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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

Subjectivity and Characterization as Compositional Tools

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Masters of Arts

in

Music

by

Joseph A. Bourdeau II

Committee in Charge

Professor Natacha Diels, Chair
Professor Anthony Davis
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2018

The thesis of Joseph A, Bourdeau II is approved, and is acceptable
in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically

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Chair

University of California San Diego

2018

EPIGRAPH

"Life's a piece of shit, when you look at it

Life's a laugh and death's a joke it's true

You'll see it's all a show, keep on laughing as you go

Just remember that the last laugh is on you"

Eric Idle - "Always Look at the Bright Side of Life"

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Subjectivity and Characterization as Compositional Tools

by

Joseph A Bourdeau II

Master of Arts in Music

University of California San Diego, 2018

Professor Natacha Diels, Chair

The goal of this paper is to examine the nature of subjectivity as it relates to my practice as a composer and performer, especially in the use of appropriated materials and recognizable cultural forms in the creation of new expressive outlets. Specifically I will discuss the ways in which recognizable cultural artifacts are used as musical materials in my work, as well as the ways in which the audience's expectations in culturally familiar situations may be exploited or subverted. I will also explore the natural or vernacular qualities in my work, and the relationship between these qualities and Appalachian folk styles.

These discussion will center around several recent projects, including recent collaborative work *Pocket Music*, a small set of recorded folk tune arrangements, and various notated concert pieces from the past few years. These works have been selected because they typify the diversity of approaches I have taken in working with the above-mentioned ideas.

A secondary goal is to examine some of the risks and benefits of working with appropriated materials in a highly personalized way, including a discussion of language and its relationship to style, as well as the ways in which pervious experiences can be combined.

<u>Introduction</u> -

A central focus of my work over the last several years has been the exploration of music which features subjective treatments of preexisting or familiar forms and materials. These materials have included folksongs and familiar literary works, as well as the audience's cultural expectations of a performance space, and of particular interest to me are the ways in which our subjective understanding of these sounds and experiences shapes our emotional understanding on them in various contexts.

A simple example of this occurs often in films, where a certain bit of music with positive associations for a given audience is set over a scene which is in some way disturbing to the same group. This creates a situation in that audience where a certain song like *Stuck in the Middle,* or *Singin' in the Rain* may have any variety of personal associations to individuals, while also now calling to mind a shared experience of an unpleasant moment on film creating a new, more complex and disorienting series of emotional interactions. Working in this way allows one to quickly create a complex web of associations using only simple materials and the audience's previous emotional experience as tools.

Examples like this also highlight the uncomfortable friction created when our sensorial experiences, in this case audible and visible, are misaligned. This friction is common in daily life, where our subjective understandings are to varying degrees misaligned with "objective" reality and the experiences of others. Thinking in this way, we can imagine every person as having a circus of subjective experiences, personalities and emotions playing out internally, though in our interactions with them we only ever get to see the way this circus indirectly through its affects on their behavior. The foremost goal of my music is to externalize this circus of associations which colors my experience as I subjectively understand it, and present hypothetical spaces for it to collide with other worlds and create new artistic possibilities, while exploring the frictional or resonant forces at work.

Using familiar musical or cultural materials as the cores on which to scaffold subjective reactions seems natural to me artistically, since this is the way in which our thought processes tend to work naturally, building subjectively upon previous experiences. Working with these materials in a way which is natural and individualistic allows me to acknowledge the influence of them upon my thought processes, while also embracing their cultural power.

This idea of honesty and the reliance on individual personalities is a recurring theme in my work, especially when exploring materials like those outlined above. In my music I aim to give performers an opportunity to speak in their own voice, and to affect personalities based upon their own for use in performance. This style of delivery is common to various casual and vernacular art forms, and is central to the type of subjectively oriented music I make.

In the following pages, we will examine several recent projects which deal with the manipulation of familiar materials, as well as natural and personality-driven performance practices. These are projects in which I have been involved either as composer, performer and/or collaborator, which have been completed within the last five years.

Interpretive Polyphony, and Personal Narrative in *Pocket Music* -

      Pocket Music is a collaborative project between myself, Lauren Jones, and Mari Kawamura, which focuses on exploring the larger worlds within small environments, like ant colonies, or a toy box. A major goal of this ensemble is to explore familiar ideas in surprising and humorous ways, while promoting a performance environment that is personal, casual, and chaotic.

      These qualities are expressed throughout the show in various ways, beginning with the setup of the ensemble. When performing we sit on the floor around a large quilt, with a messy, shared multi-instrumental setup comprised of small winds like kazoos, flutes, and harmonicas, as well as larger, more "individually oriented" instruments such as violin, toy piano, and mandolin. We also use a number of toys and found instruments in performance like a battery-operated yipping dog, squeaky toys, and various bits of kitchenware. This eclectic setup allows us to use familiar objects in new contexts, with each performer's previous experience with, and situational interpretation of an object affording them a very personal way to interact with the materials and the other ensemble members. The shared nature of the setup also promotes a close ensemble relationship, and allows for an environment where performers are playing shared instruments sometimes in very different ways in rapid succession, creating a soundscape witch recycles timbres and pitches constantly, but with the context of each event, and the nature of that sound being very reliant on the performer producing it in each moment. This sort of fractured cohesion, where individual personalities work in loose collections towards similar goals using similar materials is a central focus of our ensemble aesthetic.

      The first movement of the show capitalizes on this idea, and has performers reading preprepared instructions from a screen, and then enacting them in any way they see fit. These instructions are drawn randomly from a bank of about twenty-five cards, with each displaying for a predetermined amount of time, before a new instruction is selected. The cues are largely vague, and unusual instructions, like "Summon the Devil", and "Sing a song about the last thing you ate", ideally giving the performers a chance to respond in highly subjective and personalized ways. Some of the cards ask the performers to tap into memories of songs or events from their past, or to tell stories which have meaning to them, further giving the piece an intimate air which stands in contrast to the chaos of overlapping activities. This sort of environment promotes personality driven music, which creates opportunities for improvisation activities

that are very individualized. Improvisation as an activity in any context relies on the use of previous ideas and particular schema to create a new, individual product in real-time, and in this movement we see our way of thinking as being a very literal extension of this concept.

When performing the work we project the cues on a large screen for the audience to see, allowing them to appreciate the differences in interpretation of a given cue between performers. The "Summon the Devil" card mentioned above, for example, could conceivably be realized either very abstractly and musically, or through an (apparently) genuine attempt to bring Satan himself to the stage through more theatrically occult means. Similarly, a card like "what's your favorite mode?" could prompt a musical demonstration, or a lecture, with either opportunity being equally capable of realizing the instruction. Each performer may tend to select similar actions during a performance or not, but their subjective style and personality will show through in their actions. In the case of *Pocket Music*, our styles of interpretation generally are very different, and the overlap of individual interpretive spaces is a primary focus of this movement.

In order for this to be successful, we decided on performing the cues in such a way that the audience could generally be able to discern a connection between a given card and the actions of the performer. Although this piece features fast, chaotic changes in texture, it is important that each event still be discernible to some extent in its own right, if only fleetingly. This does not mean that an audience member is meant to hear each individual line, but rather that if any one performer was focused on, their line and its relation to their cue displayed could reasonably be determined. Working in this way allows the audience to see the personalities of each performer, and keeps the narrative and storytelling elements of the activity intact to a greater degree. We strove to achieve this degree of clarity primarily through the management of physical space, and by maintaining a degree of literality in our interpretations of cues.

In performing this movement the ensemble moves around the stage quite freely, returning to the blanket only when switching instruments, or playing a stationary setup. This level of movement allows us to use the space as a way to separate or intertwine events through physical distance, with performers being able to give themselves background or foreground roles, depending on the situation. The movement also enhances the casual nature of the performance, with the performers sometimes wandering and speaking very conversationally to the audience or each other, with this type of movement helping to break

down traditional performance expectations. Moving around also eases some of the inherent discomfort of watching a performer relate a personal experience onstage, as it makes the interactions seem more familiar and personal, rather than as a performance which commands a different kind of attention.

Regarding the interpretation of cues, we wanted to perform them in a way that dealt with attributes which were, to a degree "apparent", rather than mining a cue for more abstract, and less obvious materials. This is not to say that our understandings of cues was not allowed to develop, but we encouraged each other to carry out our actions in a way that is honest and faithful to our personal subjective understanding of the situation, while still striving to achieve some degree of clarity to an unfamiliar audience. In this way our musical responses to a given cue carry central "cores" which remain identifiable, giving our personalities a substrate to latch onto in performance. Working like this ensures that the audience always has a reasonable chance to be "in on the joke" whichever joke they should choose to focus upon, and gives the performers a simple restriction as a means for exploring the central, but "apparent" attributes of something in unusual or surprising ways.

Cultural Parody in Animal Colonies -

      This idea of exploring the apparent attributes of a given object or idea, is central to the concept of the ensemble, and allows us to take very personal approaches to unusual situations in a way which is still relatable, and carries an air of familiarity. The second movement of the show features two videos of animal colonies, ants, and sea lions, both shot and edited by Lauren Jones. The two videos are presented in very different contexts, although both deal with the natures of personal interactions in a way that is humorous and unusual. In both videos, we wanted to apply human cultural tropes to animal colonies in a live musical setting to see if we could present alternative perspectives on the materials at hand.

      The first video, made up of footage of ant colonies in Anza Borrego Desert State Park, is accompanied mostly by toy instruments, and emphasizes the complex, multifaceted interactions which take place within an ant colony. The music makes use of fluttering, chaotic textures to emphasize the complexity of ants as a group, set alongside, simple, humorous themes on kazoos and whistles to accompany footage of individual ants. Stylistically, the music places humorous emphasis relatable aspects of ant "culture", with primal, rhythmic drumming accompanying footage of ants swarming a bit of sandwich, or a cheerful march played over a long line of traveling workers. These qualities, again, lend the movement an air of humorous relateability, hopefully using familiar materials to prompt the audience to relate to the ants in new and unusual ways.

      In live situations this improvisation is a straightforward live soundtracking of the video, but when given the opportunity to record the same improvisation we chose instead to layer two takes simultaneously, creating an effect which was particularly well suited to the video, as each even becomes fuller, and looser, when layering in this way. Loosely related events create areas of probability within the context of the video and the sound world, giving the impression of a multitude of distinct personalities, working loosely towards a common goal. The sonic effect is something like clumps of sound with bits constantly falling off, and this sort of grainy, mob mentality works well in approximating our impressions of the ant colony we followed. In all, we were interested in the guided plurality of the ants, and this musical setting created a texture that we felt complimented these interests well.

      The second animal video takes a quite different approach, focussing on footage of sea lion colonies at La Jolla Cove, again shot by Lauren. When reviewing our footage, we were struck by the

human qualities of sea lion interactions, and often found ourselves anthropomorphizing the animals, to humorous results. With this in mind, we decided to string the footage together in a style reminiscent of channel surfing with clips presented as short, humorous sketches which parody film and television tropes using sea lions as the "actors". The footage has been pre-processed, and overdubbed with voices and musical samples, which we then accompany and comment on in the style of a living room television audience.

In responding to this footage, we sometimes limit our interactions to commentary and conversation, while at other times we provide live overdubs or soundtracking for the footage. Throughout this section, the commentary and music relies on familiar cultural tropes to communicate ideas to the audience, again often in parody of television shows or advertisements. The music for this section is often either old public domain recordings of familiar classical music, or created live in parody of various styles from heavy metal to new-age meditation tracks. Putting these very familiar cultural themes through the unique filter of *Pocket Music,* creates a fun and personal feeling atmosphere which may still be strange or unfamiliar at times. This section in particular is further personalized by a small reliance on local culture, since the sea lions we filmed are a well known attraction in the La Jolla area around the university where we performed.

These sections represent two different approaches to exploring the familiar qualities in an unfamiliar situation, with both ants and sea lions seeming to present human qualities, which we highlight with our performance. The alien complexity of the ants is set in immediate contrast to the very familiar, simple emotional interactions presented by the sea lions, and the music we chose to compliment the footage exaggerates these features. This footage of nonhuman animals relies on quotations from human cultural tropes to lend context to a situation, and by using these quotes we hope to invite audiences to examine the commonalities and absurdities around us.

In regards to the analogy of the internal circus used in the introduction, *Pocket Music* could be seen as the most literal realization of this concept I have been involved in, since the show is an explicitly circus-like exploration of very personal interactions. The first movement externalizes the internal ideas of the performers and puts them at work together in a musical space, while the second creates imagined emotional landscapes based on our subjective interpretations of natural interactions. These kinds of

subjective worlds are rife with distorted references to the world at large, creating interesting reflections of certain accepted ideas.

<u>Reflection on the Nature of Two Notated Concert Works</u> -

       This sort of subjective externalization is also a focus of my works in a more traditional concert-music idiom. These pieces are often explicitly notated, and this fact changes the techniques at work substantially, though the interests driving my decisions are fundamentally similar.

       Here I will discuss two recent works, timpani solo *Jabberwocky,* and chamber quartet, *A Grin Without a Cat.* These very different works both focus on bringing the personality of a text to the forefront of a musical situation, while also allowing the composer's and performers' subjective personalities to color the delivery considerably. These works also make use of relatively familiar texts, *Alice in Wonderland* for *A Grin Without a Cat,* and in the case of *Jabberwocky* a variety of culturally familiar media. Through these features, both works serve as a subjective reprocessing of textual materials, with the resultant products retaining many qualities of the source material worked into a new context.

<u>Jabberwocky</u> -

Composed in 2011, and revised heavily in 2016, *Jabberwocky* is a work for speaking timpanist, which weaves a long series of spoken quotes into a surreal meditation around ideas of absurdity and violence. The quotes making up the work are drawn from familiar sources ranging from literary classics to cartoons, comic books, and standup comedy routines. These texts are organized in a stream of consciousness manner, highlighting their differences and similarities through formal arrangement and stylistic treatment which is often extreme and humorous.

The performer is called on to perform these absurd lyrics in a way which is casual and conversational, with the goal being that the piece feels like someone improvising while delivering a monologue, rather than performing a notated piece. The audience has to believe that, to some degree what they are experiencing is "real", with the nature of the text, its emotional character, and the timpani playing being so closely intertwined that the performer gives off a convincing and totalistic performance character. A simple example of this would be that at some points in *Jabberwocky* you have to believe that the percussionist is hitting too hard *because they're angry,* rather than playing at a loud dynamic *to convey the idea of anger.* The use of text and emotional speaking in the piece works constructively with this effect, creating a more totalistic and believable performance situation. In total, this amounts to a performance which lacks a degree of perceived professionalism, feeling more like an improvised or spontaneous performance.

Each performer is further encouraged to approach the work and its emotional palate with their own personality in mind, and to work with their natural tendencies in delivery of the text. This approach gives *Jabberwocky,* an emotive, spoken-word feel, which engages with the text in a way which is natural and individualistic.

<u>Vernacular Performance in Jabberwocky</u> -

These qualities are also valued in many folk and vernacular traditions, and reliance on raw, emotional performances, especially in the voice in my works is directly related to my experience with Appalacian folk musics. These styles tend to be highly vernacular and natural, and it is this quality which influences my practice as composer and performer in *Jabberwocky.*

When watching Appalachian storyteller Ray Hicks (1922-2003), this style of performance can be seen with startlingly natural execution in a more traditional folk setting. A clip from Alan Lomax's famous 1991 documentary *Appalachian Journey* shows Hicks telling the story of a hunter shooting game in the early American south. The story itself isn't terribly important in this case, but what is important is that after the final punchline, Hicks looks around for a moment in faux surprise, before collapsing into laughing along with the others listening on the porch. This isn't necessarily surprising, anyone who's ever done a half-decent job telling a joke has done a similar thing, but it is striking in this case because of how natural, Hicks' performance is. He weaves elements of a fantastic story into his natural speaking patterns and sense of expression, speaking in a way that is engaging, but doesn't seem theatrical or preplanned. This is interesting, because as an audience member you know that the story is a lie, but you believe that he's speaking as the "real Ray", until the moment that he collapses into laughter.

By approaching storytelling or joke-telling in a style which is conversational and natural the audience has a different set of expectations and associations in mind. Whether or not this makes the music more "effective" is of course debatable, but that the music becomes more familiar or relatable seems clear. This quality is similar to the movement aspects of *Pocket Music,* and is important to my work generally, since the casual "porch music" style is one which I hope to bring to sometimes restrictive environments like the concert hall.

Jabberwocky as Modern Folksong -

Performing in this way when working with quoted material is also significant, since it requires an internalization of outside material, which is then to be externalized in a very personal way. This is similar to the way I think about composition, or communication in general, which is as an externalization of an internal synthesis of received ideas. The handling of a quote may then conform or diverge from the cultural expectations for the original character, adding resonance or friction to the audience's experience, with either being capable of producing an interesting experience so long as the performer's personality is convincingly sincere.

In this way, *Jabberwocky* functions similarly to a modern "television era" folksong suite, stitching the motives from our shared modern popular culture into a chaotic and fractured folksong suite for a new audience. Folk arts too rely on these preconceived ideas to add context and depth to a performance, with the tunes carrying a certain impact to their audience because of their intimate familiarity. *Jabberwocky* is made from components which function similarly to the conceptual blocks used in folksong, or folk-storytelling, and is certainly similar to the kind of cultural parody explored through the sea lions in *Pocket Music.* Instead of using conceptual or thematic blocks however, *Jabberwocky* is closer to its source material, quoting directly, while allowing the performer to interpret the text in a personal and natural character, and speak quotes with their own voice.

As certain spheres of popular culture, particularly American and East-Asian enjoy increasing global popularity we move towards a more global culture, which is increasingly capable of expressing shared concerns through shared global pop culture artifacts. Of course this is reductive, as not all cultures share in this particular cultural network equally, and all cultures have the potential to interpret the same pop-cultural objects in very different ways. It is, however, difficult to deny that these globalized trends offer us possibilities so far unseen regarding communication through shared cultural vessels across large geographical areas.

Only in the early twentieth century, with economic and recording booms in the U.S. could a unified national popular culture begin to take shape in the modern sense, with the introduction of television in the 1960s providing another great leap forward in this regard, with nationwide broadcasting bringing the same palate of cultural cues to every American with access to it. Although regional and

cultural differences within the United States are undoubtably still vast, and to assume equal access to popular culture would on some level be a mistake, it is undeniable that having a shared cultural experience in the form of something as concrete as films and memes over an area of land as vast as the United States is a powerful tool for expression when addressing this audience.

Also interesting is that although certain modern stories, films, songs etc. are built upon old established folk themes, they themselves can become usable cultural objects in their own right over time. Think for example of a person who only knows of *Heart of Darkness* through *Apocalypse Now.* That's good, but then if you imagine someone who only know's *Heart of Darkness* through *Apocalypse Now* which they only know from a gag on *Family Guy,* the situation become more interesting. *Southpark* is maybe a good example of this in television. The show's simple digital animation results in famously short production times of a week or less, allowing the program to be highly current and topical. The surreal nature of the show is due in part to the fact that each joke stands on a seemingly endless pile of sometimes fleeting cultural references, with episodes often making a dense net of references to materials within and outside of the program itself. *Jabberwocky* applies a similar concept to theatrical music, in a very linear sense, stringing quotes together in surprising and unusual ways.

Memes do this too, providing short, formulaic phrases or blocks which can be recombined into new and interesting formats. These new memes can then be used as conceptual blocks int their own right when quoted in other contexts, sometimes outside of the awareness of their formulaic origins. A work like *Jabberwocky* then, seems to be built on a series of themes not dissimilar to those found in folk catalogues, albeit explored through the lens of modern cultural artifacts and concerns. The piece uses familiar quotes alongside more obscure ones, arranged in a way that provides a dynamic and sometimes shocking smattering of the violent and absurd in American pop-culture.

<u>A Grin Without A Cat</u> -

A similar smattering technique is used to quite different effect in my recent work, *A Grin Without a Cat (2017),* which presents overlapping settings of excerpted chapters from Lewis Carrol's famous book *Alice in Wonderland.* The text is drawn from the chapter *Pig and Pepper,* specifically Alice's conversation with the grinning Cheshire Cat, a conversation which features many humorous semantic games and inversions of language. The title of the work is itself a reference to one such language game, ("*I've often seen a cat without a grin; but never a grin without a cat!")* and the work features frequent textual treatments which mimic this effect. Many of these treatments involve layering similar inversions atop one another vertically in a way which partially obscures them, and sets them against a dynamic musical background, placing them uncomfortably on the verge of intelligibility. In spite of this, the character of the text is vaguely conveyed, through the cartoonish and dynamic delivery of the performers, as well as the "pile up" of related concepts created by handling the text in this way. This creates a polyphonic effect somewhat similar to the opening movement of *Pocket Music,* but without the same set of improvisatory characteristics.

An example of this occurs in mm. 73-76, for example, where the words "grin" and "vanish", which appear more frequently in the excerpted text than many others (excluding common qualifiers and grammatical necessities) are singled out for repetition, and transition from chaotic overlapping patterns to a more rhythmic, pulsing delivery. Similar processes like these are at work throughout the piece, with another example occurring between bars 127 and 143. In this section the word "mad" is used repeatedly in the original text, and in my setting this word alone is represented by direct vertical rhythmic unisons in the passage. In leading up to these unisons, phrases which uses the word "mad" are delivered in chaotic overlapping verticalities, which only align directly on this word.

Techniques like these represent further examples of boiling a passage down to its essential elements, with the character of the text preserved in its dynamic delivery, and the important words or concepts are highlighted in ways which are fleeting or difficult to parse. This idea in many ways relying on the ways in which Carrol's work relies on misunderstandings and semantic games to derive much of its characteristic personality. My own personal aesthetic, which tends towards chaos and confusion finds

common ground with the text in its disorienting nature, and it is this quality which I apply to many areas regarding the text in works like this one.

Regarding the delivery of text, performers are given emotional cues to those in *Jabberwocky*, with stylistic cues such as "*impatiently, like a disgruntled customer*", and *"animated, as if reading to children"* giving clear emotional and behavioral ideas to the performer, although these cues will be received differently by each interpreter. This potential diversity of interpretations, allows freedom to the performer to internalize the instructions in a way which is personal and comfortable to them. Although these instructions typically apply to vocal delivery, as with *Jabberwocky* the close relationship between playing and vocalizing within each performer's part, means they also color the performers' physicality and performance technique. This "bleed over" is desirable and encourages the performer to approach the musical material in a work "in character", creating a more engaging, and natural-seeming performance. This affect also creates a sense of stylized characters without concrete semantic substance behind them, another common theme in Carroll's writing.

The Walrus and the Carpenter (Pocket Music III) -

A very different treatment of another of Carrol's works, *The Walrus and the Carpenter,* serves as the final movement of *Pocket Music*. In this setting the vocal polyphony is much more traditionally organized, allowing the text to be delivered in a clear, linear fashion. The poem, which is a simple English ballad is set in a lilting pentatonic melody, which serves as a firm base upon which to build further ideas. Musically, the ensemble changes styles frequently, referencing gospel revivals and folksong sing-alongs, but maintaining the rhythmic and musical feel of the original metered text. This setting of the poem features two dancers (Molly Gabbard, and Viktor De La Fuente), playing the titular characters, in brightly colored costumes which approximate the style of a children's theater performance, complementing the simple nature of the musical and textual materials.

This movement serves here as an example of an alternative setting of Carrol's work, in a situation where the nature of the text demands it. To present this very narrative and rhythmic poem in the same way as the confused and chaotic prose of *Alice in Wonderland* would be a mistake, as the music in these situations serves as a vessel for receiving the text both sonically and ideologically. The text in this case relies heavily on its narrative elements, rather than linguistic games and style, meaning that these elements cannot be obscured in the same way they can in a work like *A Grin Without a Cat.* Furthermore the organization of the music in these works mirrors the organization of the text itself, an example of resonant forces at work in text setting.

Recorded Standards and Subjective Exploration -

      The last project of note, and one which is the most recent and ongoing is a set of recorded folksongs and folk blues, mostly from the southeastern United States. These tunes rely particularly heavily on the ideas of personality and characterization outlined above, and it is in this project that the influence of folk styles on my work is most directly evident.

      A central focus of this project was to find the areas where these tunes interacted with my own subjective interests and to explore these zones of interaction. In general, I found commonalities between my experience in DIY rock music and the personal, communal qualities of folksong, and it is this overlap which I explored in a number of ways.

      The tunes to be discussed here are *Pretty Polly,* and *I Put a Spell on You,* which have been selected as particularly clear examples of the relevant compositional practices.

<u>Pretty Polly and I Put a Spell on You</u> -

       My cut of Stanley Brothers' classic *Pretty Polly* is a fairly straightforward cover in many ways, and is recorded in an uptempo, barn dance fashion similar in style to the original. The tune is an old murder ballad, with the most popular version being based on a 1920 recording by Virginia Old-Time banjo player Morgan Lee "Doc" Boggs. The lyrics tell the story of a man who proposes marriage to a young woman, inviting her on a journey into the hills, then kills her in premeditated jealousy. The lyrics of the song switch voices constantly between the murderer "Willie", the victim, "Polly", and an impartial narrator who tells the story. My recorded version focuses on the characterization of these distinct voices through various singing and post-production techniques, as well as amplification of the violent qualities of the narrative through sampling and production techniques.

       Regarding characterization and singing styles, the lines attributed to Willie are particularly striking. As the violent and deceptive nature of the character becomes clear, the voice takes on harsh, punk-influenced qualities, and additional layers of voices are added. The penultimate verses in particular feature a dramatic delivery of Willie's lines with layers of screaming vocals akin to the biblical *Legion* sitting behind the characters "human voice", creating startling friction against the softer, quivering lines of Polly, and the narrator's unfazed singing.

       The appearance of these voices coincides with the onset of several soundscaping techniques, including an increase in spatialization and reverb, as well as sound samples of shotgun blasts and deranged hollering. When set alongside these samples the cheerful, uptempo dance-music of the track seems quite disturbing, and this existing friction between the nature of the lyrics and the music is amplified considerably by the use of such explicit techniques.

       Similar effects are explored in my version of the blues standard *I Put a Spell on You, which* takes a more topical and stylized approach in setting the tune. This version uses toy piano, bass clarinet, and glockenspiel to create a grotesque, carnival like style, with layers of screaming vocals foregrounding the dark nature of the lyrics.

       These lyrics feature themes which are quite unsettling and deal with the more desperate, and disturbing aspects of infatuation, with lines like "I don't care if you don't want me, because I'm yours anyhow" taking on quite aggressive qualities in this version. The middle portion of the track features

vocals in the style of a carnival barker peddling love tonics, which devolves into parodies of more modern sex-industry goods, and samples from pornographic films. These samples function similarly to the shotgun blasts in *Pretty Polly,* this time providing anachronistic parallels to the lyrics, and creating vivid internal associations. In this way the darkness inherent to the original lyrics and treatments of the tune are amplified and altered by my modern interpretations of similar concerns regarding love and sexuality.

Working with the tunes in this way amplifies their nature, and allows them to function as vessels for exploration of various themes and ideas stemming from that point. In making arrangements like these I aim to use the stylistic and thematic features of the music at hand in tandem with my more personalized and familiar palate of experiences and techniques to create a grounded and subjective blend of artistic influences. This consideration affects the performance of the tunes in a number of ways, especially relating to the quality of the voice.

<u>Language and Vocal Quality in Folk Arrangements</u> -

In dealing with these tunes one such stylistic quality revealed itself as unusual and potentially problematic. In singing the lyrics my voice affects a southern accent, a speaking style which although predominant among my family members is not one I usually exhibit. This quality was initially unintentional, but upon attempting to remove it from my voice I found that the sound lacked certain aspects which I had come to rely upon technically and expressively.

The tendency to diphthongize or add glides to vowels which in other dialects may be more open or flat is a common characteristic of many regional southern dialects. "Pen", for example, can become something like a slurred "piyin", while "sand" becomes more like "sayend" and so on. This phenomenon is often described as a "twang" which pervades Southern speech and music, creating a sort of timbral or rhythmic ornamentation contributing to the unique sound of the style. The sliding pentatonic patterns of the blues, slide guitar, and various fiddling styles then seems fundamentally related to this manner of speaking, and as such singing in this dialect is particularly natural when playing these styles of music. Is it possible even that this twisting of vowels is what blues guitarists and Appalachian fiddlers are playing off of with the heavy use of pitch bending and gliding ornamentation on these instruments?

Whether or not the instrumental ornamentations are imitations of speaking styles is not necessarily as important as it is simply to note that the way one speaks or sings when performing this music is important in a musical sense, as well as a cultural one. Without the twisting ornamentations provided by certain vowel shapes this music starts to fall flat, and vowels hang stagnant, killing the forward momentum of the style. It is of course impossible, and perhaps unwise to truly divorce this style of speech from its cultural associations, with the vernacular speech of the Southeastern United States carrying various working-class stereotypes for many people. Although this is not a focus of my settings, the very fact that the music functions the way it does socially, as personal music of the working class is something to be acknowledged when working within the style. Here I again find common ground in my experience with punk and garage rock styles, where groups play for small, close-knit communities of participants rather than distinct audiences. The vocal delivery on the album is then a strange hybrid of these rock, and pop styles superimposed over a subjective impression of Appalachian folk musics.

One example of this is the frequent use of glottal breaks and wailing vocals used throughout the album. As an untrained vocalist, most of my experience performing in this regard is as a punk or metal singer, with the vocal quality in these styles being harsh and rough, with a distorted, screaming quality. This technique is mostly just air and throat engagement, and is easiest to achieve at a loud dynamic in the highest fifth or so of my range (roughly C4-G4). This range is difficult to sing in, often causing my voice to break or jump registers in a way that is vaguely reminiscent of yodeling. By amplifying this technique, and pushing this effect to a more extreme and foregrounded space, I discovered an effect something like the yodeling and falsetto singing commonly heard in barn dances. This discovery shows an example of preexisting experiences coloring the way in which I interpret the folk vocal styles at hand, and vice versa. These breaks, in the recordings become unusual, grotesque versions of the yodeling techniques mentioned above, functioning not as parodies, but as redefined techniques functioning within a new idiom. Working in this way allows me to function within both styles in a way which is natural, and individualistic, using my preexisting experience as a substrate for exploration into other techniques.

Conclusion -

Generally, this approach of applying subjective understandings to recognizable substrates has proven to be an effective way for me to interact emotionally with my work, the world, and culture at large. I see my music as the result of a very particular blend of influences and experiences, which interact to produce a unique and fragmented internal landscape. In exploring this landscape, I aim to externalize my interpretations of various consumed materials, like books and folk songs by allowing my subjective experiences to interact with their essential qualities in ways like those outlined above.

Externalizing these ideas musically can take a number of forms, from the very literal, to the dense and abstract, but in most cases my work seeks to use recognizable materials and parody as launching points for exploration of subjective spaces. In any case it is important to absorb and incorporate the characteristics of the source material into the nature of the resultant work, and use these characteristics as guidance parameters in the compositional process. In working with subjective materials, it seems natural to take on a style which uses these personality-driven and emotive performance practices at its forefront. In this way the subjective elements of our worldview can be used as tools to explore complex emotions and situations external to ourselves, and it is this idea which remains at the center of my artistic practice.