Interpreting popular music

DAVID BRACKETT
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For my parents, Stanley and Marion Brackett
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This project began as an attempt to find language that could explain my continuing fascination with popular music in the face of a notable lack of encouragement within academia to pursue that fascination. Not only did popular music have no place in the music curriculum, but the training I received seemed to make defending the viability of popular music an impossibility. Somehow, I knew that the popular music I enjoyed was in no way less interesting than the classical music that both I and my teachers loved; yet the methods I was learning to describe, praise, discuss, and write about music gave me no vocabulary to describe the “interesting” qualities of popular music in the way that I could describe the counterpoint of J.S. Bach, the bold modulations, intricate harmonic plan, and dramatic form of Beethoven, or the infinitely delicate orchestral nuances of Debussy, Mahler, and Stravinsky. The harmonic plan of the popular music I enjoyed was usually quite simple, consisting often of only three or four chords. If it did contain modulations, these occurred within a simple and repetitious structure. In terms of “orchestration,” these songs didn’t fare much better, as their instrumentation often remained relatively static throughout. While Mozart may have produced many standardized and trilling dances for the emperor’s Saturday night fête, every classical music buff knows that those aren’t his masterpieces; therefore, few have bothered to try and explain the simple charm often possessed by these guileless examples of “functional” music. As mentioned at the outset, this study initially grew out of an ongoing search to find terms whereby I could express what I felt to be interesting about similarly “functional” pieces which come from a very different musical context.

One unforeseen consequence of this search was that I realized that merely finding the language to discuss popular music in terms of its musical processes would never be satisfactory, for the whole idea of discussing the “music itself” was tied to the study of the very repertoire
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Prelude

In 1965, a recording by Gary Lewis and the Playboys, “This Diamond Ring,” shot up the popularity charts shortly after its release, eventually reaching the number one position in February. At the end of 1965, Billboard magazine, the leading publication of the United States entertainment industry, ranked “This Diamond Ring” as the seventeenth most popular song of the year and ranked Gary Lewis the eighth most popular artist. Therefore, according to the measurements favored by the popular music industry, this was a very popular song, recorded by an artist who was very popular at the time. Exploring the phenomenon of “This Diamond Ring” – its significance and its popularity – will serve to introduce a number of issues critical to the interpretation of popular songs: the relationship of text to context, of musicians to audiences, of style to history, of artistry to commerce.

Surveying the pop styles represented in Billboard’s “Top 100” (the most important chart for “pop” music as opposed to the “Rhythm and Blues” [R&B] and “Country” charts) in the first part of 1965 can give us some idea of the musical field against which to assess the meaning of the popularity of “This Diamond Ring.” Featured in the top ten during February 1965, the month in which “This Diamond Ring” first achieved the number one position, were the “hard-rock” sounds of “British Invasion” groups such as the Beatles (“I Feel Fine”) and the Kinks (“All Day and All of the Night”). The smooth soul sounds produced by the Motown record company figured prominently, with Marvin Gaye (“How Sweet It Is [To Be Loved by You]”), the Supremes (“Come See About Me”), and the Temptations (“My Girl”) all represented. Other songs by R&B artists such as Shirley Ellis (“The Name Game”) and Joe Tex (“Hold What You’ve Got”) filled the upper reaches of the charts as did a song by the “blue-eyed soul” artists, the Righteous Brothers (“You’ve Lost That Lovin’ Feeling”); also present was “Downtown” by Petula Clark, a
song with production values that were more closely tied to those formerly associated with Tin Pan Alley and Broadway musicals.

Of the songs mentioned in the preceding paragraph, “This Diamond Ring” resembled most closely in instrumentation and basic rhythmic approach the style of the British Invasion groups; yet aspects of the production of “This Diamond Ring” differed notably from all of the songs listed earlier. While the name “Gary Lewis and the Playboys” stood for a band, rather than for a solo singer like Petula Clark, Joe Tex, or Shirley Ellis, none of the members of the Playboys played on the recording, the instrumental portion of which was recorded entirely by studio musicians; and none of the members of the band were responsible for writing the song either. This by itself was not so unusual: of the artists listed above, only the Beatles and the Kinks were responsible for the instrumental tracks on their recordings, and only those two groups, along with Joe Tex and Shirley Ellis, wrote or co-wrote the songs they recorded. A strict division of labor was in effect for all the other recordings mentioned: the roles of singer, instrumentalist, and songwriter remained separate as they had from the inception of the popular music industry.

Put another way, there is no single “author” for these recordings. In popular songs, most listeners probably hear the lead vocalist as the source of a song’s emotional content; it is the words and sounds associated with the most prominent voice in the recording that are heard to emit the signs of emotion most directly, to “speak” to the listener. It is thereby easiest to conflate the song’s “persona” with at least the voice, and possibly the body, media image, and biography of the lead singer. For example, only a fraction of the audience would have been interested to know that David Ruffin, lead singer of the Temptations on “My Girl,” did not write the song; but that Smokey Robinson and Ronald White, who did not perform on the recording at all, in fact wrote and produced (i.e., supervised the arrangement and the recording of) it. To the majority of the audience, it was David Ruffin (insofar as he was known as an individual outside of the Temptations) exulting about “his girl,” not Smokey Robinson or Ronald White.

Yet, in this respect—that is, in the construction of an author for the pop music text that conflates some combination of singing voice, body, image, and biographical details—“This Diamond Ring” is somewhat of an anomaly. Listeners may notice a strange, almost otherworldly quality to the lead vocal which they may attribute to the presumed youth of the singer, his inexperience, or some innovative double-track recording technique. However, a listener making these attributions would be only partially correct. John Mortland explains the curious genesis of this song:

Producer Snuff Garrett . . . signed Gary Lewis and the Playboys simply because he lived two doors down from Jerry Lewis in Bel Air and was intrigued by the idea of breaking a group fronted by the child of a celebrity. He moved Gary from drums to vocals, but the boy’s voice made it onto “This Diamond Ring” only after it had been well reinforced by the overdubbed voice of one Ron Hicklin. Similarly, the Playboys didn’t play on the song.

(Liner notes from Superhits 1965, Time-Life Music)

Truly, this is an example of a simulacrum that would warm Jean Baudrillard’s heart: a song “recorded” by a group who doesn’t play on it, who didn’t write it, with a lead singer who is barely present on it. One’s head spins in search of the “original” in this instance of artistic production. Perhaps if we follow Roland Barthes and assert that the “Death of the Author” means that a “text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination” leading to the “birth of the reader,” then what matters in this case is whether any individual listener believed that the lead singer was Gary Lewis or Ron Hicklin. Then again, the concept of “voice” and authorship in song, due to its performative nature, is a complex one, the discussion of which will have to be forestalled until later in this chapter.

Curiously enough, “This Diamond Ring” belongs to a pop music category that relies heavily on biographical details of the “artist” for its appeal. Steve Chapple and Rebee Garofalo termed this tributary of pop music “schlock-rock,” a descendant of the “teenybop” music of the fifties and early sixties; and in its detachment of singing voice and author, “This Diamond Ring” anticipates “bubblegum” groups such as the Archies and the Banana Splits, the recorded voices of which do not correspond to biological humans at all but instead to cartoon characters (and it also anticipates such notorious recent “fakers” as Milli Vanilli). The scene and persona described and projected by the lyrics of “This Diamond Ring” typify those of teenybop music: the image of the teenybop idol “is based on self-pity, vulnerability, and need”; he is “sad, thoughtful, pretty, and puppylike”; in the lyrics, teenybop male protagonists are “soft, romantic, easily hurt, loyal,” while women emerge as “unreliable, fickle, [and] more selfish than men.” Teenage magazines directed towards a female readership feature male pop stars, but make little mention of the music; instead they dwell on the star’s personality, his “looks and likes.”
Since a tight link between the biographical details of the biological author and the actual performer heard on the recording cannot account for the appeal of “This Diamond Ring” and its resultant success, we must look elsewhere. Perhaps, as described in the preceding paragraph, it was the ability of Gary Lewis and the Playboys to fit so smoothly into the teenybop category in image and recorded material that won them their success, notwithstanding the fact that Gary Lewis’ “looks and likes” did not correspond to those of the lead singer heard on “This Diamond Ring.” Or perhaps elements of its musical style distinguished “This Diamond Ring” from its competitors? Musically, “This Diamond Ring” both resembles and differs from its “competition” in several respects. The song features basic “combo” instrumentation heard on many recordings of the era (electric guitar, organ, bass, drums), modal (dorian) inflections in the harmony and melody of the verse, and a basic rock beat pattern; in the chorus it features functional harmony, “closed” phrase structure (a type of phrasing associated with functional harmony and “rhyming” periodic structure), a minimum either of instrumental riffing (“open” phrase structure) or of melodic variation on the part of the lead singer, and little of the rhythmic play found in contemporaneous R&B or rock songs. Instrumentally, the verse features timpani, an instrument rarely found in R&B or rock songs, while the arrangement uses other “novelty” percussion instruments throughout the piece. The transition between verse and chorus contains a modulation of a kind—C minor (dorian) to G-flat major—that is harmonically daring and rare in the popular music of the period.

“This Diamond Ring” also contains several specific references to contemporaneous popular tunes. The harmonic progression of the chorus resembles that found in many Lennon-McCartney songs: the descending bass (G-flat/F/E-flat/D-flat) is reminiscent of “Bad to Me,” while the vi–iii (E-flat minor to B-flat minor) movement is found in many of the most popular Beatles songs (“Please Please Me,” “I Want to Hold Your Hand,” “She Loves You,” “And I Love Her,” to name a few). The melodic turn on “true” (“if you find someone whose heart is true”) also resembles similar turns in many Beatles songs (e.g., “Please Please Me” – “Last night I said these words to my girl”; “Do You Want to Know a Secret” – “nobody knows, just we two”) and in many other popular songs from the period. In other words, the musical style of “This Diamond Ring” skims aspects from contemporary rock songs, cobbles a “hook” together out of other hooks from successful songs, and is then produced and arranged from the aesthetic vantage point of “easy-listening” music.

As in the cover songs of R&B hits during the fifties, the musical profile of “This Diamond Ring” indicates an attempt by the music industry to produce a “rock” song according to the old Tin Pan Alley formula: a song is written by a more or less anonymous group of staff songwriters; a producer or A & R (“artists and repertoire”) man assembles a group of studio musicians, hires an arranger, and organizes this around a particular singer, whose image is complemented by the song lyrics. The link to Tin Pan Alley aesthetic values was recognized by radio programmers and the music industry at large when *Billboard* included Gary Lewis and the Playboys in their rankings of the top “Easy Listening” (the category for Tin Pan Alley survivors and “middle-of-the-road” music) artists of 1965. Of the artists mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, only Petula Clark was listed in the “Easy Listening” rankings, which also included Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass, Robert Goulet, Frank Sinatra, and the San Remo Golden Strings.

The description of the musical features of “This Diamond Ring” has thus far stressed its “standardized” features, portraying it as little more than the product of a musical assembly line. However, “This Diamond Ring” is not without its “individualized” elements: in addition to the aforementioned modulation, it possesses a catchy hook, and features competent instrumental performances, especially that of noted LA session drummer, Hal Blaine. Far from being automatons, some of the other musicians behind the scenes later became recognized as “creative” popular musicians. One of the co-songwriters, Al Kooper, went on to fame as a session musician for Bob Dylan’s early electric recordings and as a member of the Blues Project, an innovative blues-rock band; and Leon Russell, keyboardist and arranger for these sessions, became known as a solo rock artist in the late sixties, and as the director for Joe Cocker’s “Mad Dogs and Englishmen” tour, both musical roles ostensibly far removed from the “pop” world of “This Diamond Ring.” Of course, these “rock” music worlds were unavoidably saturated with their own form of commercialism as well; however, they were more successful (and interested) in effacing the signs of commerce and substituting signs of artistry than were the perpetrators of “schlock-rock.”

Despite this attempt to salvage a measure of musical value for “This Diamond Ring,” the case history and synchronic comparison presented would seem to be little more than a study of how “non-musical” factors can determine the popularity of a song. And this study largely tells a story of a passive audience of consumers manipulated by the will of the music industry. If the producers of Gary Lewis and the Playboys were trying to manipulate the audience, then they did a remarkably consistent
appealing in an androgynous fashion, become a teen idol? Is it still possible to create a teen idol, the heyday of which, 1955–1962, has already passed? Can the forces responsible for a popular music production — songwriters, A & R men, radio programmers, record executives, instrumentalists, singers, fan magazines — by themselves provide the impetus to make someone a star? That this last question was important is pretty much conceded by Morthland’s statement quoted earlier: Snuff Garrett (a leading producer of teen-oriented popular music) “was intrigued by the idea of breaking a group fronted by the child of a celebrity.”

However, the aesthetic questions that “This Diamond Ring” answered have lost their relevance. Gary Lewis and the Playboys were succeeded by the Monkees (who, even more than the Playboys, benefitted from extensive television exposure; but who, unlike the Playboys, were allowed to play and sing to various extents on their recordings), and then by a plethora of teen idols such as the Partridge Family (featuring teenybop star David Cassidy), the Osmond Brothers (with teenybop idol Donny), and Bobby Sherman, all of whom provided points of identification for teenybop fans after Gary Lewis no longer could (or was no longer promoted in such a way so that he could).

Another approach to understanding the reception of “This Diamond Ring” could employ the Bakhtinian opposition of monologism/dialogism. According to Bakhtin, in a dialogic text “consciousness . . . is always found in intense relationship with another consciousness . . . Every experience, every thought of a character is internally dialogic, adorned with polemic, filled with struggle, or is on the contrary open to inspiration from outside itself.” On the other hand, “Monologism, at its extreme, denies the existence outside itself of another consciousness with equal rights and equal responsibilities, another 1 with equal rights (thou) . . . Monologue is finalized and deaf to the other’s response, does not expect it and does not acknowledge it in any decisive force.” Could it simply be that a work such as Wilson Pickett’s “In the Midnight Hour” is charged with “polemic,” is “open to inspiration outside itself” in a way that “This Diamond Ring” isn’t? That “In the Midnight Hour” addresses an audience which still exists? “This Diamond Ring” was not produced primarily to inspire participation among its listeners; instead, it presented itself as an object to be consumed, interpellating its listeners merely as objects of consciousness, and not “another consciousness” (although it is possible that those “objects” did occasionally dance and sing along). “In the Midnight Hour” demands physical response in dance, and in its blues and gospel references summons up a social collectivity absent in the
world of serialized consumption evoked by “This Diamond Ring” (although some of these socially collective “subjects” were undoubtedly happy to “consume” this recording as well). By specifically “targeting” an audience of young consumers, the production combine responsible for “This Diamond Ring” cannot acknowledge these listeners as having “rights and . . . responsibilities” equal to their own. “In the Midnight Hour” comes from a tradition of R&B music which assumed an aesthetic of participation between a performer and an audience of adult listeners, hence the more mature subject matter of the lyrics.

Yet another approach to this matter of historical reception could consider the idea of musical coding and listener “competence.” Before addressing these concepts at any length, I will touch briefly on the idea of “undercoding” and “overcoding” as a way of explicating the reception history of “This Diamond Ring.” In an undercoded piece, “aspects of a piece . . . are received within a general sense of ‘understanding.’” Pieces in this category may create their own individual codes.” Examples of undercoded pieces would be avant-garde art music, and “free” jazz. On the other hand, in an overcoded piece, “every detail is covered by a network of explicit codes and subcodes. A piece in this category may be so tightly bound to socialized conventions as to be ‘about’ its code.” Examples of overcoded pieces would include muzak and advertising jingles. Ten years later, “This Diamond Ring” seems to be relatively “overcoded.” Aspects of this recording such as the novelty sound effects may have sounded cute and even “novel” at the time, but now seem tightly wedded to mid-sixties situation comedy soundtracks. The harmonic and melodic hooks discussed earlier, which may have appealed at the time, again seem reminiscent only of their era, without much resonance for latter-day listeners. The teenybop lyrics, too, project an innocence and naïveté with little relevance for the modern teenybopper, who has probably been exposed to Madonna’s Erotica despite the efforts of Tipper Gore. The lack of rhythmical and pitch inflection in the vocal part renders it ultimately predictable, a quality not contradicted by the competent but understated instrumental parts (and this would lessen its value even for a kind of “distracted listening” which may privilege physical involvement). There seem to be no competing perspectives projected by this song, nothing that prompts us to return to it again and again, no irony, satire, or self-reflection emanating from the song’s persona: “who wants to buy this diamond ring?” asks the persona, who merely wants to find “someone whose heart is true.” What could be simpler?

However, the preceding discussion risks glorifying and romanticizing the audience for “In the Midnight Hour” at the expense of the audience for “This Diamond Ring”; and it risks simplifying the extraordinary complexity of historical processes and their impact on aesthetic evaluation. In the end, the adaptability of cultural forms depends on an “irregular chain of historical transactions” involving countless negotiations, exchanges, and competing representations, which come into prominence or recede based on fluctuating power relations. The chapters that follow explore these “irregular transactions” in more detail than has the discussion of “This Diamond Ring.” For now, let us admit that we cannot fully account for why “In the Midnight Hour” is “classic rock,” while “This Diamond Ring” is not.

I

Codes and competences

The previous discussion of styles, genres, aesthetics, and reception touched on several factors that influence interpretation and meaning; however, we have not really explored how musical sounds may convey meaning except through borrowings and connections to other songs, and through a brief synopsis of the content of the lyrics. The notion of the “musical code” offers a way of theorizing the connections between musical sound and such “extra-musical” factors as media image, biographical details, mood, and historical and social associations; it can explicate the connection between an individual piece and the conventions of the period that surround it, the connection between a particular piece and the general langue from which it derives, and permit us to speculate about the connection between the musical sounds we hear and the “human universe” implied by the lyrics. The “musical code” may be explained as that aspect of musical communication that describes the relationship of a semantic system to a syntactic system, the relationship of “content” to “expression.” Richard Middleton has distinguished between two levels of coding, what he terms “primary” (form and syntactic relationships) and “secondary” (content and connotation) signification, both of which feed into a number of “general codes,” ordered here from the most general to the relatively specific: langue, norms, sub-norms, dialects, styles, genres, sub-codes, idiols, works, and performances. This chapter thus far has informally discussed the following levels of “general codes” with respect to “This Diamond Ring”: 
a. *norms*. In this case, the mainstream conventions governing the post-1900 period of popular music;

b. *sub-norms*. The conventions associated with a particular era, in this case mid-1960s pop music – the importance and unusual quality of the modulation, the relationship of the song's hooks to other songs of the era;

c. *style*. Teenybop and Tin Pan Alley pop in the context of British rock, Motown soul, R&B;

d. *idiolect*. The style traits associated with particular performers, e.g., the Beatles, Gary Lewis;

e. *works and performances*. “This Diamond Ring” as recorded by Gary Lewis and the Playboys.

Middleton discusses three main forms of “primary signification”: *sens* (links “between the verbal signifiers and the musical signifying process”), *auto-reflection* (the way in which structurally equivalent units refer to each other, including quotation, stylistic allusion, and parody), and *positional value* (the value of an element based on its syntactic position – this is the level that corresponds to the metalanguage of music analysis). On this level, we have discussed structural relationships in “This Diamond Ring” using terms such as “verse” (section A) and “chorus” (section B), the positional importance of certain harmonic features (the progression of vi–ii, the modulation), and melodic events (the “turn on “true”); the stylistic allusion of “auto-reflection” (these hooks “sound like” the Beatles); and we have employed *sens* in the use of terms such as “hook,” “open and closed phrasing,” and “melodic turn.”

We have also touched on a number of factors in the discussion of “This Diamond Ring” that could be grouped in the category of “secondary signification,” including the following:

a. *Intentional values*. These are recognized, intended connotations of specific structural or thematic effects: the finger cymbals and wind chimes in the introduction connotes novelty;

b. *Positional implications*. These are connotations arising from structural position: the memorable melodic line and harmonic sequence in the chorus create the hook;

c. *Ideological choices*. These are particular, preferred meanings, selected from a range of possible interpretations: “This Diamond Ring” evokes a world of serialized consumption as opposed to the social collectivity of “In the Midnight Hour”;

d. *Emotive connotations*. These refer to the agreed affective implications of musical events: teen idols singing teenybop songs are associated with vulnerability, need, self-pity, loyalty;

e. *Style connotations*. These are the associations summoned up by coding at the general level of style: teenybop pop means adolescent, middle-class, predominantly female fans, listening by themselves or in small groups;

f. *Axiological connotations*. These refer to moral or political evaluations of musical pieces, styles or genres: teenybop is a commercial sell-out/an empowering form of identity/a benign form of entertainment.

It should be obvious that the “secondary” level of signification is related to, and ultimately inextricable from, the “primary” level (despite the implications of the terms “primary” and “secondary,” the question of which one of the levels is the foundational one is moot). That is, categories of “secondary signification” such as “intentional values” and “positional implications” depend on knowledge of the syntactic relationships described by “primary signification.” Conversely, certain aspects of “primary” signification depend on “secondary” signification: *sens* cannot exist without the discourses (and their attendant connotations) surrounding various styles and genres, without the language of musical description which arises out of specific contexts; “positional value” can rarely be perceived without an awareness of “positional implications” (although these may not be admissible or overt in certain theoretical contexts); and the aspects of quotation and stylistic allusion contained in “auto-reflection” can be either “primary” or “secondary” depending on whether the act of interpretation emphasizes either expression or content. In general, Middleton sees the difference between these types of signification as the difference “between the roles of individual effects, privileging mechanisms of connotation, and of synthesized syntactic structures, privileging primary types of significations.”

The idea of the “code” has been criticized for its reductionism, that is, for arbitrarily limiting the range of possible relationships between signifiers and signifieds. But focusing on the purely relational aspects of every signifier to every signified without grouping them leaves us with no way of interpreting the resulting sign. Without the concept of the “code” there can be no connotation, meaning, or “communication,” which throws the emphasis from meaning back to structure. And indeed, this is what Jean-Jacques Nattiez, the best-known critic of the idea of the musical code, posits as an alternative: “[W]e can consider that, all in all,
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Structuralism was not wrong in recognizing some level of material immanence in the text—a level that cannot be outlined, and that is not exclusive. This insight is worth retaining, even when pure structuralism has proven unworkable. The recourse to “immanence” delegates discussion of a musical text to an ahistorical, non-cultural vacuum, a vacuum without perceiving subjects. It is true that, in some sense, codes are inevitably reductionist, as is any device that attempts to categorize or group utterances; but do they permit discussion of meaning, which forms an important part of the everyday discourse about music? “Kd lang is sensuous,” “Chris Isaak’s guitar evokes wide-open spaces,” “Springsteen means what he says,” “I don’t understand contemporary art music,” “the Who’s Tommy was pompous, the death of rock.”

If musical meaning is conveyed through a code that is sent or produced by somebody then it also must be received or consumed by somebody. This raises the question of “competence”: what is the relationship between sender and receiver, and how does this affect the interpretation of musical messages? Gino Stefani has outlined a model of musical competence which, in its hierarchies, parallels Middleton’s presentation of general codes. Stefani presents five levels of musical competence:

- **General Codes (GC):** basic conventions through which we perceive or construct or interpret every experience (and therefore every sound experience). This is the “anthropological” level of musical competence that everyone may exercise;
- **Social Practices (SP):** cultural institutions such as language, religion, industrial work, technology, sciences, etc., including musical practices (concert, ballet, opera, criticism);
- **Musical Techniques (MT):** theories, methods, and devices which are more or less specific and exclusive to musical practices, such as instrumental techniques, scales, composition forms, etc. It is at this level that one usually finds the definition of music as “the art of sounds”;
- **Styles (St):** historical periods, cultural movements, authors, or groups of works: that is, the particular ways in which MT, SP, and GC are concretely realized;
- **Opus (Op):** single musical works or events in their concrete individuality.

Of course, different listeners will bring these levels to bear in varying ways based on their experiences. Stefani thus describes two basic competence types, which he describes as “high competence” and “popular competence.” High competence focuses on pieces as autonomous works, while popular competence experiences pieces more on the levels of the General Codes (GC) and Social Practices (SP). Moreover, the degree to which a piece may be decoded depends on the range of levels available to an individual listener: a maximum “signification effect” would occur when a piece is interpreted on all levels; a relatively weak effect would occur if a General Code were interpreted without any information from the other levels, or, conversely, if a piece were interpreted purely on the Op level— as would occur if a piece were perceived solely as an autonomous work, without any social significance or connotative meaning. Stefani also indicates that there may be particular regions of the GC which are of interest to those with high competence, and aspects of Op coding which are of interest to those with popular competence. Thus, frequent contrast at the GC level might interest those with high competence, while specific knowledge about popular songs and performers may be the province of those with largely popular competence. Stefani’s basic competence types recall the formulations of Pierre Bourdieu, with his notions of “popular” and “legitimate” aesthetics. According to Bourdieu, these aesthetic positions emphasize either function or form, and are related to the amount and type of “cultural capital” (acquired through a conjunction of class background and academic training) possessed by an individual. In other words, listener “competence” in this formulation refers to the range of subject positions available to a listener dependent on that individual’s history and memory.

The advantage of Stefani’s model over either a purely structuralist emphasis on codes which ignores their reception or a Chomskyan notion of linguistic competence which posits a trans-cultural human “nature” into which linguistic structures are programmed, is that it introduces the notion of context. There are no ideal “addressees” or “addressees”; “context” functions not only in the Jakobsonian sense of providing a context for a specific message, but also in telling us about the larger social and cultural context, about the individual backgrounds of the senders and receivers of the message, and about the background of the message itself. Furthermore, “codes” are no more static than are the types of competence that listening subjects may bring to bear on them. As discussed earlier, an “undercoded” piece may create new codes; similarly, in the act of interpretation, the way in which we “decode” a piece may change our sense of the piece we are hearing, necessitating an infinite series of new perspectives in the act of listening.
A brief example should suffice to demonstrate how these competence levels can operate in the listening process. At the GC level, we may initially perceive “This Diamond Ring” as a series of events broken up by brief pauses, followed by uninterrupted activity which still is irregular, followed by more flowing activity. On the SP level, a listener socialized by Euro-American musical practices may interpret these events heard as an “introduction,” followed by a statement of an idea, then followed by a “chorus,” which suggests dancing, physical movement, and singing along more strongly than the preceding material. It is here that vaguely affective qualities may become apparent: feelings of vulnerability, resoluteness, comradely advice, all parts of the “human universe” that the song inhabits, created by the words and emphasized by musical codes. At the MT level, the listener hears introduction, verse, and chorus delineated by specific rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic ideas. At the St level, correlations could be made between this song and other songs, grouped in various ways (Beatles songs, British rock, Tin Pan Alley pop music, teenybop), and even historicized (this is mid-sixties pop). At the Op level, there is explicit recognition of the song, “This Diamond Ring,” performed by Gary Lewis and the Playboys.

II

Who is the author?

This chapter has already touched on some of the problematic aspects of "authorship" in popular song in the somewhat quirky instance of “This Diamond Ring.” In some respects, that song was not anomalous: frequently there is no single origin for the popular music text; and what is perceived by the audience as the emotional focal point of the song (the lead vocalist) may or may not be responsible for other aspects of the song's production (songwriting, instrumental performance, arranging, engineering). In some cases, there may be a relatively tight link between functions: in the case of the singer-songwriter, for example, the lead singer is responsible both for writing the song and for playing an instrument around which the accompaniment is based. In this category, the song's lyrics usually fall into the “confessional” mode, appearing to reveal some aspects of the singer-songwriter's inner experience. At one level, the idea that there exists some correspondence between the biography of the singer-songwriter and his or her songs seems unquestionable. Music magazines and biographies often focus on the parallels between songs and the singer's lives: thus, Joni Mitchell's “My Old Man” is “about” her relationship to Graham Nash; James Taylor's "Sunshine, Sunshine" is “about” his sister Kate, and his “Knockin' Around the Zoo” is “about” his stay in a mental hospital—indeed, the sometimes explicitly autobiographical references invite these kinds of associations. These associations then lead to statements such as “[Joni Mitchell's] primary purpose is to create something meaningful out of random moments of pain and pleasure in her life.”

Yet there are distinct disadvantages to this way of conceptualizing the relationship between singer and song. Even for singer-songwriters it is questionable whether the song only expresses the autobiographical details of their lives. At the most basic level, if this were true it would mean that a singer-songwriter could only write or sing sad songs when sad, happy songs when happy. At another level, there exists the possibility that a song and a recording may present a range of affect that exceeds the composer/performer's intentions: listeners may interpret a song in a way that has little to do with what the performer “felt” when he or she recorded or wrote it. At still another level, the notion of a strict identity between lived experience and a song's meaning eliminates the effect of the song as a musical performance: the musical codes and the manner in which the song is performed may either contradict or reinforce the content in the lyrics, adding new layers of nuance by “acting out,” inflecting, and contextualizing them. There is thus the possibility— even in a performance by a solo singer-songwriter in which singer, instrumentalist, arranger, and composer are one and the same person—of a multiplicity of authorial voices in the musical text. For example, in many Bob Dylan songs in which the lyrics express rage or scorn towards someone, there are moments in which his voice conveys a sense of compassion and tenderness (e.g., the line “I didn't realize how young you were” from “One of Us Must Know [Sooner or Later]”); or, conversely, Dylan gives an ironic or humorous lit to lyrics that could otherwise seem lustful (e.g., the title line from "I Want You"; compare this to the menacing affect produced by Elvis Costello's rendering of the same line in his "I Want You"). This does not even touch on the way in which other instrumentalists or singers may contribute “voices” to group performances, or on what happens when a singer-songwriter performs somebody else’s song: when James Taylor performs “You’ve Got a Friend,” does it mean that he actually wants to console a particular person, or that he empathizes with the desire of Carole King (the songwriter) to console somebody? The fact that Carole King sings in the background of James Taylor’s recording further complicates the relationship between the authorial voices heard in the recording, and
between the performers and the composer. Belief in literal correspondences could lead to a whole series of specious interpretations about the “friendship” between Carole King and James Taylor, or the possible friendships between both of them and a third party (and, indeed, this kind of speculation often fuels a certain kind of “Paul-Is-Dead” interest among members of the audience).\textsuperscript{27}

The concept of authorship becomes more complex when we examine songs in genres other than that of the singer-songwriter. We have already touched on some of the complexities of the situation when the roles of songwriter, instrumentalist, arranger, producer, singer, and “star” are divided as in “This Diamond Ring.” Group situations in which there are a multiplicity of singers, songwriters, and instrumentalists present a ready-made assortment of “voices,” which individually do not maintain a strict identity between performer and authorial voice (or persona). For example, in descriptions of the Beatles’ personalities, John Lennon was typically characterized as fiery and belligerent, Paul McCartney as sensitive and romantic, George Harrison as serious and spiritual. Yet John sang ballads, Paul sang hard-rock tunes, and George sang silly ditties. They sang together in different combinations, assumed different roles, and contributed additional “voices” through their instrumental parts. And, of course, there are other pop music contexts, including “This Diamond Ring,” “Downtown,” “My Girl,” and many more, which feature different degrees of creative input between the various people responsible for a pop recording (songwriter, producer, singer, arranger, instrumentalist), and the play of “voices” that present themselves to the listener.

This idea of a multiplicity of voices within the text brings us close to Roland Barthes’ idea cited earlier, that a “text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination,” an idea which questions the importance of the belief in a single, originary author. Kaja Silverman has described how a film may create a sense of multiple authorial voices through characters, plot, dialogue, and the cinematic apparatus itself; these voices can then combine to create an author “inside the text.” Nonetheless, there remains the possibility that through the consistent repetition of certain ideas (in lyrics and music) and through the association of these ideas with ideas and images outside the text (interviews, biographies, etc.), the author “inside the text” may inscribe the author “outside the text” as one of the text’s voices; this is the effect we observed in the case of the singer-songwriters. This suggests how we may sense that musicians are expressing “themselves” in song as one of the many personae they project musically.\textsuperscript{24} In the chapters that follow, one of my concerns is to trace how different notions of authorship are shaped by performers, audiences, and others associated with the production of popular music, how these notions circulate in a variety of discourses, and how they then figure in the interpretation and resultant meaning of the songs in jazz, Tin Pan Alley pop, country, soul, and 1980s pop.

The previous discussion of “This Diamond Ring,” in comparing it to “In the Midnight Hour,” may have implied the aesthetic superiority of a multiplicity of voices “inside the text.” This corresponds to some aspects of the work of Bakhtin who, in developing the aesthetic, moral, and political implications of his concepts of dialogism/monologism, imputes a greater value to polyphonic, “dialogic” texts that contain a multiplicity of voices as opposed to univocal, “monologic” texts. However, when applied to musical processes of production and reception, this mode of evaluation runs the risk of oversimplification. An uncritical application of this concept to discussions of popular music disregards the possibility of different listening situations having types of music most appropriate for them; specifically, it cannot account for musical practices such as dancing, listening to a walkman while roaming the city, or overhearing a neighbor’s radio while cleaning the house, activities that may not permit a full appreciation of the multiplicity of voices in the popular music text, but activities which nonetheless permit the listener to engage with the music.\textsuperscript{25} And Bakhtin’s ideas, when transferred from reading to listening, imply the superiority of high competence to popular competence: for his distinctions to hold, they require an ideal listener who can discern all those voices within the text.

III

Musicology and popular music

Context to text

One of the debates that recurs most often at popular music studies conferences is the debate over the relative importance of the popular music “context” vs. the popular music “text.” While proponents of each side understand that contexts consist of texts and that texts exist within a context, the lines of battle are nonetheless drawn: sociologists study contexts while musicologists study texts. There is some indication that these lines may be growing fuzzy: from the musicology side, at any rate, many have become increasingly interested over the past several years in the way in which contexts influence the perception of texts. One
important aspect of context is that it establishes the codes that listeners are most likely to apply in certain listening situations. The more we know about how people listen to a piece of music, how they evaluate it, what they do with it, and the type of meanings they attribute to it, the clearer idea we can get of what is pertinent in a text. In the preceding discussion of "This Diamond Ring," a rather "thin" context was presented: we examined the song within the context of the popular music field of its time, and (curiously) in the sociological context of the assumed audience for the song. The context was developed by referring to secondary sources such as liner notes, and to an article on the differing musical preferences of young male and female pop music fans. The musical description, brief though it was, made a number of assumptions about what was musically pertinent: harmony was analyzed according to its function, melodic pitches were analyzed according to scale type, rhythm and phrasing were discussed in relation to other popular songs of the day and according to models derived from the study of Western art music; the harmonic and melodic terms used were also derived from those used to describe Western art music. The section on "secondary signification" suggested possible connotations conveyed by some of these formal features, without making explicit the process through which the connotations were established.

Ideally, analytical emphasis could arise from terminology used in the discourses which circulate around a song, style, or genre. These discourses give us a clue as to what codes are activated by the song, and to the range of possible connotations. These discourses could include ethnomusicological research which focused on statements of the fans themselves, gathered in face-to-face encounters; they could include written documents and interviews found in mass media publications, music industry magazines, historical documents, and "secondary literature" such as biographies. In all these cases, it is important to note who is speaking, to whom they are speaking, the context of the utterance itself (what effect is it trying to make), for these discourses are never disinterested; they are constituted by texts embedded in their own contexts. This discourages an unproblematic distinction between text and context. While musical texts may retain a "relative autonomy" — music is a medium with specific properties, practices, limitations, and possibilities — they gain their meaning by circulating with other texts from other media which may include mass media publications, videos, film, industry publications, and "historical" documents. Again, as in the "aesthetics of reception," one of the aims of this type of discourse analysis is to build a synchronic text of a socio-cultural moment rather than to emphasize a diachronic unfolding of autonomous works.

Contained in these discourses are statements about musical value, about what is important in a piece of music. Simon Frith has shown how the critical discourse associated with the three main musical categories into which the musical field is conventionally partitioned — art music, folk music, popular music — all produce different conventions of aesthetic value. "Art" music revolves around providing a transcendent experience; however, only those with the right training can experience the real meaning of "great" music. "Folk" music revolves around providing an authentic experience of community. "Popular" music values are created by and organized around the music industry — musical value and monetary value are therefore equated, and the sales charts become the measure of "good" pop music. Pop music can also invoke the discourses of the first two music "worlds." The problem of authenticity vs. commercialism exists across discourses as part of the shared response to music making in a capitalist society. The chapters that follow explore the ways in which these "art," "folk," and "popular" music discourses are weighted in the evaluation of different pop styles and genres, and how these different styles and genres construct notions of "authenticity," that is, how they distinguish "sincere" expression from fodder for the masses.

The musicological quagmire

Yet even if we grant the possibility of context to help establish the pertinence of textual details, codes, and analytical decisions, problems still arise when we approach the "musical" text. In the event that we use terms other than those arising from the discourses associated with the context of a given song, then we will probably resort to terms drawn from musicological discourse to describe the music. And if we use musicological discourse to describe the details of a piece of music, we must recognize that the metalanguage of music analysis is not transparent, but that it is a medium that comes with its own ideological and aesthetic baggage which will affect what we can say. This is because musicological discourse, despite its seeming naturalness, is contingent on historical circumstances: it emerged in the mid nineteenth century in Europe in tandem with a whole panoply of beliefs about what the musical experience should provide, and about the relationship between performers, audiences, and composers. Audiences and scholars developed an aesthetic of distanced appreciation, and a belief in the autonomous art work and the primacy of "absolute" music (i.e., music lacking, in the words of Carl Dahlhaus, a "concept, object, and purpose"). These attitudes and beliefs were accompanied and accommodated by the context of the concert hall, a context which
divorced the musical work from its previous social functions, and transformed musical performance into a sacred ritual. Although these attitudes and beliefs have shifted in the last century and a half, aspects of them remain remarkably tenacious and pervasive. Their effect on the discipline of musicology was to focus attention on a small body of work (the "canon"), and to encourage a positivistic approach to musical research, an approach that was renewed vigorously in the period following World War II.

There is some validity to using musicological discourse to describe popular music: the popular music texts studied in this book emerged both from cultural contexts similar to those that spawned and subsequently nurtured musicology, and from cultural contexts with important differences as well. In the end, if we attempt to use some aspects of this discourse to analyze songs from heterogeneous cultural contexts (such as contemporary popular songs), then we must ask what guarantees the "fit" between the song, the audience, and the analytical discourse.

This is a very difficult question, and one that has been rarely asked within the context of art music analysis. Music analysis has tended to focus on pieces of music as autonomous entities in order to show the relationship of the parts to the whole. The formalistic dissection of the text appears contextless, but only because the context is taken for granted; it is therefore important to reestablish the effect of contextual factors on analytical metalinguage in order to unpack the aesthetic values embedded within this metalinguage before applying it to musics outside the canon. On the other hand, it is true that historical musicology has tended to place musical works, composers, and styles in their social and cultural context. However, the majority of these writings, until very recently, have accepted the relative importance of the canon as a given and have largely foreclosed discussions of musical meaning. They have also resisted (again, until recently) exploring questions about the relationship of text to cultural context that have interested ethnomusicologists because, in the words of Joseph Kerman, "Western music is just too different from other musics, and its cultural contexts too different from other cultural contexts." Yet Kerman never explains why or how this is so. That the statement could be accepted is due in large part to the persistence of the aforementioned historical circumstances in which musicology emerged, and to what Philip Tagg termed "notational centricity," an issue I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter.

An awareness of the insufficiency of music analysis to tell us much of value about popular music informed some of the earliest writings on the relationship between music analysis and popular music. In 1966, Charles Keil noted the emphasis in music analysis on "syntax" and its inability to deal with "process," which he described as the "mode of understanding" in improvised musics. In improvised musics, according to Keil, the "horizontal" qualities of "pulse/meter/rhythm" take precedence over the "vertical" qualities of "harmony/melody/emplacement" so prized in Western art music. Four years later, Andrew Chester used the terms "extensional" and "intensional" in a similar fashion to describe the aesthetic dichotomy between art music and popular music. "Extensional development . . . includes all devices that build diachronically and synchronically outwards from basic musical atoms. The complex is created by combination of the simple, which remains discrete and unchanged in the complex unity." On the other hand, "intensional development" is created by reflecting melody, timbre, rhythm, and other elements while many parameters may remain constant throughout a song. John Shepherd, along with the co-authors of Whose Music?, continued the critique of Western music analysis; Shepherd blamed musicology's neglect of popular music on music analysis' preference for information gathered via the "visual" mode as opposed to the "oral" mode. We may note that these early discussions include some perhaps overly simplistic binary oppositions - it is difficult to find any type of music that is either purely "intensional" or "extensional", "syntactical" or "processual" - as well as a tendency toward Romantic allegory - the story of the unmediated "oral" mode supplanted by the corrupted "visual." Nevertheless, even on a sliding scale of possibilities, it is probably fair to say that music analysis tends to emphasize "syntax," "extensional development," and "visual information"; this puts a great deal of twentieth-century popular music at a disadvantage, because it often appears deficient in those areas. The recordings studied in this book range from songs with a fair degree of syntactic interest and extensional development (Bing Crosby's "I'll Be Seeing You" and Elvis Costello's "Pills and Soap"), to songs that strongly emphasize the processual mode of understanding (James Brown's "Superbad"), to songs lying somewhere in-between (Billie Holiday's "I'll Be Seeing You" and Hank Williams' "Hey Good Lookin").

Music in culture

The early work on popular and improvised musics suggests that analyzing qualities such as "process" and "musical inflection" may be particularly fruitful, as these qualities correspond to values recognized by
Interpreting popular music

performers and listeners. This returns us to the issue of the relationship between context and text, and to the question of how we may allow our understanding of contexts to inform our explication of texts. Ethnomusicology is the discipline that has grappled with the issue of the relationship between context and text in the most sustained and explicit fashion, so we might expect to see these terms taken up and applied in ethnomusicological analyses. Still, important differences separate the obstacles confronting the ethnomusicologist and the popular music researcher. In theory, ethnomusicology takes the entire range of music made during any historical period in the world as its subject; in practice, ethnomusicological studies tend to favor music made or originating in non-industrialized, non-Western locales; in particular, the "art" musics of Indonesia, Japan, and India, and the "vernacular" musics of sub-Saharan Africa and Native America (the lone Westerners of the bunch). Attempts to find relationships between social structure and musical structure assume a stable, monolithic "culture," the characteristics of which can then be mapped on to or derived from a musical structure or a set of musical characteristics. Although the situation is changing — with an increasing number of ethnomusicologically based articles, dissertations, and books based on music from urban, industrialized contexts — the "culture" studied is typically not one of which the researcher is a member; and the music must be accepted by "an entire society as its own."  

In terms of the relationship between musical structure and social structure, music produced and consumed in modern, industrialized contexts raises a host of problems not found in rural, pre-industrial settings. When Alan Lomax applies his method for studying relations between music and culture to Western Europe, it leads him to assert that "in Western European culture . . . the leading singer commands and dominates his listeners during his performance. His association with his audience is, in sociological terms, one of exclusive authority . . . In its role relationship the symphonic audience . . . differs from the ballad audience only in its size."  A statement such as this ignores the polyglot aspects of contemporary Western society, subsuming them into a singular stance of domination/subordination in the act of transmission; it ignores the way in which a participatory aesthetic may contribute to the contemporary Western listening experience; and it ignores how various listener subject positions informed by a variety of class-, gender-, and culturally based attitudes may influence interpretation (as in Stefani's model of musical competence). What is more, these "listening positions" are not locked into place by financial status or genetic code, but can be acquired through contact with a musical style. That a broad range of factors influences listening attitudes implies that multiple listening positions may be available to a single listener; this suggests the existence of a kind of double- (or multiple-) "eared" listener, a counterpart to Bakhtin’s double-voiced producer of texts.

Lomax’s approach represents one extreme of the ethnomusicological spectrum: the tendency to search for universal principles and general theories of music that can be applied cross-culturally. At the other end of the spectrum, we find ethnomusicological approaches that concentrate on specific "music cultures," and that base their analyses and descriptions on an "insider’s approach" — that is, on using terms and theories developed by culturally informed practitioners of the music. This is somewhat closer to the approach based in discourse described earlier in this chapter, yet the particular complexities of the popular music context render a straightforward "insider’s approach problematic: in highly heterogeneous societies, meaning is more likely to result from a song’s similarity to and difference from other songs within the total musical field, from the codes it activates and from the subject positions and competences it makes available to listeners that permit them to identify with those codes. In this type of society, virtually anyone can be a "cultural insider" with respect to any type of music, although factors of class, ethnicity, and gender make some identifications more likely than others.

In a similar way to some of the aspects of ethnomusicological approaches, "subcultural" theories of the homologies between musical style and social identity assume a tight fit that tends to gloss over contradictions in musical tastes within the subculture, as well as to ignore how musical styles can become popular with groups outside the subculture under study. Moreover, the analyst begins from a set of already known social characteristics and then proceeds to find correspondences, producing the kind of circular logic that makes homologies possible.

In the end, nothing guarantees a "fit" that all listeners of any given piece of popular music, or that all readers of this book, will find appropriate. Even the cases in which ethnomusicologists, sociologists, and cultural studies scholars base their findings on the theory and terminology of “insiders” do not produce a completely airtight match between discourses, practices, and observers: for example, John Blacking’s study of Venda children’s songs uses an approach based on Venda musical perception, but then goes on to make observations about the music that the Venda themselves would not make. In a sense, the “cultural insider”
comes to stand in for the analyst, as the analyst selects statements that accord with his or her point of view. Similarly, this book explores the "context" of the production and reception of a recording in order to establish the pertinence of musical codes. However, the analyses and interpretations for the most part go beyond those found within the discursive contexts. The form of the discussion, both in this case and in Blacking's, indicates the importance of the "audience," even for a scholarly book; that is, the scholar can never escape the influence of the social context that determines the way her or his book will be evaluated.

Metaphors for music: spatial and temporal

As mentioned earlier, in musicological analysis the written document representing the piece of music, the "score," tends to function as the main source for analysis. However, the songs under consideration here circulated primarily as recordings. Recordings tend to foreground the temporality of the musical text, as well as to emphasize one particular (and frequently, in some respects, simulated) performance rather than an idealized set of instructions for a performance. As a written document, a score is a spatialized representation of a piece, which, as already discussed, lends itself to an analysis of structure. Modern popular music, which circulates primarily in recorded form, seems unsuited to analytical methods that stress spatial metaphors rather than temporal ones, and that favor visual methods as opposed to aural ones. As discussed above, contemporary music analysis tends to rely on spatial metaphors such as "structure," on biological metaphors such as "organicism," or to conflate the metaphors in the notion of "organic structure." It is important to remind ourselves of the historicity of these ideas. Indeed, parsing a piece into bits and then revealing the relationship of those bits to each other and to the "whole" permeates instruction in music theory and analysis. The idea of musical structure followed first the development of the idea of "structure" and then of "organic" structure in disciplines such as natural history and botany in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In these disciplines, the concept of structure allowed visible forms to be transcribed into the "linear unwinding of language." For natural historians, this offered the promise of transforming their discipline into something approximating mathematics or natural science. In the late eighteenth century, the idea of organic structure permitted scientists to relate phenomena to an invisible model, so that a representation of a visible object would no longer refer "back to itself," but rather to a "hidden architecture," or a "buried depth." For any discussion of musical "structure" or "organicism" to take place, the temporal musical experience had first to be converted into a visual, spatial experience. The written document known as the "score" was more suited to this than the ephemerality of the live performance and it therefore gained priority in musical study. Once the score was accepted as the primary musical "object," the conversion of this now spatialized musical experience into the "linear unwinding of language" could begin. However, it is important to note that, even in the most "spatialized" experience, a residue of temporality remains: the reading of a score takes place in time, even if it does not follow the temporal continuity of the music as it would be presented in performance. And we should remember that, no matter how much we emphasize the "aural" aspects of music, once we begin to represent them visually – either in musical notation or prose – a "spatial" element unavoidably creeps in.

If we look beyond the rise of organic metaphors in the music criticism and theory of the second third of the nineteenth century we find an emphasis on the metaphor of music as an oration. Music criticism in the latter part of the eighteenth century, and well into the nineteenth century, described music frequently in terms of an oration which used the art of rhetoric to communicate its effects to the listener. The organic metaphor tends to stress the structure of music, and hence to turn attention away from the impact of a piece of music on the listener towards the relationships which inher in the work itself: pieces of music, now imbued with the "force of life," come to be seen as autonomous entities rather than as cultural artifacts embedded in a social network. This shift from rhetoric to structure suggests that eighteenth-century attitudes towards analysis and criticism, with their orientation towards the effect of a piece on the listener, may be more appropriate to analyze and describe modern popular forms than Romantic notions of music-as-art that emphasize the composer, expression, and spatial metaphors.

The problem remains as to how to develop analytic methods based on rhetorical concepts. To some extent analysis – with its emphasis on individual works and their constituent parts – and rhetoric – which emphasizes conventions governing the relationships between pieces – are antithetical concepts. However, the metaphor of music as rhetoric still allows for the description of differences between orations, as well as an understanding of how individual orations follow generic conventions: treatises of the late eighteenth century stress the importance of the musical surface rather than seeking to explicate the hidden depths of structure (the idea of "form" as an abstract concept did not figure prominently in writings about music until the second third of the
Typically, in these writings, the notion of a melodic line that is responsible for the musical continuity of a piece is interchangeable with the notion of form (pp. 91, 95).

The idea that the metaphor of rhetoric permits us to consider the connection between an individual piece and the conventions of genre also points out the links between eighteenth-century approaches to criticism and contemporary notions of the musical code and musical competence. If pieces are "understood" by their references to genre, then this occurs through activating codes in certain ways. And, of course, recognition of these conventions relies on different types of listener competence, a connection made by eighteenth-century theorists as well, with their discussion of the appropriateness of certain kinds of music for amateurs and connoisseurs (p. 129). "Conventions" can alert us to the levels and types of codes that signify in a given piece — in other words, to what is pertinent.

The musical analyses that follow take up the idea of musical rhetoric in a variety of ways. Throughout the book, the emphasis in the musical description tends to fall on melodic features. I chose songs with prominent vocal parts that are primarily responsible for conveying melodic interest. Another important component of some of the analyses is the emphasis on paradigmatic analysis. This permits the comparison of small units which may repeat with slight variation. Paradigmatic analysis tends to be useful in situations in which some musical features remain invariant, because it brings into relief the elements which are varied. It may also be useful when comparing two recordings of the same song as a way of highlighting differences in the musical surface. Thus, chapter two compares two recordings of "I'll Be Seeing You," one by Bing Crosby and one by Billie Holiday, to each other and to the printed sheet music. In addition to comparing their recordings to one another, paradigmatic analysis is used to compare their approaches to variation within their respective recordings. The musical surface of the recordings of "I'll Be Seeing You" is also explored through a description and analysis of vocal tone color. Hank Williams' vocal performance in his recording of "Hey Good Lookin'" is examined through a discussion of the melodic and rhythmic inflection of his vocal line and of the variations in tone color. Of all the chapters, paradigmatic analysis features most prominently in the discussion of James Brown's "Superbad," due to the importance of repetition in that song. This analysis reveals how rhetorical and paradigmatic approaches may be compatible: in this song, rhetorical emphasis results from the discrete variation of numerous brief melodic ideas; paradigmatic analysis facilitates comparisons of the minute variations between different statements of these ideas. The analysis of Elvis Costello's "Pills and Soap" takes a "phenomenological" approach, describing the impact of the song as it passes, phrase by phrase and gesture by gesture. Although this approach does focus attention on the surface, this analysis contains more references to "structure" than the others because, as I argue in that chapter, the song's "individuality" derives at least partially from its assimilation of an aesthetic based on the Romantic notions of music-as-art.

To see or not to see: the question of transcription

This discussion of which musical metaphors are more appropriate for the analysis of popular music still leaves us with the question of how best to represent musical details. If representing an auditory artifact such as a recording by using written notation inevitably results in an emphasis on spatial metaphors, then won't any analysis that relies on music notation end up reifying the fluid, temporal process of the music being discussed? The answer is probably "yes." Yet it is difficult to move beyond vague notions of style, or to discuss musical details, without some kind of visual representation. While it is, of course, impossible to present a completely "accurate" transcription, the transcription may present observable "traces" of the musical details of the recording to the reader. The approach taken here has been to transcribe the most prominent aspects of the musical surface and to comment on the melodic process, rather than to search for hidden relationships between different components of the musical texture. In addition to Western staff notation, at certain points I used an automatic transcription device, the spectrum analyzer, to "freeze" other aspects of the musical surface in order to discuss them. As all notation systems enable the representation of some features more easily than others, one always runs the risk of producing a kind of distortion when "transcribing" — that is, when using one culturally-based notation system to represent musical sounds for which the notation system was not originally intended. However, we must also note the impossibility of an unmediated, direct, and therefore non-distorted means of representing a musical performance.

Charles Seeger's distinction between "prescriptive" and "descriptive" notation remains a useful starting-point for a discussion of the pros and cons of transcription. In his view, Western notation is primarily prescriptive: it consists of directions for a performance. Attempts to make Western notation describe an actual performance (or a recording of a simulated performance) involve a kind of "translation" process. When
using Western notation to "describe" music for which it was not intended, we are first forced to look for elements in the music that best fit the priorities of the notation (pitch and metered rhythm), priorities that may have little to do with the aesthetic values of the music in question. Secondly, as Seeger rightly pointed out, no one can interpret any notation without some sort of oral (or aural) tradition; therefore, in reading a transcription of an unfamiliar form of music, the reader has no way of reconstructing it (p. 170). Western notation conveys precise information about only pitch, and, even then, only within the boundaries of the twelve-note, equal-tempered system. Duration and amplitude are displayed in relative terms and timbre, phrasing, and a whole host of minute inflections - that is, the way that music sounds, what Seeger called "the knowledge of what happens between the notes" (p. 170) - are conveyed even less accurately by Western notation.

As discussed earlier, the "notational centrality" of Western musicology has contributed to the neglect of much of the world's music outside of a narrow canon of works. If music notation conveys information about certain elements more than others, and musicological study is based on the "score," then it follows that the music most studied is notated music in which complexity of pitch relations and form figure most prominently. This has had the effect of marginalizing not only popular and non-Western music, but musical styles in the "classical music tradition" itself that "don't look like much on the page," such as Spanish guitar music, or seventeenth-century Baroque dance music, to name a few.11

Ethnomusicologists have struggled with the issue of transcription; indeed, the ability to transcribe has been considered a kind of rite of passage: accusing an ethnomusicologist of making an inaccurate transcription would be tantamount to branding her or him incompetent.12 The trouble with "accurate" transcriptions that attempt to account for all the specific details of a performance - for the way in which this music does not sound like Western art music - is that what they do most convincingly is show how the "notation does not look like the musical sounds it is meant to represent."13 The transcriber outfits the transcription with an increasing density of detail in order to show how the temporal process of the piece in question contradicts the impression of stasis in the notated representation, that is, to convey all the elements either underestimated or misrepresented by Western staff notation.

Yet the plight of the transcriber is not quite the hopeless situation that it might seem. Readers of a transcription may have access to or familiarity with the sounds of the music being transcribed and hence have acquired some of the requisite "oral tradition" to enable them to interpret the written notation. This is the assumption behind the transcriptions in this book. The occasional density of detail is meant to convey the sense that these transcriptions are in some ways fitting round pegs into square holes. They represent recorded sounds, not directions for performers to produce those sounds. Chapter two, in fact, demonstrates how recordings of a "standard" deviate from the printed sheet music.

As mentioned earlier, the analyses also employ a kind of automatic transcription, the spectrum photo. Although at one time championed as a kind of musicological cure-all, automatic transcriptions have their shortcomings as well.14 First of all, the automatic transcription gives an impression of "scientificity"; yet, curiously, science tells us that the psychophysics of the ear creates sounds, such as combination tones and difference tones (frequencies created in the inner ear as the result of two or more pitches), that are not physically "present" outside of our heads. Thus the automatic transcription does not reflect what any human actually hears. Secondly, until sophisticated computer software became available recently, it was impossible to "check" the automatic transcription, to check the correspondence between its representations and the sounds heard in the recording. Thirdly, and most importantly, the human mind has the ability to adapt to new sounds, tuning systems, strange timbres, etc., and to make the unfamiliar familiar, to soften loud sounds, to amplify quiet sounds, to tune out "interference." Thus the "objective" measurements of the automatic transcription "give no real indication of what one experiences in any specific context."15 Even in using the automatic transcription, the analyst must choose the examples and interpret the information. The primary advantage of the automatic transcription is that it allows us to observe musical elements that we do not hear, sounds that we change or distort in the act of hearing. Spectrum photos do represent timbral differences that may have cultural significance when contextualized. The danger exists in assuming that features which are observable in the photo are significant simply because they can be observed; this risks falling back on a theory of musical immanence. From the standpoint of its importance to the listener, the temptation might be to posit some sort of cross-cultural linguistic "competence," which is revealed by the presence of features in an automatic transcription.

Song analysis

Many contrasting views within the field of musicology exist on the best way to interpret the combination of words and music known as "song," almost all of these created in response to the analytical challenge of art
song. One difficulty in transferring these approaches to the analysis of 
popular song is that they tend to rely on a strict dichotomy between the 
"poet" and the "composer." Thus we learn that the composer's "voice" 
manifests itself most directly in the accompaniment; or that a poem 
"retain[s] its own life . . . within the body of the music" – ideas that 
cannot apply in a context in which the music may well have preceded 
the text or have come into existence at roughly the same time. Kofi Agawu 
has recently proposed working from a "music-to-text rather than the 
more familiar text-to-music approach." This approach transfers more 
fruitfully than previous approaches to a study of popular song; by not 
privileging words, it emphasizes aspects of the music/text relationship 
that obtain in all song. Anybody listening to song perceives music and 
text simultaneously; therefore Agawu's warning to "avoid a taxonomy of 
inputs" may be equally useful for studying either popular songs or art 
songs. It is not as if we first hear the words, then the music, and then 
put the whole thing together.

Furthermore, these musical processes are communicated in a specific 
recording, thus eroding the sense of the "song" as an entity that can exist 
outside of that recording. When we analyze "I'll Be Seeing You," we are 
analyzing Billie Holiday's or Bing Crosby's recording of "I'll Be Seeing 
You," not a template of pitches and rhythms that exist uninfluenced by a 
performance.

As already intimated in the discussion of musical coding and 
competence, the connotations of song lyrics are affected by conventions 
and the genres and styles to which these conventions refer. Denotation 
is therefore always modified by "musical processes." Middleton presents 
a three-pole model of different words/music relationships as found in 
popular music. He describes these three poles as:

1. "affect": words as expression – tend to merge with melody; voice 
tends towards "song" (i.e. intoned feeling);
2. "story": words as narrative – tend to govern rhythmic/harmonic flow; 
voice tends towards speech; and
3. "gesture": words as sound – tend to be absorbed into music; voice 
tends towards becoming an instrument.

As discussed earlier, the context created by a wide variety of discourses as 
well as the relative autonomy of musical practices is crucial in 
establishing the conventions, style, and genres that obtain in any given 
popular music text. This is how we can understand the relationship 
between words and music heard in the recordings of "I'll Be Seeing You." 
as falling primarily under the category of "affect," "Superbad" as 
primarily "gesture," and "Hey Good Lookin" and "Pills and Soap" as 
combining aspects of "story" and "affect."

IV

Postlude

The chapters that follow all take up the issues of authorship, the 
relationship of text to context, musical codes, and audiences. One of the 
arguments throughout is that there is not necessarily one way of 
interpreting popular music, but that different types of popular music use 
different types of rhetoric, call for different sorts of interpretation, refer 
to different arguments about words and voices, about musical complexity 
and familiarity, and draw upon different senses of history and tradition. 
However, each of the case studies approaches these issues in a slightly 
different fashion. Chapter two builds up its context primarily through 
examining music industry publications, secondarily through biographical 
literature. The idea of the musical code is invoked explicitly, and 
connotations are extrapolated from the discourses surrounding Crosby 
and Holiday. Chapter three explores how the idea of "country music" 
emerged through a confluence of forces. Hank Williams' "Hey Good 
Lookin" is interpreted in light of certain "metanarratives" that have been 
tightly linked with country music since its emergence. Chapter four 
examines "African-American" music as a historical discourse based on 
anecdotal accounts and surviving musical practices, which are seen as 
implying a layer of transcultural musical features. This provides the 
context for an analysis of James Brown's "Superbad." Chapter five looks 
at Elvis Costello's "Pills and Soap" through contemporary critical 
discourses about his music, his own statements about his music, 
discourses on modernism and postmodernism, on the aesthetics of those 
with "legitimate" and "popular" taste, and the conflict between sixties 
"countercultural" and seventies "punk" aesthetics.

In his essay, "History: Science and Fiction," Michel de Certeau writes, 
"While place is dogmatic, the coming back of time restores an ethics." De 
Certeau is referring to the shift in historical writing during the 
seventeenth and eighteenth centuries from a period when it was affiliated 
with literature and the art of rhetoric to a period when it became 
affiliated with science. In this shift, an emphasis on the temporality of 
events in historical writing was replaced by a "taxonomic ordering of
place articulated by an ever-shifting combination of personal histories, budgetary pressures, and institutional affiliations.

It is common in the debates between musicologists and sociologists involved with popular music studies for sociologists to question what musicology can contribute to our understanding of popular music. It may be fruitful to turn this question around, to ask what our understanding of popular music can contribute to musicology. And it may be, in its relentless foregrounding of its temporality, of its ephemerality, of its sociality, and of the contingency of any given song’s importance (all of which undermine the emphasis on structure, on autonomy, on transcendence, on the fixity of place), that the study of popular music may accelerate the process, already under way, of bringing “time” back to musicology, thereby encouraging the restoration of an ethical dimension.
Example 1: *Pitch registers*

Register 1  Register 2  Register 3  Register 4  Register 5  Register 6  Register 7

Notes

1. Introduction


2. For Baudrillard’s exposition of his notion of the "simulacrum," see Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman (New York: Sémiotext[e], 1983). I refer here specifically to what Baudrillard terms a third-order simulacrum, that is, a copy of an object for which there exists no original.


6. A note on pop orchestration: timpani and other auxiliary percussion instruments (besides drum kit) feature in numerous other 1965 hits. For example, recordings using Phil Spector’s “wall-of-sound” such as the Righteous Brothers’ “You’ve Lost That Lovin’ Feeling” employ a range of dense orchestral effects; a song such as Little Anthony’s “Hurt So Bad” uses timpani and effects such as violins playing in artificial harmonics. The difference between these songs and “This Diamond Ring” lies in the way the latter song’s instrumentation signifies “novelty,” an effect which I suspect could be corroborated by studying the sound track of contemporaneous TV shows such as *I Dream of Jeannie* and *Bewitched*.

7. The usage here (and intentional blurring) of the opposition “standardized/individualized” refers to Theodor Adorno’s usage in his scathing attack on popular music, “On Popular Music” (with the assistance of
George Simpson), in *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*, vol. 9 (New York: Institute of Social Research, 1941), 17–48 (reprinted in Frith and Goodwin, ed., *On Record*). However, Adorno would never concede that a piece of popular music was “individualized,” and he therefore used the term “pseudo-individualized.”

8 This approach is derived from the “aesthetics of reception” developed by Hans Robert Jauss. For an introduction to this approach, see Jauss, “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,” in *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 3–46. Objections have been made that this approach relies on a static, essentialized notion of a decontextualized “audience” or “reader.” For overviews and criticisms of Jauss and the Konstanz school, see the following: Paul de Man, “Introduction” to Jauss’ *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception*, vii–xix; and Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 78–85.

9 Greg Shaw comments on the “machinery” for producing teen idols: “a good-looking teenager could be spotted on the street (as was Fabian, according to legend), cut a record, and, aided by a few gifted DJ’s, within a few weeks have a hit on the national charts – no uncertainties, no risks” (“The Teen Idols,” in *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock and Roll*, ed. Jim Miller [New York: Random House, 1980], 97).


13 This phrase is David Lang’s, quoted in Middleton, *Studying Popular Music*, 228.


17 These terms and their description come from Middleton, *Studying Popular Music*, 232. Other types of secondary signification listed by Middleton include “links with other semiotic systems” (‘visual, kinetic, verbal, even olfactory associations; ‘funky’ soul; ‘steamy’ swamp-rock”), and “rhetorical connotations” (‘associations arising from correspondences with rhetorical forms . . . and styles’). The most extensive exploration of connotation in a single piece of popular music is Philip Tagg’s *Kojak: 50 Seconds of Television Music: Toward the Analysis of Affect in Popular Music* (Göteborg: Studies from the Department of Musicology, 1979). Tagg tests the pertinence of his observations through elaborate methods of “intersubjective” and “interobjective” comparison.


24 This refers to the model of communication proposed by Roman Jakobson, in which an “addressee” sends a “message” to an “addressee,” to be operative the message requires a “context,” a “contact,” and a “code” (“Linguistics and Poetics,” in *Language in Literature*, ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987], 66).


26 Within the musico-litterary literature, Edward T. Cone has posited the notion of a composer’s “voice” within the text, but one, however, that largely relies on a unity relationship between the “composer” and the “voice” heard in the piece of music (*The Composer’s Voice* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974]). Carolyn Abbate has formulated a rather different conception of “voices” in classical music (a conception closer to one used in this book),
one in which voices "manifest themselves . . . as different kinds or modes of music that inhabit a single work" (Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991], 10).

27 This refers to the controversy surrounding the "clues" alluding to Paul McCartney's death allegedly contained in several Beatles' songs and other pieces of memorabilia (including album covers) during the period 1967–1969.


34 However, for examples of a few of the recent works that do theorize this question explicitly (in addition to works already cited in this chapter), see Lawrence Kramer, Music as Cultural Practice, 1800–1900 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Susan McClary, Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); Rose Rosengard Subotnik, Developing Variations: Style and Ideology in Western Music (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991). For a work that anticipates much of the current concern with contextual issues, see William W. Austin, "Swanna," "Jeanie," and "The Old Folks at Home": The Songs of Stephen C. Foster from His Time to Ours, second edition (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987 [1975]).


36 Tagg, KOJAK 28.


39 Alan Lomax, "Song Structure and Social Structure," Ethnology 1:4 (October 1962), 440. To be fair, Lomax's "cantometrics" method has since been


43 Michel Foucault, The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 134–36. The quest for objective status has haunted both the historical and theoretical branches of the discipline of musicology through the twin emphases on positivism and formalism. For a critical historical overview, see Kerman, Contemplating Music.

44 Foucault, The Order of Things, 229.

45 The following discussion is based in large part on the argument put forward by Mark Evan Bonds in Wordless Rhetoric: Musical Form and the Metaphor of the Oration (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).


47 Bonds, Wordless Rhetoric, 1–2. All subsequent citations in this chapter will be noted by page numbers in parentheses.

48 For an introduction to paradigmatic analysis, see Nicholas Ruwet, "Methods of Analysis in Musicology," Music Analysis 6 (1987), 11–36; and for a good summary of paradigmatic approaches, see Middleton, Studying Popular Music, 183–89.

49 For similar caveats regarding the use of transcription in the analysis of popular music, see Tagg, KOJAK, 31; and Peter Winkler, "Randy Newman’s Americana," Popular Music 7:1 (January 1988), 11.

50 Charles Seeger, "Prescriptive and Descriptive Music Writing," in Studies in Musicology 1935–1975. All subsequent citations in this chapter are noted by page numbers in parentheses.


52 See Nettl, The Study of Ethnomusicology, 74. See both Nettl (The Study of Ethnomusicology, 67) and Hood (The Ethnomusicologist, 50–55) for their descriptions of their "initiations" into ethnomusicology through a rite of transcription.

53 Hood, The Ethnomusicologist, 85–86.

54 Seeger was the most prominent proponent of the automatic transcription (see "Prescriptive and Descriptive Music Writing"); he was followed in this respect by Hood (The Ethnomusicologist, 94–101). The best critique of automatic transcription is Nazir Jairazbhoy, "The 'Objective' and Subjective View in Music Transcription," Ethnomusicology 21:2 (May 1977), 263–73.

55 Jairazbhoy, "The 'Objective' and Subjective View." 268.

56 Quotations are from Edward T. Cone, The Composer's Voice, 12; and Lawrence Kramer, Music and Poetry: The Nineteenth Century and After (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 127. In a later section of The Composer's Voice (40–45), Cone ruminates on different relationships between composers and song, briefly considering "the poet-composer" and relationship of words and music in popular song.


59 Michel de Certeau, "History: Science and Fiction," in Heterologies, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 220–21. All subsequent citations in this chapter are noted by page numbers in parentheses.

2. Family values in music? Billie Holiday's and Bing Crosby's

"I'll Be Seeing You"

1 This quote is from the liner notes from The Time-Life Bing Crosby (1985) by Charles K. Wolfe. Information about recording and broadcast dates was obtained from Timothy A. Morganeth, Bing Crosby: A Discography, Radio Program List, and Filmography (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland and Co., 1987).