As the title of my presentation suggests, my topic today will be the relationship between rock music and musical analysis; more specifically, I would like to explore whether or not it is possible to employ certain music-analytical methods to rock music — methods that are currently used by American and British music theorists in the analysis of art music in the Western European tradition. I should point out up front that I am sensitive to the fact that the methods of musical analysis currently in use by music theorists were developed to describe European art music, and that for some pop music scholars this is enough to eliminate any consideration of the use of these methods in the examination of popular music. I will take the position that methods developed in the study of art music can be very helpful in the analysis of popular music, if these methods are employed with a sensitivity to the popular music style under consideration in each instance. Since my area of interest is rock music, I will confine my remarks to the consideration of that general repertory only, though I feel that much of what I will argue for rock music transfers pretty well to most other popular styles developed in Europe, the United States, and Canada.

That I anticipate some resistance to this idea is also indicated in the title of today’s presentation. In fact, I feel a certain tension exists between what might be thought of as the archetypal music theorist or musicologist and his or her popular music counterpart in scholarship. Theorists are thought of typically as staunch formalists — to adapt a phrase from Dragnet’s Joe Friday, a theorist is concerned with “the notes, ma’am, just the notes.” The popular music scholar is thought of, by most theorists at least, as somebody who devotes considerable attention to social and political contexts, discusses song lyrics, but never gets down to the music itself. Of course these are caricatures, but these exaggerated images illustrate well the sort of fundamental difference in approach between the two intellectual camps. The pity here is, at least for me, that theorists and musicologists could gain considerably by confronting some of the issues raised typically by popular music scholarship, and this point has been made elegantly by John Shepherd, Richard Middleton, and Susan McClary.¹ But the purpose of my presentation today is to suggest that popular music scholars could profit as well by considering some of the issues in which theorists routinely engage in the analysis of a piece of music.

I would like to proceed today by briefly outlining a much longer paper that I presented to the Music Theory Midwest conference in Madison, Wisconsin in May 1993.² I would then like to play a few musical examples and suggest what I think are interesting analytical issues, in hopes of stimulating some discussion of those excerpts.

The paper I will summarize is entitled “We Won’t Get Fooled Again: Rock Music and Music Theory.” The paper is addressed to my fellow music theorists, and I basically argue that theorists should open up the repertory of pieces they consider to include rock music. I contend that the analysis of rock music informs issues currently much discussed in the discipline — issues such as style, intertextuality, and alternative tonal systems. I also suggest that coming to terms with rock music raises issues that, though they do not arise directly in the study of art music, could be applied back to art music with fruitful results. A good example here is the issue of timbre, an unavoidable consideration in thinking about rock music but a parameter often relegated to secondary status in the analysis of art music. Basically I argue that the serious examination of rock music can “open up one’s ears,” allowing the analyst to appreciate aspects of art music that may have gone unnoticed before.

I frame my argument in terms of the how and what of musical analysis; that is, what music does a theorist consider — a question of repertory — and how does the analyst approach the music — a question of the applicability of analytical paradigms. I begin by considering the theories of the Austrian theorist Heinrich Schenker. In this section of the paper I argue that Schenker’s theory provides a powerful tool for the analysis of mostly German art music from Bach to Brahms, excluding the New German School of Wagner and Liszt. The power of the paradigm when applied to this narrow repertory often has the effect of directing the music that a Schenkerian will consider; that is to say, if one knows that Schenker’s theory will work well in the analysis of a piece from a certain repertory, one can be tempted to choose the music one considers on the basis of

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²A revised version of this paper, “We Won’t Get Fooled Again: Music Theory and Rock Music,” will be published in Anazid Kazanjian, David Schware, and Lawrence Siegel, eds., State of the Art: Rethinking Music Studies in the 90s (University Press of Virginia, forthcoming).
how well the analysis will likely turn out. This, I argue, can create a kind of blind spot for theorists, and result in the neglect of repertoires that do not fit the analytical model. This criticism can, of course, be directed at pitch-class set theory or twelve-tone theory as well, the two other dominant paradigms in the theory field today.

After my discussion of Schenker and music theorists, I turn my attention to the manner in which the issue of the analysis of popular music is considered in the writings of popular music scholars — and I suppose I might as well admit it right now, I am fairly critical of the way popular music scholarship has treated the contributions of musicologists to the field of popular music studies. First I focus on Susan McClary's 1989 article entitled "Terminal Prestige: The Case of Avant-Garde Music Composition." What I find most unsettling in that article is the way in which she uses popular music, in this case Earth, Wind, and Fire's "System of Survival," as a kind of counter example to the avant-garde music of Schoenberg, Sessions, Boulez, and Babbitt. The music of these composers is portrayed as being complicated for the sake of it, and the popular music example is then introduced as a kind of antidote to the terminal condition of these modernists. Of course, McClary at no point suggests that the Earth, Wind, and Fire tune is unsophisticated musically, rather she suggests that the kind of complexity that it engages is one that is somehow more relevant, and for her, more interesting. The problem I have with this argument is that I find much of the music on the Touch the World CD (on which "System of Survival" appears) to be very sophisticated in music-technical terms. That is, even without the socio-political spin that McClary puts on the music, I find it fascinating musically in many of the same ways that I find the music of the modernists fascinating. In fact, it seems to me that most of the music on the CD is markedly unpolitical, and aims at being interesting in music-technical, and even formalist terms. I end this discussion by agreeing with McClary about the what of musical analysis — the choice of music, but disagreeing about the how — the method.

Next I turn to the argument put forward by scholars such as John Shepherd, Richard Middleton, and Peter Wicke concerning analytical method. To varying degrees each of these writers has suggested that traditional analytical methods are inappropriate to the analysis of popular music. I should point out that though I disagree with Middleton on a couple of points, I consider the analytical sections in his book, Studying Popular Music, to constitute a true tour-de-force in the field of popular music studies. My argument with regard to this issue is rather straight-forward: I just do not think enough work has been done by highly skilled and experienced analysts to dismiss any analytical approach a priori. And I might suggest here that perhaps we could agree to call an end to the Wilfrid Mellers-bashing that has gone on in the past; there is an entirely new generation of theorists interested in popular music, and their work will be appearing in print soon. I ask you to judge the effectiveness of their analytical approaches with an open mind.

In the final portion of my paper I attempt to sell my music theory colleagues on the notion that rock music, as I stated a moment ago, both plays into issues current in the discipline, and raises new and interesting ones all its own. At this point in today's presentation though, I would like to try to sell you on the value of technical analysis of the popular music text itself. Here I adopt a position very close in some ways to ones that have been forwarded by Richard Middleton and John Shepherd.

First I would like to consider two passages from the 1972 Yes hit, Roundabout and compare these two settings of what is approximately the same musical material. In the first excerpt, the strong 4/4 meter, the pounding bass guitar, and the guitar chord voicings are very much in the rock style, although not nearly as hard-driving as a lot of early-70s rock. In the second example, though, the same material is set to the mellotron and electric bass. Note that the traditional, classical-style voice leading in the mellotron entirely changes the effect of the musical material. Here a reference to art music is readily conceivable. Now the average listener will not understand these passages in even the basic technical way that I have just described them. But he or she will take in the effect of these passages, even if only to say that the first passage "rocks," and that the second one is "mellow" or even "ethereal." This phenomenon, a listener recognizing such things without being able to articulate them, is called in style theory a "tacit competency." But the effect here is created through a skillful manipulation of musical materials, and music theory can tell you how that is achieved.

Consider this next example, I won't tell you yet who it is, though I'm sure many of you will recognize the artist right away. The tune is called Carphone, and the artist is former Byrds mastermind Roger McGuinn. This tune is a wonderful example of a rock tune that requires you to know other rock tunes to get the full effect. The lyrics are a kind of cynical commentary of modern life and business, one imagines perhaps in L.A. If you know the 1966 Byrds tune Rock 'n Roll Star, the reference here is quite clear.

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3 At this point in the presentation two excerpts from Roundabout were played. I will refer to these according to their timings on the Fragile CD. The first runs from 01:44 to 02:14 and the second runs from 05:33 to 05:49. Yes, Fragile, Atlantic SD 19132-2, 1972.

4 At this point Roger McGuinn's Carphone, from the CD Back From Rio (Arista ARCD-8648, 1991), was played.
During the guitar solo, a quote from Simon and Garfunkel’s *Mrs. Robinson* occurs, and at the end of the tune, you need to know the Beatles’ *A Day in the Life*. Now all of these references are created by manipulating strictly musical materials in the tune. This kind of intertextuality, it turns out, is in many ways not all that different from the kinds of references that occur in Igor Stravinsky’s neo-classical works, in Hans Werner Henze’s music, or in the instrumental music of Mozart. I point this out not to somehow vindicate Roger McGuinn as a musician, but rather to suggest that the mechanism at work creating this effect seems to be operative across style, historical, and cultural boundaries.

Finally, I would like to play another McGuinn number and ask a simple question; but first, here’s the tune. Now let me pose the following question: I know this is Roger McGuinn, but why do I hear Elvis Costello? You tell me. The point of all this is that I think that music theory can offer assistance in explaining much of what happens tacitly in rock music, and also in other, though I will admit not all, popular-music styles. If we follow John Shepherd’s warning that we cannot go on viewing this music as a kind of “inscrutable black box,” popular music scholarship must come to terms with the technical aspects of the musical text. But I want to be clear about what I am proposing; I am not saying that popular music scholars need to become expert analysts. I am saying that expert analysts may have something to say about popular music that is helpful. If one is committed to a sociological or political reading of popular music, I don’t understand how knowing something about how a piece achieves its musical effects technically works against that kind of reading. On the other hand, as theorists get more involved in popular music — and I am certain that they are and will get more involved in popular music — it is unreasonable to expect that these scholars will become sociologists or culture critics. Though I suggested at the beginning of this talk that pop music scholars and music theorists and musicologists are very different, I would like to remain optimistic and suggest that despite our many differences in our approaches to the analysis of popular music, we definitely can work it out.

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7 Roger McGuinn’s *You Bowed Down*, also from *Back From Rio*, was played at this point in the paper.
8 This rhetorical question is meant to highlight the fact that while we recognize McGuinn singing, the tune itself is written by Elvis Costello. Costello is heard singing back-up later in the tune, but the excerpt provided the listener here, 00:00 to 00:42, does not include Costello at all. Thus, without musical analysis, how are we to account for Costello’s clear presence in a musical sense in light of his absence in a literal sense?