview with author, May 13, 2018.

operates a small store in Chinatown called Salt Box Records, which specializes in 1980s boogie, Japanese city pop, and modern funk.

The founding of new labels has been essential to canonizing boogie, which preceded but has now become inextricable from its revival in the form of modern funk music. Early on, labels focused on rereleasing rare and collectible records from the 1980s. The Boogie Times label in France began to issue CD compilations of obscure boogie-funk as early as 2005. By 2010, they were releasing vinyl 12-inches. In addition to reissuing the collectible song, these 12"s included unreleased material and demos, making them available for the first time on vinyl. Other labels like the Washington D.C.-based People's Potential Unlimited (PPU) developed a similar approach to their releases. But unlike Boogie Times, whose limited-run reissues quickly turn them into collectors' items, PPU's Andrew Morgan remains committed to keeping their records affordable and in print. As modern funk came into its own, the label made the jump from exclusively releasing old material to putting out modern funk. While Morgan is known for keeping a barely visible public profile, many DJs credit PPU with having re-popularized funk for a growing number of record collectors. These early labels tended to focus on American material, but over the last decade more than a dozen nationally focused compilations have highlighted boogie in

Brazil,[154] France,[155] Japan,[156] Nigeria,[157] and South Africa.[158] These compilations testify not only to the global production of electronic funk in the late 1970s and 1980s but to the desire of today's listeners to overcome the parochialism of earlier generations of funk collectors.

Unlike the labels that were founded in the first decade of the 2000s, those that formed in the 2010s have tended to concentrate on new acts rather than reissuing old material. One prominent example is Star Creature—a label whose aesthetic draws heavily from the abstract geometric art of the 1980s and 90s and on the uninhabited beach scenery of Japanese city pop.[159] The label launched in 2014 as a way for its

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[154] For Brazilian boogie, see Favorite Recordings' *Brazilian Disco Boogie Sounds (1978-82)* (2014) and *Brazilian Disco Boogie Sounds Volume 2 (1977-84)* (2015) and the compilation of 7-inches, *As 10 Mais Boogie, Vol. 1* (2017) released by the Somatória Do Barulho label.

[155] For French boogie, see Favorite Recordings' *French Disco Boogie Sounds (1975-84)* (2015), *French Disco Boogie Sounds Volume 2 (1978-85)* (2016), *French Disco Boogie Sounds Volume 3 (1977-87)* (2018), and *French Disco Boogie Sounds Volume 4 (1977-91)* (2019). Also see *France Chébran: French Boogie 1980-1985* (2015) and *France Chébran: French Boogie 1982-1989* (2018) co-released by the Parisian labels Born Bad Records and Serendip.

[156] For Japanese boogie, see Culture of Soul's *Tokyo Nights: Female J-Pop Boogie Funk: 1982 to 1988* (2017) and two compilations released by Light in the Attic Records (US), *Pacific Breeze: Japanese City Pop, AOR and Boogie (1976-86)* (2019) and *Pacific Breeze 2: Japanese City Pop, AOR and Boogie (1972-86)* (2020).

[157] For Nigerian boogie, see *Brand New Wayo: Funk, Fast Times & Nigerian Boogie Badness 1979-1983* (2011) on the Nigerian Comb & Razor Sound label and *Doing It in Lagos: Boogie, Pop & Disco in 1980s Nigeria* (2016) released on the British Soundway label.

[158] For South African boogie, see *Boogie Breakdown: South African Synth-Disco 1980-1984* (2016) on the American Cultures of Soul label and *Gumba Fire: Bubblegum Soul & Synth-Boogie in 1980s South Africa* (2018) on the British Soundway label.

[159] The Star Creature label has made room for both traditional and "postmodern" forms of expression. Consider the similarities and differences between Saucy Lady and Shiro Schwarz, two acts on the label. Known as the "Beantown Disco Queen," the Boston-based Japanese-American Saucy Lady has recorded modern funk songs in

founders Ben Van Dyke and Tim Zawada to keep in touch after Ben left their hometown of Chicago for a job in Los Angeles. These white millennial Chicagoans made their way to boogie through hip-hop, where their interest in the origins of so many sampled grooves dovetailed with boogie's revival. While Star Creature's founders consider their project to be a modern funk label, they distinguish that output from the house records and disco edits they have also released. Star Creature's most loyal supporters are vinyl DJs in the modern funk scene, but they have sold more digital downloads than records "by an order of magnitude." According to Van Dyke, they typically sell five or six hundred physical copies of a 7-inch, but two or three times as many digital files—albeit at a much lower price point. For him, the popularity of digital sales is a sign that the music is making its way beyond the modern funk scene's core of DJs and record collectors. Van Dyke explains that Star Creature was popularized online through its presence on the Bandcamp platform and by DJs including their releases in their mixes. While many small labels are dependent on sales to survive, profits are not what drives Star Creature. Both Ben and Tim have well-paying full-time jobs in other industries, and the label remains more of a "passion project" than an entrepreneurial venture. For example, while even many

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both English and Japanese for the label. In keeping with the city pop tradition, and in perhaps an unintended articulation of finance capital to the cultural consequences of globalization, her first album is titled *Diversify* (2011). Shiro Schwarz is a Mexico-based duo with a Japanese first name and a Jewish surname that connects the sounds of modern funk with a tongue-in-cheek retrofuturist aesthetic. Although musically the group primarily draws on the sounds of the boogie era, their stylistic approach more closely resembles the phenomena Reynolds describes in *Retromania*, where the past is treated playfully rather than with reverence. In contrast with the soaring vocalese of 1980s funk, Shiro Schwarz's male vocalist sings without affect and in a narrow vocal range.

small labels opt for external distribution, they choose to pack most of their sales

themselves, with the help of local friends and DJs.[160]

Cutting across labels releasing modern funk today is a desire to work with

older artists. Most often, this has involved pairing singers from the 1980s, both

popular and little known, with contemporary producers. I've already discussed

Dâm-Funk's collaborations with Steve Arrington and Leon Sylvers III. Howard "So

Fine" Johnson, who was produced by Kashif in the early 1980s, sang on the XL

Middleton production "Can't Get Away from Your Love" (2021) for the latter's

MoFunk label.[161] Chicago disco underground favorite Donnell Pittman worked with

Kumar McMillan to release three 7-inch singles on Star Creature. The Cadencé label

linked Heather Haywood from the Cool Notes (UK) with French modern funk

producer Nickee B. Contemporary recording and communications technologies have

enabled artists and producers to work together across great physical distances.

Of course, globalization has not only facilitated novel forms of musical

production; it has engendered new possibilities for reception. Because funk's

canonization has failed to receive the kind of institutional recognition and financial

backing that rock has—the Dayton Funk Museum officially opened in 2018 and

closed the following year after being unable to afford $1,400 monthly rent—YouTube

has functioned as the de facto platform for re-establishing boogie's popularity

(Robinson 2019). A quick search of "boogie funk" leads to dozens of channels

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[160] Ben Van Dyke, interview with author, June 3, 2018.
[161] The jacket on this release is a pastiche of the 12-inch sleeves issued in the 1980s by the Los Angeles-based Macola Record Co. label.

dedicated to the music as well as thousands of songs. Because the music itself is international, so too is its fan base. Yet, if one lets YouTube's algorithm guide their listening, one notices that an overwhelming amount of the music is accompanied by fan-produced montages of Chicano symbolism and logos that associate funk with Orange County. While Dayton will always be "The Land of Funk," Orange County Chicanos have become the music's unofficial conservators.

Chicano Heritage and Subcultural Nostalgia

Despite the music's popularity, there was once an unofficial ban on 80s funk in Orange County. Because boogie was so strongly associated with "cholos" and gang members—people they didn't want at their clubs—bar owners turned away DJs that played the music. In the late 90s and early 2000s, 80s funk was relegated to house parties called "backyard boogies." Yet, at that time, prior to the development of modern funk and its retroactive canonizing effect, there wasn't a distinct scene built exclusively around boogie. DJs typically mixed it with hip-hop, electro, and freestyle in their sets. When formatted together, these genres are usually referred to as "Old School" and can still be heard on throwback radio stations like Southern California's KQIE. Once Funkmosphere, which began in 2006, carved out a space for boogie, it drew Chicanos locally and from Orange County who wanted to hear and play the music. Future Funk Freaks co-founder Ivan "Debo" Marquez recalls driving forty miles from Santa Ana to Culver City on a Monday night, only having to drive home and get up early for work the next morning. Before he found a bar that would take a

chance on the music, many future Funk Freaks' crew members dropped sets at Funkmosphere in its early years.[162]

Funk Freaks is a crew of thirteen Chicano DJs based in Orange County that began throwing parties in 2009. As one of the only crews playing funk at an Orange County nightclub, they quickly built a following, spreading predominantly by word of mouth and social media. Although there are no women in the crew, many have played their parties as guest DJs, and every March they throw a special event called "Electric Ladies" that exclusively features female DJs. Over the last decade, Funk Freaks has expanded from a DJ crew and monthly event into a record label, clothing line, and record store. Their name references a lyric from "Don't Fake the Funk," the first track on Prince Charles and the City Beat Band's album *Stone Killers* (1982).[163] Interestingly, the liner notes to the Afro-centric album—whose cover depicts a shirtless black militant posing with submissive women amidst a backdrop of a burning city—were written by Nelson George. While critics like George have typically stressed the middle-class character of boogie, Funk Freaks uses the term interchangeably with "street funk." Indeed, it shows that the meanings of the music are not primarily located in the form itself, but in the social context in which it is deployed. For many working-class Chicanos, an Afro-diasporic form has come to represent *their* heritage—a music that captures their pride and aspirations as much as their cultural and economic exclusion from the American mainstream.

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[162] Ivan "Debo" Marquez, interview with author, June 13, 2018.
[163] The lyric goes, "I'm not the freak of the week, I'm the freak of the year / Don't fake the funk."

Marquez's upbringing illustrates many of the hardships faced by working-class Chicanos and how funk has soundtracked their lives. Marquez is a "first generation" Mexican American whose parents immigrated from Mexico to California, where they became part of the state's large immigrant labor force. Both service workers, his mother was a housecleaner while his father worked in restaurants. Common to low-income communities, many friends and members of his extended family moved in and out of juvenile detention and the prison system. Few received their high school diplomas. For Marquez, music symbolizes "the streets"—not only the sounds bumping out of a 94 Monte Carlo but the music of day laborers and blue-collar workers. Chicano rap, G-funk, boogie, and Art Laboe's Oldies were the soundtrack to what he describes as "the lifestyle."[164]

Funk initially made its way to him by way of mixtapes produced by his cousin, a member of a Costa Mesa gang. Marquez started DJing in junior high when his brother's friend gave him equipment and records for safekeeping before being incarcerated. One day the turntables and mixer appeared in the room he shared with his older brother. He recalls waking up at four in the morning to play records before catching the bus to school at 6:30 AM, only to come back at 3 PM and practice. At sixteen, he got his first job and bought his first pair of turntables. In high school, he played hip-hop and funk at "backyard boogies," where many people requested popular 1980s funk songs. DJs often refer to these songs as "Funk 101"—hits by major label acts like the Bar-Kays, One Way, Midnight Starr, etc. At that time, in the

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[164] Ivan "Debo" Marquez, interview with author, June 13, 2018.

late 1990s, Funk 101 records were inexpensive, often just a dollar, which facilitated building a collection that a young DJ required. The more Marquez explored the history of funk, the more he realized that it had been sampled by his favorite hip-hop artists.

In contrast to other parties in the modern funk scene, Funk Freaks draws a predominantly Mexican-American crowd. Marquez explains: "For our party, it's a lot of *raza* that come out from all over—San Diego, Oxnard, L.A., Orange County, all cities." He continues, "It's a mixture of bald-headed gangsters [with a] full head of tattoos, beautiful women in cocktail dresses and heels, but then you got the homies, the couple of younger kids coming from San Francisco, the pop-lockers in the back chillin', the guys posted up drinking."[165] Typically, he says, there are twice as many women as men on the dance floor.[166] Everyone comes dressed for the occasion, but the most numerous and spectacularly styled partygoers are the "cholos." While the subculture can be traced back to the zoot-suited Pachucos of the 1940s, the style had transformed significantly in the 1970s and 80s. Like the music of that era—"souldies" and funk—cholos' dress carries on largely unchanged today (Moore 2017, 99). The street style derives partly from prison culture, but also repurposes and exaggerates clothing worn by manual laborers. Baggy khaki pants synched in at the waist, a Pendleton worn over a white sleeveless undershirt, a bandana folded flat and worn

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[165] Ivan "Debo" Marquez, interview with author, June 13, 2018.
[166] This comports with Sarah Thornton's sociological study of house and rave music in Britain during the late 1980s and early 1990s. She writes "Dancing is, in fact, the only out-of-home leisure activity that women engage in more frequently than men" (Thornton 1996, 103).

around one's head, large mustaches or a neatly groomed goatee, and distinctive tattoos (family surnames written in large cursive script, spider webs, cars, clowns, and crosses) carry group-specific meanings within the Chicano/a subculture (Lipsitz 1990, 139). Cholo tattoos, for example, "often feature a nickname, gang name, or neighborhood name executed in a Gothic script, a stylistic feature that recalls the lettering used for official proclamations in colonial Mexico" (Moore 2017, 99). The style is an assertion of ethnic identity and belonging—neither exclusively Mexican nor part of the American mainstream—as well as empowerment. "The oversized garments take basic pieces of apparel and give the wearer street swagger in part by making the person look physically larger than he or she really is" (102). And yet boogie-funk, a music made predominantly by blacks that carries *Africanisms* within its form, had become their music.

That history traces back at least to the 1970s when demographic shifts in Los Angeles encouraged black and brown cultural interaction. As George Lipsitz explains, "In 1970 more than 50,000 Hispanics lived in the traditionally black south-central area of Los Angeles; by 1980 that figure had doubled, with Chicanos making up 21% of the total population of the south-central area" (Lipsitz 1990, 148). Through the growth of Latin in-migration, the lowrider car culture that was so strongly associated with Chicanos and War's "Low Rider" (1975) became articulated to G-funk in the 1990s through productions of the Compton-born Dr. Dre. In between was the boogie era, when the music that would inspire G-funk spread across L.A. not only through black groups on the SOLAR label, but through Chicano groups like

Tierra. A favorite of lowrider culture enthusiasts since their formation in the early 1970s, Tierra's Latin soul adapted to the changing soundscape of L.A. with their own boogie 12-inch "Sonya" (1983).[167]

East Los Angeles' Chicano community is known for its oldies and sweet soul collectors[168] but the diaspora in Orange County[169] is known for boogie-funk. Marquez explains that if a Chicano from Orange County walks into a record store:

> They'll know you're looking for that 80s boogie-funk. You like that G-funk, that slaps, the synthesizers, the moogs, you like that heavy—what we call slaps… It's kind of like an unwritten word… If you go into any record shop and they ask you, 'Where you coming from?' 'Oh, I'm coming from Santa Ana' [or] 'I'm coming from Buena Park.' They'll know you're looking for that 80s boogie-funk… For some reason we gravitated towards that. People from Orange County gravitated towards that sound. That 80s boogie-funk. The synth. The electro. You know, that synthesizer-, Moog-, vocoder-funk. And it's mostly thanks to the lowrider culture…[170]

That culture continues on the Funk Freaks label, whose Street Funk volumes feature cholas posing with lifted cars in front of iconic Orange County landmarks.

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[167] This is not to say that boogie-funk was ever without Latin influence. Before Steve Arrington returned to Dayton and joined Slave in the late 1970s, he studied Latin rhythms in California's San Francisco Bay Area with Coke Escovedo, a former percussionist with Santana and the godson of Tito Puente. Concurrent with a brief stint with his brother Pete in the group Azteca, Coke pioneered the crossover style known as Latin soul, sometimes referred to as "brown-eyed soul." A renowned percussionist in his own right, Pete Escovedo passed his talents down to his daughter. Sheila Escovedo performed alongside Herbie Hancock, Lionel Richie, and Marvin Gaye in her early twenties before she joined the George Duke Band as both a percussionist and singer in 1977. This was also the year she met Prince, who would become her longtime collaborator. Though she is best known for her solo material as Sheila E., she also sang on Prince's best boogie track "Erotic City" (1984).

[168] For examples of the "lowrider oldies" popular in Los Angeles, see the 12 volumes of *East Side Story* compilations. Each volume features now-iconic photos of East Los Angeles' Chicano car culture. Also, see eastsidestoryproject.com.

[169] Technically south of Los Angeles, Orange County is still generally considered part of the greater Los Angeles area.

[170] Ivan "Debo" Marquez, interview with author, June 13, 2018.

As representatives of an ethnic subculture in the age of platform capitalism, Funk Freaks illustrates some of the cultural contradictions of the present. While Marquez takes pride that Funk Freaks represents Chicano musical heritage, *la cultura*, his crew has expanded overseas. He made connections with DJs and record collectors throughout Europe while spending a year in Barcelona, Spain in 2011-12. As a result, Funk Freaks have four members in St. Petersburg, one in Amsterdam, three in France, five in Germany, one in Austria, one in Switzerland, two in Sweden, and four in Norway. Marquez understands this network to bring global recognition to his crew and to boogie-funk, understood as a Southern California-based Mexican-American tradition. Paradoxically, the promotion of black music becomes "a way of expressing their identity rather than as a means of distancing themselves from it" (Lipsitz 1997, 87). Yet Funk Freaks isn't simply a subcultural export. The first 12" issued on the Funk Freaks label is by the Australian band Confection, and their catalog features many other modern funk acts based outside the United States. Marquez has made a point of bringing international acts to Orange County, like the 1980s Italo-disco producer Ago (Agostino Presta) and the contemporary Italian modern funk producer Dogg Master. In this sense, Orange County functions as a hub in an international network of funk. As much as in the 1980s, boogie remains a globally available form—though one made under different technological and cultural conditions.

While some musicians understand modern funk as innovating on a musical form, Marquez sees the movement as bound up with cultural nostalgia:

> It's revival music. That sound, that feeling, that culture of the lowriders, the cruise nights, the party nights, the backyard boogies… Here in California that's how it was back in the day. It was house parties all day and night with DJs playing funk music… That's what I will always try to recreate in our music that we be pressing with the Street Funk volumes. That's what I'm trying to recapture and give back to the people. That feeling…[171]

At the same time, he contrasts the music his label releases with the style pioneered by Dâm-Funk, which is slower, darker, and more contemplative than the joyful, uptempo party tracks made for the dancefloor. For Orange County Chicanos, he says, "Funk music is the soundtrack to our lives."[172]

Orange County Funk Fest (OCFF) is a testament both to the resurgent popularity of funk and to its power of nostalgia in Southern California Chicano communities. In contrast to most modern funk events, which are held at local bars and clubs, OCFF continues to sell out convention centers. The yearly festival now on average draws approximately 20,000 people, making it the funk revival's largest event. Launched in 2012 by George Sanchez's Curious Entertainment, the OCFF is an all-day celebration of funk and Chicano heritage. Resident DJ Omargod even has his turntables fitted inside the front end of a '64 Chevy Impala—the definitive lowrider.

Given the nickname "Curious" as a child, after the cartoon monkey Curious George, Sanchez grew up throwing backyard boogies and warehouse parties in his Santa Ana neighborhood. A former street sweeper, Sanchez quit his job to pursue event coordinating full-time in 2010. Along with his sister Nelly, he cofounded Curious Entertainment two years later. That year they launched OCFF at Original

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[171] Ivan "Debo" Marquez, interview with author, June 13, 2018.
[172] Ivan "Debo" Marquez, interview with author, June 13, 2018.

Mike's, featuring legendary groups like Slave, Lakeside, Circle City Band, and the Bar-Kays. Since then, consecutive sold-out shows required booking larger venues and investing substantial amounts of capital. In 2015, their father passed away, leaving his children each a $100,000 inheritance. George and Nelly invested their shares in 2016's Funk Fest, which filled the Anaheim Convention Center Arena. OCFF has since hosted events at the Pacific Amphitheatre and the Honda Center, Anaheim's largest venue (Duran 2018). The acts that they have brought to perform read like a directory of funksters from the boogie era: Chocolate Milk, Con Funk Shun, Evelyn "Champagne" King, Klymaxx, Mary Jane Girls, Morris Day and the Time, O'Bryan, Ozone, S.O.S. Band, Zapp, and more.

Despite his successes, Sanchez has had to navigate police harassment and city lawsuits as a promoter of funk in Orange County. Although Santa Ana is over 75 percent Latino, the city's coordinated response is both discriminatory and unsurprising. The events hosted by Curious Entertainment celebrate the music and culture of Mexican Americans who refused assimilation and used popular culture toward symbolically resistant ends. Whether with the lowrider cars, whose simultaneous artistry and impracticality offend a dominant culture that finds them "impractical, tasteless, and garish," or with boogie-funk—a music that has been recoded from the soundtrack of "Ghetto Life" to that of the barrio—the stigma attached to Chicano subculture still serves as a symbolic threat to the established order (Lipsitz 1990, 153).

In the classical Cultural Studies formulation, subcultures are "the expressive forms and rituals of… subordinate groups" (Hebdige 1988, 2). Because in capitalist social formations ownership of means of production—which become means of representation and meaning-making in the culture industries—are largely denied to these subordinate groups, it is "from below," through their modes of dress, cultural forms, and codes of behavior that they obliquely express social criticisms. These are not isolated folk cultures constituted independent of the culture industries. Rather, the meanings that are produced by subcultures, and those that circulate about them, are contested both from within and without. Subcultures are thus interpretive "texts" to be "read," where political fault lines and social antagonisms can be registered on the surfaces of their styles, and in the homological structure of their musical forms. We have seen how the formation of a Chicano subculture became articulated to boogie-funk in greater Los Angeles, not only by way of black and brown cohabitation and cultural exchange but as a fitting musical form for lowrider car culture. That articulation persists in the modern funk scene, where Chicanos have re-popularized 1980s funk as a matter of musical and cultural preservation.

From Subculture to Taste Culture

And yet, in the canonization of boogie, we find more than a subculture, in the classical meaning. Chicano nostalgia has been an important foundation for the revival, but the online infrastructure and global circulation of the music has exceeded these bounds and become the basis for the development of modern funk. In this scene, both DJs and crowds are often heterogeneous, spanning multiple generations, as well

as "racial," ethnic, and class backgrounds. By shifting the object under investigation

from subcultures to crowds, Sarah Thornton reworked the Cultural Studies

formulation and built on its insights to make sense of what she termed *club culture*.

Thornton explains:

> Club cultures are taste cultures. Club crowds generally congregate on the basis
> of their shared taste in music, their consumption of common media and, most
> importantly, their preference for people with similar tastes to themselves.
> Taking part in club cultures builds, in turn, further affinities, socializing
> participants into a knowledge of (and frequently a belief in) the likes and
> dislikes, meanings and values of the culture. (Thornton 1996, 3)

In other words, in club cultures and other taste cultures, shared social position is not a

prerequisite for cultural affinity; cultural affinity is instead the basis of a shared

sociality.

The DJs I interviewed do not, for instance, hold similar structural positions in

the economy, and almost none of them DJ as their primary source of income.[173] So

too, many outside Chicano communities made their way to funk through other

subcultural heritages. For example, some of the founding members of Sweaterfunk

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[173] The following information was gathered in interviews with the author in 2018.
While Tommy "Toonz" Valenzuela, 47, from Salinas, works in a grocery store and
supports five children, Ben Johnson, 30, from Davis, owns a record store in
Sacramento and has no children. Todd Shima, 47, also lives in Sacramento and works
as both a college counselor and adjunct professor of Asian American Studies at
Sacramento City College. Renmin Cadorna, 43, who is a member of the San
Francisco-based Sweaterfunk Crew, is employed as a dental equipment repair
technician. Kirk Michael Harper, 54, another Sweaterfunk member, owns and
operates a coffee shop in San Francisco. Melissa Dueñas, 30, teaches ESL (English as
a Second Language) to adults in San Diego. Mike Steffen, 34, from Alameda, works
as a framer and is an aspiring artist in Oakland. Of the three label owners I
interviewed, Randy Ellis, 36, DJs and sells used records, while Ben Van Dyke, who
runs Star Creature Records works as a programmer in tech. Ivan "Debo" Marquez
owns and operates a record store in Santa Ana, DJs, hosts parties, and markets the
Funk Freaks clothing line.

developed an interest in the music through the mod revival. Mods were a predominantly white 1960s British subculture that claimed American R&B as their own. Known for their "spectacular" style—freshly pressed tailored suits, short hair, polished scooters—as much as their copious use of "uppers," mods were one of the many British postwar subcultures that navigated the presence of West Indian in-migration through musical and stylistic affiliation with black cultures (Hebdige 1988, 52–59). By the late 1970s, a mod revival had developed in the UK with two-tone ska and modernist "anti-rock" like The Jam sounding the movement (Reynolds 2006, 288). Five thousand miles away, San Francisco had its own mod revival—one that followed contemporary British trends while venerating the same American soul from the 1960s that filled the dance floor at Wiggan Casino. Here was an American appropriation of a revival of an English subculture that itself obsessed over rare American soul records. While some mods dwelt in soul's past, refusing to keep up with contemporary black culture, others followed British collectors' interest in rare groove[174] and jazz-funk into boogie.

In the early 2000s, a former mod and boogie enthusiast Jon Blunck was a regular contributor to the now defunct UK soul music forums solaradio.com and soul24-7.com. Blunck's musical sensibilities put him at odds with many American record collectors, who reproduced the dominant black nationalist narratives about the music. But on these forums, he noticed another member based in Los Angeles who posted under the name Dâm-Funk. Though he used American slang, Blunck assumed

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[174] For information on rare groove see Caspar Melville's *It's a London Thing: How Rare Groove, Acid House, and Jungle Remapped the City* (2019).

he was British because of his appreciation for boogie. While out digging at Record Recycler in Torrence, Blunck was handed a mix by the owner. It was a CD of boogie songs mixed by Dâm-Funk used to promote his original party, 1983. Not only did Riddick and Blunck become fast friends; 1983 and Funkmosphere would inspire Blunck to start his own party. After relocating to San Francisco, he launched Sweaterfunk in 2008 at Li Po Lounge in Chinatown. Offering little more than a windowless basement and cheap beer, Blunck had to provide his own sound system, which he purchased with inheritance money from his recently deceased grandfather. Following the lead of Funkmosphere, Blunck wanted to create an atmosphere where dancers would have to seek out the party rather than stumble upon it on a drunken night out.

The first few months of Sweaterfunk were small affairs, drawing in mostly friends and record collectors. But things picked up as word spread and a few pieces were published in various San Francisco-based news outlets. Part of the appeal was to keep things intimate: playing records that you could only hear at the party, avoiding mixes to publicize the event, and DJs playing for themselves rather than catering to crowds' expectations. Their slogan became: "Three wrongs make a right—wrong night, wrong venue, wrong music."[175]

In contrast to Funk Freaks, Sweaterfunk is diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, class, and gender.[176] And while they might include some uptempo "street funk," Sweaterfunk gravitates toward the more "sophisticated," middle-class side of modern

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[175] Kirk Harper, interview with author, June 16, 2018.
[176] One year after the party began, the crew had five men and four women.

soul and boogie. Sweaterfunk's Kirk Harper describes boogie as sounding the development of the black middle class, the people who were "tired of shouting," that fulfilled their aspirations and were benefitting from their personal successes. Thus, the music, its stance, and its style reflect a more "relaxed" and "comfortable" situation for the diaspora in comparison to earlier eras of soul and funk. Harper jokingly refers to boogie as the "Coogi era," after the sweater brand. After all, his party's name is a nod to the album covers of the boogie years: "If you look at all those records in the early 80s, they're all wearing funky sweaters."[177]

The funk revival has a complex relationship to the "mainstream"—a ubiquitous but contentious term in the literature on subcultures and post-subcultures. In Thornton's canonical study on club culture, the majority of clubbers and ravers understood the mainstream as "derivative, superficial, and femme," and defined themselves in opposition to it (Thornton 1996, 5). At the same time, her work challenged whether the mainstream vs. subculture framing is an adequate representation of the ways that structural antagonisms are registered through culture. Alternatively, is the discourse around subculture its own kind of ideological distortion—deployed in practice by the subcultures themselves and theoretically elaborated by academics? And what does it imply when members of a shared scene sit on both sides of the divide, with some identifying it as subcultural, and others aspiring to the mainstream?

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[177] Kirk Harper, interview with author, June 16, 2018.

There is no line that neatly separates the modern funk scene from the mainstream. Both are porous. Some modern funk DJs who participated in forms of subculture in their youth continue to position themselves (and modern funk) against the mainstream. For example, the cofounder of the Sacramento-based Lazer Funk party, Todd Shima, was into punk rock in the early 80s. And while that music does not move him anymore, its anti-establishment stance clearly still informs his thinking. Shima told me, "I think that we are making a stand that we don't want to be a part of the mainstream music culture."[178] For Shima, modern funk is a subculture that pushes against social norms. He says he has found a community where he doesn't have to get married, buy a house, have children, and so on. It is a community that is accepting of his alternative lifestyle. When I asked him about the significance of making mixes, he paused, then told me that they mean "fuck mainstream society," a practice and stance he traces back to hip-hop.

Other DJs agreed about the importance of keeping modern funk separate from a perceived mainstream. Yet for them, it is not explicitly or immediately about lifestyle. Rather, they hold this view because as DJs, they want the freedom to choose their own music. Ben Johnson told me that modern funk is important because it is a scene that encourages you to "play music you like and think is good and not just pander popular stuff."[179] Dustin Worswick (DJ Epik), one of my only informants who spins full-time for a living, seconded Ben's view. He said, "I've spent many years doing parties where I had to play crappy music that I hate and one thing that really

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[178] Todd Shima, interview with author, June 26, 2018.
[179] Ben Johnson, interview with author, June 26, 2018.

drew me to modern funk is the fact that this music is coming out that is danceable again, that has a vibe of the past [but] is new…."[180] All the DJs I interviewed agree that modern funk provides the cultural space for DJs to play what they want. For most of them, this includes rare and obscure vinyl records.

Yet, none of them exclusively play rare or expensive tracks. And it is here that the mainstream is incorporated into the culture of modern funk. Major-label boogie tracks regularly make their way into the sets of my informants. The Whispers, Midnight Star, Howard Johnson, Evelyn King, Melba Moore, or Kashif are heard at almost every party I've been to in the past three years. When I asked DJs about this, many of them told me about the tactical importance of peppering in a familiar track after a series of obscurities. Familiar songs capture their audience's attention and get the floor moving—and sometimes, even singing. However, audience competency varies from party to party, as well as region to region. Thus, sometimes signature tracks can serve the same function as a mainstream cut, especially at a more underground party. Some DJs also hope that modern funk will make it into the mainstream. Dâm-Funk already walks both worlds, having recorded an album with Snoop Dogg. Some in the underground attribute the recent success of Bruno Mars, in part, to the modern funk scene, which, they argue, brought funk back into popular culture and popular consciousness.

What the future holds for the boogie revival remains open, but the first phase of modern funk has definitively drawn to a close. On August 24, 2017, Funkmosphere

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[180] Dustin Worswick (DJ Epik), interview with author, June 26, 2018.

205

(est. 2006) held its final weekly. On July 19, 2018, Sweaterfunk (est. 2008) followed

suit. Both crews have transitioned to holding special events in place of their weekly

parties. Funk Freaks (est. 2009) held their own ten-year anniversary the following

year. That night in Santa Ana I was one of nearly a thousand dancers, of which maybe

only a dozen were white. But on the dance floor, we grooved together and sang along

to the same songs. Growing up in the San Fernando Valley's upper-middle-class

suburbs, funk was not a part of my cultural heritage. But in my twenties, I made my

way to the music through the modern funk scene, and it connected me with people

and parts of Los Angeles that I wouldn't know otherwise. Meeting DJs who collect

boogie records from all over the world made me appreciate how widespread

electronic funk was in the 1980s—a fact that belies how little scholarly attention it

has thus far received. So too, the vibrancy of the scene they built sits uncomfortably

with the notion of a depthless musical present, severed from history. In fact, modern

funk is shot through with historical contradictions that bring the significance of

boogie's revival into focus.

If subcultures persist even under the homogenizing tendencies of global

capitalism, they are often intimately connected to taste cultures that exceed

subcultures' shared nexus of class, ethnicity, and cultural memory.[181] We live in

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[181] Lipsitz writes, "Yet, even under these circumstances of global integration, local
identities and affiliations do not disappear. On the contrary, the transnational economy
often makes itself felt most powerfully through the reorganization of spaces and the
transformation of local experience—especially within and across urban areas"
(Lipsitz 1997, 5). Like urbanization, popular music undergoes patterns of uneven
development that reinforce as much as undermine our sense of place.

neither a "subcultural" nor a "post-subcultural" moment. Subcultures and taste

cultures can and do exist symbiotically. If in the boogie era, a global musical form

was made possible by the same circuits of capital that were remaking the world into a

single integrated market, the potential for cross-cultural reception has been

dramatically enhanced by the simultaneity of communication facilitated by the

internet and social media. Taste is less and less constrained by distance, both spatial

and temporal. At the same time, the culturally homogenizing tendencies latent in

platform capitalism do not eliminate local and ethnic forms of identity. In fact, they

provide opportunities for strengthening them. As George Lipsitz explains, "when

music travels across cultures, artists and audiences notice peculiarities of place that

would otherwise remain hidden from them without the opportunity for comparison.

Consequently, international music can make local and national knowledge more

important rather than less" (Lipsitz 1997, 18). Modern funk DJs are especially attuned

to the regional particularities of boogie precisely because they understand it to be a

global musical form. And yet, *wherever* and *whenever* the music's origins, boogie is

coded as the sound of the greater Los Angeles.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Political Economy of Old Music from Storage Culture through Streaming Culture

> If one seeks to find out who 'likes' a commercial piece, one cannot avoid the suspicion that liking and disliking are inappropriate to the situation, even if the person questioned clothes his reactions in those words. The familiarity of the piece is a surrogate for the quality ascribed to it.
>
> —Theodor Adorno

> Where financiers invest in futures, bands speculate in pasts.
>
> —Simon Reynolds

> It had taken me 17 years to amass all these files, but the rise of cloud computing made the whole thing pointless. My hoarding instincts were fading, curating the library was growing more tiresome by the year, and the older drives didn't even work with modern systems. Finally I caved, bought a Spotify subscription, and accepted the reality: what I'd thought of as my personal archive was just an agglomeration of slowly demagnetizing junk.
>
> —Stephen Witt

We are listening to more old music than ever before. In an article for *The Atlantic* published last year, music historian Ted Gioia provocatively asked, "Is Old Music Killing New Music?" The statistics he provides about today's music industry are alarming: with old songs now comprising 70 percent of the U.S. music market, "the new-music market is actually shrinking. All the growth in the market is coming from old songs" (Gioia 2022). Gioia explains how industry trends have converged in ways that disadvantage new music and working musicians. Commercial radio has

long been a bastion of musical conservatism, where nostalgia formats saturate the airwaves. But even on contemporary stations, fewer new songs make their way onto ever-tighter playlists. The Big Three major labels (Universal Music, Sony Music, and Warner Music) are spending more of their capital on publishing rights than on developing new talent. And with investment firms spending astronomical sums to acquire hit musicians' back catalogs, publishing has become high finance.[182] Streaming platforms are also contributing to the problem. Gioia explains, "The top 200 most popular new tracks now regularly account for less than 5 percent of total streams. That rate was twice as high just three years ago" (Gioia 2022). In these ways and more, old music is crowding out our musical present, making it increasingly hard for new acts and new styles to become popular. Crucially for Gioia, the problem is not that new music is somehow "worse" than old music—a generational prejudice that masquerades as today's common sense—but that the industry has structured itself against it.

Gioia gives the impression that the relative growth of industry revenues derived from catalog titles is a very recent trend. In fact, it stretches back decades. During the first decade of the 21st century, declining sales of current music (released within the past 18 months) was its own kind of novelty whose longevity was uncertain. This is because recent changes in CD distribution pointed in two directions. On the one hand, the "big-box" stores cut down on retail space for CDs to make way

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[182] "The song catalogs most in demand are by musicians in their 70s or 80s (Bob Dylan, Paul Simon, Bruce Springsteen) or already dead (David Bowie, James Brown)" (Gioia 2022).

for other kinds of media like DVDs and video games. The effect was to prioritize well-funded new releases and hit records from yesteryear. On the other hand, the growth of online retail incentivized vast reissue campaigns. By driving down warehousing costs, stocking any individual title no longer had to be justified by a rate of sale. As online retail began to undermine the profitability of the chain store model, physical media's prominence at the center of music distribution was being displaced by an emergent digital storage culture.

Digital storage culture refers to an era, an infrastructure, and a set of social practices. First, it signals an era of transition in the music industry (roughly 1999-2015) located in between the hegemony of physical media and streaming cultures. Second, it refers to the networked infrastructure that enabled the circulation and storage of music in its digital (and non-physical) form. Third, it invokes the social uses of that infrastructure and its cultural effects. As the mp3 became "the most common form in which recorded sound is available," new technologies emerged to circulate and store them (Sterne 2012, 1). File-sharing, through both legal and illicit channels, proliferated globally. Music consumers became "users" as they input metadata into files and organized their digital music libraries. Meanwhile, the practice of making mixtapes transformed into "playlisting." As the formal music industry consolidated around hits, both past and present, the corresponding rise of peer-to-peer networks and curated music blogs made "lost" and obscure music widely accessible for the first time. Never had so much recorded music been publicly available to hear.

However, a conjunction of semi-autonomous factors contributed to making digital storage culture a residual one. Legal action against widely used peer-to-peer networks and cloud-based file hosting services put up barriers to file-sharing, catalyzing the decline of music blogs. The 2007 launch of the iPhone foreshadowed the phase-out of mp3 players while the proliferation of smartphones in general provided opportunities for emerging apps and platforms. As legal, technical, and economic challenges made digital storage culture increasingly cumbersome, new streaming services found an opening to capture users.

Today, we live in the era of streaming culture. Monthly subscriptions to massive databases of music have replaced the practice of building a personal audio library. As a result, platforms have obviated the need to organize one's files or input metadata. We still create our own playlists, but platforms like Spotify drive users toward their own recommendations and playlists. Though no institution has filled the vacuum for criticism left by independently run music blogs, reissue campaigns have placed a growing amount of "rare" albums onto platforms. As songs from these albums make it onto popular playlists, the effect has been to challenge established canons. In short, music streaming platforms increasingly govern how we discover, organize, and listen to music, subsuming functions once performed by people and rationalizing them in accordance with the logic of financialization.

While the financialization[183] of global capitalism is a process that stretches back decades, its impact on popular music has intensified in the era of streaming culture. In the case of Spotify, the world's leading music streaming platform, financialization was not only a condition of possibility for rapid global expansion; finance provided models for structuring the corporation (Eriksson et al. 2019, 162). Its effects are now heard on Spotify's curated playlists and services. If, as Fredric Jameson argues, curation is the central aesthetic category that is generated by financialization, it is also one that draws our attention to the shifting subjects (curators), objects (curated), and practices of curation. As streaming platforms transformed music listeners from commodity owners into renters—generating predictable income streams for shareholders—the playlist has become Spotify's primary form of music curation. In the process, human curators have been increasingly eclipsed by algorithmic recommendations while the very conceptualization of the music listener has changed from a stable demographic subject to a context-specific and behaviorally-dependent "user" that is continually subjectivized. Spotify's so-called curatorial turn has deepened our consumption of old music and transformed our experience of music history. Thus, to understand the shifting modalities of nostalgia and the increasing infiltration of our listening habits by catalog music, we have to trace developments in the music industry from digital storage culture to streaming culture.

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[183] See Greta Krippner's "The Financialization of the American Economy." She understands financialization as "the growing weight of finance within the American economy," which in turn has shaped patterns of accumulation (Krippner 2005, 174).

Conceptualizing History

There are stakes in how we understand history in the shift from digital storage culture to streaming culture. First, we must be careful to avoid framing the emergence of music streaming as an impact narrative. As sound studies scholar Jonathan Sterne explains, impact narratives "cast technologies themselves as the primary agents of historical change" (Sterne 2003, 7). Mobilizing a crude conception of causality, impact narratives claim that technology determines social relations in far too totalizing a fashion (8). Not only do they overemphasize the novelty of technological change at the expense of continuity; they equate technologies' affordances with their usage. For Sterne, "Technologies are repeatable social, cultural, and material processes crystallized into mechanisms" (8). If their design encourages certain activities while discouraging others, it is people who put technologies to use in often unintended and creative ways. Thus, as functions "developed from and linked to cultural practices," technologies are "shot through with the tensions, tendencies, and currents of the culture from which they emerged" (8). In the case of music streaming, that culture itself is "shot through" with the tensions of a financialized global capitalism.

Second, as we trace the passage from digital storage culture to streaming culture, from one cultural dominant to another, we must attend to their overlapping temporalities. As a matter of method, this will require two maneuvers. On the one hand, we need a diachronic presentation of history that can apprehend a global and epochal transformation in the music industry. Without this grand narrative, it would

213

be impossible to identify how an emergent phenomenon became a dominant one. Nor would it be possible to locate latent tendencies within either cultural order that point beyond it—that is, to the possibility of some new historical dominant. On the other hand, this universal narrative must be troubled by synchronic snapshots—"moments" that reveal the tensions, contradictions, and overlap between storage and streaming culture in relation to the forces that drove this shift. For a time, storage culture and streaming culture grew in tandem. And in significant ways, streaming initially depended upon digital technologies of personal storage. Mapping historical change is by necessity a comparative operation. But if we do not separate these two maneuvers analytically, what results is a typologizing and classificatory presentation of history, where every phenomenon is slotted into either one era or another (Jameson *Jameson* 26). Indeed, attention to the overlapping temporalities of storage and streaming cultures clarifies that technological change is a contingent and non-teleological process. After all, vinyl's contemporary revival cuts across this shift, becoming the "first [physical] recording format to return to dominance from near-extinction" (Mall 2021, 73).

Third, the question of periodization raises its own problems of conceptualization. If the passage from storage culture to streaming culture occurred *within* an ongoing process of global capitalist development which I am calling financialization, we must be careful to avoid what Althusser refers to as "expressive causality" or "expressive totality." Here the temptation is to see digital storage culture and streaming culture as two "expressions" of financialization, where the mode of

214

production's internal logic expresses itself in a cultural superstructure, and where history appears as a web of seamless homologies. Our task is then to preserve the concept of totality—which allows us to posit a complex relationship between financialization and culture by affording semi-autonomy to both "levels"—without relying upon an idealist concept of causality. Indeed, a materialist approach must treat storage culture and streaming culture as registering different relationships to financialization as an ongoing process.

Fourth, there are different kinds of periodizing categories: those of closure and those of process.[184] The former is exemplified by the various *late*-s and *post*-s that proliferate in attempts to periodize capitalism *after* modernity. While they have the benefit of drawing lines of continuity between capitalism's past and its present, their function as bookends lends themselves to a certain ahistoricity that reappears in much nostalgia critique. As Mark Fisher and Simon Reynolds translated Jameson's problematic in *Postmodernism* into a pop-musical register, the refusal of old music to exit the public sphere became not only a register of cultural exhaustion, but evidence that we were living through the end of history. For these theorists of nostalgia, the persistence of popular music's past became synonymous with capitalism's triumph. But whereas Jameson identified postmodernism as the *dominant* cultural logic of late capitalism, Fisher and Reynolds constructed closed systems, where the space for resistant cultural forms was foreclosed. In contrast to such negative and totalizing accounts, my wager is that by treating financialization as a process, we may instead

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[184] I am indebted to Jeb Purucker for this point.

understand developments within it less as a matter of closure than as a way of producing futures. In other words, rather than being *after history*—as Mark Fisher and Simon Reynolds would have it—the passage from storage culture to streaming culture indexes some of the cultural consequences of financialization as much as it signals a new relationship to musical materials *as history*.

Prefiguring Digital Storage Culture

Storage culture is a retroactive term that emerges with the development of streaming culture. Using space as an organizing concept, the distinction between these categories highlights the ways that musical formats are differently embedded in economic infrastructures of production and distribution, as well as cultures of consumption. By consumption, I am not only referring to the moment of exchange, where musical commodities are either sold and taken out of circulation or made accessible through rent, but also to the ways that people use and engage with recorded works. If from the perspective of production, the question of storage becomes a critical logistical matter for warehousing, transportation, and retail, from the side of consumption, storage raises issues surrounding mobility, ownership, organization, and display.

We can broadly segment storage into three categories: physical storage, digital storage, and streaming. Approaching the political economy of old music through categories of storage clarifies transformations in the music industry that are not visible by looking solely at audio formats. For example, digital audio files can be stored on a CD, a personal hard drive, or a corporate server. The ways in which those

files can circulate therefore depend not least on where and how they are stored. An analysis of storage also complicates approaches that foreground a binary opposition between the analog and the digital on the one hand, and the physical and the digital on the other. As Jeremy Wade Morris clarifies, "the CD commodity as a whole was only musically digital. CDs come with very non-digital packaging—discs and jewel cases that require physical retail stores, manufacturing plants, distribution trucks, and store shelves" (Morris 2015, 2). Post-vinyl physical media formats like cassette tapes and CDs did little to alter the music industry's industrial infrastructure (2). However, once the data on CDs was able to be "ripped" from its physical packaging by consumers, digital audio files were suddenly at the center of an emergent networked infrastructure that included new kinds of computer software and mobile devices.

While markets for physical media never entirely collapsed, our cultural attachment to packaging and formats was changing. In "In Memoriam: The Music CD and its Ends," Will Straw argues that the CD's mobility—a characteristic that once made the format attractive to consumers—ended up contributing to its cultural devaluation. Unlike vinyl, whose use was confined to domestic and club settings, CDs could be played in cars and portable devices. The result was that CDs began to be stored in places outside the home, and in ways different from other formats. Straw writes, "More than cassettes, CDs were easily removed from their packages, arranged in binders, stacked in carrier cases, and flipped through by automobile drivers or joggers in moments of selection" (Straw 2009, 87). Sometimes CD booklets were kept in their jewel cases at home; other times they made it into portable binders. But

after 1996, when home CD burners were released for consumer markets, more and more "burned" CDs began to fill these binders. And as people duplicated their collections and made CDs for friends—sometimes cramming up to one hundred songs on a single disc—many music fans became less attached to physical packaging.[185] Straw argues that as the CD was losing its quality as an "artifact," CD-Rs were contributing to the process of severing music from its objectification altogether (82). Indeed, as the cost of hard drives declined in tandem with their growing storage capacity, CD-Rs became little more than a temporary resting place for files in between their source and one's hard drive. In other words, they functioned as an intermediate step between a culture of physical storage and that of digital storage.

The Impact of Online Retail

The emergence of digital storage culture was coterminous with changes in music retail that led to the relative growth of catalog sales. While the sales ratio of catalog to current music went unchanged during the 1990s, when the music industry started tracking this ratio, the gap grew each year in the following decade. According

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[185] Straw noticed that sometime between 2003 and 2005, the bootlegged CDs sold on the streets of Mexico City had changed. Since the late 1990s, bootlegs were sold as approximations of official releases, complete with photocopied covers, booklets, and packaging details. But by 2005, these imitations were replaced by rewritable CDs (CD-Rs) that contained dozens of pirated tracks in the mp3 format. Rather than maintaining fidelity to any official releases, these CD-Rs compiled songs that spanned artists' whole careers. In some cases, entire discographies were contained on single disc. But as the quantity of songs on these CD-Rs increased dramatically, the quality of their packaging was reduced to a bare minimum. According to Straw, they "offered little more than quickly recognizable images of performers and cramped track listings produced with word processing programs" (Straw 2009, 80).

to Simon Reynolds, "In the year 2000…catalogue sales (including both recent catalogue and deep) accounted for 34.4 per cent of total album sales in America, while current stood at 65.6 per cent; by the year 2008, catalogue had increased to 41.7 per cent while current was 58.3" (Reynolds 2011, 64). Counterintuitively, this occurred while record stores across the country were closing, making it "harder for consumers to get hold of non-current releases" (64). The Wherehouse filed for its second and final bankruptcy in 2003 after acquiring Blockbuster Music less than four years prior (Leeds). Tower Records followed suit in 2006. Meanwhile, "big-box" stores drew down their stock of catalog titles to make retail space for non-musical products like DVDs and video games (Reynolds 2011, 64–65). The effect was to prioritize well-funded new releases and the occasional hit record from yesteryear.

Under these conditions, the growth of catalog sales was driven primarily by the economics of online retail. With traditional retail, inventories are constrained by high storage costs. To reach the most potential consumers, retail spaces operate in densely populated areas where rents are high. High rents translate into high costs for storage and display. When display space is limited, a certain rate of sale is required to justify keeping a title stocked on the shelves. Thus, the higher the storage costs, the greater the pressure to cater to mass markets. Online retail is liberated from these constraints. By warehousing in low-rent areas, comparatively low storage costs enable inventories to increase exponentially. Uninhibited by physical proximity to consumers, online retailers can expand their customer base to just about anyone with an internet connection. However, their vast inventories allow them to capture new

markets by catering to general and niche tastes. The phenomenon is even more dramatic with digital music retail, where physical warehousing is substituted with data storage infrastructure and the storage cost of each additional item approaches zero. In *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More*, Chris Anderson suggests that internet commerce had overthrown the "tyranny of space," but Reynolds sees it as "a victory over the tyranny of time" (Anderson 2006; Reynolds 2011, 65–67). He writes, "If the store display areas are online and virtual, there is also absolutely no pressure to get rid of older, slow-selling items to make space for newer releases" (Reynolds 2011, 67). "The result has been a steady encroachment by past production on the window of attention that current production had hitherto dominated" (68). These distributional changes would ultimately work their way back to the sphere of production.

Whether online retail sold physical media or digital downloads, it incentivized labels to expand their reissue programs. And even with the closure of national music retailers—that is, stores that specialized in carrying deep catalog titles—the effect of online commerce could be felt perusing the isles of independent music retailers, where shelves were abundant with reissues. The quantity of rereleased music had never been greater. As a consequence, record stores' long-running practices of specialization and taste-making were popularly reframed as curation. A similar and contemporaneous shift occurred in the 2000s with the explosion of "curated" vintage boutiques. But whereas those that sold vintage clothing still had to rummage through thrift stores and estate sales to acquire their stock, record stores were ordering *new*

pressings of old titles from online catalogs and national distributors. Thus, the discursive subsumption of record retail under the category of curation accompanied real material transformations in the music industry.

Record Collecting in the Age of Digital Storage Culture / The End of Aura?

Once raw audio in a digital form became disaggregated from its physical packaging, scholars, critics, and journalists began to grapple with its economic and cultural effects. More often than not, the problematic that framed this emerging discourse reflected dominant interests within the music business. Within much of the popular music press, political and cultural matters were often secondary to the long-term profitability of the music industry. Was it possible for our society to value music if we were no longer willing to pay for it? If music was no longer scarce, becoming infinitely reproducible with marginal costs approaching zero, how could the industry survive? For others, transformations in the materiality of music had much greater political stakes. As authors advanced positions on intellectual property and so-called piracy, digital reproduction's compatibility with capitalist social relations was called into question and the meaning of the mp3 became a site of cultural struggle.[186]

Scholars turned to record collecting and the vinyl medium as a foundation for assessing the novelty of digital storage culture. This new scholarship on vinyl in the digital age pivoted around the work of Walter Benjamin, whose analyses of mass production and book collecting powerfully anticipated the cultural anxieties that now

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[186] "The perception of a decline and devaluation in music is tied almost entirely to the technologies through which it circulates" (Morris 2015, 1).

accompanied music's datafication. Though they stressed different aspects of vinyl's contemporary relevance—differences that ultimately reflected the populations of record collectors they interviewed—there was broad agreement that Benjamin's thesis that aura withers away in the age of mechanical reproduction no longer applies to vinyl records, if it ever did.[187]

The point was most forcefully made by Julian Dibbell in his 2004 essay, "Unpacking Our Hard Drives: Discophilia in the Age of Digital Reproduction," which begins by identifying an antinomy in Benjamin's thought. He writes, "Where ["The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"] proclaims the death of the aura in the era of the copy, ["Unpacking My Library]" reincarnates it, insisting that each copy too has its halo of uniqueness, generated not so much by the copy

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[187] This point was first made by Sarah Thornton *before* the mp3 became a widely used technology. In *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*, Thornton argues that vinyl records became reinvested with aura once disc cultures emerged. Rather than suggesting that Benjamin had misunderstood his own concept, Thornton historicized it. If at the time of Benjamin's writing records "transcribed, reproduced, copied, represented, derived from and sounded like performances," innovations in recording technology transformed music "into 'records of ideal, not real, events'" (Thornton 1996, 27). She writes, "In the process of becoming originals, records accrued their own authenticities. Recording technologies did not, therefore, corrode or demystify 'aura' as much as disperse and relocate it. Degrees of aura came to be attributed to *new*, *exclusive*, and *rare* records" (27). If magnetic tape enabled a transformation in the production of recorded sound, where instruments could be recorded additively as opposed to capturing a single musical event, the enculturation of vinyl also required a transformation in the process of consumption. Within rock ideology and live music cultures, recorded sound is still seen as a substitute for live performance and authenticity is located in the performer. But with the emergence of disco and subsequent disc music cultures, DJs and discotheques naturalized the practice of dancing to vinyl records. As a consequence, authenticity was relocated to discs. Here, DJs act as collectors and performers of "original" sources, mediating between the source and the crowd that activates it (30). Even when her work is cited, scholars of vinyl in the digital age have yet to substantially engage with Thornton's arguments.

itself as by the unique history of its passage through the market to the consumer" (Dibbell 2004, 281).[188] Even if mass production entails a form of equivalence between objects, their travels on the secondary market give them individuality and personal history: wear and tear on a corner, the name of a former owner written on the inside cover, a scuff here or a scratch there, etc..[189] However much collecting is a social practice, it is one that remains individualistic and deeply personal. Following Benjamin, Dibbell reminds us that the kinds of investment—both psychological and economic—that collectors attach to objects depend on their sensuous qualities as much as the larger system of social relations in which they are embedded (282, 285). Thus, if aura endured in vinyl copies because of its status as a physical object and as personal property, what happens when music is severed from its materiality and our ability to possess it? Would aura finally be eradicated in "the age of digital reproduction," along with the "intimate possessiveness" to which it is tethered (286, 284)? Or would it simply be transferred to digital music in its informational form, which would still facilitate the "pleasure of sorting, finding, pursuing memories or schemes" (287)? In either case, a new structure of feeling would accompany the outcome of the digital music wars.[190]

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[188] Scholars of collecting have made similar points. For example, in *Collecting in a Consumer Society*, Russell W. Belk writes, "If such mass-produced objects as books, even rare editions, lack an aura by themselves, their ardent pursuit, passionate acquisition, and worshipful possession in collection can provide one" (Belk 2006, 61–62).

[189] Other qualities are only knowable to the collector. After all, who else can know an object's penultimate stop before making its way into their collection?

[190] In 2004, what forces would prevail was very much an open question.

While Dibbell maintained a certain openness about the future of aura in the

age of digital reproduction, others saw the proliferation of digital music files as a

condition of possibility for vinyl's re-enchantment. In *Vinyl: The Analogue Record in*

the Digital Age, Dominik Bartmanski and Ian Woodward (2015) argue that the

hegemony of the mp3 grounded a cultural desire to return to the tactile pleasures of

vinyl. Much of their book is devoted to the materiality of records—that is, the

physical qualities that give vinyl its unique sound, look, and feel. Rather than its

status as property, they argue that it is the format's "historicity" that enables it to be

invested with aura. They write, "The provenance, seriality, and historicity of the

unique or rare material thing—the vinyl record itself as a material container or

representative of this bundle of heritage features—creates an aura that is the product

of its accumulated historicity and cultural meaning" (Bartmanski and Woodward

2015, 106). In stressing vinyl's historicity, they asserted the contingency of aura. A

cultural work—or in their case, a format—may possess, dispossess, and even

repossess aura in different contexts. If Benjamin's usage of aura was applied to

singular works, where copies functioned as forgeries or imitations, Bartmanski and

Woodward affirmed that even copies without originals could possess it.[191] But this

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[191] Roy Shuker makes a similar point in *Wax Trash and Vinyl Treasures: Record Collecting as a Social Practice*. He writes, "The overarching reason for collectors' preference for vinyl can be loosely categorized as 'nostalgia', linked to the perceived aura and authenticity of the format" (Shuker 2016, 65). "The preference for vinyl is grounded in it being the original historical artefact, with an associated perceived authenticity as a sound carrier, related to its sound and packaging, and the listening process/experience. Many vinyl collectors take the view that vinyl recordings are how a particular album was originally created, and therefore in a sense represents a more authentic listening experience" (67). This idea of an authentic listening experience is sometimes referred to as heritage. While Bartmanski and Woodward agree that

was only true of physical formats. By contrast, digital music files are understood to fulfill the conditions for aura to wither away. They write, "Digital files… store or embed sounds, are portable and exchangeable, but (aside from the different types of digital format) no one digital file is different to another and in fact are endlessly reproducible and circulable" (105–106). Put another way, the digital music file is understood as a format that has no history: it appears without materiality (it cannot be touched), without uniqueness and authenticity, whose reproduction and circulation bear no marks of its presence in space and time.

Scholarship on vinyl was therefore always also a commentary on the digital music file. In applying Benjamin's categories to the mp3, this body of work affirmed that it was only with digital reproduction that the withering of aura had finally taken place. However, we should be skeptical about the ways scholars have brought "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (Benjamin 1970a) together with "Unpacking My Library" (Benjamin 1970b). After all, as scholar of record collecting Kevin Moist points out, Benjamin himself never attempted to integrate his work on collecting with his scholarship on mass production (Moist 2008, 99). Here, I am less concerned with whether or not Benjamin misunderstood his own concept than I am with reading scholars' desire to affirm the aura of vinyl symptomatically. According to sound studies scholar Johnathan Sterne, aura is itself a nostalgic category that names what is lost with the emergence of consumer capitalism, a phase of capitalist

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heritage plays an important part in vinyl's contemporary relevance, they argue that nostalgia has little to do with the format's revival (Bartmanski and Woodward 2015, xii–xiii).

development characterized by the mass production of cultural works and

sense-perceptual reification (Sterne 2003, 220). As a retroactive and retrospective

category, aura's narrative function as historical closure lent itself to nostalgic and

ideological usage by scholars of record collecting. Though records were growing in

popularity after decades of decline, they provided a foil for the all too familiar

cultural anxieties surrounding the mp3's newfound hegemony and *perceived*

inauthenticity.[192] Thus, if re-enchanting vinyl with aura in the age of digital

reproduction was a nostalgic attempt to historicize the present—one that resulted in

understanding the mp3 as a *break* with history—authors used Benjamin's categories

in imprecise ways. Indeed, rather than describing "the unique phenomenon of

distance, however close [a work of art] may be," aura was translated into something

akin to fetishism, where collectors' metaphysical investment in objects imbued them

with the spirit of the artist or their historical context. So too, ritual[193] was

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[192] See Sarah Thornton's *Club Cultures* (2006) and Johnathan Sterne's *The Audible Past* (2003) for the ways that records were understood as inauthentic.

[193] For Benjamin and for Western Marxism more generally, ritual refers to the social function of art *prior* to capitalism. Before music could even be perceived as art, Jacques Attali explains, "*Its fundamental functionality is to be pure order*" (Attali 1985, 31). Insofar as music functions as ritual, it did so as an expression of social power, and as a matter of social reproduction. In Amiri Baraka's and Chris Cutler's formulations, music took a "folk" form prior to its contemporary status in a commodity form (Jones 1999, 28; Cutler 1993, 6). In its folk form, music music-making is a collective practice that organizes social activity, whose function is transparent to its participants. For example, so-called work songs keep the pace of labor. Collectively sung and authorless, there is no separation between performer and audience. But with the emergence of class society, and later capitalism, musicians become specialists within a complex division of labor. So too, music became something separate from society—art. As a result of its commodification, music was objectified and reproduced first as sheet music and later as records. In meeting the listener halfway—for example, in the home rather than the concert hall—reproducibility had opened new potentials for cultural struggle, where the

disarticulated from its concept—before music could even be conceived as an art

object separate from activity, its function *as ritual* was in the reproduction of power

relations—and recoded with its quotidian meaning as habitual practice.

As they compared and contrasted how collectors used and accumulated music

on different formats, scholars took different positions on whether collectors'

attraction to vinyl was motivated by nostalgic desire. Roy Shuker[194] and Kevin

Moist[195] emphasize their collectors' nostalgic attachment to the music of their youth

and how vinyl's heritage features are articulated to a concept of history. Shuker

explains, "Many vinyl collectors take the view that vinyl recordings are how a

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capitalist organization of production was not entirely determinant of a work's meaning (Frith 1978, 48). Thus, for Benjamin, mass production "emancipates the work of art from its dependence on ritual" (Benjamin 1970a, 224). Or as Attali puts it, "Music trapped in the commodity is no longer ritualistic. Its code and original usage have been destroyed" (Attali 1985, 24). Thus, ritual has nothing to do with its everyday usage as habitual practice. Playing records can be as much of a "ritual" as one's morning coffee, but that bears no relation to the ways Marxist theorists have used the term to map major shifts in musical production and reception. Clarifying these concepts is a necessary detour through the ideological terrain of popular music studies.

[194] "The overarching reason for collectors' preference for vinyl can be loosely categorized as 'nostalgia', linked to the perceived aura and authenticity of the format. Vinyl is what many collecting 1960s and '70s groups and genres grew up with, and, as such, is frequently accompanied by positive associations with their adolescence and youth, and a sense of history" (Shuker 2016, 65).

[195] Moist shows how people use their collections "not as an end point but as a springboard to further creative action and can potentially use the collection itself as support for an alternative view of culture both present and past" (Moist 2008, 105). His collectors have eyes toward preservation, emphasizing works that may have been "lost" without their efforts. Their collections are geared toward filling musical and informational gaps, forging by juxtaposition and documentation, sonic and cultural connections obscured by official histories. Unlike the popular stereotypes of introverted and covetous collectors, Moist's collectors share their music by curating and illustrating compilations, forming their own record labels, producing DJ shows, contributing to museums, and by extending personal invitations to scholars, journalists, and fellow collectors to peruse their records.

particular album was originally created, and therefore in a sense represents a more authentic listening experience" (Shuker 2016, 67). In other words, to listen historically in the present requires listening to the format in which the music was originally released. Though perhaps unproblematic for collectors of 60s rock or 70s soul, where analog recordings and vinyl LPs were universally used, what about music from the 1980s and 1990s that was recorded digitally or initially released on multiple formats? Questions that complicate the analog/digital binary were generally ignored by scholars. In contrast with Shuker's and Moist's collectors, who specialize in old analog music, Bartmanski and Woodward's collectors are "format pluralists" rather than "vinyl purists." Though they do not exclusively play vinyl, these Berlin-based techno DJs are committed to releasing new music on vinyl and performing it in club settings. Bartmanski and Woodward insist that they cannot be nostalgic about a format that had never fallen out of fashion within the techno scene. Thus, collectors' desire "to renew the old world" may be more about their musical preferences than their attachment to vinyl.

While most analyses of record collecting emphasized how musical taste influences collectors' interest in the format, Simon Reynolds inverted the causality. In his 2004 essay "Lost in Music: Obsessive Record Collecting" (2004), Reynolds argues that as a result of digital downloading, a nostalgic sensibility inherent to record collecting had worked its way into popular music culture writ large. Reynolds' thesis is that there is an inverse relationship between our access to the past and musical creativity. Before online retail and the mp3, CD-reissue programs in the 1980s

induced a shift in how many bands related to rock history. What emerged was what

Reynolds termed "record-collection rock"—"where a band's total sonic identity is

reducible to its members' listening habits" (299). He writes:

> The first examples of this syndrome were groups like the Jesus and Mary
> Chain and Spacemen 3, who disengaged punk from its outside-world
> imperatives and set themselves up as custodians of a canon of mavericks and
> marketplace failures: Velvets, Stooges, Love, MC5. As the CD reissue and
> box-set boom escalated, and retro culture made the past accessible like never
> before, this mode of creativity became more common. (Reynolds 2004, 299)

If musicians' influences once came from a world outside itself—be it politics,

literature, poetry, etc.—they became ever more inwardly directed as our musical past

was liberated from scarcity. The consequence of the mp3 and its place at the center of

a "post-Napster file-sharing culture" was that bands could "assemble their identity

along a flat plane, ahistorical and postgeographical" (301, 300). For Reynolds, the

ultimate end of this process was the mash-up phenomenon, where songs were stitched

together in ways that added as little original music to the assembled product as

possible (Reynolds 2011, 356–57). Only conceivable in digital storage culture,

mash-ups represented the latest regression in listening, where the pleasure of the form

derives only from the listener's ability to identify the song's constituent parts. Though

they depended entirely on music history, mash-ups themselves were not for posterity.

Mash-ups were thus a homological response to transformations in music *distribution*.

If "file-sharing culture is basically an infinitely vast communal record collection," its

cultural consequences could be registered not least in the crowding out of

contemporary music by pop's immediate past (Reynolds 2004, 307).

Selling the mp3

Prior to the ascendency of music streaming platforms, mp3 was the dominant format of what Jeremy Wade Morris terms the digital music commodity. In his 2015 *Selling Digital Music, Formatting Culture*, Morris conceptualizes the digital music commodity as "a particular combination of data and sound that exists as an entity in and of itself for sale or acquisition in online outlets via computers or other digital portable devices" (Morris 2015, 2). The digital music commodity is a formatted audio file—an mp3, a wav, or in the case of Spotify, Ogg—designed to encode, decode, and reproduce sound. But it also contains "paratextual" materials "that prepare audiences for its reception" (19). In the case of physical music commodities, these paratextual materials come in the form of album covers, jewel cases, labels, stickers, barcodes, and liner notes. But with the digital music commodity, these materials no longer reside on the surface. Rather, they exist in the form of metadata, which means that they "become much less obvious and much more embedded into the commodity itself" (19). Much of the information that was once contained on the surfaces of physical media has been eliminated or condensed by the digital music commodity. For example, the iPod's display and Spotify's interface reduce album covers to a small thumbnail image while back covers and liner notes are eliminated entirely. This led critics like Galaxie 500's Damon Krukowski to understand digital distribution as eliminating history, where music "was stripped of the information that would tie it to a particular moment of the past" (Krukowski 2017, 169). However, the selective removal of information had more to do with the ways corporations distributed digital

music than it did with a transition to digital metadata as such. Indeed, rather than causing *ahistorical* listening, digital metadata should instead be understood as *differently historical*, a form of information that allows for digital music to be acquired (legally or illegally), cataloged, stored, transported, and heard in new ways.

The digital music commodity was an instance of what David Arditi calls the album replacement cycle. Arditi writes, "The album replacement cycle is the process through which people repurchase music they own on new media... [It] ensures record labels' periodic growth from catalog recordings" (Arditi 2021, 44). This business strategy was pioneered by the major labels in the early 1980s in response to the music industry's spectacular crash in 1979. It proved exceptionally profitable during the years in which CDs dominated the market for recorded music. As Roy Shuker explains, "there was a conscious effort by the major record companies systematically to reshape public music consumption by limiting the production of LPs, refusing retailers their option of returning unsold vinyl stock, and artificially inflating the wholesale cost of CDs to guarantee increasing profits" (Shuker 2016, 60). Developed by Sony in Japan, the CD launched internationally in 1982. By 1988, CD sales had overtaken sales of vinyl records. CD-driven industry profits grew every year throughout the 1990s, with much of that growth coming from the repackaging of back catalogs (Sterne 2012, 185). However, profit margins were inflated by illegal industry-wide coordination. Even as "efficiency gains in compact disc manufacturing

brought the per-unit cost of goods below a dollar," the major labels colluded to keep

the retail price of a new album at $16.98 (Witt 2016, 79).[196]

The CD boom reached its peak in 2000 but busted just two years later,

triggering a secular decline in CD profits. While the music industry was quick to

blame online file-sharing for the slump, it occurred *after* Napster was legally forced

to go offline in 2001. The launch of Napster in 1999 indisputably popularized

file-sharing and peer-to-peer network technology, but this digital infrastructure did

not negatively impact the sales of physical media until portable MP3 players were

readily available. Before this, mp3s had to be played on one's computer or burned to

a disc and played on a CD player.[197] But in either case, these listening conditions

failed to take advantage of the new technology's affordances. If computer playback

limited the user in terms of portability, burning mp3s to a CD-R made little use of the

technology's remarkable compression[198]—that is, its capacity to be stored in small

amounts of space. Indeed, the question of storage was central to the court case that

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[196] "As the U.S. Federal Trade Commission would later reveal, for nearly six years the Big Six—after the PolyGram merger, the Big Five—had quietly worked together to convince large retailers like Musicland and Tower Records to refrain from selling discs at a discount, in exchange for access to pooled advertising funds. Deals of this sort violated federal antitrust law, and since the Big Five collectively controlled close to 90 percent of the U.S. compact disc market, the impact on consumers was substantial. The estimated cost from 1995 to 2000 was half a billion dollars—two bucks from the pocket of every American" (Witt 2015, 114).

[197] As Witt explains, "you could burn mp3s to a compact disc—hundreds of them, actually—but a lot of CD players weren't equipped to play the files, and even for those that were, navigating through a menu of hundreds of files on a compact disc player was cumbersome and unwieldy" (Witt 2015, 125).

[198] "Compression, broadly put, decreases the size of a digital file by removing excess or unneeded data, making it quicker to upload, download, or send and easier to store in larger quantities" (Morris 2015, 39).

legalized the mass production of portable mp3 players. In a 1999 lawsuit brought by

the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) against Diamond Multimedia

Systems, manufacturer of the Rio portable mp3 player, a legal precedent was set that

established mp3 players were not recording devices like the Walkman and the

Discman (Witt 2015, 192). Instead, mp3 players were legally classified as hard drives

because their primary function was to make preexisting files portable. However, when

the iPod was released in October of 2001, "the device rewarded digital piracy by

making mp3s easier and more convenient to use" (156).

It was not until April of 2003 that Apple launched iTunes, which offered legal

digital music downloads for $0.99 per song and $9.99 per album as a complement to

the iPod. Before iTunes, browsing and purchasing were done on separate programs,

where songs downloaded from online music stores were played on independent media

players. But Apple integrated these functions with iTunes, making the acts of

purchase and playback seamless (Morris 2015, 148). To upload songs from one's

computer to the iPod, users were required to use the iTunes media player. As a

consequence, sales of iPods immediately translated into more users of iTunes, which

functioned not only as an interface for one's music "library" but as a digital music

retailer. As Morris explains:

> Since the store and the player shared the same overall interface, the practices
> for navigating the store were virtually the same as those for navigating the
> user's personal library… The media player became a media store, but the
> design of the interface and the integration of personal libraries and the store
> itself made the act of paying for music nearly invisible. In an era when
> millions of digital music users were accustomed to downloading their music
> for free, Apple's design strategies tried, as much as possible, to downplay the
> act of paying for music. (Morris 2015, 149)

The strategy worked. In its first year alone iTunes sold over seventy million downloads and by 2008 it became North America's leading music retailer. However, what was good for Apple was not necessarily good for the music industry as a whole. While the shift to digital distribution led to big profits and inflated stock prices for Apple, it failed to make up for the revenue lost from falling CD sales (Morris 2015, 132; Witt 2015, 225).[199] In 2012, digital music sales surpassed those of compact discs but downloads remained a small portion of overall industry revenue (Witt 2015, 260).

Beyond the numbers, iTunes was significant for the ways it had transformed how music was commodified. In a larger sense, "the iTunes store was pivotal in promoting the very idea that digital music *could be* a commodity, a digital item with a price tag" (Morris 2015, 134). On a much smaller scale, it disaggregated the individual song from the album by eliminating the industry practice of forced bundling. During the 1980s the decline of AOR (album-oriented-rock) and the emergence of MTV reasserted the centrality of singles to the music business (Witt 2015, 199). But as CDs replaced vinyl, the gradual phase-out of physical singles forced consumers to purchase full albums. As in the 1950s, albums became little more than vehicles for singles. But unlike the singles-driven rock 'n' roll market (roughly 1956-66), forced bundling was a major contributor to industry growth in the era of CDs. According to Stephen Witt, "This—more than piracy, more than

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[199] "When Sony had had its Walkman craze, the music industry had sold tens of millions of tapes. And alongside the Discman craze, the music industry had sold tens of millions of CDs" (Witt 2015, 192).

bootlegging, more than anything else—was what was really killing the music

business" (Witt 2015, 199).

As disaggregation challenged the centrality of the album format, it opened up

new possibilities for reaggregation (Morris 2015, 158-9). In emphasizing the

individual song over the album, Apple products transformed the role of the playlist

for the music industry and made curation central to the music business in new ways.

As Morris details:

> There were seasonal playlists (e.g., the iTunes essential Halloween Mix
> featuring songs about werewolves and other monsters—$24.75), yearly
> reviews (e.g., the "Best of 2005" songs playlist—$86.76), and iTunes
> Essentials (e.g., Essential Bob Dylan—$71.28). There were also partner
> playlists (such as Starbucks' Playing for Change: Songs from around the
> World for $14.99, or Nike's motivational sports/workout mixes), as well as
> playlists from hundreds of celebrities and well-known media figures. (Morris
> 2015, 158–59)

In addition to these official playlists, users were able to assemble their own "iMixes,"

which iTunes made available for purchase (159). Drawing on Rob Drew's work on

compilations, Morris stresses that these playlists served to commodify the previously

uncommodified practice of making mixes. Thus, iTunes playlists functioned more

like commercial compilations that were sometimes user-generated, rather than mixes

per se.[200]

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[200] There were still important aspects of commodification at work in home-taping and
CD-burning. Firstly, mixes depended upon commercial recordings. Secondly, they
were immensely profitable for corporations manufacturing hardware for music
distribution and storage. In some cases, the question of home-reproduction produced
bitter conflict between divisions of a single corporation. For example, when Sony
Electronics released a consumer-grade CD-burner in 2001, Sony Music strongly (but
unsuccessfully) objected (Sterne 2012, 208). Such objections demonstrate the way
that corporations have been contradictorily embedded in different markets within the
music industry.

While iTunes used playlists to sell music, most people used iTunes to assemble playlists for their iPods. Initially, many people made playlists of their favorite songs with little thought to how they were organized. But as Michael Bull argues in *Sound Moves: iPod Culture and Urban Experience*, the construction of personal playlists took on increasingly utilitarian functions. The early 21st century iPod user managed everyday life by privatizing their sonic environment with music. Bull writes, "iPods become strategic devices permitting the user to shape the flow of experience, holding contingency at bay by either predicting future experience—the next song on the play list—or by shaping their own sound world in tune with their desire" (Bull 2008, 126–27). In choosing the soundtrack to one's experience, and filtering out the outside world through sensory gating, iPod users exercised control over the meaning and feeling of their everyday activity (13, 22). To this end, iPod users curated playlists to accompany specific activities like waking up, working out, or focusing at work, but also to direct or enhance their mood (46, 71, 112). Though music has long been used in these ways—especially by radio programmers—never before did listeners have so much control over their auditory environment. Bull's work showed that the iPod's capacity for personal playlisting was displacing genre-based listening for the psychological management of experience (153). At the same time, music became subservient to a function outside itself, subsumed by the theme of the playlist (112–3).

Just as iPod users curated their own playlists, they also spent a great deal of time organizing their digital libraries. This was particularly true for people who

"pirated" the majority of their music. While those who purchased music from iTunes

"received a speedy download of a working, virus-free file that came with digital

album art and accurate metadata," those who downloaded music from peer-to-peer

networks or file-hosting blogs often had to deal with poorly organized and incorrectly

labeled files (Morris 2015, 151). iTunes provided an interface for users to easily alter

their digital music's metadata, which went well beyond correcting the capitalization

and spelling of song and album titles. As Morris explains:

> Metadata let users add ratings to their music, track how many times a song has
> been played, see how recently a song has been played, and tag tunes with
> other commentary. Advanced metadata make digital music libraries
> searchable, not just alphabetically or by date but by multiple, customizable
> variables (tempo, mood, favorites, etc.) (82).

With physical media like records, cassettes, and CDs, consumers typically organize

their music by format and genre with albums arranged in alphabetical order.

Depending on the size of one's collection, rearrangement can be a long and arduous

process. But with one click, iTunes enabled the reorganization of one's library

according to a host of different categories: artist, song name, genre, year, user rating,

number of plays, date uploaded, and even song length. Indeed, inputting the metadata

of files in one's digital music library became one of the neurotic pleasures of owning

"pirated" digital music commodities.[201] For this reason, Reynolds wrote of the iPod,

"Even as it abolishes record collecting in the traditional sense, the iPod represents the

ultimate extension of its mindset: the compulsion to hunt, stockpile and endlessly

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[201] Songs that were purchased in iTunes were more restricted. Though they could still
be assigned personal ratings, iTunes did not permit users to alter artist and album
titles.

reorganise" (Reynolds 2011, 116). In the era of digital storage culture, organization became an ongoing rather than a finite task. With the spatial and economic barriers to accumulation circumvented, there were always more files waiting to be classified.

The iPod's vast storage capacity offered new possibilities for mobile listening. With portable cassette and CD players, one could only listen to as many albums as they could carry.[202] For many, listening required some amount of planning or at least a prediction of what they wanted to hear later that day. "For most users, however, a hastily bundled selection of tapes or CDs would be carried in the hope that it would contain appropriate music" (Bull 2008, 127). Bull argues that users of the Walkman typically preferred not to listen to music over listening to a tape they were not in the mood for. Portable mp3 players made this situation exceptional because listeners could take their whole collection (or at least a substantial portion of it) with them. In making a lifetime's worth of music available in an instant, these devices "provided a technological solution to the management of the contingency of aural desire" (127). In Bull's terms, the iPod's storage capacity helped to "close the gaps" in one's day, offering the potential of sonic continuity amidst contingency. He explains:

> Whilst the personal stereo was commonly used as an 'in-between' device—from door to door—the iPod expands the possibilities of use from the playing of music through attaching it to the user's home hi-fi, plugging it into the automobile radio, and by connecting it to the computer at work, thus giving users unprecedented ability to weave the disparate threads of the day into one seamless and continuous soundtrack. (Bull 2015, 128)

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[202] Consumer desires shaped by mp3 players rubbed up against the limits of physical storage culture in the 2000s when many people began keeping several large binders of "burned" CDs in their cars.

Thus, the iPod's mobility and storage capacity offered a new sonic temporality to everyday life.

On the one hand, the iPod offered a kind of musical compensation for the way capitalism structures time around work. In an economy built upon wage labor, where workers are paid by the hour, time takes on a disciplinary function. As George Lipsitz explains:

> Before the rise of the factory, people generally worked at their own pace for their own purposes, disciplined by necessity or desire, but not by the time clock. Industrial labor brought the clock and its incessant demands into the workplace and into the home; days became divided into units of working time and individuals lost control over nature, purpose, and duration of labor. (Lipsitz 1990, 112)

In accompanying us to and from work, and sometimes even on the job, iPods allowed us to reclaim in sound what we were denied in totality—free time (Bull 2015, 147).

On the other hand, iPods reinforced our relationship to clock time at the expense of our listening experience. As we listened, the interface of the iPod displayed the music's duration down to the second, tracking the song's passage of time and showing how long remained before the song was over. Reynolds describes how "This function not only abolishe[d] the 'lost in music,' timeless quality of immersive listening but ha[d] an insidious tendency to encourage the listener to skip to the next track rather than wait for the song to unfold in its own due time" (Reynolds 2011, 118).[203] Thus, the iPod not only transformed our experience of

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[203] He concludes that this was "consumer empowerment disempowering both artist and Art. Instead of being an experience to which you submit yourself, music becomes something useful" (Reynolds 2011, 118).

activities once separate from personal listening time; it transformed our listening practices and our experience of musical time.

In Jamesonian terms, the iPod was a manifestation of postmodernity's domination of time by space (Jameson 1991, 25). Declining costs of hard drive memory during the late 1990s and 2000s enabled the iPod to condense thousands of hours of music into a single handheld device. When the iPod launched in 2001 it was available with 5GB or 10GB of storage. By 2009, there was a 160GB model (Apple Wiki). While Apple measured storage capacity by gigabytes, iPod users regularly touted the size of their devices in terms of time. It was common to hear people refer to how many days of non-stop listening it would take to play all the music contained on their mp3 players. But in its function as an archive, the iPod also served to spatialize time. Reynolds argues that by cramming so much musical history into itself, easily searchable and available for instant recall, the iPod was an extension of the logic of the internet (Reynolds 2011, 83-4): "The internet places the remote past and the exotic present side by side. Equally accessible, they become the same thing: far, yet near… old yet *now*" (85). Following Jameson's problematic, Reynolds suggested that as music files made their way from the internet to iPods, it signaled the end of temporality altogether.

In a far grander spatial register, the iPod indexed the accomplishments of capitalist globalization in the 2000s. Whereas up through the end of the postwar period manufacturing had been overwhelmingly concentrated in Europe and North America, what Philip McMichael terms the globalization project resulted in new

global networks of integrated production (McMichael 2017, 110, 132). As multinational corporations (MNCs) like Apple centralized their strategic and administrative functions in the United States, they came to rely on a decentralized network of labor-intensive production abroad (Panitch and Gindin 2012, 287). Here the supply chain of the iPod is instructive. As Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin detail in *The Making of Global Capitalism*:

> The iPod's 451 parts were overwhelmingly made in Southeast Asia: the US produced some of the chips, Japan the hard drive, and South Korea and Taiwan most of the other components, with final assembly done in China, mainly by the Taiwanese-owned firm Foxconn (the world's largest electronics contract manufacturer). (Panitch and Gindin 2012, 288)

The cost-breakdown of the iPod demonstrates how greater economic interdependence between states was entirely compatible with American imperialism:

> On top of a total factory cost of $145, Apple added $80 for its own design, software engineering, and marketing contributions; retailers in the US added $75 more, bringing the final price to $300. Thus less than half the revenue generated by the iPod went to all the producers in Asia (and only a tiny fraction—1.8 percent of the total factory cost—to China as the site of final assembly), while Apple received at least a quarter of the revenue, and over half when the iPod was sold online or through an Apple store. (Panitch and Gindin 2012, 288)

As trade liberalization increased competition between firms on an international scale—simultaneously putting downward pressure on workers' wages globally—the transformation in the global division of labor benefitted high-tech sectors in which American MNCs dominated the world market.

The success of the American-state-led globalization project depended upon the greater mobility of finance capital between states. As foreign direct investment flowed in both directions between advanced capitalist economies and low-income

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countries, the economic boom of the 1990s witnessed outsized investments in information technology (Harvey 2007, 157).[204] In the most advanced capitalist countries, venture capital was funneled into tech companies and start-ups with the effect of inflating stocks and asset prices. At the same time, "in the low-income economies, telecommunications was the largest sector for foreign direct investment in the 1990s" (Srnicek 2020, 22). As Nick Srnicek explains, "Concretely, this investment meant that millions of miles of fibre-optic and submarine cables were laid out, major advances in software and network design were established, and large investments in databases and servers were made" (22). As information and communication technologies were internationalized, global capitalism's capacity for borderless production dramatically increased. Additionally, in "la[ying] the groundwork for the digital economy," it globalized the internet (18–9).

Globalization and the Circulation of Digital Music

The circulation of digital music commodities in the early 2000s depended on the globalization of the internet. Far more than purchases from the Apple store, it was music culled from worldwide peer-to-peer networks that filled the hard drives of iPods (Morris 2015, 129). While these networks were often developed by a small number of tech-savvy individuals, many were also businesses. In other words, they had a corporate structure, venture capitalist investors, a business strategy, a logo, and lawyers (95).

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[204] "In 1970 investment in [information technology] was on par with the 25 per cent going into production and to physical infrastructures respectively, but, by 2000, IT accounted for around 45 per cent of all investment, while the relative shares of investment in production and physical infrastructure declined" (Harvey 2007, 157).

Launched in 1999 amidst the dot-com boom, Napster was the first of these networks to transform the circulation of digital music. Its innovative peer-to-peer software "connected users to a centralized server where they could trade one another mp3s" (Witt 2015, 114). Within months, there were millions of users dispersed across the world. Although they were unevenly concentrated in more developed economies, Napster's global reach substantially contributed to the network's traffic. Unsurprisingly, the most downloaded songs at the time were those at the top of the American pop music charts. However, the ability of a global user base to "share" songs from their own locales and cultures contributed to Napster's rapid growth within "wired" countries (Morris 2015, 98).[205]

A host of software that utilized peer-to-peer technology followed in the wake of Napster's forced shutdown in 2001. Some of these programs, like Kazaa and Limewire, attempted to fill the void by imitating Napster's software and design. Others like BitTorrent and Oink attempted to correct Napster's shortcomings. Napster's use of peer-to-peer technology connected individual users on a one-to-one basis through a centralized server (115). No matter how many copies of an identical song file were available, it could only be downloaded from a single user. BitTorrent's innovation was to enable pieces of a single file to be downloaded from multiple users simultaneously, correcting Napster's traffic bottleneck problem. With torrents, a flood

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[205] Morris writes, "a 2001 Jupiter Media Metrix report noted that Napster had more than a million users in Canada, Germany, and Italy and was in significant use in more than thirteen "wired" countries, including Brazil, Japan, Argentina, Denmark, and others. The press release for the report described this as "phenomenal global growth" and, because of users' abilities to add songs from various local regions and cultures, "one of the few real-time global marketplaces of culture" (Morris 2015, 98).

of users attempting to download the same file no longer crashed servers; it increased

the speed of downloads (Witt 2015, 167). As Witt explains, "A file transfer like that

would happen quickly, perhaps even instantaneously. And even before you finished

downloading, you could yourself simultaneously upload pieces of the half-finished

file to other users around the globe" (167). Insofar as a single song could be

assembled piece-by-piece from computers all over the world, torrents' use of

peer-to-peer technology functioned as the digital equivalent of integrated production.

While BitTorrent addressed the technical limits of Napster's digital

architecture, Oink (est. 2004) addressed the issues with its content. In making its

users' libraries publically available as a default setting, Napster encouraged the

distribution of poorly organized songs (160). As Witt details, "Glitchy, low-quality

files had abounded on Napster—files misnamed or mistagged, files attributed to the

wrong artist, files with glaring audio flaws" (172).[206] Indeed, this reality demonstrated

how inadequately scholars of record collecting understood the mp3. Not only did

metadata often contain the traces of an mp3's history—for example, the tag or

username of the person that "ripped" the audio from its disc—there was little ability

to enforce standards of quality control on peer-to-peer networks. To address this

problem, the United Kingdom-based Oink set out to maintain "a carefully curated

digital archive with fanatical emphasis on high-fidelity recordings" (171). It did so

with a series of rules. Digital uploads had to be derived from their original compact

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[206] The satirical punk-rock blog *The Hard Times* parodied this phenomenon with the headline, "'Sex and Candy' by Nirvana, and Other Classic Songs I First Discovered on Napster" (Coyne 2017).

discs. Liner notes and album art had standardized sizes. Metadata had to be properly

input (172). Unlike the Pirate Bay BitTorrent, which was a public tracker with no

upload requirements, the private and invitation-only Oink made "sharing" obligatory

by requiring users to sustain download/upload ratios (173).[207] To maintain access to

Oink's ever-growing archive, users had to contribute to it. While early users uploaded

their music collections, as the archive grew, newer users scoured record stores for

missing rarities (174). Oink's strict policies got results. Until it went offline in 2007,

Oink managed the most comprehensively organized archive of recorded music in

history.

     As global intelligence operations aimed at stopping digital piracy were

shutting down peer-to-peer networks, the music blog phenomenon was growing in

significance. Operating as fans, critics, and ultimately distributors, bloggers

meaningfully shaped the digital music landscape of the 2000s. Although the practice

of blogging began in the late 1990s, the collapse of Napster spurred the proliferation

of blogs dedicated to music (Borschke 2017, 114). In contrast to Napster and other

early peer-to-peer networks that circulated individual songs, blogs emphasized

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[207] The design of peer-to-peer networks reinforces the idea that the wealth of mp3s
available for download were a "crowdsourced phenomenon," "sourced from scattered
uploaders around the globe… [and] not organized in any meaningful way" (Witt
2015, 2). But as Stephen Witt describes in *How Music Got Free*, "the vast majority of
pirated mp3s came from just a few organized releasing groups" (3). Witt follows a
worker at a CD-manufacturing plant that gets involved in the "warez" scene,
"leaking" nearly 2000 CDs prior to their formal release (215). In the 2000s, even
commercial radio was playing pirated albums that were leaked before their formal
release (Wolk).

complete albums (Reynolds 2011, 104).[208] Music blogs were early examples of Web

2.0, a term coined by Tim O'Reilly in 2004 that broadly identifies two shifts. As

digital culture scholar Lev Manovich explains:

> First, in the 2000s, we are supposedly seeing a gradual shift from the majority
> of Internet users accessing content produced by a much smaller number of
> professional producers to users increasingly accessing content produced by
> other nonprofessional users. Secondly, if in the 1990s the web was mostly a
> publishing medium, in the 2000s it has increasingly become a communication
> medium. (Communication between users, including conversations around
> user-generated content takes place through a variety of forms besides email:
> posts, comments, reviews, ratings, gestures and tokens, votes, links, badges,
> photos, and video.) (Manovich 2009, 319–20)[209]

Platforms like Blogger and WordPress offered user-friendly templates and content

management services for free to users, but their business models depended upon the

data that users freely provided.[210] That data consisted of more than recommendations,

criticism, and debate. Like Napster, these businesses facilitated the circulation of

pirated music.

The growth of music blogs depended upon independent curators and data

management corporations. Although blogs did not host digital music files directly,

entries often contained links to file-storage services such as MegaUpload,

RapidShare, and Mediafire. They operated on a so-called freemium model, where

users were provided with *free* access to basic services but had to pay a *premium* for

additional features. Bloggers typically paid for extra storage space to host their

[208] In the 2000s, even commercial radio was playing pirated albums that were
"leaked" before their formal release (Wolk).
[209] Manovich argues that only the second shift is borne out by statistics (Manovich
2009, 319). However, the role of user-generated content is central to the music blog
phenomenon.
[210] Blogger was acquired by Google in 2003.

expanding collection of curated music. So too, many readers[211] paid a small monthly

fee to these same corporations to eliminate wait times and get faster download speeds.

As with manufacturers of blank cassettes in the 1980s and CD-Rs in the late 1990s

and 2000s, cloud-computing corporations made enormous sums at the expense of the

music industry.

Regular complaints about copyright violations[212] led both bloggers and the

clouding-computing services to voluntarily remove content. According to O'Donnell

and McClung, "For most MP3 blogs, songs are only available for download for a

limited time, usually 7 to 10 days. This gives the blogs a greater level of protection

from possible litigation but also functions to cut back on bandwidth used by each

MP3" (O'Donnell and McClung 2008, 76).[213] The widespread understanding that

these links were temporary compelled voracious downloading. Blog enthusiasts

combed archives to find every last operable link, often having dozens of downloads

processing simultaneously. As the anxiety of missing out combined with ever-cheaper

storage costs and the accessibility of broadband internet, everyday music fans were

transformed into amateur digital librarians. The effect of the music blog was

ultimately paradoxical, at once greatly contributing to the glut of music circulating on

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[211] Of course, reading lengthy reviews was never a prerequisite for downloading an album. Also, many music blogs uploaded music files without any prose accompanying the download link.

[212] "In some cases the songs available for download are legally provided by record companies to the bloggers, hoping they will spread the message about a given band. In other instances, bloggers post songs that violate copyright laws" (O'Donnell and McClung 2008, 75–76).

[213] Businesses like MediaDefender also sprung up to "interfer[e] with unauthorized file-sharing: disseminating fake files, clogging uploaders' queues, disrupting downloads" (Wolk).

the internet while also providing a check against it. Curation, after all, requires

purposeful practices of distinction and selection.[214]

In contrast with the more established media industries, especially commercial

radio, music blogs were sites for specialized knowledge. As Margie Borschke

explains:

> The output was diverse: There were blogs that covered the cutting edge of the underground and those who collated information on a particular genre or period in music history (i.e., Rare soul 45s); there were bloggers who used songs as a springboard for creative writing; there were bloggers who took a personal approach, outing their eclectic collections, and sometimes recounting stories about how a song featured in their personal lives. (Borschke 2017, 117).

Music bloggers were often described as practicing "sharity"—"a three-way pun on

'share' + 'charity' + 'rarity'"—where "barely a genre seemed unrepresented, from the

most readily available mainstream fare… to the most inaccessible arcana" (Reynolds

2011, 105). Thus, the music blog network was known not just for its

comprehensiveness—that is, how it filled gaps in a publically available but

decentralized cyberscape—but for the way it cultivated tastes for the arcane

(O'Donnell and McClung 2008, 75). From freak folk to modern funk, many of the

niche and revivalist trends of the 2000s had blogs dedicated to the musical eras that

inspired them.[215]

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[214] "MP3 bloggers fashioned themselves archival auteurs—active listeners who attempt to create coherence from the activity of accumulation and to order the chaos inherent in that practice" (Borschke 2017, 156).

[215] The various psychedelic undergrounds of the 1960s and 70s were particularly well documented on blogs like Holy Warbles, Time Has Told Me, Red Telephone, and others. Music sourced from these blogs was overwhelmingly imitated by the so-called freak folk scene. Without exception, these time-traveling "folk" were all too knowing

In assigning cultural value to the marginal and bringing the obscure out of obscurity, music blogs challenged written histories of musical repertories[216] while undermining a shared sense of popular canons.[217] As evidenced in the last chapter, it wasn't that the old canons disappeared, even when they were subject to change and expansion. But as bloggers and their publics constructed their own private inventories of great records, greatness was no longer determined (however problematically) socially—that is, by album sales, cultural impact, and/or debates in the music press. However great the temptation to see this effect as signaling the end of taste's determination by its context, what it really registered was a new relationship to music's historic availability. Blogs marked the end not of history but obscurity.

In some cases, blog coverage led to the rediscovery of artists and official reissues of their catalogs (Reynolds 2011, 107). When successful, such projects stimulated the release of ever more old music by encouraging labels to sift through artists' archives of unreleased and demo material (when such material existed).[218]

to be freaks. This was music made by cloying librarians for others in the know enough to catch the references.

[216] Mark Mazullo argues that "the written history of a musical repertory is dependent at least in part on its historical-critical reception, the connection between rock and its historians becomes a central aspect of rock's history itself" (Mazullo 1997, 147).

[217] One could argue this development in popular music was preceded by the postmodern turn in the academy decades earlier, where the collapse of literary and philosophical canons splintered into personalized ones (rather than destroying the notion of canon altogether) (Jameson 1988a, 193).

[218] In 2011, Reynolds pointed out that if these old records were freely available online, there was little incentive for people to purchase them (Reynolds 2011, 107-8). However, this utilitarian perspective has been nullified by the vinyl revival. Over the last decade, the number of small reissue labels has grown dramatically while established archival labels like Light In the Attic (LITA) and Numero Group have expanded their catalogs both in terms of releases and generic focus. While Numero began rereleasing rare soul and funk, it has since expanded into punk and 1990s indie

Reissues and archival releases were typically sold as digital files, CDs, and vinyl that included a single-use code for a complimentary digital download. Thus, as music blogs served to re-popularize vinyl in the era of the digital music commodity—serving as a check to the increasingly utilitarian uses of the mp3—they imported record collector culture into digital storage culture. Suddenly, the collectors' impulse to possess what no one else had morphed into the blogger's competitive desire to circulate obscurities (106).[219] Attitudes previously found only among record collectors—where obscurity can become a substitute for quality and where accumulation can become an end in itself—became increasingly commonplace among those who used blogs to grow their libraries (Reynolds 2004, 195). The generalization of such forms of reification was impossible before networked post-scarcity.

In contrast with peer-to-peer networks, where users were more or less anonymous[220], curation took on new public dimensions with the music blog. Blogs served as a form of exhibitionism in a dual sense (Reynolds 2011, 106). On the one hand, music bloggers performed traditional curatorial practices like selecting cultural works for public exhibition and commenting upon them. Like exhibits in a museum, blogs tended to be organized around a theme, genre, or moment in history. On the

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rock. LITA has moved on from 1970s folk and rock into releasing Japanese city pop and ambient music as well as American new age. Both labels now operate their own record stores.

[219] As we saw in Chapter three, this shift eventually mades its way to the dance floor, where Dâm-Funk announced the titles of rare records after performing them at Funkmosphere.

[220] A username and the files in one's library were typically all that was publicly visible to other users.

other, blogs took on personal dimensions in ways unfit for the museum. In this sense,

blogs were closer to social media, where it was common for users to describe music

in terms of individual experience and personal intimacy. As Margie Borschke writes,

"The practice [of music blogging] is linked to new kinds of sociality and a technology

used to represent the self in an online environment" (Borschke 2017, 117). In other

words, bloggers were not simply curating musical "exhibits" for others to enjoy; in a

new way, music became a medium for curating the self.[221]

The Figure of the Hipster as a Symptom of Digital Over-Accumulation

The figure of the hipster emerged as the most spectacular response to this

musical conjuncture. The significance of taste reached its apex with the appearance of

this new cultural archetype. Despite the excess of commentary, the hipster was

notoriously hard to pin down at a conceptual level. The problem was reinforced by its

representatives' active disavowal of the label as well as the reoccurring journalistic

trope announcing the "death of the hipster." In 2009, *n+1* editor Mark Greif hosted a

symposium on the hipster at the New School for Social Research. While a multitude

of theses were advanced, a point of unity among the panelists regarded periodization:

the hipster surfaced in 1999 with the widespread use of the internet. [222]

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[221] This is why blog entries tended to overwhelmingly contain positive reviews. To include a "bad" album would be putting bad art in a museum, or wearing a shirt that featured a band one didn't like.

[222] Other aspects include the hipster's class position and racial imagination. Mark Greif convincingly argues that hipsters were typically white, downwardly mobile but highly educated middle class consumers that used taste as a means of acquiring cultural capital. Their style, which included trucker hats and big belt buckles, raised the specter of white identity in an era of multiculturalism and so-called colorblindness. Thus, in contrast to earlier patterns of "cool" white migration into communities of color, the 21st century hipsters avoided cohabitation. Instead,

In the early 2000s new platforms for self-presentation served to solidify the aesthetic, and the popularization of the term accompanied the mainstreaming of hipster fashion and sensibilities. Through social media (MySpace, Facebook, and later Instagram), fashion blogs (on WordPress and LiveJournal), and edgy magazines like Vice, the style migrated quickly from the thrift store to the Beverly Hills boutique to the major retailers like Urban Outfitters (Tortorici 2010, 134). While there were certainly a multitude of determinations at play in the construction of the hipster, the internet was essential to the figure's relationship with popular culture and to affect, grounding compulsions that resulted in a historically specific presentation of knowledge and the self.

What was significant about hipsters was how they transformed the site of curation from the exhibit to the self. As Danya Tortorici put it, "Among the unique characteristics of the twenty-first-century hipster is his conviction or pretense that his very life is, if not a piece of art, at the very least an art show to be curated, advertised, recorded, etc." (Tortorici 2010, 125). One need not trace all the individual micro-trends that appeared as a play of surfaces in the 2000s to recall the hipster's obsession with self-presentation. Greif argues that hipsters did not function like the

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neighborhoods transformed in their image, which is why many cultural critics identified them as the shock troops of gentrification (Greif 2010a; 2010b). Grégory Pierrot is correct to note that insofar as red-lining kept neighborhoods of color comparatively inexpensive, "hipsters are both symptoms and engines of racial discrimination" (Pierrot 2022, 21). However, his short book *Decolonizing Hipsters* fails to see any utopian impulses in the hipster, charting a straight line from the archetype's emergence to the presidency of Donald Trump. It is entirely unclear to me how the Can-listening, Godard-watching aesthete can be representative of Trump's base. Ariel Pink and John Maus are clearly the exceptions that prove the rule.

older subcultures, where a distinct style was articulated to a music genre that marked them off from a dominant culture, as well as one another. Whereas subcultures tend toward insularity—after all, exclusion and the accompanying anxiety of being marked as a poseur are central features of subcultural distinction—hipsters were unique for their breadth and eclecticism. They mixed among the punks, the indie rockers, the metal heads, and all the other genre-based scenes that persisted (and mutated) decades after their emergence. Hipsters had an overall scene-savviness. In their capacity as "aspiring cultural savants," their style functioned homologically, projecting the appearance of comprehensive cultural expertise without having to say a thing. "Digging" for clothing and music was central to the lifestyle.

Yet under conditions of networked post-scarcity, the ability to use taste to distinguish oneself became a Sisyphean task. Distinction became an increasingly competitive and time-consuming practice for this subset. As Greif powerfully puts it:

> I take it that "hipster" as a name points to the fact that something has become even *more* drastic, or set apart, again, about these people's status as possessors of knowledge; and that, if we believe there is something essential about 1999 that lasts to the present, it is that the acquisition and display of taste before anyone else has also been radicalized, by the new forms of online capitalism; so that it is increasingly hard to possess, for example, popular music that everyone else can't also immediately possess after widespread internet use. (Greif 2010b, 12–3)

While the internet eliminated older forms of gatekeeping, to be "in the know"—or rather, to know more than anyone else—arguably required *more* time rather than less because there was so much more information available. Even without the obstacles of cost and physical space, digital acquisition entailed countless hours reading blogs, clicking links, sitting through download cues and wait times, inputting metadata,

organizing one's files, and so on. In stark contrast with critics who saw the mp3

offering up instant gratification, building a comprehensive personal library was

time-intensive. One's music library may not have been for exhibition, but it was for

posterity. And just as significantly, even if one amassed more music than they could

ever listen to, the act of listening never got any shorter. *Knowing* music took time, and

not knowing was to risk defrauding oneself publically. At its worst, this anxiety

devolved into a personal accounting of how much has been heard, read, watched,

etc.—a kind of accelerated consumption that bears no relation to understanding.[223]

But even if the hipster was motivated by insecurity and the selfish pursuit of cultural

capital, those drives were complemented by an unshakable commitment that *music*

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[223] This form of reification was parodied in 2011 in the sketch comedy show *Portlandia* (Krisel 2011), where three hipsters sitting in a coffee shop fight about who has read more of the latest publications. "Did you read it?" "Yes" or, "I did not like the end of it." There is no discussion of content whatsoever. Lines of questioning quickly move from specific articles to publications in general to a plane's skywriting to fortune cookies. Their friend Maggie shows up late and asks, "Did you read the new *Portland Monthly*?" as she drops a copy on the table. Not a moment passes before Fred and Carrie tear up the magazine to eat its pages. In making cultural consumption literal, the point is of course that quantity of consumption bears no relation to understanding what one has read, but also that that is what can happen when consumption becomes a matter of competitive distinction. The sketch ends with the hipsters spotting two news racks outside the restaurant. They run outside and tear through their pages. With no more newspapers to shred, they lock eyes on a Yellow Pages hanging from a phone booth across the street, causing them to run into traffic. The hipsters are hit by cars, making literal the "death of the hipster." The camera focuses on a streetlight flashing "Don't Walk" and a voice from off screen says, "Hey, it says don't walk. Can't you read?"

matters. It was this utopian[224] impulse that occasionally broke through the hipster's otherwise ironic[225] disposition.

Breaking Digital Storage Culture

The linked infrastructure of peer-to-peer networks, music blogs, and cloud computing services was challenged by a global effort to tamp down on file-sharing. With names like Operation Buccaneer, Operation Fastlink, and Operation Takedown, a series of targeted raids began as early as 2001 and continued through 2012. These raids were sometimes spectacular and led to high-profile arrests. Other times, they arbitrarily punished people who made no money from file-sharing. More significant than any arrests were the seizure of servers where pirated music and films were stored. Arrests did little to discourage everyday people from illegally downloading music but the seizure of servers had a lasting effect on digital storage culture.

While the closure of one peer-to-peer service tended to spur the development of another, the effort to shut down file-hosting services put an end to the music blog almost instantly. Consider the case of MegaUpload, which at its peak in 2011 serviced 50 million users per day and accounted for "a full 4 percent of global internet traffic" (Graeber 2012). In January 2012, MegaUpload co-founder Kim Dotcom (formerly

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[224] The term "hipster" always operated pejoratively, and in this sense to discuss them at all was to be critical of them in one way or another (Greif 2010b, 8). But in critics' desire to humiliate hipsters, they often missed out on this utopian dimension.
[225] Fisher argues that irony was a symptom of capitalist realism. He writes, "capitalist realism presents itself as a shield protecting us from the perils posed by belief itself. The attitude of ironic distance proper to postmodern capitalism is supposed to immunize us against the seductions of fanaticism. Lowering our expectations, we are told, is a small price to pay for being protected from terror and totalitarianism" (Mark Fisher 2009, 5).

Schmitz) was arrested at his New Zealand mansion on charges of copyright

infringement, racketeering, money laundering, and piracy. The press compared the

raid to an action movie, portraying Dotcom as the head of a digital crime syndicate

that was finally getting justice. Police helicopters, attack dogs, semi-automatic

weapons, and the rural mansion's secret bunker only added to the drama and

Dotcom's celebrity. While the media fixated on him, it downplayed how similar raids

were taking place in data centers across Europe where MegaUpload's servers were

located. With the seizure of these servers, links embedded in prominent music blogs

ceased to function (Borschke 2017, 1).

When blogs lost their data storage, they lost their primary function as music

distributors.[226] While some bloggers tried to re-upload their music and re-embed links

in old entries, most assumed that their new links would go the way of the old ones.

While global interventions to stop piracy put an end to the music blog, they also

provided an opening for the emergent culture of music streaming.

The Emergence of Music Streaming[227]

At least for a time, the temporalities of storage culture and streaming culture

were overlapping. A cursory look at the timeline of music streaming platforms

demonstrates that this shift did not happen all at once. If the launch of Pandora in

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[226] There was sometimes a stark contrast between blogs that distributed music and those like Fisher's *K-Punk* and Reynolds' *blissblog*, which were primary outlets for criticism.

[227] Portions of this section previously appeared in "Thinking Thinking Culture in the Age of Global Finance: A Review of *Spotify Teardown*" (Gampel 2021). For a financial history of Spotify, see the collectively authored *Spotify Teardown* (Eriksson et al. 2019).

2000, YouTube in 2005, and Spotify[228] in 2008 constituted the first phase of music

streaming in the era of digital storage culture, the opening of Tidal in 2014 and Apple

Music in 2015 signaled that the future of the music business would belong to

streaming. Streaming now accounts for approximately 85 percent of all music

industry revenue with Spotify as the world's leading platform. As of 2022, Spotify

has 433 million users, with 188 million subscribers across 183 markets (Spotify

Newsroom). In looking at the growth and effects of Spotify as representative of larger

transformations from storage culture to streaming culture, I will show how

financialization grounded Spotify's capitalization, influenced its corporate structure,

and continues to shape its playlisting practices. In the shift from ownership of a

personal music library to access to a privately owned archive, platform playlists have

restructured how we engage with music *as history*. In the final analysis, the dynamics

of financialization explain why old music has become ever-more embedded in

contemporary listening habits.

Spotify was founded in 2006 by Daniel Ek and Martin Lorentzon in Sweden.

However, since 2009 "Spotify has been principally owned by a number of venture

capital firms based in different parts of the world" (Eriksson et al. 2019, 32).

Spotify's capitalization occurred across seven rounds of funding drawn primarily

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[228] The authors of *Spotify Teardown* argue that the platform began as "de facto pirate service," "sometimes presenting itself as the continuation of the ongoing illicit disruption, while at other times insisting on a binary opposition between illegality and legality" (Eriksson et al. 2019, 43, 41). From its inception in 2006 up through its official launch in 2008, the music that circulated on Spotify "originated from The Pirate Bay and other file-sharing networks" (45). Thus, Spotify's legalization required purging this music from its servers and signing licensing deals with record companies.

from global venture capital firms. By the time of its initial public offering (IPO) on April 3, 2018, that funding totaled over $3 billion (with $1.6 billion in stocks and another $1.5 billion in the form of convertible debt) (Eriksson et al. 2019, 35, 66). In early 2019 Spotify had its first profitable quarter. However, Spotify has yet to turn an annual net profit despite its ever-growing revenues, which in 2021 totaled over 9.6 billion dollars (Iqbal).

In contrast to how we typically think about economic growth, with profits driving investment and the accumulation of capital, the authors of *Spotify Teardown* explain that venture capital's primary interest in Spotify is not to make the company profitable but to make it *valuable*. They write, "Venture capital bets on return on investments at the time of an "exit," that is, when Spotify is either acquired by a larger corporation or introduced at the stock exchange. Meanwhile, more and more venture capital is needed to cover the recurring losses and keep up the growth" (Eriksson et al. 2019, 32). As Nick Srnicek convincingly argues, platforms like Spotify adopted this "growth before profits" model with the idea that "through rapid growth they would be able to grab market share and eventually dominate what was assumed to be a major new industry" (Srnicek 2020, 21). At present Spotify controls just over 30 percent of the market for streaming but long-term profitability may depend upon gaining monopoly power.

Scholars have recently argued that Spotify's financialization extends beyond the platform's capitalization into its corporate structure. The authors of *Spotify Teardown* claim that "coordination within Spotify's production chain followed and

appropriated models from the financial world" (Eriksson et al. 2019, 162). They portray Spotify as a broker, making markets between the music industry and unauthorized file sharers (163). According to this approach, Spotify took advantage of arbitrage opportunities from undervalued songs, first illegally as free riders and then legally with its proportional revenue payout system (165–6). ("Estimates… usually state that revenue per played track runs as low as $0.005 at Spotify" (76).) In treating financialization not only as a periodizing category but as a theoretical framework for conceptualizing platforms, the authors of *Spotify Teardown* identify fundamental features of Spotify's history and organizational structure that are absent or are misrepresented in the dominant narratives that circulate about the platform. The strength and the stakes of this problematic become clearest in their analysis of what is called "programmatic advertising." Programmatic, the industry shorthand, "is a mechanism for using personal data and algorithms to buy and sell ads" that "includes the automation of online ad buys via interconnected online "trading desks" that allow the auctioning off of inventory within milliseconds" (166). Although Spotify still sells most of its advertising inventory with human sales teams, programmatic exemplifies how financialization is linked to user data and algorithms in the structure of Spotify's business operations.

For most of Spotify's existence, the Big Three major labels (Universal, Sony, and Warner) owned considerable stock in the platform. Unlike television and movie streaming—where "content owners can choose one platform to stream their content, and consumers must subscribe to multiple platforms if they want to consume this

content"—music streaming platforms depend upon licensing agreements with *all* the major labels (Arditi 2021, 17). This has little to do with the kind of content that is offered. Instead, it reflects the music industry's greater degree of consolidation in comparison with television and film (Prey, Esteve Del Valle, and Zwerwer 2022, 85). As *Spotify Teardown* puts it, "The Big Three form an oligopoly that can act as a cartel when dealing with any music streaming service" (Eriksson et al. 2019, 32). If a single one cut ties with Spotify or with any of the other major streaming platforms, it could potentially upend the entire business model. According to David Arditi, "In order to gain the licensing to stream music, Spotify gave the major record labels equity in the company" (Arditi 2021, 48).[229] Equity in Spotify also incentivizes the major labels to renew those licenses. In other words, label equity functions as a risk management strategy by making the future more predictable. While Universal and Sony remain shareholders in the platform, Warner Music Group sold all of its shares just two months after Spotify's April 2018 IPO (Music Business Worldwide 2018; Prey, Esteve Del Valle, and Zwerwer 2022, 85).[230] The top institutional shareholders in Spotify, however, are *not* record labels. They are venture capital firms. Until Spotify becomes profitable, growth depends on regular infusions of investment funds from venture capitalists.

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[229] Arditi explains that "after Spotify went public, the labels cashed in significantly. Major labels also had significant equity in Beats, and following Apple's purchase of Beats, Universal grossed $448 million from their 14% stake in the sale" (Arditi 2021, 48).

[230] Warner Music Group generated $504 billion dollars from selling its shares in Spotify. The impact of Warner's divestment on Spotify's featured content remains unclear.

These differently positioned investors have diverging interests in the platform's future. As Robert Prey, Marc Esteve Del Valle, and Leslie Zwerwer explain, "while Spotify may be feeling pressure from the major labels to promote more of their content, they are at the same time being pressured by financial investors to reduce their content costs" (Prey, Esteve Del Valle, and Zwerwer 2022, 85). This is an effect of how investors relate to Spotify's payout model. Spotify uses a "pro rata revenue share approach," where "revenues are divided to the rights holders based on how many approved plays a certain track has in relation to all the other tracks played at the same time" (Eriksson et al. 2019, 155). Approximately 70 percent of Spotify's revenues are paid to rights holders, the majority of whom are record labels. While the major labels invested in Spotify as a way to ensure returns on their copyrights, venture capitalists "are investing in dis-intermediation—in a business model which reduces, or eliminates entirely, the need to rely on content from the traditional recorded music industry" (Prey, Esteve Del Valle, and Zwerwer 2022, 85–86). Spotify must satisfy the major labels so as not to threaten divestment and the termination of licensing agreements. At the same time, it must demonstrate to current and potential future venture capital investors that it can find ways to cut payouts to rights holders (86). The longer Spotify runs at a loss, the more it will have to orient itself toward potential future investors. This antagonism is built into Spotify's promotional strategies and playlists.

Consider the ways that Spotify has tried to reduce payouts to rights holders. Music journalist and editor for *The Baffler* Liz Pelly puts it bluntly: "Spotify is trying

to replace labels" (Pelly 2017). She argues that if the platform succeeds in licensing music directly from artists, "Spotify will almost certainly contribute to the disappearance of truly independent record labels" (Pelly 2018a). Spotify has dubiously pitched this effort at vertical integration as increasing artists' independence, but its real purpose is "to lower the costs they pay for licensing music" (Pelly 2018a). One of Spotify's efforts to cut costs has been its use of so-called "fake artists." As Prey et al explain, "In the summer of 2016, *Music Business Worldwide* reported that Spotify was paying producers a flat fee to create tracks under fake names" (Prey, Esteve Del Valle, and Zwerwer 2022, 86). Rather than the traditional label role of investing in artists and developing their careers over time, Spotify was funding the creation of "content" that could pad their Spotify-owned-playlists.[231] By promoting these playlists over others, Spotify amplifies its own content and limits the payment of royalties outside the corporation.[232] The Spotify Singles program is another effort at reducing payouts to record labels. Since 2016, Spotify Singles has released two-track EPs by over 300 different artists on a weekly schedule. With each EP typically featuring one original song and one cover, the program has tried to thread the needle between rights holders and the interests of venture capital (Pelly 2018b). Certainly, it tips the scale in favor of the latter but it also evidences how Spotify's attempt to replace labels is bound to the publishing rights of old music. Indeed, this is

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[231] "All of these tracks were found on Spotify mood playlists such as 'Peaceful Piano', 'Deep Focus', and 'Ambient Chill', where they generated 'hundreds of thousands, or in many cases, millions of streams'" (Prey, Esteve Del Valle, and Zwerwer 2022, 86).

[232] *Music Business Worldwide* reports that publishing rights to these songs "may be up for grabs" but the masters are owned by Spotify (Ingham 2016).

just one example of what is driving financial investment in musicians' back catalogs. Thus, finance is not simply a matter of how Spotify is funded; it shapes how "content" is produced, formatted, and consumed.

Financialization, Curation, and Playlists

Financialization's impact on streaming culture can most clearly be registered via Spotify's playlists. Around 2012-3, Spotify underwent a shift now widely described as its curatorial turn. The turn cemented the playlist's status as Spotify's primary object for streaming and marked a new emphasis on algorithmic and human recommendations (Eriksson et al. 2019, 117). Eriksson et al. explain that "A large number of these playlists are created by third-party services such as Filtr, Topsify, or Digster, owned by Sony, Warner, and Universal respectively—the three major record labels that, in turn, own stakes in Spotify" (5). In other words, Spotify's curatorial turn and its accompanying reconceptualization of the user was built atop a layer of corporate acquisitions by both the major labels and Spotify.

Before the turn, Spotify functioned as an on-demand service whose interface resembled iTunes, where users could search for music and assemble personal playlists. Spotify's marketing corresponded to the design of its search-based interface, foregrounding that consumers could choose from (then) over 20 million individual songs contained in its massive database (60). The platform emphasized consumer choice rather than recommendations, albums and individual songs rather than playlists, and musical quantity over quality. Thus, Eriksson et. al argue that "[t]he user was effectively conceived of as a sovereign individual, who already knew

exactly what he or she wanted to listen to and did not need help with music recommendations" (43–44).

Spotify's move away from this individualist conception of users took different forms. In December 2012 Spotify announced it would introduce a Discover tab and a Follow tab. The former included "a new, personalized recommendation function" based on users' listening history (60). The latter would provide recommendations from "artists, trendsetters, editors and experts" that users could "follow" (Spotify press release quoted in Eriksson et. al 60). Both tabs indicate that Spotify had reconceived users as in need of guidance through its catalog (61).

Rather than foregrounding access to its ever-growing database of songs—which as of 2022 hosts over 80 million tracks—Spotify started emphasizing musical quality and playlists appropriate for different contexts (Spotify Newsroom). With the help of Tunigo—which Spotify purchased in May 2013 and integrated into its client—Spotify increased the importance of its playlists based on activities and moods. Tunigo's team of about twenty "music experts" was joined by an expanding group of "music editors" who were hired to curate local playlists for countries where Spotify was available (Eriksson et. al 2019, 61). The following year Spotify acquired the Echo Nest, which had run Spotify's and its competitors' algorithmic recommendations. The Echo Nest enabled Spotify to offer features that went beyond taste-centric "personalization" by incorporating users' spatial and temporal data into its algorithms (65). For example, the now-discontinued Spotify Running feature "used the smartphone's sensors to detect the pace of a runner and play music at the same

speed" (64). In 2015 Spotify purchased another music intelligence company, Seed

Scientific, and introduced its immensely popular Discover Weekly personalized

playlist that updates every Monday. Discover Weekly anticipated other weekly

playlist offerings like "Release Radar" and "Fresh Finds." Thus the curatorial turn

marks when "Spotify began to transform itself from being a simple *distributor* of

music to the *producer* of a unique service" (61). The unique service Spotify provides

takes the form of playlists, which have become "the central form of music curation"

on the platform (Prey, Esteve Del Valle, and Zwerwer 2022, 80).

Like most streaming services, Spotify trades in tropes of personalization.

Scholars disagree about the effectiveness of personalization and the role it plays for

Spotify. Robert Prey argues that accurate recommendations are what make streaming

services competitive. He writes, "Unable to build a competitive advantage through

the sheer size of their catalogues, these platforms are each attempting to perfect the

art of personalization and prediction: giving listeners exactly what they want, and

what they don't yet know they want" (Prey 2018, 4). For Prey, the platform that will

win the "streaming music wars" will likely do so based on its curatorial power.[233]

More provocatively, the authors of *Spotify Teardown* challenge the "normative claim

that [Spotify's] radio algorithm *should* produce apt recommendations" (Eriksson et al.

2019, 100). They argue that recommendation inaccuracy may drive users away from

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[233] For Prey, curatorial power is "the capacity to advance one's own interests, and
affect the interests of others, through the organizing and programming of content"
(Prey 2020, 8). Spotify promotes its success in "providing *customised*, *personalized*,
or localized content, recommendations, features, and advertising on or outside of the
Service" (Spotify Privacy Policy quoted in Prey 2018, 4)

Spotify's free service and toward a paid subscription (167–168). After all, the platform has never generated enough revenue from advertising to cover the costs of its free service (156). Inaccuracy may encourage users to stream Spotify's Featured Playlists instead of its radio function. Finally, it might be a covert way to promote more established and financially well-supported major label artists at the expense of independent and "emerging musicians or neglected genres (with economic ramifications)" (100).

While Spotify Radio claims to provide both personalized and never-ending music, the authors of *Spotify Teardown* conclude that it does neither. Drawing on an experiment that used bot listeners to track streams, they visually represent how Spotify's algorithm produced music loops that "displayed a repeated pattern with only slight variations according to which artist a radio station was based on" (Eriksson et al. 2019, 101). Not only did these loops "look more or less the same independent of bot characteristics" but "user feedback of 'thumbs up' (like), 'thumbs down' (dislike), or skip did not produce significant differences in the results" (102).[234] Their experiment confirms that Spotify has "exaggerated" its computational claims about its radio function while also corroborating user complaints about repetitiveness and recommendation inaccuracy (100–102). According to Ted Gioia, these algorithmic feedback loops ensure "that the promoted new songs are virtually identical to your favorite old songs" (Gioia 2022). Gioia is right to point out that the effect isn't just on

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[234] The widely-held assumption that more input in Spotify's algorithm will produce increasingly accurate future recommendations compels users to do so. This means more revenue for Spotify because data produced from usage is used to lure advertisers (Eriksson et al. 2019, 96, 136–7, 166–72).

listeners. It discourages today's artists from taking chances on new sounds. To do so is to risk algorithmic irrelevancy and commercial failure.

Independent of its accuracy, personalization remains central to Spotify's marketing and business model. From the commercial playlists Spotify markets as "mixtapes" to the yearly Spotify Wrapped campaign that generates a template for users to share their listening history on social media, personalization encourages users to develop a sense of intimacy with the platform (Eriksson et al. 2019, 118, 136; Pelly 2020). However, personalization is primarily practiced algorithmically through its "computational recommendation formats based on taste profiles, song identification, and digital fingerprints" (Eriksson et al. 2019, 103). Since Spotify's curatorial turn, the platform has emphasized personalization through "Discover Weekly," "Release Radar," and other in-house playlists rather than its radio function (103).

In contrast to the fictitious individualism that the category insinuates, so-called personalization depends not least on the input of other users. Spotify utilizes what it refers to as taste profiles to inform its algorithmic recommendations, which use processes of collaborative filtering to identify users with similar listening patterns (128). As Eriksson et al. write, "If the assumption had previously been that musical taste is a property of the individual, now Spotify seemed to implicitly accept the view that it is rather 'an aggregate of the supra-and the subpersonal'" (Eriksson et al. 2019, 65). In other words, taste profiles are at once "personal" and social. They record a user's past streams of artists and genres, assigning "scores that measure how heavily, actively and regularly those artists and genres are played and how much is streamed

267

from an artist's full catalog of music" (129). That data is mapped not only with that of other users but to descriptions of artists and genres that are pulled from online sources including "blog posts, music reviews, tweets and social media discussions" (Prey 2018, 1090–91). The Echo Nest relates the two aforementioned sources of data to its musical analysis software. As Robert Prey explains:

> Unlike Pandora's manual, labor-intensive method of aural classification, The Echo Nest utilizes acoustic analysis software to process and classify music according to multiple aural factors—from its pitch to its tempo to its danceability. 'The system ingests and analyzes the mp3, working to understand every single event in the song, such as a note in a guitar solo or the way in which two notes are connected', explained Brian Whitman, co-founder and CTO of The Echo Nest. 'The average song has about 2000 of these "events" for the system to analyze. It then makes connections between that song and other song with similar progressions or structures' (as cited in Darer, 2012). (Prey 2018, 1090).

Thus, the user's taste profile fits into a larger musical map that connects the sonic analysis of songs to the semantic analysis of online discussions about artists and genres (1090-91).

From Ownership to Access

These shifts are of course bound up with a much larger transformation of social relations in the music industry, where most consumers have exchanged their personal collections for access to a privately owned database. In the process, listeners have been transformed from commodity owners into renters. In the early years of the mp3, perceptive critics like Julian Dibbell saw this as a latent potential of the format. In 2004, he wrote, "The endpoint is a vision of the pop fan not as consumer but as tenant farmer, never owning anything at all, never enjoying any uses of her music, fair or not, except those the record company explicitly grants" (Dibbell 2004, 283).

From this perspective, the dominance of streaming culture represents the greatest act of accumulation by dispossession in music history, made possible by platforms' enclosure of music *as data* (Harvey 2005, 74). If you delete the app, you lose your music. Or, if you choose not to renew your subscription, you are punished with advertisements that interrupt the flow of listening.

Music streaming platforms bring into relief why critics and scholars theorized digital storage culture through the framework of record collecting. If the comparison with vinyl allowed for the manifest expression of anxieties surrounding the mp3's "inauthenticity," it also implicitly gestured toward continuities between analog and digital storage cultures. Even if most people downloaded their music illegally, they owned their music and used it as they pleased. They input their own metadata, burned CDs for their cars, shared their files on peer-to-peer networks, and sometimes copied whole hard drives worth of music for their friends. While the size of hard drives enabled us to think of our vast stores of digital files as "libraries"—a metaphorical shift that preceded iTunes, but that Apple hoped would propel users toward mass (legal) consumption—the forms of classification that allowed us to organize them had long been the province of database managers like librarians and archivists (Morris 2015, 69). Metadata remains central to the digital music commodity in the age of streaming culture, but it is no longer coded by individual users. Instead, metadata is input by platform designers and music aggregators that decide what information is or is not relevant. Thus, with streaming culture, acquisition and organizing—practices that are central to collecting—are alienated to platforms. Music listeners no longer

build their collections, single by single, album by album. While Spotify users can still add albums to the "Your Library" tab, this does not require the kind of time-intensive commitment that the accumulation of files did in the age of digital storage culture. In abolishing the temporality of storage culture, while also re-intermediating our practices of musical discovery, Spotify has eliminated the anxiety that propelled our drive toward musical over-accumulation. As a consequence, streaming culture has tossed the hipster[235] into the dustbin of history. At the same time, it explains why the concept of collecting has become anachronistic. In Spotify's practice of playlisting, as in music writing about streaming culture, the concept of collecting has been displaced by that of curation, the central aesthetic category generated by financialization.[236]

From Access to Context

If curation at Spotify was initially conceived of as guiding users through an ever-larger database, it has since taken on another role in tailoring recommendations to users' immediate contexts. As Prey explains, "This has been made possible by the

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[235] If the hipster was a symptom of digital storage culture, no archetype has yet to emerge as a representative of streaming's cultural effects.

[236] In recent years, the category of curation has become ubiquitous in discussions about popular music. This is as true of contemporary scholarship as everyday speech. For example, in "Conceptualizing Curation in the Age of Abundance: The Case of Recorded Music," Johan Jansson and Brian J Hracs conceptualize the division of labor in the music industry as performing different curatorial tasks (Jansson and Hracs 2018, 1602–22). But in classifying 80 different actions into a five-part typology of "curation-related activities"—where everything from labels signing bands, to record stores stocking titles, to music writing is understood as a curatorial practice—they expand the category's meaning to the point of removing its explanatory power. Their reframing is undoubtedly a symptom of our own historical situation, where curation functions as a framing concept for everyday life. Art historian David Balzer refers to this "acceleration of the curatorial impulse to become a dominant way of thinking and being" as curationism (Balzer 2014, 8).

270

proliferation of mobile devices which permit the collection of data points on location, motion, time of day, and nearby contacts" (Prey 2021). In addressing users' "context states," Spotify has once again reconceptualized the music listener. Unlike commercial radio,[237] which presumes a stable subject—where formats link demographic groups to music genres and advertisers in an all-encompassing style—Spotify deciphers taste based on user context and behavior.[238] Who Spotify thinks we are changes throughout the day. Here, "behavior" includes every action we take on the platform, whether that's searching for an artist or song, listening to and skipping over tracks, or creating playlists (Prey 2021). Thus, for Spotify, *who we are* is less important than *what we do*, or what our smartphones infer about what we are doing. Commercial radio treats listeners as stable publics to be formatted; with Spotify, we are perpetually subjectivized.

New forms of subjectivation are a consequence of what Marx terms real subsumption, "the process by which social relations formerly outside of the accumulative regime of capital are brought into this regime" (Franklin 2015, 7). Here, the forces of capital collide with Spotify's attempt to supplant practices once performed primarily by listeners. Both Michael Bull and Simon Reynolds identified that as iPod users created playlists appropriate for different moods and activities,

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[237] Of course, commercial radio also has "drive time" and "late night" programming, but these shows are still organized around the presumed tastes of a demographic.
[238] Prey writes, "streaming platforms are less interested in how users self-identify as music fans, or even in demographic markers that traditionally acted as a proxy for music preferences. Instead, they take an epistemologically behaviorist position to understanding music taste" (Prey 2021).

music took on an increasingly utilitarian function.[239] Rather than being an aesthetic

experience unto itself, iPod users geared their music toward accompanying and

enhancing other activities. Many critics of Spotify point out that the platform also

treats music this way. From this perspective, Spotify has commodified[240] and

automated this formerly intimate act, rationalizing the process of playlist construction

in accordance with the dictates of differently positioned capitals.

However, Spotify does not only recommend music to complement our

pre-existing activities and moods; the platform uses playlists to structure our behavior

and our emotions. For example, Spotify's Featured Playlists update several times a

day with messages that subtly direct users' activity. Eriksson et al. argue that Spotify

reproduces "chrono-normative prescriptions of 'the good life' that instruct users to

get out of bed, go to work (in an office), work out in the afternoon, and then socialize

with friends, family, and lovers in the evening. Meanwhile, music is presented as a

way of increasing productivity and performance in these time-bound activities"

(Eriksson et al. 2019, 121). The effectiveness of these contextual recommendations is

an open question. Although Spotify claims to tailor playlists for our different

"moods," many critics have pointed out that the platform is quick to recommend

"happy" music. This is because "Spotify specifically wants to be seen as a

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[239] Anahid Kassabian refers to this phenomenon as ubiquitous listening. She writes, "Those of us living in industrialized settings (at least) have developed, from the omnipresence of music in our daily lives, a mode of listening disassociated from specific generic characteristics of the music. In this mode, we listen "alongside," or simultaneous with, other activities" (Kassabian 2013, 9).

[240] If iPods users once described their relationship to their iPod as the "soundtrack" to their life, Spotify turned the phrase into a marketing slogan: "Soundtrack your life with Spotify."

mood-boosting platform" (Pelly 2019). Spotify uses data about its users' feelings to effectively sell targeted advertising, but insofar as it encourages users toward specific feelings, Spotify "creates environments more suitable for advertisers through what it recommends" (Pelly 2019). These features of Spotify go well beyond a quantitative increase in the utilitarian use of music.

Contextual curation effectively displaces taste as the principal problem for programming, marking a qualitative transformation in the function of music and its capture by neoliberalism. After all, for Foucault, "neoliberalism is not just a manner of governing states or economies, but is intimately tied to the government of the individual, to a particular manner of living" (Read 2009, 27). If streaming platforms are, from one perspective, representative of a neoliberal mode of governmentality—"operat[ing] on interests, desires, and aspirations rather than through rights and obligations"—algorithmic curation can then be understood as encouraging users to govern themselves through the options provided by the platform (29). Yet, contextual curation also points us beyond neoliberalism proper toward what Seb Franklin calls *control*. Franklin designates control as a logic of digitality premised on "dividuation," Deleuze's term that describes how subjects can become divided within themselves, broken down into discrete parts that can be made equivalent (Franklin 2015, 9). Here Spotify treats users as it does music, transforming social phenomena—in this case, songs and users—into segmented, discrete, and quantifiable digital objects that can be analyzed, measured, and administered. While the passage from digital storage culture to streaming culture registers a transformation

within financialization, streaming platforms are themselves suspended between different logics of neoliberalism and control. As much as algorithmic curation segments the market to target specific individual consumers, it also points toward a future in which the individual dissolves completely into a play of trans-individual systems.

Playlisting Old Music

Under these conditions, scholars have reasonably honed in on Spotify's curatorial practices at the expense of what it curates. But if *music* has thus far been absent from the scholarship on music streaming, what does its absence tell us? Or, put another way, what is the relationship between curated playlists and the old music that is dominating both the market and our listening habits?

To understand this problem, we must work our way back to the problematic of financialization that frames the existing scholarship on streaming. In his 2015 essay "The Aesthetics of Singularity" Fredric Jameson frames the turn towards curation as part of a larger historical situation, as the latest aesthetic practice generated by a financialized global capitalist system. By positing a homology between financialization, cultural production, and aesthetic experience, he provides an account of temporality—the "reduction [of time] to the present"—that appears to unify these disparate "levels" of the social totality (Jameson 2015, 106).

Jameson's analysis of curation is not referring to music recommendation software but to what happens once the system of fine arts has collapsed, where once distinct arts and media—painting, photography, performance, video, sculpture,

etc.—are no longer able to be clearly differentiated. In this situation, postmodern works appear as collages—"one-time unrepeatable formal events (in their own pure present as it were)"—rather than the creation of new stable cultural forms (113). "[P]aradigmatic of the postmodern artistic practice," he argues, are installations, which are not objects made for posterity or for the museum's permanent collection, as were older forms of art (108, 111). They are events, organized around the moment of their exhibition. In their very form, installations are thus a "replication of the new museum in which it is housed… whose exhibits and cultural events are the equal of musicals or eagerly awaited films" (109). As the contemporary museum has become "a popular and mass-cultural space" and a siphon for global finance capital—where the paradigmatic derivative functions "more like a unique event than a contract"—it has undergone its own shift "from access to context," where our aesthetic experience of encountering artistic works takes on the character of the consumption of brand names (118, 109). Jameson argues that under these circumstances, "the form of the work has become the content; and that what we consume in such works is the form itself"—its temporality, its status as an event (113).

There is an analogy to be made here. Streaming—itself a metaphor—suggests a "continuous flow of music" with a presentist temporality (Eriksson et al. 2019, 117). With streaming, data files are not stored on one's hard drive to be retrieved for future use, but to be "played immediately after a small amount of audio data has been received" (88). Copied from data centers, passed through a vast infrastructure in pieces as they make their way from servers to the Spotify client, streams are for the

now. So too, Spotify's contextual playlists are organized for the *now*, to guide and accompany "events" in one's day. If we understand Spotify's products as embodying presentist temporalities analogous to Jameson's installations, if what we consume is the idea of a playlist—its form or its concept, be it a "mood," an activity, etc.—more than its sensory content—the affective link between financialization and old music is brought into relief. In his 1979 essay "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," Jameson writes, "the pop single, by means of repetition, insensibly becomes part of the existential fabric of our own lives, so that what we listen to is ourselves, our own previous auditions" (Jameson 1992, 26–27). Of course, listening to Spotify has its own structure of feeling, distinct from the formatted flows that characterize radio broadcasting. Yet in Spotify's attempt to "soundtrack your entire life,"[241] the pop music single's familiarity through repetition—not only of past commercial hits but also as a catalog of one's most personal selections—becomes a playlisted experience of musical nostalgia. At every level, the pervasiveness of old music today is a consequence of Spotify's design and effects.

It should suffice to conclude that the curatorial turn and the shift from access to context are not unique to Spotify, music streaming, or online platforms. Indeed, if we follow Jameson on this point, the phenomenon is a consequence of the infrastructural dynamics of financialization.

Jameson argues that in the museum the curator stands as the only human left in an institution no longer representable at a human scale, as the allegorical

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[241] "You can soundtrack your entire life with Spotify. Whatever you're doing or feeling, we've got the music to make it better" (Spotify quoted in Eriksson et al. 121).

personification of the museum's fusion with global finance capital (Jameson 2015, 110). Headquartered in Sweden but with satellite offices around the world, and with a database of over 80 million songs, podcasts, and videos, Spotify operates at a far greater scale than any individual museum, no matter how globalized its collection or its financial partners. While a financialized global capitalist system is as much a condition of possibility for the contemporary museum as for Spotify, the latter points us beyond Jameson's object, where even the figure of the curator has taken on the temporality of finance, replaced by that of the algorithm, which automates curation at the same computational speed Spotify sells micro-targeted audience segments to advertisers on its online trading desks.

Coda: Vinyl Returns

It is widely known that vinyl has once again become the music industry's leading physical format. In the music industry press, vinyl's re-popularization is known as the vinyl revival (MRC Data and Billboard 2022, 27). At least two things are significant about this. First, to speak of vinyl's "revival" ignores the communities that never entirely broke from the format: club DJs, analog audiophiles, indie rockers, and DIY punks, as well as those genre-centric collectors (of psychedelic rock, soul, funk, punk, jazz, etc.) that never stopped digging at their local record stores and swap meets (Mall 2021, 74). Recent scholarship on vinyl has largely centered on these consumers in contrast to the trade publications' bias toward new markets.[242] Second,

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[242] For two examples, see Roy Shuker's *Wax Trash and Vinyl Treasures: Record Collecting as a Social Practice* (2016) and Dominik Bartmanski and Ian Woodward's *Vinyl: The Analogue Record in the Digital Age* (2015).

vinyl's recent growth cuts across the eras of digital storage culture and streaming culture. As Andrew Mall argues, the vinyl revival's "perpetual growth frustrates accepted logic—both that revivals are short-term fads and that physical formats have no future in the increasingly digital record industries" (73). The long-term growth of vinyl suggests that its cultural significance may have shifted in conjunction with the recent dominance of streaming. It also demonstrates that the succession of music formats is not a teleological process.[243] As Mall puts it, "vinyl is the first [physical] recording format to return to dominance from near-extinction" (73).

Yet from the perspective of the music business as a whole, vinyl has become statistically significant again only very recently. During the first decade of the 21st century, vinyl sales were insubstantial in comparison with CDs. Even as CD sales steadily declined from their 2000 peak at $13.2 billion, they were still selling in the billions of dollars throughout the 2000s. By contrast, vinyl was selling in the mere tens of millions after bottoming out in 1993 at $10.6 million. Then in 2008, as both iTunes sales and the Financial Crisis were at their apex, vinyl sales began to grow again (Arditi 2021, 132). Just two years later, "LP sales reached $88.9 million—a revenue level not seen in twenty years" (Mall 2021, 76). Throughout the 2010s growth continued steadily. In 2020, vinyl revenues reached over $619.6 million, outselling CDs for the first time since 1986 (76). 2021 was even more robust. As one journalist explains, "while physical product accounted for just 10% of recorded-music

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[243] It is also true that very few music fans are format purists. Even for those that have strong preferences, the use of one format or another is often determined by context. For example, I use streaming platforms or listen to the radio in the car but prefer to play vinyl at home.

revenue in the first half of 2021… vinyl was more than two-thirds of that total, bringing in $467 million" (Willman 2021).

Although articles about vinyl's comeback have become a journalistic cliché, few critics have identified meaningful trends *within* the format's revival. In contrast to the 2000s, where sales of second-hand and catalog titles eclipsed the sale of new music, vinyl sales of current music are now substantial and the trend is only growing. According to Paul Speraw, former owner of Metavinyl record store in Santa Cruz, California:

> Sometime around late 2020 or early 2021, I noticed that my sales were up, but that growth was almost entirely coming from new vinyl. After old pressings of classic titles dried up during the pandemic, I started selling a ton of reissues at prices that would have been ridiculous a few years earlier. But I also sold more Khurangin records than anything else for a year or more. I sold tons of Thundercat LPs and Top 40 vinyl. And I probably would have been selling way more new music had I been carrying more of it. As soon as people got those $1400 stimulus checks, people just went to town.[244]

Speraw's perspective stands in stark contrast to the cultural critics who understand vinyl's contemporary popularity as just one more iteration of musical nostalgia. Indeed, the homology between old music and old formats sits less easily today, even as reissue programs have continued unabated. *Paradoxically, it is the growth of current music on a residual format that registers an emergent challenge to the dominance of old music.* In other words, if vinyl's revival seemed to confirm Reynolds' thesis about retro in the age of digital storage culture, vinyl may now be providing a check against it in the age of streaming culture.

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[244] Paul Speraw, interview with author, January 6, 2023.

Vinyl is no longer limited to the narrow communities that sustained the format in the 1990s and 2000s. By any definition of the term, the format is once again *popular*. With major labels once again mass manufacturing LPs, "big-box" stores are stocking vinyl while drawing down retail space for CDs (Mall 2021, 76). As one journalist elaborates, "Chains like Walmart and Target, which have all but quit the CD business, now order their own exclusive color-variant pressings on top of the exclusives that indie stores or artist websites tout" (Willman 2021). While the COVID-19 pandemic compounded supply chain issues for record manufacturers—which included a shortage in the colored pellets required to press color-variant LPs—it also massively stimulated demand. According to one year-end *Billboard* report, vinyl album sales rose over 50 percent from 2020 to 2021 (MRC Data and Billboard 2022, 5).

While this situation bodes well for industry growth as a whole, the major labels' return to vinyl has negatively impacted many working musicians. For example, when Sony ordered roughly 500,000 copies of Adele's *30*, pressing plants across the country seized up.[245] *30* quickly became the best-selling vinyl album of 2021, with over 300,000 copies sold in a matter of months.[246] But because Sony's

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[245] For Fisher, Adele's music was symptomatic of the kind of historical closure his body of work was an attempt to theorize. In "The Slow Cancellation of the Future," Fisher writes, "although her music is not marketed as retro, there is nothing that marks out her records as belonging to the 21st century either. Like so much contemporary cultural production, Adele's recordings are saturated with a vague but persistent feeling of the past without recalling any specific historical moment" (Mark Fisher 2022, 14).

[246] Demand for Adele's *30* may have been overestimated. On March 13, 2023 a Twitter user posted a photo of dozens of sealed copies of the LP priced at $9.99

massive order came on the heels of multiple factory closures, plants had to extend

delivery dates on other releases. Facing up to year-long wait times to obtain physical

copies of their albums, many bands that rely on LP sales made the hard decision to

postpone touring[247] (Willman 2021). New factories are slated to open in 2023, both

domestically and in Europe, but it remains unclear if they will be able to meet the

current demand for vinyl, to say nothing about the format's projected growth. These

new plants will be operating with far fewer presses than the major label-owned

factories of the 1970s, leaving industry insiders skeptical about their impact on

release timelines (Owsinski 2022). As new musicians try to carve out space for

themselves in an industry structured around superstars and nostalgia, the vinyl format

will continue to be a site of both economic and cultural struggle.

Fighting Against the Past

Old music is big business. Since music streaming platforms have only

strengthened old music's grip on our present, breaking the power of this articulation

will require both an alternative vision for music distribution and the political

organization to realize it. Meaningful first steps have recently been taken on both

fronts. For example, Liz Pelly has made a compelling case for socializing streaming.

By now, most of us have abandoned our personal digital "libraries" for one for-profit

streaming service or another. But what if instead of Spotify, we had a national

streaming service that functioned like a public library? Pelly encourages us to

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sitting on the shelves of her local Goodwill ("New Adele '30' LPs Were Seen At
Goodwill After Blame For Vinyl Delays" 2023).

[247] Because streaming provides marginal payouts to all but the biggest superstars,
touring and merchandise sales are typically all that sustains new artists.

"conceptualize universal access to music as a public good, to be managed in the public interest with public funding" (Pelly 2021). Socialized streaming would encourage ways of listening unimpeded by the determinations of finance capital. In cutting out playlists, recommendations, and discovery algorithms, socialized streaming could put an end to the curatorial logics that are biased toward hit songs. And by substituting a pro rata payout system for a pay-per-stream model, lesser-known artists would not be competing with superstars for a portion of pooled revenues. Pelly's proposal goes beyond nationalizing music distribution; it is about democratizing it so that "musicians, music workers, and music communities could have a say in how socialized streaming services are built, and participate in how they're run" (Pelly 2021). While socialized streaming may not wrest popular music from the commodity form, Pelly understands it as a necessary "part of the greater ongoing project of freeing art from capitalism" (Pelly 2021).

To this end, 2020 witnessed major developments in music workers' organization. This includes the formation of the socialist Union of Musicians and Allied Workers (UMAW), which mobilized thousands of musicians during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic impacted the music industry unevenly. At the same time that musicians suddenly found themselves unable to perform, the value of Spotify more than doubled. Of course, asset inflation did not trickle down into relief for working musicians. Nor did it have any effect on the platform's paltry payouts, which led UMAW to demand "Justice at Spotify." On March 15, 2021, the New York-based UMAW organized protests at Spotify headquarters in over thirty cities,

making it the first internationally coordinated action against the global platform (Ruiz). UMAW has since taken its demand for larger royalties to Congress. Working alongside Michigan Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib, they drafted a Congressional Resolution "to help educate Congress on the issue" of musicians' exploitation by streaming platforms (Blistein). Though it falls far short of socializing streaming, the resolution recommends instituting payouts on a per-stream basis (Blistein). According to UMAW, "Streaming companies would be required to pay royalties directly to musicians, both featured and non-featured, above and beyond any royalties already paid to record labels and other copyright holders" (UMAW). Legislation is reportedly being written, but whether it passes will be the result of a protracted struggle.

Post-Script

Whatever the outcome of the streaming wars, the capitalist production of popular music will continue to produce new contradictions. Resolving these contradictions will require nothing short of a radical transformation of society—one that eliminates markets in the production as well as the exchange of cultural works. Walter Benjamin famously concludes his 1935 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" with a conjunctural reflection on private property. The existing capitalist crisis would be resolved either by socialist revolution (and the transformation of property relations) or intensified by the fascist drive toward war (and the preservation of capitalism's "property structure") (Benjamin 1970a, 241). If fascism was "the introduction of aesthetics into political life," "Communism responds by politicizing art" (242). Today, where we too have seen the reemergence of both

283

socialist and fascist currents in American social movements and aesthetics, the property question has become increasingly important. This is certainly true in music, where recent trends are polarized into opposing camps—either in hip-hop's long-running discursive war between black liberation and individualist currents (in which we can include Kayne West's recent embrace of Nazism), or in vaporwave's sub-generic splintering into laborwave and fashwave—at the same time listeners have been dispossessed by streaming platforms ("This Is Fashwave, the Suicidal Retro-Futurist Art of the Alt-Right" 2018).

The centrality of rentierism today extends beyond streaming subscriptions and the intellectual property holdings of the music industry to the dynamics of financialized capitalism itself. As Lisa Adkins, Melinda Cooper, and Martijn Konings convincingly argue in *The Asset Economy*, "The key element shaping inequality is no longer the employment relationship, but rather whether one is able to buy assets that appreciate at a faster rate than both inflation and wages" (Adkins, Konings, and Cooper 2020, 5). Capitalism's neoliberal revolution required breaking the power of organized labor while extending the opportunity of home ownership to that very same class of wage earners. Decades of central bank policy suppressing wages and promoting housing price inflation turned homes into speculative assets, not just for real estate developers and private investment funds, but as a compensatory measure for workers on the losing end of globalization. But as housing became a speculative asset for older workers, younger generations of wage earners who are unable to access intergenerational wealth are increasingly locked out of asset ownership. With

the political will for public housing programs a non-starter in most Western capitalist

states, the extraction of ever-larger rents is now locking more and more workers into a

future of propertylessness.[248] Thus, as a consequence of financialization's dynamic of

rentierism—where in the music industry as in real estate, dispossession produces

interminable income streams for asset owners—generation[249] has once again become

a political and cultural[250] fault line.

The 2007-8 Financial Crisis ruptured these dynamics of accumulation and

provided a backdrop for the emergence of a new "No Future" discourse.[251] While all

these texts were commentaries on affect, finance, and inequality in contemporary

capitalism, Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism* (2009) and Simon Reynolds'

Retromania (2011) were rare in their attention to popular music. Writing after the

crash but before the emergence of Occupy Wall St., they argued that retro was a

cultural register of political defeat and historical closure. After "the end of history,"

there was "No Future" for music either. While they refined the retro concept and

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[248] As Fisher rightly stresses, "If there's one factor above all else which contributes to cultural conservatism, it is the vast inflation in the cost of rent and mortgages" (Fisher 2022, 15). Here, the argument is that as workers require more money for their cost of reproduction, their time for pursuing cultural production declines.
[249] Stuart Hall suggests that the category "generation" is "symbolic rather than literal, relating as much to a shared experience, a common vision, or thinking within the same 'problem space' as it does to a mere date of birth" (Hall 2017, 44). Generations are not unified in their thinking and action so much as they share a historical situation, a kind of 'problem space', that makes them engage with similar problems as well as pleasures, and this unites them in both real and imagined ways.
[250] "OK Boomer."
[251] The "No Future" discourse also includes Mikkel Krause-Franzten's "abortion of the future," Franco "Bifo" Berardi's "after the future", and Maurizio Lazzarato's "strange sensation of living… without time" (Adkins, Konings, and Cooper 2020, 73).

powerfully captured many of its musical expressions, in presenting retro as capital's triumph, they foreclosed the possibility of resistant uses of pop music's past in the present. Whatever their capital-centrism contributed toward capturing the prevailing structure of feeling, was nonetheless a loss from the perspective of historical materialism.

As late as the 1990s, at the height of neoliberalism, George Lipsitz argued that contemporary popular music was recording "cultural and social roles [read: resistance] not yet possible in politics" (Lipsitz 1997, 17). In the global and culturally hybrid forms of reggae, Afrobeat, salsa, punk rock, and more, "cross-national and multi-racial music offer[ed] hope for a better future" (14). For Lipsitz, these musics posed transnational cultural challenges to an equally transnational capitalism. The following decade Fisher and Reynolds reversed course, arguing that even cultural resistance had been neutralized by capital's articulation to retro. Formerly radical genres became dead styles to be plundered as the imagination of contemporary musicians was atrophied by capital—what Jameson called the colonization of the unconscious. Combatting capital on the critics' front therefore required taking up an anti-retro position on contemporary popular music. With futurism a thing of the past, the best music of the 2000s indexed a genuine longing for history rather than the past's stylized reproduction.

While the Fisher-Reynolds thesis remains the dominant critical approach toward retro today, no thinker working within its problematic has yet attempted to produce a comparable balance sheet of the 2010s. Many of the tendencies they

identified in the 2000s have only intensified since then: the proliferation of retro genres continues unabated while streaming platforms have us listening to more old music than ever.[252] But if the rise and fall of new social movements—Occupy Wall St. (2011), Black Lives Matter (2014, 2020), the struggle against the Dakota Access Pipeline (2016), Bernie Sanders's runs for the presidency (2016, 2020), waves of teachers' strikes (2018, 2019), etc.—has widened our sense of what is politically possible, what is the cultural significance of retro *now*, after what Badiou calls the *Rebirth of History* (Badiou 2012, 5)?

More than a decade before Jameson authored his famous essay on postmodernism and nostalgia film—the work that provided a template for Fisher and Reynolds's bleak cultural diagnoses in the 21st century—he argued that nostalgia was a politically indeterminate affect rather than a symptom of historical closure. In *Marxism and Form*, Jameson writes:

> But if nostalgia as a political motivation is most frequently associated with Fascism, there is no reason why a nostalgia conscious of itself, a lucid and remorseless dissatisfaction with the present on the grounds of some remembered plentitude, cannot furnish as adequate a revolutionary stimulus as any other: the example of Benjamin is there to prove it. (Jameson 1974, 82)

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[252] The ongoing proliferation of retro musics over the 2010s has been accompanied by a dangerous and compensatory return to "poptimist" relativism. When politics appeared less pressing or "impossible," taste took on an almost inexpressible significance. In his early writing, Reynolds referred to the phenomenon as *bliss* (Reynolds 1990, 13). Understanding popular music this way now appears as being tethered to a bygone structure of feeling. With its disappearance, the oppositional sensibility that sustained writers like Mike Fisher—who understood that the taking of sides on musical matters had larger cultural and political stakes—went with it (Reynolds 2018a, 17). This is one of streaming's effects on popular music culture, where all tastes and judgments are rendered equal.

Fisher proved it too, even if the political horizon of "acid communism" sat uneasily with "the slow cancellation of the future." In the present context, however, where nostalgia and capital are so intimately linked—not only in the Jamesonian sense that Fisher stressed, where capital has limited our ability to use music to imagine a future, but in the concrete transformation of the music business—the fight against old music, which we can now reframe as a fight against music's financialization, must be taken on multiple fronts. We have already discussed the economic and the political. Let us add a third. As listeners, there are demands on us too. To begin with, we would do well to follow Ted Gioia's principled commitment to listen to new music every day. But we can go further. Let us imagine, even just for a moment, that in the age of streaming culture, it is finally possible to dispense with the collector's desire to renew the old world and listen more closely to our musical present *as history*. For decades now, scholars have been writing about the traces of the past in our musical present as a check against ahistorical thinking. But if that search culminated in the work of Mark Fisher and Simon Reynolds, for whom contemporary popular music sounded the end of history, we might do better to think with Jacques Attali, who listened not just for the past but for the future.

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