Richard Hermann

not sufficient for a critical assessment of Berio's Sequenza IV. That combination
omits the work's diachronic and narrative references and its transformations of them.

This essay might, therefore, give pause to those in the fields of philosophy,
linguistics and artificial intelligence who solely equate mind with thought, thought
with natural language, and the anatomical structures of the brain that instantiate
natural language with potentially adequate working models of the mind.37 In a
letter to Marc-André Souchay of October 15, 1842, Mendelssohn wrote "People
often complain that music is ambiguous, that their ideas on the subject always seem
so vague, whereas everyone understands words. With me it is exactly the reverse—
not merely with regard to entire sentences, but also as to individual words. These,
too, seem to me so ambiguous, so vague, so unintelligible when compared with
genuine music, which fills the soul with a thousand things better than words."38
That thought might also apply to the hope of finding fully adequate interpretations
of any sort for sophisticated music; nonetheless, the continuing process of
interpreting sharpens our perception and understanding.

Richard Hermann

Stylistic Competencies, Musical Humor,
and "This is Spinal Tap"

John Covach

As its title suggests, this study focuses upon matters of humor and musical style,
specifically the ways in which musical numbers in the 1984 Rob Reiner film This
is Spinal Tap elicit an amused response.1 On first pass, one might wonder how such
seemingly diverse concerns as nineteenth-century German philosophy, recent
theories of musical style, and late 1960's rock and roll could possibly intersect:
one could hardly imagine a more incongruous trio of figures than Arthur
Schopenhauer, Leonard Meyer, and the fictional Nigel Tufnel, lead guitarist of the
equally fictitious rock group “Spinal Tap.” I hope to demonstrate not only that
there are music-analytical concerns that make for these rather strange bedfellows,
but also that the notion of incongruity itself plays a pivotal role in this eclectic
combination.

The present study will explore the various ways in which three Spinal Tap
numbers elicit an amused response from listeners. I am primarily concerned with
the ways in which humor is created through specifically musical means. In the
context of the film, there are many factors at work in the Spinal Tap songs that
contribute to their humorous impact; each song, for instance, is accompanied by
visual images (shots of the performers, audience, off-stage shots, etc.). Each song is
also situated in the context of the unfolding of the story itself, and can elicit an
amused response according to these relationships. In addition, each song has lyrics
that elicit an amused response. There are, for example, a number of factors creating
humor in the Spinal Tap song “Big Bottom,” and perhaps the most obvious of

37 See Pamela McCorduck, Aaron's Code: Meta-Art, Artificial Intelligence, and the Work of
Harold Cohen (New York: Freeman, 1991) for a flawed but interesting account of these same
issues—among others—with regard to visual art. In The Open Work, trans. Anna Cancogni,
Italy as Opera Aperta: Forma e indeterminazione nelle poetiche contemporanee (Milan:
Bompiani, 1962), Umberto Eco realizes that critical theory and aesthetics must engage
non-linguistically based art works too. In fact he starts out that work with discussion of
contemporary musical compositions including Berio's Sequenza per flauto solo of 1958. A
rewritten version of that opening appears later in his The Role of the Reader: Explorations in

38 See Letters of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy from 1833 to 1847, trans. Lady Wallace, 1864
cited in Ruth Halle Rowen, Music Through Source & Documents, (Englewood Cliffs, New

1 "This is Spinal Tap," Rob Reiner, dir., written by Christopher Guest, Michael McKeand, Harry
All musical examples are drawn from the original soundtrack album, Spinal Tap (Polygram

For those unfamiliar with the film, Spinal Tap is a fictitious British heavy-metal rock band.
The film poses as a documentary ("rock-umentary") of what appears to be Spinal Tap's last
American tour. The tour falls apart as the group makes its way from the East Coast to the West
Coast, by the time they reach Los Angeles the band has almost broken up completely. The film
features concert footage, glimpses backstage, interviews, and flashbacks.
these components is the lyrics; but another component creating humor in the tune is that all three guitarists play bass guitars—the drummer plays only low tom-toms and the keyboard player only low notes on the synthesizer—and two of the guitarists "spank" the third with the necks of their guitars at the end of the tune. The rhyme scheme that produces the many references to the derrière (which will not be quoted here) is a literary-verbal technique; the low-end instrumentation—one sees three bass guitars in the film—and the spanning of guitarist Tufnel are visual cues. Ultimately one must consider each of these aspects, and their interaction, in accounting for the humorous effect of a song such as "Big Bottom"; humor arises in the Spinal Tap songs in multiple contexts and these contexts tend to reinforce one another. This study will, nonetheless, focus attention on those factors that create humor in the songs by purely musical means; I am concerned with examining how the musical materials themselves, thought of in their own contexts, elicit an amused response.

My discussion of the Spinal Tap songs below will rely on theories of humor that have been developed in the field of the philosophy. In order to lay the groundwork for the musical analysis and discussion that will follow, then, a brief overview of philosophical writings on laughter and humor will be helpful. In his book, Taking Laughter Seriously, John Morreall discusses the three basic theories of laughter. The first is the "superiority theory," which originates with Plato but is articulated most forcefully by Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes asserts that laughter results from a feeling of superiority over others—a laughing at others. A second theory is set down by Herbert Spencer and later taken up by Freud; this is the "relief theory." Spencer asserts that our laugh is a release of nervous energy. Freud refines this theory by further classifying the types of energy that laughing releases. The third theory, found in the writing of Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer, is referred to as the "incongruity theory." Our laughter is the result of some perceived incongruity between concept and object. Morreall points out that laugh and humor are not synonymous and that laughter exists without humor and humor without laughter. For Morreall, each of these three theories says something about our laugh-response, but each is incomplete. For the purposes of the present investigation, the third theory of

laughter is most useful, primarily because it sheds considerable light on the specifically musical means at work in eliciting an amused response. I will therefore concentrate throughout the following discussion on the incongruity theory.

In volume two of his The World as Will and Representation, Arthur Schopenhauer defines his "theory of the ludicrous" as follows:

According to my explanation, put forward in volume one, the origin of the ludicrous is always the paradoxical, and thus unexpected, subsumption of an object under a concept that is in other respects heterogenous to it. Accordingly, the phenomenon of laughter always signifies the sudden apprehension of an incongruity between such a concept and the real object thought through it, and hence between what is abstract and what is perceptive.

By way of example, Schopenhauer puts forth the following:

Of this kind is also the anecdote of the actor Unzelmann. After he had been strictly forbidden to improvise in the Berlin theater, he had to appear on the stage on horseback. Just as he came on the stage, the horse dunged, and at this the audience were moved to laughter, but they laughed much more when Unzelmann said to the horse: "What are you doing? don't you know that we are forbidden to improvise?"

In this anecdote, the representation of the horse defiling the stage is viewed through the concept of theatrical improvisation; the fact that the horse's action falls outside what is "in the script" allows for this otherwise unlikely pairing of concept and representation. We laugh when we realize the incongruity of percept and concept.

Let us say, then, that we accept the notion that perceived incongruity can give rise to an amused response. The next step is to determine how this would

4 Ibid., pp. 20–37.
5 Ibid., pp. 15–19.
6 Morreall divides his book into two parts: the first deals with laughter, the second with humor. Clearly laughter can occur without humor and humor without laughter, and Morreall argues that this distinction is a crucial one. He provides a table divided into nonhumorous and
there are three components components of the theory of humor that have been developed in the field of philosophy. In order to lay the groundwork for the musical analysis and discussion that will follow, a brief overview of philosophical writings on laughter and humor will be helpful. In his book, Taking Laughter Seriously, John Morreall discusses the three basic theories of laughter. 2 The first is the “superiority theory,” which originates with Plato but is articulated most forcefully by Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes asserts that laughter results from a feeling of superiority over others—a laughing at others. 3 A second theory is set down by Herbert Spencer and later taken up by Freud; this is the “relief theory.” Spencer asserts that our laugh is a release of nervous energy. Freud refines this theory by further classifying the types of energy that laughing releases. 4 The third theory, found in the writing of Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer, is referred to as the “incongruity theory.” Our laughter is the result of some perceived incongruity between concept and object. 5 Morreall points out that laughter and humor are not synonymous and that laughter exists without humor and humor without laughter. For Morreall, each of these three theories says something about our laugh-response, but each is incomplete. 6 For the purposes of the present investigation, the third theory of

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6 Morreall divides his book into two parts: the first deals with laughter, the second with humor. Clearly laughter can occur without humor and humor without laughter, and Morreall argues that this distinction is a crucial one. He provides a table divided into nonhumorous and humorous laughter situations. Thus situations like solving a puzzle or problem or winning an athletic contest are instances of nonhumorous laughter, while hearing a joke, a clever insult, or a pun are humorous instances (see “Taking Laughter Seriously,” pp. 1-3). After a thorough discussion of laughter, Morreall proposes the following definition: “Laughter results from a pleasant psychological shift” (p. 39). His theory of humor, on the other hand, is based on the incongruity theory (pp. 60-84). The present study takes up the incongruity theory as a theory of humor.
7 The superiority and relief theories might be used to unpack the humorous effects of these songs that occur in the other dimensions that this study does not directly address. To a certain extent the superiority theory is taken up in Scruton’s notion of irony discussed below.
9 Ibid., p. 93.
10 Bearing in mind the distinction made earlier between laughter and humor, this statement does not preclude the possibility that perceived incongruity may also give rise to another response.
apply to humor in music. To say that something is incongruous is to appeal to some set of norms. In the world of everyday life, we share certain ideas of what is normal, or at least, of what is common. The comic artist is especially sensitive to these commonly held notions about the world and uses them to create the incongruity that so amuses us. In the world of music, then, one must determine what norms could give rise to incongruity and account for how these could be manipulated to humorous ends. One area of research that identifies musical norms is the study of musical style. Much of the work done by Leonard Meyer, Leonard Ratner, and Robert Gjerdingen has demonstrated that composers and practice Western art music (especially the music of Viennese classicism) operates according to certain normative procedures. Meyer, for example, defines style as follows:

"Style is a replication of patterning, whether in human behavior or in the artifacts produced by human behavior, that results from a series of choices made within some set of constraints." Further, Meyer's notion of style change involves a consideration of compositional choices that fall outside the constraints of the style—that is, musical-stylistic incongruities. The replication of these new choices can produce style change. Obviously, these stylistic incongruities can also produce humor and the music of Peter Schickle's fictitious P. D. Q. Bach bears this out."

or that an amused response may be elicited in some other way. The claim is only that an amused response may be triggered by a perceived incongruity.


13 In his "Innovation, Choice, and the History of Music," Meyer sets out his position as follows (p. 518): "Put simply: save as a curious anomaly, a single, unique innovation, however interesting in itself, is of little import for the history of music. What is central for the history of an art is, I suggest, neither the invention of novelty or its mere use—whether in a single composition or in the oeuvre of a single composer—but its replication, however varied, within some composition community. Though this study limits itself to considerations of stylistic norms, it is certainly possible to view the congruity/incongruity dialectic in other analytical contexts.

14 A good example of stylistic incongruity can be found in P. D. Q. Bach's "My Bonnie Lass She Smelled"; in this parody of Elizabethan madrigal singing, one vocalist sings a cadenza that quickly becomes an improvisatory jazz skat-singing solo. The humor depends on the perceived incongruity between these two musical styles. See The Warls of P. D. Q. Bach, Peter Schickle

If there exist certain stylistic norms in art music, they are certainly also present in popular music; in fact, Theodor Adorno's main complaint with popular music, or at least the pop of the late 1930s and early 1940s, is that it is formulaic in an empty and mechanized way. If op-style norms exist, then so does the possibility of stylistic incongruity, and therefore, humor in popular music. While the notion that pop songs can be humorous may seem obvious to those who know popular music, bear in mind that our concern is with specifically musical humor; there have, of course, always been songs with funny words.

II

Let us examine the stylistic incongruity that occurs in Spinal Tap's "Heavy Duty" (supposedly from their 1976 LP "Bent for the Rent"). Example 1 provides a musical analogue to Schopenhauer's horse story and confirms that incongruity can produce specifically musical humor. Here the incongruity resides between two very different, even antithetical, musical styles.

(Vanguard VSD 71920, 1971). Robert Gauldin has collected a number of humorous examples from the Western art-music repertoire and organized them in a way similar to the examples that follow. I wish to thank Dr. Gauldin for sharing his collection of taped excerpts and outline with me.


16 All the Spinal Tap songs under consideration are composed by Christopher Guest, Michael McKean, Harry Shearer, and Rob Reiner. Of these four, perhaps Guest is the only one with well-known previous work in musical satire. He was a cast member of National Lampoon Lemmings, a Woodstock satire, in which he parodies James Taylor, in addition to cowriting three songs. See National Lampoon Lemmings (Blue Thumb Records, BTS-6006, 1973). He also composed songs for and performed on National Lampoon Radio Dinner (Blue Thumb Records, BTS-38, 1972).

None of the three Spinal Tap numbers under consideration in the present study occurs in its entirety in the film. References are always to the complete versions that appear on the soundtrack LP. All examples are transcribed and arranged by the author.
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II

Let us examine the stylistic incongruity that occurs in Spinal Tap’s “Heavy Duty” (supposedly from their 1976 LP “Bent for the Rent”). Example 1 provides sixteen measures from the song’s chorus: the style is that of mid-1970’s heavy-metal rock. The final occurrence of this chorus is followed immediately by the music shown in Example 2. Clearly we perceive the insertion of a classical-style minuet—in this instance the well-known minuet from Boccherini’s *String Quintet in E major*—into a heavy-metal song as incongruous, not to mention the additional incongruity of the “power-chords” that accompany the melody, which is itself played by the lead guitar. These incongruities are the key to the humor here: in a tune that aspires to “heavy-duty-osity,” an instrumental interlude in the classical style is desperately out of place. This example might be viewed as a musical analogue to Schopenhauer’s horse story and confirms that incongruity can produce specifically musical humor. Here the incongruity resides between two very different, even antithetical, musical styles. If there exist certain stylistic norms in art music, they are certainly also present in popular music; in fact, Theodor Adorno’s main complaint with popular music, or at least the pop of the late 1930s and early 1940s, is that it is formulaic in an empty and mechanized way. If pop-style norms exist, then so does the possibility of stylistic incongruity, and therefore, humor in popular music. While the notion that pop songs can be humorous may seem obvious to those who know popular music, bear in mind that our concern is with specifically musical humor; there have, of course, always been songs with funny words.
Stylistic Competencies, Musical Humor, and "This is Spinal Tap"

Example 2: "Heavy Duty," insertion of the minuet from Boccherini's
String Quintet in E Major
(Example includes lead, rhythm, and bass guitar parts.)

there are no passages in "Cups and Cakes" that produce incongruity by radical stylistic juxtaposition. In fact, most of the song's musical characteristics are congruent with the norms of the British-invasion style. In order to understand the role played by stylistic incongruity in "Cups and Cakes," we need to first explore in some detail the ways in which the tune matches the style.

Let us turn to the music. The song begins with a five-measure introduction employing piano, string quartet, and trumpet, with electric bass entering at the end of the fifth measure to lead into the first verse. One notices immediately the use of trumpet and string quartet, instruments more often associated with "high-brow" music, and their pseudo-Baroque scoring. The first and second verses are shown in Example 3. The text of the first verse is sung solo to the accompaniment of pseudo-Baroque piano, along with electric bass, and tambourine. A cello line in the eighth measure of that verse leads into the second verse, which is sung by a second solo voice to the same accompaniment, augmented now by harpsichord.

At the bridge (see Example 4), the voice, piano, and electric bass are joined by the string quartet, and the tambourine is replaced by snare drum and tom-toms.
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At the bridge (see Example 4), the voice, piano, and electric bass are joined by the string quartet, and the tambourine is replaced by snare drum and tom-toms.
The instrumentation is identical to the first verse with the addition of string quartet.

As Susan McClary and Rob Walser have pointed out, the music of one's own culture often seems completely transparent and requires very little meditation to achieve its effect.\(^{18}\) While the listener who knows the British-invasion style will surely recognize it in “Cups and Cakes,” describing how one can identify such a style often poses a number of difficulties.\(^{19}\) The ability of listeners to identify a particular style results from what will be termed a specific “stylistic competency.” At a low level of competency one can merely identify the style; at a higher level of competency, one can acutely identify the significant incongruities from the style within a single work.\(^{20}\) Stylistic competencies are frequently tacit: a listener is able to perceive a stylistic incongruity—in fact, the incongruity may seem obvious—but is often unable to articulate the perception in a systematic or technical way.

While the stylistic incongruity that occurs in “Heavy Duty” requires that the listener possess a low-level competency in two styles—one needs to know only that the juxtaposed styles are 1970s heavy metal and classical-period art music, not that there are any deviations within those styles—the fullest appreciation of the humor in “Cups and Cakes” depends on a rather advanced British-invasion stylistic competency. This claim is supported by the fact that so many features of “Cups and Cakes” are congruent within the style.

One way of identifying the ways in which “Cups and Cakes” is congruent with the British-invasion style is to compare it with genuine tunes from the style. Figure 1 enumerates some of the correspondences between “Cups and Cakes” and a number of other songs in the British-invasion style.\(^{21}\) The introduction to “Cups and Cakes” uses string quartet and trumpet. “Classical-sounding” instruments are typical of mid-1960s British-invasion music, and one need look no further than the Beatles’ “Yesterday” or “Eleanor Rigby” for strings and their “Penny Lane” for...

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Vocal progressions

Vocal major to i.

Example 3: “Cups and Cakes,” Verses One and Two
(Example includes melody and reductive representation of bass movement and harmonic progression.)

By Michael McKean, Chris Guest, Rob Reiner and Harry Shearer
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Example 4: “Cups and Cakes,” Chorus

(played to sound like tympani). This is followed by an instrumental interlude featuring the trumpet, accompanied by piano, electric bass, and tambourine. The harmonic progression in this five-measure interlude is identical to that of the introduction until the fifth measure, where a modulation up one whole step, from C major to D major, occurs through the introduction of the new dominant sonority. The final verse, though transposed to D, is identical to the second verse up to its seventh measure. The harmony in measures 8–10 of the last verse progresses as follows:

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Stylistic Competencies, Musical Humor, and “This is Spinal Tap”

D: vi –vi | iv–vi | I | I

The instrumentation is identical to the first verse with the addition of string quartet.

As Susan McClary and Rob Walser have pointed out, the music of one’s own culture often seems completely transparent and requires very little mediation to achieve its effect. While the listener who knows the British-invasion style will surely recognize it in “Cups and Cakes,” describing how one can identify such a style often poses a number of difficulties. The ability of listeners to identify a particular style results from what will be termed a specific “stylistic competency.” At a low level of competency one can merely identify the style; at a higher level of competency, one can acutely identify the significant incongruities from the style within a single work. Stylistic competencies are frequently tacit: a listener is able to perceive a stylistic incongruity—in fact, the incongruity may seem obvious—but is often unable to articulate the perception in a systematic or technical way.

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John Covach

Text

"You Were Made For Me," Freddie and the Dreamers (1965)
"Mrs. Brown, You've Got a Lovely Daughter," Herman's Hermits (1965)
"I'm Henry VIII, I Am," Herman's Hermits (1965)
"Sunday For Tea," Peter and Gordon (1967)

Accent

"Mrs. Brown" (1965)
"I'm Henry VIII" (1965)

Strings

"Yesterday," Beatles (1965)
"Eleanor Rigby," Beatles (1966)
"As Tears Go By," Rolling Stones (1966)
"Sunday For Tea" (1967)

Harpsichord

"Lady Jane," Rolling Stones (1966)
"Yesterday's Papas," Rolling Stones (1967)
"Sunday For Tea" (1967)

Trumpet

"Penny Lane," Beatles (1967)

Harmonic movement of "Cups and Cakes" (verse = C: I-V-VI-V-IV-V-V; I-VII-VI-V; bridge = E: I-V-VII-VI) and melodic movement and rhythm fall within the style generally. The use of inversions suggests a "learned" aspect. Last verse modulates up a whole step (see also "Penny Lane").

Figure 1: Stylistic Correspondences in "Cups and Cakes"

trumpet. The eighth-note rhythm of the strings in the introduction to "Cups and Cakes" is especially reminiscent of the eighth-note strings in "Eleanor Rigby," and the trumpet solo of "Penny Lane" might easily have been the model for the one here. The harmonic root-progression is common enough in this style; the use of inversions lends a certain "learned" aspect to the movement, further reinforcing the pseudo-Baroque aspects of the arrangement. The melody features the characteristic eighth-note syncopation found in many pop styles. The lyrics are silly, but so are the ones to "Mrs. Brown You've Got a Lovely Daughter" or "I'm Henry the Eighth, I Am" by Herman's Hermits. Both those numbers also feature the heavily accented voice of Peter Noone, making him the likely model for the overdone accent in "Cups and Cakes."

In many ways, however, "Cups and Cakes" is most reminiscent of Peter and Gordon's "Sunday for Tea." To begin with, both sets of lyrics deal with tea time and use instruments commonly associated with high-brow music. The five-measure introduction to "Sunday for Tea," for instance, is played by harpsichord.

Example 5: "Sunday for Tea," Verses One and Two
(Example includes vocal parts and an arrangement of the accompaniment as it appears on the recording.)

SUNDAY FOR TEA By John Carter and Ken Lewis
John Cowan

Text
"You Were Made For Me," Freddie and the Dreamers (1965)
"Mrs. Brown, You've Got a Lovely Daughter," Herman's Hermits (1965)
"Pin Henry VIII, I Am," Herman's Hermits (1965)
"Sunday For Tea," Peter and Gordon (1967)

Accent
"Mrs. Brown" (1965)
"Pin Henry VIII" (1965)

Strings
"Yesterday," Beatles (1965)
"Eleanor Rigby," Beatles. (1966)
"As Tears Go By," Rolling Stones (1966)
"Sunday For Tea" (1967)

Harpischord
"Lady Jane," Rolling Stones (1966)
"Yesterday's Papers," Rolling Stones (1967)
"Sunday For Tea" (1967)

Trumpet
"Penny Lane," Beatles (1967)

Harmonic movement of "Cups and Cakes" (verse = C: I-V-VI-V-IV-V-VII-V-VII-IV-V;
bridge = E: I-V-VII-VI) and melodic movement and rhythm fall within the style generally. The
use of inversions suggests a "learned" aspect. Last verse modulates up a whole step (see also
"Penny Lane").

Figure 1: Stylistic Correspondences in "Cups and Cakes"

Trumpet. The eighth-note rhythm of the strings in the introduction to "Cups and
Cakes" is especially reminiscent of the eighth-note strings in "Eleanor Rigby," and
the trumpet solo of "Penny Lane" might easily have been the model for the one
here.22 The harmonic root-progression is common enough in this style; the use of
inversions lends a certain "learned" aspect to the movement, further reinforcing the
pseudo-Baroque aspects of the arrangement. The melody features the characteristic
eighth-note syncopation found in many pop styles. The lyrics are silly, but so are
the ones to "Mrs. Brown You've Got a Lovely Daughter" or "I'm Henry the
Eighth, I Am" by Herman's Hermits.23 Both those numbers also feature the heavily

22 It is the use of a trumpet in a British-invasion style tune that is most significant. The trumpet
melodies in both "Penny Lane" and "Cups and Cakes" imitate "classical music," but that is as
far as the resemblance goes. In the documentary film The Compleat Beatles (videotape, Delilah
Films Inc., 1982), Beatles producer and arranger George Martin states that Paul McCartney
heard the piccolo trumpet in a performance of Bach's Brandenburg Concerto (no. 2) and
wanted to make use of the instrument in music the Beatles were recording at that time. For an
account of the composition of the trumpet part in "Penny Lane," see George Martin with
Jeremy Hornsby, All You Need is Ears (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), pp. 201–2. I
cannot resist pointing out that the trumpet solo also uses a particular riff that strongly
resembles one in the theme music to the 1980's TV series "Dynasty."

23 Both of these songs are found on the compilation Herman's Hermits XX, Their Greatest Hits
(Abbco, AB 4227, 1972).

Example 5: "Sunday for Tea," Verses One and Two
(Example includes vocal parts and an arrangement of the accompaniment as it
appears on the recording.)

SUNDAY FOR TEA By John Carter and Ken Lewis
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accented voice of Peter Noone, making him the likely model for the overdone
accent in "Cups and Cakes."

In many ways, however, "Cups and Cakes" is most reminiscent of Peter and
Gordon's "Sunday for Tea."24 To begin with, both sets of lyrics deal with tea
time and use instruments commonly associated with high-brow music. The five-
measure introduction to "Sunday for Tea," for instance, is played by harpsichord

24 "Sunday for Tea" is found on the Peter and Gordon compilation cassette A World Without
solo in a pseudo-Baroque style. The first and second verses are each eight measures in length, but are in a pop-folk style, with vocal duet accompanied by strummed acoustic guitars and acoustic bass (see Example 5). The eighth measure of the first verse features an interjection from the harpsichord, and the second verse adds a xylophone, which does not constitute a strong reference to high art, to the accompaniment. The eight-bar bridge introduces a pop-style tambourine to the ensemble, while the twelve-measure third verse incorporates a new "chord-comping" harpsichord throughout. An eight-measure instrumental interlude follows with the music from the second verse scored for traditional piano trio only. The remainder of the song consists of a repetition of the bridge, followed by verse three; concluding with the introduction, which is used as a codetta. Thus one may note the use of "classical music" instrumentation throughout the song, with the instrumental interlude for piano trio and the introduction and codetta for harpsichord the most obvious references to high-brow music. Considering the correspondences enumerated here, both in comparison with the British-invasion style and with an original British-invasion tune like "Sunday for Tea," it is not at all clear how incongruity could be at work creating humor in "Cups and Cakes."

The British philosopher-aesthetician Roger Scruton, in considering Schopenhauer's theory of incongruity, cites caricature as a counter-example. In discussing a caricature of the former British Prime Minister, Scruton writes:

The caricature amuses, not because it does not fit Mrs. Thatcher, but rather because it does fit her, all too well. It is true that it must also contain an exaggeration: but the exaggeration is amusing because it draws attention to some feature of her. If one wishes to describe the humor of a caricature in terms of incongruity it must be added that it is an incongruity which illustrates a deeper congruity between an object and itself.25

Laser, Scruton adds that "...satire at least possesses, when successful, the quality of accuracy."26

Scruton's remarks further refine the incongruity model by introducing the notion that a dialectical tension exists between congruity and incongruity, and his observations on satire and caricature shed important light on the questions that arise in comparing the bogus Spinal Tap number with the genuine one by Peter and Gordon, as well as with the British-invasion style generally. "Cups and Cakes" does fit the style and this accounts for the correspondences which are found in Figure 1 (the number of correspondences could be increased quite easily). But, to follow Scruton, does "Cups and Cakes" contain some kind of exaggeration?

26 Ibid., p. 162.
solo in a pseudo-Baroque style. The first and second verses are each eight measures in length, but are in a pop-folk style, with vocal duet accompanied by strummed acoustic guitars and acoustic bass (see Example 5). The eighth measure of the first verse features an interjection from the harpsichord, and the second verse adds a xylophone, which does not constitute a strong reference to high art, to the accompaniment. The eight-bar bridge introduces a pop-style tambourine to the ensemble, while the twelve-measure third verse incorporates a new “chord-comping” harpsichord throughout. An eight-measure instrumental interlude follows with the music from the second verse scored for traditional piano trio only. The remainder of the song consists of a repetition of the bridge, followed by verse three; concluding with the introduction, which is used as a coda. Thus one may note the “classical music” instrumentation throughout the song, with the instrumental interlude for piano trio and the introduction and coda for harpsichord the most obvious references to highbrow music. Considering the correspondences enumerated here, both in comparison with the British-invasion style and with an original British-invasion tune like “Sunday for Tea,” it is not at all clear how incongruity could be at work creating humor in “Cups and Cakes.”

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Let us again consider “Sunday for Tea.” The lyrics poke fun at conservative and affluent British high society. The use of harpsichord and piano trio is motivated by the use of these instruments in drawing rooms and gardens of the elite (or, at least it is rooted in the popular association of these instruments with aristocracy). This interaction of lyric and instrumentation produces a kind of gentle irony, and the tune is surely meant tongue-in-cheek. The music hall element is not far off in this number, and the music-hall style played a prominent role in Peter and Gordon’s previous single “Lady Godiva,” which made use of tenor banjo and tuba.27 The irony of “Sunday for Tea” amounts to a criticism of high society—albeit a not-so-direct one—and one can find many songs from the same period that took a more direct aim at their targets.28

When the Thanesmen/Spinal Tap adopt this style there are indeed exaggerations. Trumpet and string quartet do not really interact with the lyrics, which are even plainer and sillier than those of “Sunday for Tea.” Further, how do we make sense of the tympani-like drumming in the bridge, especially when the lyrics are “milk and sugar/bread and jam/yes please sir and thank you ma’am her I am”? There is no gentle irony or underlying social commentary here. While “Cups and Cakes” abounds with features typical of the style, certain ones are exaggerated or are combined with others in ways that produce an exaggeration within the style. These exaggerations, to follow Scruton, draw attention to particular and real features in the style—features that are, nonetheless, ripe for a humorous treatment. None of this produces an amused response, however, unless the listener can tell the difference between the real thing and the exaggeration; it is the listener’s stylistic competency that permits this crucial discrimination. Without the ability to make such a judgement (no matter how tacitly or overtly this is done), “Cups and Cakes” could pass for a legitimate song in the style (though probably a below-average one). While one knows that in context of the film “Cups and Cakes” is supposed to be funny, the listener highly competent in British-invasion music can detect the stylistic incongruities even when the song is heard in isolation.29

One might also posit that there is a kind of “threshold region” within a listener’s stylistic competency. An incongruity that is easily perceived falls below this threshold, one that is too difficult to perceive falls above it. When an incongruity falls into the area where it challenges the stylistic competency, without boring it or confusing it—when it balances on this threshold—then the greatest amused response is aroused; the key to eliciting the amused response would seem to depend

27 Peter and Gordon's “Lady Godiva” may also be found on A World Without Love, cited above.
28 The Kinks' “A Well Respected Man” (1965), the Beatles' “Nowhere Man” (1966), and “Penny Lane” (1967) are just three examples of many that can be cited.
29 This is confirmed to a certain degree by the fact that in the film one hears only the very end of the tune, on the soundtrack LP, however, one finds the entire song. Most of the features of “Cups and Cakes” discussed here are not obvious from the show excerpt of the tune one hears in the film itself.
on just the right kind of dialectical tension between congruity and incongruity. In short, what is obvious is not as funny as what requires a little more thought; or as our two Spinal Tap guitarists say during a philosophical moment in the film, "There's a fine line between clever and . . . stupid." With regard to the satire of Spinal Tap, the movie's most effective numbers are those that nearly pass for authentic ones; the stylistic exaggerations offer a challenge to the listener's powers of detection.

III

In "Heavy Duty," the obvious incongruity between styles accounts largely for the humorous effect of the tune. In "Cups and Cakes," those characteristics that are congruent within the style and those which are incongruent enter into a dialectical relationship. The Spinal Tap number "(Listen to the) Flower People," however, elicits an amused response in a way slightly different from the two preceding examples.

We are to believe that "Flower People" was released in 1967, perhaps during the celebrated "summer of love." The tune begins with a six-measure introduction that features electric-guitar arpeggiation around a D-major chord. Two eight-bar verses are followed by an eight-measure chorus (see Example 6). Next there is an instrumental interlude of fifteen bars. Two eight-measure verses follow, played as before except that two beats are inserted between bars four and five of the first verse. The music from the instrumental interlude is used as the basis for a psychedelic-style ending.

There are some fairly obvious gags in this song: the use of the famous theme to Mozart's Eine Kleine Nachtmusik at the words "it's like a Mozart symphony" in verse three produces an obvious interstylistic incongruity (this is, of course, similar to the appearance of the Boccherini minuet in "Heavy Duty," discussed above). The whispered "shh" after each occurrence of the word "listen" in the text and the phase-shifted "no" after "it's not too late" are exaggerations of stylistically typical vocal effects.30

"(Listen to the) Flower People," like "Cups and Cakes," is in the British-invasion style. "Flower People," in addition, relies heavily on stylistic traits usually associated with "psychedelic rock"; but this stylistic mixture is also typical of late British-invasion pop. "Flower People" has many of the typical psychedelic features: reversed-tape effects, exotic scales (the ending especially), and the use of sitar.31

30 In Herman's Hermits' 1967 hit, "There's a Kind of Hush," the word is sung "hushhh." See Greatest Hits.

31 In this instance a "Coral Sitar" is used, an instrument manufactured by the Danelectro Company that sounds somewhat like a sitar but is tuned like a guitar. For more on the
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Example 6: "(Listen to the) Flower People," Verses One, Two, and Chorus (Example includes lead and backing vocal parts and an arrangement as it appears on the recording.)

By Michael McKean, Chris Guest, Rob Reiner and Harry Shearer
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Reverse Tape

"Rain," Beatles (1966)
"I'm Only Sleeping" (ending), Beatles (1966)
"My White Bicycle," Tomorrow (1967)

Sitar

"Norwegian Wood," Beatles (1965)
"Paint It Black," Rolling Stones (1966)
"Shapes of Things" (sitar-like), Yardbirds (1966)
"My White Bicycle" (sitar-like, reversed), (1967)

Lyrics


Vocal Whispers

"There's a Kind of Hush," Herman's Hermits (1967)
"My White Bicycle" (1967)

Figure 2: Stylistic Correspondences in “Flower People”

Figure 2 shows a table of correspondences for “Flower People.” 32
While “Flower People” has many of the general features of late British-invasion music, it also models features of certain specific tunes rather closely. The harmonic progression of the verse (see Figure 3) is I–II–iv–I. Consider the Beatles’ 1965 hit “Eight Days a Week” which progresses I–II–IV–I, or their 1966 hit “Nowhere Man” which moves I–V–IV–I–ii–iv–I. “Flower People” can be seen as a conflation of those two. Further, “Eight Days a Week” features the guitar introduction shown in Example 7. The introduction to “Flower People” (Example 8), while much simpler, is nevertheless similar.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Correspondence</th>
<th>Chord Progression</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Eight Days a Week”</td>
<td>D: I–II–IV–I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Nowhere Man”</td>
<td>E: (I–IV–I)–ii–iv–I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Flower People”</td>
<td>D: I–II–iv–I</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3: Correspondences in Harmonic Progression

32 Another example—an obscure one, to be sure—that makes use of some of the psychedelic features discussed here is a tune by the British psychedelic band “Tomorrow”; it is their 1967 British hit “My White Bicycle,” which appears on the group’s LP Tomorrow (Import Records, Inc./EMI Records Ltd., IMP 1003, 1968). Here one notes the reverse-tape effects, exotic-scale guitar passages, simple-minded lyrics, and whispered back-up vocals. The lead guitarist in this recording is Steve Howe. Howe, as a member of the British supergroup Yes, went on to be an extremely influential figure on the 1970’s progressive-rock music scene. Howe is certainly the target of the backstage scene in “This is Spinal Tap” in which lead-guitarist Nigel Tufnel (played by Christopher Guest) leads film maker Martin Di Burge (played by Rob Reiner) through his dozens of collectible guitars. The Yes group becomes one target of Spinal Tap’s progressive rock send-up numbers—pieces entitled “Stonehenge” and “Rock and Roll Creation.”

33 It should be pointed out that the Los Angeles-based Byrds cannot be considered British invasion, but are usually thought to be part of the “American response.” For a discussion of the American response, see Ward, Stokes, and Tucker, Rock of Ages, pp. 303–14. For a fuller consideration of the Byrds, see Johnny Rogan, Timeless Flight: The Definitive Biography of the Byrds, 2nd ed. (Essex: Square One Books, 1990).

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| “Eight Days a Week” | D: I–II–IV–I |
| “Nowhere Man” | E: (I–V–IV)–I–iv–I |
| “Flower People” | D: I–II–iv–I |

Figure 3: Correspondences in Harmonic Progression

The introduction to “Flower People” bears an even stronger resemblance to the opening of the Byrds’ 1965 hit “Mr. Tambourine Man” (Example 9). While the Byrds’ Roger McGuinn uses his characteristic Rickenbacker electric twelve-string and the Spinal Tap introduction does not, the voicings, and the guitar fingerings that go with them, are very similar. The similarity between the introductions to “Mr. Tambourine Man” and “(Listen to the) Flower People” is further reinforced by the similar electric bass guitar parts that accompany each. Further, the musical texture employed in both tunes after the introduction consists of chords arpeggiated on the twelve-string low on the neck against a second guitar that articulates short, rhythm high voicings (see Figure 4).

“Flower People” demonstrates a closer kind of modelling than either “Heavy Duty” or “Cups and Cakes.” Despite these many close correspondences, though, there is something about “Flower People” that keeps it from being mistaken for an authentic example of either British-invasion pop or psychedelic rock. And it is precisely this stylistic “near miss” that elicits the amused response.

In his 1981 book, Sound Effects, sociologist Simon Frith distinguishes between pop and rock. Pop music is made with the consumer in mind: it is commercially motivated and aims to give the listeners “what they want.” Rock, on the other hand, lays claim to authenticity and sincerity: the musician expresses himself or herself without regard for commercial gain. Frith points out that most rock musicians reside somewhere in between these opposite poles. Frith’s book provides

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32 Another example—an obscure one, to be sure—that makes use of some of the psychedelic features discussed here is a tune by the British psychedelic band “Tomorrow”; it is their 1967 British hit “My White Bicycle,” which appears on the group’s LP Tomorrow (Import Records, Inc./EMI Records Ltd., IMP 1003, 1968). Here one notes the reverse-tape effects, exotic-scale guitar passages, simple-minded lyrics, and whispered back-up vocals. The lead guitarist in this recording is Steve Howe. Howe, as a member of the British supergroup Yes, went on to be an extremely influential figure on the 1970’s progressive-rock music scene. Howe is certainly the target of the backstage scene in “This is Spinal Tap” in which lead-guitarist Nigel Tufnel (played by Christopher Guest) leads film maker Martin Di Burge (played by Rob Reiner) through his dozens of collectible guitars. The Yes group becomes one target of Spinal Tap’s progressive rock send-up numbers—pieces entitled “Stonehenge” and “Rock and Roll Creation.”

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Example 8: Introduction to “Flower People” (Guitar and Bass)

Example 9: Introduction to “Mr. Tambourine Man” (12-String Guitar and Bass)
(Please note that octave doublings that result from the tuning of the third and fourth strings are represented in parenthesis.)

“Mr. Tambourine Man” Words and Music by Bob Dylan
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has a high degree of integrity, and the desire to make some kind of living through doing so, come to seem irreconcilable to many rock musicians; some quit, some sell out, and some get jobs teaching music theory or musicology. Some rock musicians are able to strike a balance between the pursuit of their musical goals and the demands of the music industry, at times achieving notable commercial success.

What makes “Listen to the) Flower People” not fit the British-invasion/psychedelic-rock mold, what makes it seem not quite right, is this: “Flower People” is a sell out, and the stylistically competent listener can discern this. To use Frith’s distinction, it is all pop and no rock. It arouses an amused response because it tries every stylistic trick in the book in an effort to be current, and in 1967 current means psychedelic. But psychedelia was the voice of the counterculture, a culture that advocated “peace, love, and dope.” Psychedelic music was high in commitment to the ideals of the “flower people movement”—or was at least perceived to be so—and the rock pole eclipsed the pop one in this music—or, again, was as at least supposed to.

Into this context comes Spinal Tap, which is presumably looking for a hit single in the United States and “flower power” is “in.” In order not to offend, however, they attenuate the elements in the music that might be considered objectionable. There is a kind of stylistic neutralization that takes place—a sort of entertainment-business “spiffing up” that makes the tune acceptable to parents everywhere. The liner notes to the soundtrack LP (which also play along with the gag) inform us that “Flower People” is the single from Spinal Tap’s 1967 LP “Spinal Tap Sings ‘Listen to the Flower People’ and Other Favorites.”

In a 1984 mock interview published in Guitar Player magazine, Nigel Tufnel (Christopher Guest) reflects on Spinal Tap’s 1967 hit:

36 Liner notes to Spinal Tap, Spinal Tap.

35 In his *Studying Popular Music* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1990), Richard Middleton cautions that a simple binary opposition like the pop-rock one presented here can be misleading (p. 43). It is clearly possible that the artist who builds a career on the directness and authenticity of his or her music may be just as likely to be manipulating this image—or have it manipulated by a manager or record company—for commercial gain as the most cynical pop star. In using Frith’s distinction in the present discussion, however, I am less concerned with the reality of whether artists are really what they appear to be, than with the notion that listeners perceive authenticity in musical, and specifically stylistic, terms. The idea is that in absence of any other information, the competent listener can hear the artist either “selling out” or remaining faithful.
Example 8: Introduction to "Flower People" (Guitar and Bass)

```
Guitar
\[ \begin{align*}
& C E G D G A E C \quad \text{(Intro)} \\
& D G B D G A E C \\
& E A D G E A D \quad \text{(Chorus)} \\
& F A D G F A D \quad \text{(Chorus)} \\
& G B E G B E G \quad \text{(Chorus)} \\
& A D G A D G A \\
& D G B D G A E C \\
& E A D G E A D \quad \text{(Chorus)} \\
& F A D G F A D \quad \text{(Chorus)} \\
& G B E G B E G \quad \text{(Chorus)} \\
& A D G A D G A \\
& D G B D G A E C \\
& E A D G E A D \quad \text{(Chorus)} \\
& F A D G F A D \quad \text{(Chorus)} \\
& G B E G B E G \quad \text{(Chorus)} \\
& A D G A D G A
\end{align*} \]

Bass

\[ \begin{align*}
& E A D G E A D \quad \text{(Intro)} \\
& F A D G F A D \quad \text{(Chorus)} \\
& G B E G B E G \quad \text{(Chorus)} \\
& A D G A D G A \\
& D G B D G A E C \\
& E A D G E A D \quad \text{(Chorus)} \\
& F A D G F A D \quad \text{(Chorus)} \\
& G B E G B E G \quad \text{(Chorus)} \\
& A D G A D G A \\
& D G B D G A E C \\
& E A D G E A D \quad \text{(Chorus)} \\
& F A D G F A D \quad \text{(Chorus)} \\
& G B E G B E G \quad \text{(Chorus)} \\
& A D G A D G A
\end{align*} \]
```

Example 9: Introduction to "Mr. Tambourine Man" (12-String Guitar and Bass)

(These notes are intended for use by those who wish to demonstrate the musical technique of the song and do not constitute an appropriate work for any other purpose."

```
12-string doublings in parenthesis

12-String Guitar

\[ \begin{align*}
& C E G D G A E C \quad \text{(Intro)} \\
& D G B D G A E C \\
& E A D G E A D \quad \text{(Chorus)} \\
& F A D G F A D \quad \text{(Chorus)} \\
& G B E G B E G \quad \text{(Chorus)} \\
& A D G A D G A \\
& D G B D G A E C \\
& E A D G E A D \quad \text{(Chorus)} \\
& F A D G F A D \quad \text{(Chorus)} \\
& G B E G B E G \quad \text{(Chorus)} \\
& A D G A D G A \\
& D G B D G A E C \\
& E A D G E A D \quad \text{(Chorus)} \\
& F A D G F A D \quad \text{(Chorus)} \\
& G B E G B E G \quad \text{(Chorus)} \\
& A D G A D G A
\end{align*} \]

Bass

\[ \begin{align*}
& E A D G E A D \quad \text{(Intro)} \\
& F A D G F A D \quad \text{(Chorus)} \\
& G B E G B E G \quad \text{(Chorus)} \\
& A D G A D G A \\
& D G B D G A E C \\
& E A D G E A D \quad \text{(Chorus)} \\
& F A D G F A D \quad \text{(Chorus)} \\
& G B E G B E G \quad \text{(Chorus)} \\
& A D G A D G A \\
& D G B D G A E C \\
& E A D G E A D \quad \text{(Chorus)} \\
& F A D G F A D \quad \text{(Chorus)} \\
& G B E G B E G \quad \text{(Chorus)} \\
& A D G A D G A
\end{align*} \]
```

Stylistic Competencies, Musical Humor, and "This is Spinal Tap"

"Flower People" (1967)
12-string arpeggios (acoustic) in verse
with high-voiced chord
accompaniment (6-strg.)
arpeggio intro (6-strg.)
with sliding bass accomp.

"Mr. Tambourine Man" (1965), Byrds
12-string arpeggios (electric) in verse
with high-voiced chord
accompaniment (12-strg.)
arpeggio intro (12-string)
with sliding bass accomp.*

* see also Eight Days a Week for acoustic 6-strg. + elec. 6-strg. (and similar intro). For another 12-strg. intro, see "Ticket to Ride," Beatles (1965), or "Turn, Turn, Turn," Byrds (1966).

Figure 4: Modeling in "Flower People"

has a high degree of integrity, and the desire to make some kind of living through doing so, come to seem irreconcilable to many rock musicians; some quit, some sell out, and some get jobs teaching music theory or musicology. Some rock musicians are able to strike a balance between the pursuit of their musical goals and the demands of the music industry, at times achieving notable commercial success.

What makes "Listen to the Flower People" not fit the British-invasion/ psychedelic-rock mold, what makes it seem not quite right, is this: "Flower People" is a sell out, and the stylistically competent listener can discern this. To use Frith's distinction, it is all pop and no rock. It arouses an amused response because it tries every stylistic trick in the book in an effort to be current, and in 1967 current means psychedelic. But psychedelia was the voice of the counterculture, a culture that advocated "peace, love, and dope." Psychedelic music was high in commitment to the ideals of the "flower people movement"—or was at least perceived to be so—and the rock pole eclipsed the pop one in this music—or, again, was at least supposed to.

Into this context comes Spinal Tap, which is presumably looking for a hit single in the United States and "flower power" is "in." In order not to offend, however, they attenuate the elements in the music that might be considered objectionable. There is a kind of stylistic neutralization that takes place—a sort of entertainment-business "spiffing up" that makes the tune acceptable to parents everywhere. The liner notes to the soundtrack LP (which also play along with the gag) inform us that "Flower People" is the single from Spinal Tap's 1967 LP "Spinal Tap Sings 'Listen to the Flower People' and Other Favorites." 36 In a 1984 mock interview published in Guitar Player magazine, Nigel Tufnel (Christopher Guest) reflects on Spinal Tap's 1967 hit:

35 In his Studying Popular Music (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1990), Richard Middleton cautions that a simple binary opposition like the pop-rock one presented here can be misleading (p. 43). It is clearly possible that the artist who builds a career on the directness and authenticity of his or her music may be just as likely to be manipulating this image—or have it manipulated by a manager or record company—for commercial gain as the most cynical pop star. In using Frith's distinction in the present discussion, however, I am less concerned with the reality of whether artists are really what they appear to be, than with the notion that listeners perceive authenticity in musical, and specifically stylistic, terms. The idea is that in absence of any other information, the competent listener can hear the artist either "selling out" or remaining faithful.

36 Liner notes to Spinal Tap, Spinal Tap.

a clear (and accurate) description of these contradictory pressures.

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Psychedelic-rock features easily challenging exaggeration; juxtaposition amused Schopenhauer's lack. The psychedelic rock, as Nigel Del's (1991): 7(18/10) suggests, clamoring "humor, Ray, a Rudes tunes of the then desperate. This "This Spinal Tap."

The interviewer: please-and Nigel Del Tufnel: Well, to be honest—and only because I like you I'm telling you—we tried to jump on the bandwagon. There was such an enormous sort of public clamoring for that sort of garbage, frankly, we thought we might as well reap some of the benefits. So we dished that one out, and it really did well for us, actually.

The broadest amused response to "Flower People," then, is aroused by challenging the listener's stylistic competency for British-invasion and early psychedelic-rock music. "Flower People" is so close to the real thing that it could easily pass for authentic. One does notice the incongruity of the psychedelic features with their pop application. But unlike "Heavy Duty," stylistic juxtaposition alone is not enough to mark "Flower People" as a satire; there are genuine tunes that mix these stylistic features. To return to Scruton, the listener is amused only upon recognition that some particular stylistic incongruity is an exaggeration; we say: "This couldn't be real!" It is not so much the presence of psychedelic features in a tune that is directed at a broad pop audience that triggers the humor, as much as it is that the use of these features is a little heavy-handed and desperate. Spinal Tap goes a little too far—they are perhaps too eager to please—and the listener realizes that the incongruity is too great to be genuine. The humor then ultimately lies in issues of stylistic authenticity, or in the blatant lack of it.

IV

Schopenhauer's incongruity theory, when extended by Scruton's notion of a congruity-incongruity dialectic present in satire, provides a useful model for understanding the humor in the three Spinal Tap numbers examined here. Most important to this study, however, is the fact that the incongruity theory can be combined with theories of style to explain incongruity both between styles and within a single style.

The discussion of the incongruities in these three Spinal Tap songs might suggest, however, that an amused response arises from a sense of superiority: we laugh at the band's inadequacy. Again, Roger Scruton's remarks are useful: he distinguishes between sarcasm and irony. The former is a "laughing at" action which entails rejection. Irony is, on the other hand, a "laughing at" action without rejection; it is kinder and entails a certain aspect of laughing at ourselves. In ironic humor, the character becomes more endearing through his or her inadequacies; irony is involved in a mental act. Scruton calls "attentive demolition." The Spinal Tap songs, and the film generally, evoke this ironic response.

Spinal Tap, with their endearing inability to ever get anything quite right, is not the ultimate target of the musical humor in "This is Spinal Tap." However, the dialect of congruity/incongruity in the bogus songs that triggers the humor also forces a reconsideration of the model; in the moments that the listener hears this parody, not only does "Cups and Cakes" seem silly, but the whole British invasion itself seems silly. The Spinal Tap group, as well as the songs they play, serves as a kind of "lens" through which one views the model style. The richness of the humor in these numbers arises not simply because the tunes themselves are funny, nor because they are performed in a funny way, but because they also provide a humorous perspective, through clever distortion, on the models. This is not to claim that one emerges from this experience convinced that the music of groups like the Beatles or the Rolling Stones is foolish; after all, one's experience of a parody of something need not forever strip it of the possibility of subsequent serious consideration. Instead, the full humorous effect of each Spinal Tap number relies on the listener's ability to identify references within a rich network of intertextuality.

The relationship between the kind of amused responses discussed above and the more serious, aesthetic response requires further exploration. As Scruton, Morreall and others have suggested, these two modes of contemplation can share the quality of disinterestedness. In fact, the act of "distancing" oneself from the model, both specific and general, plays a crucial role in eliciting the amused responses described above. But the stylistic competency that allows one to identify intertextual references need not only elicit an amused response; the detection of stylistic incongruities is crucial to the aesthetic response in music generally. Though an


40. For a discussion of intertextuality in music, see Robert S. Hatten, "The Place of Intertextuality in Musical Studies," American Journal of Semiotics 3/4 (1985): 69-82. Hatten also uses style theory to explain intertextual references in music, and he provides a number of examples. In the same issue, see Thais E. Morgan, "Is There An Intertext In This Text? Literary and Interdisciplinary Approaches to Intertextuality" (pp. 1-40), for an extremely helpful survey. The issue of intertextuality and style theory is discussed further in Covach, "The Rutles."
John Covach

Interviewer: ... In 1967 you did "(Listen To The) Flower People," which seems like a complete departure. Why?

Tufnel: Well, to be honest—and only because I like you I'm telling you—we tried to jump on the bandwagon. There was such an enormous sort of public clamoring for that sort of garbage, frankly, we thought we might as well reap some of the benefits. So we dished that one out, and it really did well for us, actually. 37

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...Irony and sarcasm are two ends of the same axis: the axis of incongruity. And the central character of this axis is the paradox. The paradox is the source of both irony and sarcasm. Irony is the reaction of the observer to the paradox, and sarcasm is the reaction of the main character to the paradox. Irony is the public expression of a paradox, and sarcasm is the private expression of a paradox. Irony and sarcasm are the two faces of the same coin. 39

Arthur Miller's view of comedy is interesting because it is the opposite of the American view. While Americans find it easy to laugh at the idiotic and the incompetent, Americans tend not to laugh at the sophisticated. Americans find it easy to laugh at the fool and the buffoon, but Americans tend not to laugh at the wise man. Americans find it easy to laugh at the man who is not serious, but Americans tend not to laugh at the man who is serious. 

Stylistic Competencies, Musical Humor, and "This is Spinal Tap"

distinguishes between sarcasm and irony. The former is a "laughing at" action which entails rejection. Irony is, on the other hand, a "laughing at" action without rejection; it is kinder and entails a certain aspect of laughing at ourselves. In ironic humor, the character becomes more endearing through his or her inadequacies; irony is involved in a mental act Scruton calls "attentive demolition." The Spinal Tap songs, and the film generally, evoke this ironic response. 40

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The relationship between the kind of amused responses discussed above and the more serious, aesthetic response requires further exploration. As Scruton, Morreall and others have suggested, these two modes of contemplation can share the quality of disinterestedness. In fact, the act of "distancing" oneself from the model, both specific and general, plays a crucial role in eliciting the amused responses described above. But the stylistic competency that allows one to identify intertextual references need not only elicit an amused response; the detection of stylistic incongruities is crucial to the aesthetic response in music generally. Though an


39 Scruton, "Laughter," pp. 167-69. Scruton contends that "devaluation" is an important aspect of ironic response (p. 168): "Irony devalues without rejecting: it is, in that sense, "kind." For example, Joyce's ironic comparison of Bloom with the wily Odysseus de-values the former only to insert him more fully into our affections. His shortcomings are part of this pathos, since they reflect a condition that is also ours. Irony of this kind causes us to laugh at its object only by laughing at ourselves. It thus forces upon us a perception of our kinship."

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examination of how the amused response differs from the more serious aesthetic one is beyond the scope of this study, it seems clear that the respective response mechanisms are highly similar.\footnote{Two complementary kinds of instance suggest that these two mechanisms are highly similar: 1) a listener whose stylistic competency is insufficiently developed will not detect the incongruities in a parody, and may respond to the piece aesthetically; 2) a listener whose stylistic competency is insufficiently developed will mistakenly identify incongruities, perhaps mistaking a serious work for a parody. In the first instance, I have often noted that listeners unfamiliar with popular music find the Spinal Tap songs to be typical stylistically, even judging them to be boring or uninventive. In the second instance, one could easily lead a group of listeners generally unfamiliar with twentieth-century music into believing that an acknowledged masterwork such as Arnold Schoenberg's Pierrot Lunaire is a parody. This kind of interpretive mix-up surely hinges on the stylistic competencies involved.}

The "Flower People" example is suggestive in a second, related way: if issues of authenticity can arouse an amused response, they can also arouse an aesthetic one. In fact, it is fairly evident that many serious rock fans demand authenticity from the musicians they follow and that many musicians stake their reputations on a defiance to sell out; Eric Clapton's departure from the Yardbirds is the classic example.\footnote{Ward, Stokes, and Tucker, Rock of Ages, pp. 282-83; Gillet, The Sound of the City, pp. 278-9. The reader is reminded that I am concerned here with authenticity as it is perceived in specifically musical terms.} Many rock listeners develop very advanced stylistic competencies and in listening to a rock song weigh every stylistic incongruity against a complex (though often tacit) model. The listener accepts incongruities that are judged to be innovative and rejects others that are judged to be corruptive or derivative. By this process the listener comes to an aesthetic evaluation of the music. This again suggests that the mechanisms that produce humor are very like those that produce aesthetic appreciation.

While this study has focused primarily on the ways in which humor can be created through specifically musical means, it is clear that the musical humor in each tune interacts with other contexts that are not specifically musical but nevertheless participate in eliciting an amused response. Thus the musical means that create humor in these songs can only be isolated from the larger context of the film itself provisionally; humor is created in the film in many ways and music plays only one part—albeit a crucial one—in the overall effect. Despite the fact that the musical text itself is situated among other contexts in the film—and even on the soundtrack LP—it is clear that there are specifically musical means of eliciting an amused response in each song examined above. Just as the musical context is situated within the larger context of the film itself, however, so too is each specific Spinal Tap song situated within a larger body of musical works. The musical humor arises from setting each bogus Spinal Tap number against the appropriate musical repertory, and it is the song's position within this network of other songs that gives it its significance and allows it to achieve its effect. The source of the humor then is ultimately relational, and the humor lies not so much in the song itself, but rather in the relationship between the specific song and a large number of other songs that it invokes.\footnote{Earlier versions of this paper were read before the International Association for the Study of Popular Music (New Orleans, 1990), Music Theory Midwest (Evanston, 1990), University of Rochester Symposium on Rock Music (1990), and the Society for Music Theory (Oakland, 1990). I would like to thank Robert Hatten, Robert Gauldin, and John Morreall for reading an earlier draft and offering many helpful suggestions.}
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