CONTINENTAL THOUGHT & THEORY: A JOURNAL OF INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM
Thinking Music: Praxis and Aesthetics

Continental Thought & Theory
A journal of intellectual freedom
Volume 3 | 3: Thinking Music: Praxis and Aesthetics
231-254 | ISSN: 2463-333X

# Music about Music; or, Adorno Comes Alive!

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Before we can even get to Barry Manilow, we must deal with Theodor W. Adorno, who wrote a lot about music, comprising nearly half his output by one account.[1] He was himself a composer, having studied music at the University of Frankfurt, and worked with Alban Berg in Vienna. In the late 1930s, he was involved in the Princeton Radio Research Project, which invented the discipline of mass communication.[2] As for his opinions about specific genres of music, we mostly remember his racist aversion to popular or commercial jazz.[3] My reflections here don't concern jazz but rather a genre a lot of readers would, with Adornian moxie, announce to be unlistenable but when no one's looking might enjoy as a guilty pleasure. I mean popular radio music from the 1960s and 70s and on into the present day. I'm primarily interested in developing something Adorno got right about popular music, as a category, which admittedly is a conclusion that's hard to get wrong: namely, that in capitalism music has become commodified and that something he called "commodity listening" has become a norm, even loads of fun. The problem here is that Adorno died in 1969 and didn't live long enough to see just how commodified popular music would become, and so our own reckoning with the continued commodification of music in "the culture industry" after Adorno enables us to direct his criticisms to the right place and hone his thinking.

Yet Adorno heard enough to rethink some crucial formulations by Marx, expanding the very meaning of a commodity when it comes to music. Of interest

 http://dx.doi.org/10.26021/12235

here is Adorno's translation of Marx's idea of "commodity fetishism" into "musical fetishism," as Adorno calls it, to describe how people relate to each other through commodified music. We'll run with this idea of musical fetishism in order to think about the qualities of such music produced after Adorno, the way in which popular music *thematizes* postmodern style owing to its self-referential quality, by which songs are about songs, music about music, song-making about song-making, listening about listening, and so forth. To be sure, if we want to criticize postmodernism as a style, we should start with popular suburban radio music in the late 1960s and 70s when there were innumerable examples of such self-referential songs that exhort people to come together for some greater good that, in the end, amounts to buying a bunch of stuff. To some readers, of course, any critical thesis about popular music as a self-referring commodity comes as no surprise, and needs no Adorno to decipher, but quite why or how this music is fetishistic and indeed ideological is worth exploring, if for no other reason than the fact that it is ubiquitous and inescapable even if you claim to be above it.

## Musical Fetishism

Let's begin with Adorno's essay "On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," in which our author seeks to conceptualize "musical fetishism" as a "later expression" of the "commodity character" Marx describes in the first chapter of *Capital*.[4] In speaking of the "character" of the musical commodity in this way, Adorno intends to update Marx's thesis that:

> A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour.[5]

What's different about Adorno's handling of Marx? To begin with, the musical commodity can no longer be thought of as a use-value that has been subsequently "transubstantiated" into an exchange value, because the processes of commodification have been rationalized further since the time of Marx's writing.[6] The problem is different now because, as Adorno argues, "exchange value deceptively takes over the function of use value," inducing a feeling of usefulness about the musical commodity. Plainly put, it's an exchange value that seems like a use value in that it is "useful" as an object of enjoyment, which lures one into supposing an emotional "connection" to the commodity—that it's just you and the music in an

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intimate, and "immediate" relationship, even though there are in fact many levels of mediation too numerous to count but which can be captured by the single word, "media." In other words, Adorno considers this manner of privately consuming music to be a social phenomenon. When he says that the "change in the function of music involves the basic conditions of the relation between art and society,"[7] he's suggesting that the musical commodity isn't a source of alienation from yourself or from others, per Marx, so much as a cause of enjoyment whereby you sense you are authentically (again, "usefully") part of something greater than yourself, "the doing of what everybody does"—the *en masse* habit of enjoying music by personalizing it.[8] Musical fetishism, according to Adorno, informs how, through popular music, we *thematize* to ourselves our relations to other people. Maybe this is obvious today, but it wasn't so apparent in 1938 when Adorno wrote this essay. He's prescient here.

Perhaps you cavil at these ideas. Fair enough. But if you actually believe that enjoying music is a timeless affair—as if things never change and human predilections aren't ever a product of the times nor touched by history in the least—then look at it this way. Have you ever exclaimed, "this is my song!" or "this is my theme song!"? Don't you know the slogan, "music is the soundtrack to life"? Haven't you ever said, "This song reminds me of Dave!" (or some acquaintance of your choosing)? These questions, these sentences, you could only utter in late capitalism, a grammar that's only logical, a syntax only intelligible, in the postmodern manner of being-in-music. Being-in-music? This is not about a musician experiencing a certain kenosis in performance nor quite you showing off your vinyl collection to your smoking buddies. Rather, these expressions reflect something unique about the musical commodity, namely, that if music is everywhere you turn, then it can be about anything: Dave, a walk in the park, a football team, breakfast cereal, bad romance, your boring life, whatever. The old compositional interest in "themes" in classical music becomes outright thematization in popular music on a larger psycho-social scale.[9] Music is the theme to your life not because you're young and awesome but because music is everywhere and everything already. How can it *not* be *there for you* at exactly the right time helping you capture the moment?

To wit, Adorno speaks about the ubiquity of commodity music in terms of "background" music.[10] But is he not really describing our world now much more accurately than his world in 1938, even if the shock of the new of this kind of music piping into an elevator, say, made him react all the more energetically about such ambient music? Today, wherever you go, there's music playing in a way we are conditioned — or at least challenged — to ignore: eateries, cafés, grocery stores, malls (what's left of them), and so forth. Why must there be music, nay, muzak in Kmart, Kroger, or Countdown (apart from its "quiet hour" one measly day a week)?

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Why is shopping at Express, Forever 21, or H&M like strolling through a thumping dance club (where even I — not exactly the target demographic for these stores — feel weirdly sexy there)? Why must there be blaring music in Chili's? Why does the gas/petrol pump emit music as noxious as the escaping fumes? Even virtual environments are poisoned in this way: why does the answering service at your doctor's office play the worst upbeat music possible when you're on hold and anxious as hell about your biopsy results?

Fueling up, shopping, waiting on the phone, eating at a restaurant, using a public toilet: doing all of these activities *to music* should strike us as odd as dancing to architecture. But here we are. Perfectly normal, a fairly new normal, however, over the last few decades. Such are the soundtracks to life; we get them whether we want them or not. And from that situation issues the mindset or, okay, subjectivity required to process background music: you can hear music but not necessarily listen, you can hum it but not think about it, you can eat to it, crap to it so that no one hears you, ignore it, whatever — as long as music is there, as long as it "spreads over the whole of musical life," capitalism is doing its musical work.[11] That is what Adorno takes to be "commodity listening"[12] involving the "regression of listening," which for him basically means that listening isn't so musicological anymore, and that capitalism supplies its own rituals for consuming the so-called sound of music.

Back to the point about history and the way things change: I'd honestly wager that people never said things like "music is the soundtrack to life" or "this song reminds me of Dave" in the nineteenth century or any time before, and that's not because there was no cinema back then or only Davids around. For millennia, music was composed *for* a deity, a star, a planetary satellite, a river, a king, a lover, an enemy, a festival or holiday, such that when you perform or hear any such chants, songs, or rhythms, you could rightly say they "remind" you of this or that subject. But that's not what we're after here. Rather, I'm addressing a phenomenon that is totally different, a moment when music was written to sell in the twentieth century; music composed under a specific regime of media technology; music that hails a generalized "you" or "we"; music projecting a universalized "I," "He," or "She" with which the individual listener is free to identify and then transmogrify into an idiosyncratic image of relationships to others. Our question is what sort of sociality and mode of production enables this transmogrification?

My sense is that Adorno's insights into musical fetishism, as form of being-in-music specific to capitalism, pushes us in the direction of an answer, as well as to new perspectives on the projections of musical sociality he himself didn't live to see in its manifestation in nascent postmodernism.[13] Adorno can therefore come alive to help us — my title here playing off, of course, of Peter Frampton's double live album

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from 1976, "Frampton Comes Alive!" He can be revived to assist us in the inquiry into songs whose purpose is to have us imagine being-in-music with others, getting caught up in the musical projection of people listening together as an audience — a formation he elsewhere calls "a fiction of 'community' in music": "the intention of diverting attention from social conditions," attempting "to make the individual believe that he is not lonely, but rather close to all others in a relationship portrayed for him by music without defining its own social function."[14]

## Songs about Songs

Adorno was grumpily vatic in 1938 when speaking about what we would later recognize as a distinctly postmodern phenomenon of stylistic self-reference where everything has to be so self-consciously "meta." He could sense, in other words, that music would example certain stylistic developments of self-reference in commodity culture better than other media as when "[c]ountless hit song texts praise the hit songs themselves, repeating their titles in capital letters."[15] For our purposes here, we can try to tally the countless examples of songs about songs in popular culture that emerged over the course of the twentieth century, especially after Adorno's time, from the late 1960s on, which is also the path from modernism to postmodernism. In so doing, my point will concern the way in which technological developments in music, and the rise of the music industry as a "culture industry," informs popular music played for the masses on the radio — masses who want to hear songs about listening to songs on the radio, and a music talent industry that was happy to oblige. In other words, if we think the history of music as a history of technological development (as Adorno was glad to do, when you recall his musings on the phonograph[16]), we begin to see little light between a song's content and its form, where the point of the song is nothing but reference to its own production and performance. In this case, we're talking about something potentially intriguing and, at the time, new — pushing farther Adorno's claim (again, elsewhere) "that music itself, under the superior power of the music industry developed by monopoly capitalism, became conscious of its own reification and of its alienation from [people]."[17]

So, we should take it from the top and attempt a mini-history of songs about songs. A key instance comes in the 1935 number, "The Music Goes 'Round and Around," by Reilly-Farley and their Onyx Club Boys. This tune is all about playing music on this "gadget" that's the trombone: "I blow through here,/ and the music goes 'round and around,/ Whoa-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho,/ And it comes out here." The song goes on and on in this fashion. It is a curious thing to behold, how self-referential and wordy these lyrics are, over literalizing the act of musical performance to where the performance is about the performance, the song about the song. The first time is the

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charm, but the second, the third, the fifteenth? As the decades roll on it will soon seem that this motif of musical self-references — apart from the fact that this oldie has seen dozens of renditions across the decades, itself displaying the compulsion to repeat the practice of making music about music — is what so much music is basically about, music about (making) music.

Overt references to instrumentation as seen in "The Music Goes 'Round and Around" —what you're doing on the fiddle or guitar while you're playing either — were over time joined by descriptions of the new technologies that transmitted the music and mediated it to us, like the juke box and of course the radio. The early examples of this sort, apart from Doctor Ross's "Juke Box Boogie" from 1954, which has no vox/lyrics, are, first, Chuck Berry's "Roll Over Beethoven" (1956), with references to the radio (writing letters to "my local DJ") and to the juke box — my soul singing the blues and telling Tchaikovsky to take a hike. There is also Skeeter Davis's "The Little Music Box" from 1962, also oriented around the juke box. This is basically a ditty about listening to music playing "our song," with the whole idea that there is an "us" to music. This may be the first time the notion that a "song" could be "ours" was proffered in popular music, the way we drive in a car with friends, windows down, and yell "turn it up, this is our song!" Whatever the case may be, Davis's lyrical idea would be repeated by The Buckinghams's "Hey Baby (They're Playing Our Song)" (1967), also perhaps an early example of song titles with pointless parentheticals. You can see how these precise dates, in the 1960s, signal a moment when music stands in for a relationship, a song that is "our song" or for that matter "my song."

By 1967, we are well within an era of the growth in the music industry, in musical technologies, and of course moving from modernism to postmodernism. And it's a moment where we must take Adorno with us after his death in 1969 because he didn't live to see the age that would complete his ideas, the time when suddenly and quite significantly it seemed that almost every song was about, well, songs — beginning with Sonny and Cher's "The Beat Goes On" (1967), which veritably compiles every theme of music about music mentioned thus far — with lyrics describing instruments making sounds ("Drums keep pounding a rhythm to the brain"), lyrics themselves making music through consonance ("La de da de de, la de da de da"), lyrics referencing the history of music and signaling new trends ("Charleston was once the rage, uh huh/ History has turned the page, uh huh"). But above all, this tune expresses the motif of everyday life being "the beat," which can only be said because such music is ubiquitous thanks to its distribution in the culture industry.

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But what we're after here is the way music about music was less a documentary about its evolution — though we will still track this idea — and more a mode of thematizing ourselves and our relationships, romantic or otherwise, with others. In 1973, for instance, Jim Croce (posthumously) released his hit, "I'll Have To Say I Love You In A Song":

> Yeah, I know it's kind of strange
> But every time I'm near you
> I just run out of things to say
> I know you'd understand
> 'Cause every time I tried to tell you
> The words just came out wrong
> So I'll have to say I love you in a song

We recognize the old romance conventions — lovers who cannot put into words their love for you — but now you can sing about a failure to speak, but also sing about singing, which is an art perfected by Barry Manilow, to whom now — at long last — we turn. For he "writes the songs," according to the teachings of his 1976 hit, "I write the Songs":

> I've been alive forever, and I wrote the very first song
> I put the words and the melodies together
> I am music and I write the songs
>
> I write the songs that make the whole world sing
> I write the songs of love and special things
> I write the songs that make the young girls cry
> I write the songs, I write the songs . . . [18]

Who is this person? What of this "I"? Whoever it is, this "I, I, I, I" is the transcendent "I" who's eternal, having been "alive forever." This "I" wants to express a total experience with song that emanates outwardly and "includes" everyone.

And what's this thing about wanting to "make the whole world sing" anyway, and what will *that* accomplish? To this question, you might remember the 1971 commercial for TV, "I'd like to teach the world to sing, in perfect harmony/ I'd like to buy the world a Coke, and keep it company." This anthem inaugurated Coke's new self-realization as a commodity. The old slogan of the 60s, "Things Go Better with Coke," made the relatability, as it were, of the commodity clear — as in, "hey, if you're

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doing things, do them with a Coke, it'll be so much better!" But this was rather unmusical in view of what was happening in popular music all around. And so, the slogan, "The Real Thing," debuted with this hill-top candle light sing-along about *teaching the world to sing in perfect harmony*, not only musical harmony but social and political harmony (if you've seen the commercial), a multi-cultural fantasy of social unity — the forbearer of the multinational, multiculturalist Benneton ads and Nike commercials of the 1980s.

What will supposedly end racism and sexism, as well as environmental devastation, in other words, is teaching the world to sing, to relate openly to each other by relating as consumers to the Real Thing that is the commodity Coke. This jingle was originally a different song by The New Seekers entitled "I'd Like to Teach the World to Sing (In Perfect Harmony)" (1971), with lyrics like "'I'd like to teach the world to sing,/ In perfect harmony./ I'd like to hold it in my arms,/ And keep it company." The advertising department at the Coca-Cola Company, however, changed this wording so that we're now teaching "the world to sing — to sing with me — in perfect harmony, I'd like to buy the world a Coke and keep it company. That's the real thing. Coke is what the world wants today." What a translation! It's the strangest thing to imagine, even on its face the stupidest kind of utopian expression not even close to a chicken in every pot.

Because both of these songs filled the airwaves, we have to recall that they were heard together continuously, and interrelationally. Our perspective must therefore be dialectical whereby we hear both songs, and read both sets of lyrics, in an overlay, in an interpretive move quite like Walter Benjamin's theory of translation[19], where (as a translator reading a translation) you're experiencing source and target text *together* and finding interest in the differences you notice within the two that-are-one, similar to the way we experience a cover song, hearing the original track when listening to the new rendition, how the guitar solo in the original is rendered into a keyboard part in the cover, and so forth. In this case here, it's not the world buying a Coke, it's the world treated to a Coke by some atomized "I" on a hilltop. And in the change from "I'd like to hold it [the world] in my arms and keep it company" to "I'd like to buy the world a Coke and keep it company," we witness how a human embrace, the loving even if imagined caressing of another person, is substituted for a commodity, really, the hugging of the commodity or the commodification of the huggee, who can, like the bottle or can itself, be similarly discarded once finished (Love the one you're with!). The ideology that is this musical fetishism is that you buy the Coke *and in so doing* no social justice is achieved and no utopian ideal is realized. You can't have your Coke and utopia too.

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This musical moment with Coke is truly made for Slavoj Žižek, who already has a great reading of a Coke product "as the ultimate capitalist merchandise," "a commodity whose very material properties are already those of a commodity" rather than (as Adorno observed) your usual old commodity that's a use value transformed into an exchange value. Thinking in particular of caffeine-free diet Coke, Žižek explains that this beverage has no substance (no sugar, no caffeine, no flavor) and never satisfies your thirst, but somehow piques your desire for more dissatisfaction, again, and again, and again — which is, too, truly a moment for The Rolling Stones in 1965, close enough to this moment, with the incantation: "I can't get no satisfaction, I can't get no satisfaction, Cause I try and I try and I try and I try, I can't get no, I can't get no." Well, turns out, you *can* get "no" because "no" or "nothing" *is* what you get in satisfaction. And this is Žižek's point when he asks the following of the soft drink: "Is it not true that in this sense, in the case of caffeine-free diet Coke, we almost literarily 'drink nothing in the guise of something'?"[20] This is "surplus enjoyment personified" in the way our pleasure comes strictly in consuming the twelve ounces of nothing that is this commodity—so the pleasure is an empty pleasure, pleasure about nothing. One thinks of Judge Smails in the film "Caddyshack" (1980) who famously says to his bratty son: "you'll get nothing and like it!" And as far as this hilltop song about Coke is concerned, the message could be rewritten as: "I'd like to buy the world…absolutely nothing! Nothing is what the world wants today," and it likes it! It's an empty utopianism, or better, capitalist utopia, which is to say, well, capitalist logic, *prima facie*. Adorno, I think, anticipated Žižek not only in his reinterpretation of Marx's theory of commodity fetishism but perhaps also in his own idiosyncratic psychoanalytic perspective: it's not for nothing, or it's precisely on account of nothing, that Adorno animates or personifies the subject-listener of commercial music in a telling fashion: "I am nothing, I am filth, no matter what they do to me, it serves me right."[21] This is the commodity listener par excellence.

But we should get back to Manilow long enough to see that he met his match in Billy Joel. In Joel's song, "Piano Man," the universal "I" finds its proper audience, a "we," the "we" of what we all want: "Sing us a song, you're the piano man, sing us a song tonight / Well, we're all in the mood for a melody and you've got us / feeling alright." Joel is here vocalizing a scene in a smoky club where the swaying inebriated crowd, "we," cries out for a song. But this "we" truly evolved in the genre of what our own royal we may call "we songs," in which imperatives and declarations are uttered in the name of a transcendent "we" that's always predicated as "champions" or "family" or whatever. Of course, I am referring to "We are the Champions" by Queen (1977) or "We are Family" by Sister Sledge (1979) but you could equally name "This Is How We Do It" by Montell Jordan (1995) or "Paper Planes" by M.I.A (2007), which

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once more in radio play transcends the cultural specificity (in all instances) and political activism (especially in the last) offered in the lyrics in the way white girls and boys can groove to it with nary a thought of anything but the moment of escape that's more suburban ecstasy than any release of muscular tension (Frantz Fanon's term[22]) in the communities whence some of this music comes. But that's always the consequence of universality, isn't it? It's everyone musically "we-ing" together in radio space or cyberspace where "we" could be anything and escape it all, and do nothing but enjoy.

Let's not forget, though, that Billy Joel and Barry Manilow were bested by Elton John, who could never stop writing songs about songs, it seems, as in the cases of "Your Song" (1971), "Crocodile Rock" (1972), "Bennie and the Jets" (1973/74), and "Sad Songs (Say So Much)" (1984), which if they say so much then why tell us this within the bounds of parentheses? Doesn't matter, just heed the injunction to get thee to a radio (of course you're already at one) and "turn 'em on, yeah, turn 'em on! Turn on those sad songs! Why don't you tune in and turn them on?"[23] There's a point here, that goes right to thematizing experience, the way we have all been habituated to shut ourselves into our room and put on Leonard Cohen or The Smiths, say, if we're feeling ugly and unfuckable, or for that matter any song in the minor key. We seek these songs to give shape to our emotions and in the process intensify the sadness all day long. But we also play sad songs when we're not sad, and in the listening, we soon become morose, inevitably finding something to lament, such that the music about music helps us thematize ourselves, enables us to produce a particular kind of self-consciousness whose self-relation is the commodity logic of "musical fetishism."[24]

**Intermediation: Film/TV/Radio**

We turn to this question of "saying so much" with music, for this is one of Adorno's major motifs, the ways in which people fall silent to music and let the music do the talking. That is, Adorno points to the "reduction of people to silence, the dying out of speech as expression, the inability to communicate at all," and asserts that the musical commodity "inhabits the pockets of silence that develop between people moulded by anxiety, work and undemanding docility."[25]

I submit the film "Say Anything" (1989), directed by Cameron Crowe, in which the key moment of "saying anything" is *saying nothing* with music. Recall John Cusack as Lloyd Dobler, in trench coat and white high tops, all glum and mute, holding up a boom box playing Peter Gabriel's, "In Your Eyes," for Diane Court (Ione Skye's character). She's inside her home resting on the bed in the daytime by the open window. This is a romantic moment, even if stalkery—how many moments like

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this involve a window! — but I squirm even thinking about its literalism in the way Dobler enacts the lyrics down to the word: "When I want to run away I drive off in my car,/ But whichever way I go,/ I come back to the place you are." Yep, and there he is, at the place she is, having driven his car there, now standing at the front bumper, as the music, in post-production sound editing, morphs from (pseudo-)captured sound to a full backing track with the levels slid way up to fill the theater and our ears with sound, subsuming us into the moment of saying it with music while standing silent. This moment is often called a "serenade," but that's wrong, since that tradition holds you actually have to sing or play a dang instrument to perform one.

If we're looking for some more recent examples — even if granting that in the late 1960s and early 70s there was a bolus of instances (more on this below) — we could expect this musical fetishism to continue on in film. An example that stands out, for me, is "Her" (2013), directed by Spike Jonze. This film follows the story of Theodore Twombly, played by Joaquin Phoenix, who is processing the regret of a recent separation from his spouse. As he leaves work — where he writes personal letters for customers equally alienated from their interpersonal relations, themselves in other words unable to speak — he slinks into the elevator, partially collapses against the back rail, and asks his earpiece, "play melancholy song." A sad song plays. Then he instantly says "play different melancholy song." A sad song plays. No need to request any song by name, and there's no indication that Theodore knows these songs when he hears them — perhaps except through his request for a "different" song but this makes sense, because the first tune said something about "dying ("when you know you're gonna die…"), at which point he furrows his brow in disapproval of the reality principle. He's embodying Elton John's blanket dictum (above) to "turn on those sad songs," whatever they may be. You'll know it when you hear it.

Next, we catch Theodore on a lugubrious stroll in the subway station the following day. He sees an advertisement for "the first artificially intelligent operating system," called OS[1], "an intuitive entity that listens to you, understands you, and knows you; it's not just an operating system, it's a consciousness." Fascinated, he acquires the product, which names itself Samantha, who is voiced by Scarlett Johansson and who is embodied in Theodore's earpiece.[26] One fine day they fall in love. About halfway through the film, Theodore is on the beach, lying in the sand, shoes off, no beach towel (honestly). And in his earpiece, he suddenly hears piano music playing. "Mmm, that's pretty. What is that?", he asks. Samantha replies cursorily: "trying to write a piece of music about what it feels like to be on the beach with you right now." The camera slowly tracks left to right across the scene, gauzy green waves rolling under the dappled pastel sunlight, a couple of lovers come into

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view, next a family, all enjoying themselves as dolphins breach the foam. Theodore exhales, “I think you captured it.” Samantha responds affirmatively by sounding out an exhale, too. (There are two other moments in “Her,” quite like this one—one involves the production of a photograph through music[27], the other, Samantha singing extemporaneously to Theodore plucking a ukulele like a twee darling.[28])

This scene on the beach in “Her,” however, is a sweet, touching moment that makes so much sense, as a pure presentation naïvely consumed. But I’m after the reason *why* it makes any sense at all. What exactly is “captured” by Samantha's extemporized piano song and how? What does the beach have to do with piano music if a piano isn’t literally on the beach? These are the dumb questions we must pose to denaturalize what’s now so second nature to us about music in relation to other media, and indeed in relation to experiences like being on the beach where the piano “appears” not in your eyeballs but in your earbuds or mind. We can even estrange the very architectures we call music venues, beginning with the invention of the opera house as a distinctly modern example.[29] The point is that, in a deeper way, none of this so-called cultural production makes sense; it’s just that we’ve been acclimated to consume disparate media forms in one gulp and feel satiated by the combination, a resulting unnamable quality even more metaphysical than the oaky accents you claim to taste in your wine. This experience, that logic of association by which dissimilars are conjoined, is exactly the place where musical fetishism — and ideology — operate as what’s unnamed but felt.

Music has come a long way since Adorno descried its use as background music for silent films.[30] Obviously, music was never secondary to film. Think the “talkie,” “The Jazz Singer” (1927), not surprisingly a musical topic but still mostly a silent film with background music and title cards, making all the more surprising and new the moment when Al Jolson exaggeratingly mouths the words — what we now call lip synching and sound editing — to “Dirty Hands! Dirty Face!”, which is supposed to be a cute song about his rough and tumble son (“my boy”) whom he loves no matter how much of a “little devil” he is, but it alludes to Jolson’s infamous performance in blackface in the last third of the film, not so cute and all the more disturbing for the expert ease with which he applies the makeup, lickety-split. Film and music go hand in hand, though not quite so seamlessly in these early productions. As a point of historical curiosity, “The Jazz Singer” was released basically at the same time the first commercial jingle was paired with a commodity: on December 24, 1926 a quartet in Minneapolis sang live a jingle on the radio for the breakfast cereal Wheaties, and did so for years thereafter (with the twist that the manufacturer had purchased the radio station, WCCO, for this exact purpose).[31] The basic point, which hardly needs expressing, concerns the linking of sound with visual

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media —which even after nearly a century of this intermediation we should never consume naturally and always take to be constructions, pieces put together, with the joins showing. (Of course, some musicians perceive the misfit of media when their songs are played at the political rally of a fascist American politician.)

My interest here is in how this linking of media is enfolded back into the media products themselves and is itself thematized as media relating to media, with music as their social glue. Musical commodities would so awaken to their mediation with cinema, and vice versa, that both media fundamentally becomes (or is becoming of) the other. This is why, in the long run, the phenomenon of music thematizing experience is synonymous with the media counterpart of music, which is film — whence derives that common sense that "music is the soundtrack to life." Again, it's so strange, on its face: music is not the soundtrack to the movie you paid a ticket to see, or now stream, but rather it leaped species and is now the soundtrack to the movie that is somehow your life.

We can hear this intermediation when we listen to, say, Dire Straits. This band already gave us yet another example of music about music in their hit "Sultans of Swing" (1978). They also wrote a song about music that is also a movie, and a movie that is a life with a soundtrack that thematizes experience. Lofty, yes, for Dire Straits, but that's the point of their tune "Skateaway" (1980):

> But now that she can skate around town
> She's the only, only one
> No fears alone at night she's sailing through the crowd
> In her ears the phones are tight and the music's playing loud
> She gets rock n roll and rock n roll station
> And a rock n roll dream
> She's making movies, on location
> She don't know what it means
> But the music make her wanna be the story
> And the story was whatever was the song, what it was
> Rollergirl, don't worry
> DJ play the movies, all night long

We got all the elements from all the decades of music about music: the DJ and the radio, the headphones, and the post-disco "rollergirl" making movies in her head by listening to music and viewing the passing streetscape as if it were a film, drawing her surroundings into the theme of "whatever was the song." Yes, again, the song could be anything — it doesn't matter what, just as it doesn't matter to mopey

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Theodore Twombley what specific melancholy song he hears as long as it is sufficiently sad and isn't too on-the-nose about death. As long as it's generically music, the thematization will continue, and the enjoyment of the musical commodity will be endless as the listener makes herself the center of the story.

We are now squarely within another one of Adorno's criticisms, again incomplete because he didn't live to see the day, about what's "illusory" about music in the way it "appears" in visual media.[32] The once primetime law office drama of "Ally McBeal" (which ran from 1997-2002) is useful here in depicting the way music not only thematizes experience but organizes people into groups. To begin with, we recall those occasions when Ally (played by Calista Flockhart) absconds herself into the copy room, her office, or the bathroom to escape for a moment the civilized mold of official culture and remotivate herself to the theme song playing in her head, which we of course hear, too, and which always terminates with the sound of a needle scratching off the record, which is a clever way to cut the music but which also indexes a piece of technology that was waning at that time (before the LP renaissance). The needle scratches off of the record, the fantasy rips apart, the moment a colleague enters the room and discovers Ally in reverie, jumping, turning, and dancing as terribly as her contemporary Elaine on Seinfeld. What of this? Adorno writes: that "The counterpart to the fetishism of music is a regression of listening. This does not mean a relapse of the individual listener into an earlier phase of his [or her] own development . . . . Rather, it is contemporary listening which has regressed, arrested at the infantile stage."[33] I won't apologize for making much of manifest content, as Freud would call it, but Ally's bathroom retreats often invoke the very image of regression in the form of the dancing baby, cutting the rug to the ooga-chaka song (AKA Blue Swede's "Hooked on a Feeling" [1974]) as if the baby were an adult and the adult were, well, a baby.

As for the way music "organizes" groups, I'd be tempted to refer you once more to "Caddyshack," the scene where every kid and geezer in the pool suddenly falls into synchronized water ballet to (*pace* Chuck Berry) the backing track of Tchaikovsky's "Waltz of the Flowers." But sticking with "Ally McBeal," we cut to a Boston crosswalk to find Ally, "The Fish," or "Biscuit" with a theme song going in their heads at various moments, and voilà, everyone else waiting to cross seems to hear the song too, just as we viewers do. The groove is contagious. Everyone walks to the slow thrumming tempo of Barry White's "Staying Power," until the record scratches once more and they part, going their own way.[34] I wouldn't call this syncopation exactly in the way Adorno meant in his essay, "Perennial Fashion — Jazz," which he felt to be planned improvisations in commercial jazz performance — arbitrary and artificial freedoms and expressions of individuality that fall back in line to the tempo,

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which he views in the context of a great organizing force "to achieve musical dictatorship over the masses."[35] Still when thinking about these cross-walk scenes in "Ally McBeal" — however inevitably evocative of the free and confident stroll depicted on the cover of The Beatles' "Abbey Road" (1969) — my mind courses back through Pink Floyd's goose-stepping hammers in "The Wall" (1982/1979) to the Nazi street- and stadium marches of Nuremberg, the latter of which were obviously on Adorno's mind. In "Ally McBeal," all disassociated persons get organized to move in synch to whatever's playing in the head of Ally or the Biscuit. To channel Adorno here, the sad fact is that the pretext for some collective motion in music is simply one person's idiosyncratic fantasy of momentary freedom in music. Is that a utopian moment? Not exactly. The personal "theme songs" in "Ally McBeal" never rise to the thought of genuine collectivity, because almost axiomatically, the music mustn't ever go on. That because when the music that organizes the masses originates in a single ego, then fascism is your dance and strut.

In so many of the cinematic examples, it used to be that we'd be privy to a character's secret thoughts by voice overs and asides (a trope translated from plays and novels), but now televisually and cinematically we are privy to the music in each and every one of their heads. As with the scene with Lloyd Dobler, we are all listening in but not quite listening together — only phantasmatically in the way within commodity fetishism the relation between persons is (really) a relation between things, here music made "thingly" as a commodity that brings us together.

And so goes the sound of silence: Thanks to even newer technical capabilities, two people can pair earbuds to the same device and listen to music together in silence. Social media aps like Earbuds help people listen together by remaining apart, and the relatively new "silent discos" gather partiers together to dance in (relative) quiet to music heard only through earphones, often to different dance tracks. You can only guess what Adorno would make of these trends when he's done with the "get off my lawn" part, but these latest phenomena seem, finally, to normalize and nullify that memorable saying by Madame de Staël: "sometimes even in the usual course of life, the reality of this world disappears suddenly, and one feels, in the midst of his interests, as in a ball in which one would not hear the music, the movement would seem insane."[36] Well, it's not insane anymore, because insane is the new normal, from that point of view, as when you see someone arguing with the sky (with their interlocuter on the invisible earbuds) whereas before, if you had a heart, you might have worried about their mental well-being.

Finally, TikTok surely has a place in this narrative, not because on February 15, 2020 at 2:48pm I saw a commercial on basic cable advertising "soundtracks for life, it starts on TikTok." Nor do I mention it because TikTok originally was the app

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musical.ly. Curious here, rather, is the way TikTok reduces songs to around fifteen-second snippets to which mostly teens dance and lip sync. There's a case for understanding that this demographic only ever discovers music through the platform (so my friends with teens tell me). We are far from album-oriented experiences, well away from hanging out at record stores thumbing through the racks while the newest releases are played on the sound system, and distant from a mode of listening to music with a duration greater than fifteen seconds. Instead, we're well into a form of musical relationality that the pandemic has only exacerbated—the condition of being separate but artificially together more intensely than ever. It could quite possibly be that music, under the pressures of social media, will become the fabled vanishing mediator, drawing people into relations as the music itself reduces down to so many bars, so few beats, so few seconds. Music about music is basically about nothing anyway, so why need music at all? When the music does stop, when there's nothing left to hear, we find the spot where enjoyment fills the gap as we swipe up from one Tok to the next, again, again, and again.

**The Postmodern Commodity**

If we're going to periodize, then let's do so, because all that I have said in the foregoing describes postmodernism and the consequent new shape of the musical commodity within late capitalism. All of these songs about songs are one grand theme sounding out in the media of late capitalism, and they expose something of the closed circuit of the culture industry in postmodernism, in which giving you the same thing in a slightly different way counts for variety.

Let's first be an archivist about all of this and register the many other examples of what I'm arguing. Three Dog Night's "An Old Fashioned Love Song" from 1971 seemed the keynote for the decade to come just in its opening lines, from the reference to itself and its media — "Just an old fashioned love song/ Playing on the radio" — to the strange abstraction about "music" and "sound" that tells us something or other about a human relationship with the image of a devoted, or perhaps clingy, lover: "And wrapped around the music is the sound/ Of someone promising they'll never go." We can't sit here all day and read every lyric from every song, so we won't. But note that the following year, 1972, was a banner year for music like this: Elton John's "Crocodile Rock" (1972), Bread's "The Guitar Man" (1972), Chicago's "Saturday in the Park" (1972), The Doobie Brothers's "Listen to the Music" (1972), The Who's "Long Live Rock" (1972), The Moody Blues's "I'm Just A Singer (in a Rock and Roll band)" (1972/73), all followed by Grand Funk Railroad's "We're an American Band' (1973), The Rolling Stones's "It's only Rock n Roll" (1974), and The Grateful Dead's "Uncle John's Band" (1974). Elvis was of course not quite fitting into his

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sequin jumpsuits anymore, but he obviously put his finger to the wind to learn to offer up "Raised on Rock" from 1973, which to my ears sound desultory and formulaic — to boot with a really subsumptive definition of "rock" (per) — a view seconded by Billy Joel's 1980 incantations: "Next phase, new wave, dance craze, anyways,/ It's still rock and roll to me."

Moving along: there's the 1975 tune "I Love Rock 'n Roll" by the Arrows, which Joan Jett and the Blackhearts covered in 1981 to greater acclaim, changing absolutely nothing in the original composition but the pronouns of the object of desire, from a "she" to "he" (and frankly that worked for the adolescent Andrew hearing Jett's gravelly voice desiring a dude). From thence to Wings's "Silly Love Songs" (1976), Donny and Marie Osmond's "I'm a little bit country, and I'm a little bit rock 'n roll" (1976), Boston's "Rock N Roll Band" (1976), Wild Cherry's "Play That Funky Music" (1976) — which is more like "steal that funky Black music, white boy," because its main riff rips off Stevie Wonder's signature groove on the keys in "Superstition," and Wild Cherry's rendering of this part to the guitar fools few discerning listeners. There is A Taste of Honey's "Boogie Oogie Oogie" (1978), which I realize has an emcee- and dance-club DJ point of view expressed in its lyrics, but it's still music about music with the requisite immanent description ("Listen to the music and let your body move"); and finally, M's "Pop Muzik" (1979), with its "Dance in the supermarket/ Dig it in the fast lane/ Listen to the countdown/ They're playing our song again."

In the new decade, the year 1980, there was The Village People's "Can't Stop the Music" (and of course a musical by that name[37]) coterminous with Cheap Trick's "Can't Stop" ("Well I can't stop the music I could stop it before") and The Kings's "This Beat Goes On" (1980), and onward to Foreigner's "Juke Box Hero" (1981), The Ravyns's "Raised on the Radio" (1982), Public Image Ltd's "This is Not a Love Song" (1983), Jefferson Starship's "We Built This City (on Rock and Roll)" (1985), Journey's "Raised on Radio" (1986) — and skipping many examples all the way up to Madonna's "Music" (2000), whose lyrics tell us that — and I'm paraphrasing — music makes the world do this and that and the other thing. It's about here that I stopped making notes on this topic, but I don't think there's any doubt of the trend line here, bulging up from the x axis from the late 60s to the early 70s. These are just some of the examples, enough to say that this is a mass phenomenon for a corresponding mass phenomenon that is musical fetishism.

Is this upswell and uptick in song about songs, music about music in the late 1960s and early 70s, the result of musicians literally running out of things to say — per Adorno's comments about the silence that befalls everyone in capitalism, a silence audible because we are speaking and not "saying anything," listening but not

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hearing? All this systemic self-referentiality would suggest the answer, yes. Or it would point to, more charitably, the limits that are drawn when art meets politics, and often when art bumps up against the glass ceiling of politics, doesn't break through, and instead falls back onto itself to be well contented with just itself, for its own sake. It's like that moment in Hegel where the "in itself" attempts to become "for itself" the instant it encounters exteriority, its other, only to flop back into a state of unhappy consciousness or general skepticism or stoicism — in other words, a withdrawal from the world for whatever (in Hegel's case, two) reasons.[38]

However, we think about these issues in terms of aesthetics or politics, there's always the problem of history, which is why our conclusions about popular radio music are quite like Adorno's well-known idea about "lyric poetry" whose lack of reference to contemporary history, its refusal of topicality, its withdrawal in other words, is the very index of its historicity. What Adorno identifies in particular is "individualism" as the escape hatch from "the reification of the world" into "a life free from the coercion of reigning practices, of utility, of the relentless pressures of self-preservation" — "a protest against a social situation that every individual experiences as hostile, alien, cold, oppressive, and this situation is imprinted in reverse on the poetic work."[39] He doesn't mean U.S. individualism—and of course, not all my examples are "American" in that way, and as Fumi Okiji shows Adorno's notion of the "individual" couldn't apply to Black Americans at all[40] — but the ideology of individualism as a species of "peace, love, and freedom" from this era is certainly at work in much of these musics. (And let's recall that this popular white hippy slogan meant something very different to people of color the world over, as Malcolm X tells it in 1965.[41]) In popular radio rock music during this early moment of postmodernism, the historicity of music about music lies in its lack of historical thinking or political engagement, which is a conclusion intended to sound like some of Jameson's insights about postmodernism, who is a close reader of Adorno anyway.[42]

Whatever radical potential there was in the late 60s and early 70s, when it came to counterculture, those transformative energies were absorbed and thematized by the processes of capital and commodification, which included the feedback loop of music about itself, music doing nothing and going nowhere while being everywhere and available for every purpose or "use." Such music helps one think collectively but not *collectivity* — a society and mode of production so transformed as to sustain the gains for which activists struggled and died but which is a transformation some popular music attempted to metaphorize as simply putting "flowers in your hair."[43] This music affirmed, in the end, one's own ego and pleasures, where the social conscience is channeled into the different public mindedness of exhibitionism and enjoyment in the presence of others, if only for a weekend. There is

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no true "we" in this particular genre, only the non-additive "doing of what everybody does." How is such music not the supreme ideological form?

## Notes

I originally wrote this paper for Adorno's centennial birthday symposium held at the University of Georgia on September 12, 2003, organized by Beatrice Hanssen, with Jed Rasula as part of our trio. Most of the text of this essay is the same, apart from my adding some more recent academic studies, pop songs, and films. I thank Marty Rogers and Nick Bielli for talking with me about this essay over the years in Athens, GA, and my gratitude to Cindy Zeiher for her comments that improved this composition. This essay is for Beatrice.

**Notes**

[1] See Robert W. Witkin, *Adorno on Music* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 2.

[2] Paul Larzarsfeld directed the project. See Thomas Levin and Michael von der Linn, "Elements of a Radio Theory: Adorno and the Princeton Radio Research Project," *The Musical Quarterly* 78.2 (1994): 316-24. And, of course, Adorno, "A Social Critique of Radio Music," *Kenyon Review* 8 (1945): 208-17; and "The Radio Symphony: An Experiment in Theory," in *Radio Research, 1941*, ed. Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Frank N. Stanton (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1942), 110-39.

[3] Adorno expresses a "myopic ethnocentrism toward non-European music in general, and perhaps a disguised racism when applied to jazz"; his "critique of jazz reveals his nationalist and elitist strains and the tendency to level all forms of popular culture" (William P. Nye, "Theodor Adorno on Jazz: A Critique of Critical Theory," *Popular Music and Society* 12.4 [1988]: 69-73; here, 72; and Joseph D. Lewandowski, "Adorno on Jazz and Society," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 22.5 [1996]: 103-121; here, 104). Fumi Okiji, in her *Jazz as Critique: Adorno and Black Expression Revisited* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), finds a way forward on the question of Adorno and jazz that begins with the fact that the "black experience does not figure into Adorno's jazz critique" (24) at all and that if we are going to follow Adorno to say that "jazz insufficiently models individual freedom" (18), then we must acknowledge from the start that such freedom—indeed such bourgeois individuality—was not formulated with African Americans in mind, a point that compels us to listen again at the inherent criticality Black jazz performance.

[4] Adorno, "On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (New York: Routledge, 1991), 37; see 40. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage, 1977), 953; see 127-28, 138, 160, and of course 164 on the commodity's "mystical character."

[5] "On the Fetish Character in Music," 37.

[6] On rationalization, see Adorno, "On the Social Situation of Music" *Telos* 35 (1978): 128-64, esp. 129; and "On the Fetish Character in Music," 40.

[7] "On the Fetish Character in Music," 39.

[8] "On the Fetish Character in Music," 40. Adorno therefore adjusts this crucial formulation by Marx: "the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things" (*Capital*, 165)—with the addendum that, now, those "things" appear nonetheless as use values (i.e., exchange values in disguise as objects of [useful] enjoyment).

[9] Thematization harks back to the musicological issue of "themes" or leitmotiven, which is a bit

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different from "quotation" (citing other songs within songs, as you indeed hear playfully in jazz sometimes). In symphonic music, themes are parts that are played or "cited" throughout the performance, with slight variations on the theme throughout to mark the development of the score—and they are always pleasurable to notice and think about, but above all—with every bit of philosophical meaning intended here—we are meant *recognize* them, identify, and *identify with* them right at the moment the music refers to itself, cites itself. Themes draw you in, and ask you to participate in the production of the music by listening to it, and *following* it. Richard Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries," which emerges in act three of the second opera of the "Ring" cycle, is perhaps one of the more widely known themes, thanks to the film "Apocalypse Now" (1979), but in Wagner you can hear intimations of this theme in the transition from act 1 to 2, to its brief allusion in act 2, to its full-blown manifestation in 3. (It's probably no accident that Wagner, given his talent for themes, would serve the purposes of propaganda—as it turned out, nationalism and fascism; and his antisemitic writings didn't help).

Themes, more generally, distinguish parts of songs according to texture and mood, through the variation of instrumentation (a flute for whimsical movements, think butterflies in the sunshine, or flutes (plural) for tense and nerve-wracking moments; oboes for milling about a moldering gothic mansion in a '50s B movie, tuba for the prowling shark, and cimbasso to say swim faster or get eaten, and so forth). But, after so much film and television (with all of its sit-com and drama "theme songs"), musical themes now call for so much more *participation* in listening that they assume an ontological purpose, and have taken on the task of helping us thematize our own experience, and our relations with each other, in the way you can say a song reminds you of someone (which is not so different from how themes are even named like "Rocky's theme" or any other characterological thematic assignations in film.). Music no longer needs the visual complements of film or TV to promote thematization. Above all, however, the point of this long digression is that themes are bound up with recognition and identification, and perhaps after the Lacano-Žižekian idiom, we could name this surplus recognition or surplus identification far in excess of any object as to be itself the object, objet petit a.

[10] "On the Fetish Character in Music," 30, 43, 58.

[11] "On the Fetish Character in Music," 43.

[12] "On the Fetish Character in Music," 35.

[13] Of course, this impulse to thematize experience was formerly only for books, a motif that by my lights began in various medieval epics and then romances up through Cervantes's mock-romance cum quasi-novel and became amplified across time up to the early nineteenth century, when the public fretted aloud about young women and men reading too many novels. These impressionable readers, so the thinking went, would live out novels, emulate them, become them, be perverted by them. On this history, see François Proulx's *Victims of the Book: Reading and Masculinity in Fin-de-Siècle France* covers this territory very well (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019). Central here, in my view, is not merely the question of "influence," which flattens the ideological problem (and that's not a criticism of Proulx). Rather, it is exactly that function of ideology to help you thematize experience, to identify with a character in the novel, to picture yourself in the gaze of that character and reflect back in your actions in the world an ideal version of yourself to be reciprocally admired by a strictly fantastic fictional Other in the pages of a book. That is perhaps a way to describe the issue of influence.

[14] Adorno, "Social Situation of Music," 144-45; 143; in the first quote, he is talking about "communal music" in capitalism; in the latter, "objectivist music" in particular (Schoenberg, Hindemith). But I find

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that both quotes work well together in a reading of popular music made after Adorno. His remarks, however, on the "hit songs" of so-called "light music" seem applicable, too, especially on the "psychological mechanism of hit song production," which "is narcissistic" such that the listener feels "embraced by the collective or that he himself is a leading personality," the latter of which you could translate as the rockstar or DJ (163).

[15] "On the Fetish Character in Music," 38. Another helpful formulation in thinking about songs about songs is Adorno's claim that "Mass culture is a system of signals that signals itself" ("The Schema of Mass Culture," *The Culture Industry*, 82).

[16] Adorno, "The Form of the Phonograph Record," *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert and trans. Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 279:

> The key to the proper understanding of the phonograph records ought to be provided by the comprehension of those technological developments that at one point transformed the drums of the mechanical music boxes and organs into the mechanism of the phonograph. If at some later point, instead of doing "history of ideas" [Geistesgeschichte], one were to read the state of the cultural spirit [Geist] off of the sundial of human technology, then the prehistory of the gramophone could take on an importance that might eclipse that of many a famous composer.

It's not always that you see a Hegelian aesthetician elbow aside a great musician for a turntable. But technology happens. And it matters, and sometimes does push us this way and that into modes of living and being we didn't experience yesterday. We will revisit the question of technology—radio, the juke box, digital music- and streaming devices, cinema, television, and so forth—and the way all of these media expose us to music, anytime, anyplace, but it's precisely this question of technology that demands we heed Adorno's crucial revision of Marx, especially Marx's notion of commodity fetishism.

[17] Adorno, "Social Situation of Music," 129.

[18] I cannot resist remarking that Manilow did *not* write the songs about writing the songs; the lyrics and music were done by Bruce Johnston. Manilow did offer us "The Old Songs" (1981), however.

[19] Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn and ed. Hannah Arendt (NY: Schocken Books, 1968), 69-82.

[20] Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (New York: Verso, 2000), 21-39; these quotes are from pages 22, 23.

[21] Adorno, "Perennial Fashion—Jazz," 132; see 122, 129. Cf. Okiji's reading of this quote in *Jazz as Critique*, 25. We can also bear in mind that Adorno has himself a version of the Lacanian concept of jouissance when he writes that "The new phase of the musical consciousness of the masses is defined by displeasure in pleasure" ("On the Fetish Character in Music," 33).

[22] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox, introductions by Jean-Paul Sartre and Homi K. Bhabha (New York: Grove Press, 2003), 17, 174.

[23] I suspect that Elton John, in writing this tune "Sad Songs," may have been hearing Otis Redding's "Fa-Fa-Fa-Fa-Fa (Sad Song)" (1966): "keep singing them sad, sad songs, y'all, SAD SONGS is all I know"—with the noted shared upward emphasis on "SAD SONGS."

[24] My forgoing mini-history of popular, mostly "rock," music presupposes that music is and was always self-referential. Songs since the Middle Ages (if not earlier) are titled as "songs" or "ballads." And if you look at, say, the Delta Blues tradition, there are countless titles containing the word "blues," in songs that give voice to the hardships, loves, losses, labors, and struggles of African Americans in the early twentieth century. Indeed, centuries before in the U.S., the relation between people cannot be so generalized, per Marx's commodity formula, in view of the realities of chattel slavery and racial

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capitalism when Black slaves, prisoners, or day laborers uplifted themselves in song, in uncommodified music of their own making, because they themselves were the commodities. Furthermore, any generalization about popular music in postmodernity has to remember the artists who are affirmatively postmodern in their compositional approach, those zany non-sequiturs in Frank Zappa, or the musical referentiality in Captain Beefheart & His Magic Band—like their "Beatle Bones 'n' Smokin' Stones," among other self-consciously askew and twangy tracks. And there are those artists who maintained a high-modern avant-garde angularity in the likes of Laurie Anderson, John Cage, or Pauline Oliveros, among others. That said, these latter musicians who experimented with instrumentation and musical media weren't given much radio play, apart from (in the U.S. at least) college stations and various free form radio outlets.

[25] "On the Fetish Character in Music," 30.

[26] Not to discount the moment when the couple tries to have sex with a surrogate representing Samantha.

[27] About three-quarters of the way through the film, Theodore asks, "What are you doing?" Samantha replies: "I'm just looking at the world. I'm writing a new piano piece." "Oh yeah, can I hear it?" he responds. To which she answers "Uh hmm." The music plays—it's a piece by William Butler of Arcade Fire and Owen Pallett called "Photograph," but it's supposed to be her original composition. Theodore smiles, "What's this one about?" To which Samantha says: "Well, I was thinking we don't really have any photographs of us, and uh I thought this song could be, like, a photograph; captures us in this moment of our lives together." Again, more "capturing." Theodore says, "Uh huh. I like your photograph. I can see you in it." And she says: "I am"—and here we get the notion of Samantha being-in-music made possible by her being-virtual.

[28] While Theodore arpeggiates the ukulele, he says to Samantha: "I want you to make up the words for this one," whereby she sings a track by the artist Karen O, "The Moon Song," which was composed for the film. (It sounds like Johansson raspily sings the first bar before Karen O's voice comes in.)

[29] One of my favorite moments in Fredric Jameson's *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971) involves the architectures of music—precisely this kind of estrangement endorsed by Adorno:

> So it turns out that to assess the full originality of Adorno's historical vision, we must try to bring a new unfamiliarity to some of the social phenomena we are accustomed to take for granted: to stare, for instance, with the eyes of a foreigner at the row upon row of people in formal clothing, seated without stirring within their armchairs, each seemingly without contact with his neighbors, yet at the same time strangely divorced from any immediate visual spectacle, the eyes occasionally closed as in powerful concentration, occasionally scanning with idle distraction the distant cornices of the hall itself. For such a spectator it is not at once clear that there is any meaningful relationship between this peculiar behavior and the bewildering tissue of instrumental noises that seems to provide a kind of background for it. (12)

[30] "Everywhere it takes over, unnoticed, the deadly sad role that fell to it in the time and the specific situation of the silent films. It is perceived purely as background. If nobody can any longer speak, then certainly nobody can any longer listen" ("On the Fetish Character in Music," 30).

[31] Timothy D. Taylor, *The Sounds of Capitalism: Advertising, Music, and the Conquest of Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 83-85. There are many musical films or rather films that are musicals, but not all relevant to my inquiry like "Singin' in the Rain" (1952), or "Grease" (1978), though "The Sound of Music" (1965) and "Saturday Night Fever" (1977) contains moments of


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thematization, as I'm using the term here. See note 37.

[32] "On the Fetish Character in Music," 57. See also "Social Situation of Music," 129, 163.

[33] "On the Fetish Character in Music," 46.

[34] Perhaps related here is the notion of the "interpretive personality" ("Social Situation of Music," 147, 150-51).

[35] Adorno, "Perennial Fashion—Jazz," 125. See also his remark in the same essay that "[w]hile the leaders in the European dictatorships of both shades raged against the decadence of jazz, the youth of the other countries has long since allowed itself to be electrified, as with marches, by the syncopated dance-steps, with bands which do not by accident stem from military music. The division into shock-troops and inarticulate following has something of the distinction between party élite and rest of the 'people'" (129).

[36] "[Q]uelquefois même dans le cours habituel de la vie, la réalité de ce monde disparaît tout a coup, et l'on se sent, au milieu de ses intérêts, comme dans un bal dont on n'entendrait pas la musique, le mouvement qu'on y verrait paraîtrait insensé" (Madame de Staël, *De l'Allemagne* [Paris: Charpentier, 1844], 570).

[37] Regarding musicals more generally, we might not even need to imagine ourselves in the ways the older musicals of the 1930s, '40s, and '50s do. But there's something to musicals, of course, because musicals (per their titles) are always about themselves, musicals, about music in a self-conscious fashion, or about musicians, or about people breaking from day-to-day drudgery to stage a mini-musical within the musical, or baseball players moonlighting "as a song-and-dance team in the off-season" ("Take me Out to the Ballgame" [1949]). Perhaps it's no surprise that in the period of our concern, we get the "The Sound of Music" (1965), the title track sung by Julie Andrews, vocalizing the lyrics: "The hills are alive with the sound of music/ With songs, they have sung for a thousand years/ The hills fill my heart with the sound of music/ My heart wants to sing every song it hears." What's strange here is that "music" must be specified as "sound" (there are other examples of this in my main text). It's not music. It's the *sound* of music. Which is what? What does music sound like? Is this not like looking up the definition of a color in the dictionary, where red is said to be…red?

[38] While of course the goal is to be both "in itself" and "for itself," as Hegel describes the process: "It is essence, or that which has being in itself; it is that which relates itself to itself and is determinate, it is other-being and being-for-itself, and in this determinateness, or in its self, or in its self-externality, abides within itself; in other words, it is in and for itself" (Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977], 14/§25).

[39] See Adorno, "On Lyric Poetry and Society," *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 37-54; here, 39-40. In a formulation like that involving lyric poetry, Adorno says that music "fulfills its social function more precisely when it presents social problems through its own material and according to its own formal laws-problems which music contains within itself in the innermost cells of its technique" ("Social Situation of Music," 130).

[40] Okiji, *Jazz as Critique*, 18.

[41] "Tonight, during the few moments that we have, we're going to have a little chat, like brothers and sisters and friends, and probably enemies too, about the prospects for peace—or the prospects for freedom in 1965. As you notice, I almost slipped and said peace. Actually, you can't separate peace from freedom because no one can be at peace unless he has his freedom. You can't separate the two—and this is the thing that makes 1965 so explosive and so dangerous" ("Prospects for Freedom in

 http://dx.doi.org/10.26021/12235

1965," *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, ed. George Breitman [NY: Grove Press, 1965], 147-48).

[42] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991.

[43] Of course, I'm referring to Scott McKenzie's "San Francisco (Be Sure to Wear Flowers in Your Hair)" (1967).

 http://dx.doi.org/10.26021/12235