We Won't Get Fooled Again:  
Rock Music and Musical Analysis

John Covach

In 1971 the British rock band The Who released their seventh album, entitled *Who's Next.* The final track on the LP, the eight-and-a-half minute "Won't Get Fooled Again," is for the most part a hard-driving rock number. The arrangement of this song is perhaps most noteworthy for its use of a repeated-note figure played by the organ, occurring especially in the introduction and in two instrumental interludes, and for Roger Daltry's two excruciating screams, the second of which, occurring immediately before the final verse, must surely be considered among the most famous screams in all of rock music. The lyrics of "Won't Get Fooled Again" represent Pete Townshend at his cynical best. Writing in the first person, Townshend portrays a feeling that political revolutions change very little for those not in political power; for the average person—or in this case, the

1An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of Music Theory Midwest in Madison, Wisconsin, 16 May 1993. I would like to thank Susan Cook, Marianne Kielan-Gilbert, Allen Forte, Walter Everett, and David Schwarz for reading that earlier version and offering many helpful comments. The opinions that follow are, of course, my own.

2"Won't Get Fooled Again," words and music by Pete Townshend, from the LP *Who's Next,* Decca DL 79182, 1971.
average restless youth—nothing seems to be significantly changed the day after the revolution. Following the second organ interlude, which terminates with a Keith Moon drum solo, Daltry lets out his famous scream. It is a scream of recognition and horror: our singer discovers that the “new boss” is no different from the “old boss.”

As its title indicates, this essay will explore issues in the analysis of rock music. Within the academic community of musical scholarship, musical analysis is usually considered to fall within the domain of the discipline of music theory. Certainly musicologists and popular-music scholars incorporate musical analysis into their work to some degree, but it is music theorists who have developed and routinely employ a number of sophisticated techniques and systems for analysis. This essay, then, will focus in large part on how music theorists might approach the analysis of rock music within their own disciplinary contexts. It will, however, also be concerned with the ways in which music theory and analysis can make a contribution within the disciplinary context of popular-music studies generally. Indeed, the question of how music theorists might approach the analysis of popular music—and even whether they should consider popular music at all—is one that affects both the disciplines of music theory and of popular-music studies. These two disciplines, however, have tended to ignore one another: theorists have been occupied almost entirely with the analysis of music within the European art-music tradition, and popular-music scholarship has tended to focus its attention more on cultural, social, and economic contexts and less on the musical texts themselves. I will suggest in this essay that there is an interdisciplinarity middleground that shows a potential for enriching both disciplines.

I will focus my remarks in this essay especially on rock music, since that is the area within popular music that my own research addresses. I will argue that Townshend’s parable-like lyrics sound a warning that must be heeded as we consider, first, the role popular music might play in the ways in which theorists will think about music and music theory in the future; and second, the role that musical analysis should play in the study of popular music in a broad sense. In the first case, theorists might well ask themselves why they should be concerned with popular music at all. Having adapted

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3It should be pointed out that, according to this interpretation, Daltry should have employed the word “no!” for this scream. Instead, he employs the word “yeah!” The latter is, however, the standard word/syllable employed in rock screams; “yeah!” should thus not be understood literally in this case—and this is obvious from the context—as suggesting that ideology political change is somehow positive.

Townshend’s song title for my essay, I am obliged to explain how I feel theorists have been in some sense “fooled”; after all, if one has not been fooled initially, how could one be fooled again? I will therefore address this issue first.

Second, I will consider two positions that address the analysis of popular music that have been forwarded outside of the discipline of music theory; the first position comes from the field of musicology, and the second arises from popular-music studies. Both of these positions are critical of the notion that traditional analysis can offer much to popular-music studies and even assert that such analytical perspectives can distort an interpretation of the music in fundamental ways. I will argue that both of these positions have problems, and I will identify and discuss these. Finally, I will suggest a number of reasons why I feel some theorists may want to consider investigating rock music, why the study of rock music can make a positive contribution within the music-theoretical discourse, and how the analysis of popular music can make a significant contribution to the field of popular-music studies.

II

It is probably safe to say that music theory as a professional discourse is currently in a period of critical self-reassessment; at music theory conferences one often hears such Kuhnian terms as paradigm shift and post-paradigm period (Kuhn 1970) bandied about by colleagues engaged in informal discussion. Much of this discussion can be organized around two intimately related questions: (1) How should theorists study music? and (2) What music should they study? In terms of analysis, for example, techniques and methods influenced by literary theory have made significant inroads in the discourse. 4 In terms of the musical works that theorists analyze and theorize about, criticism that the canon of “great works” is too narrow and must be expanded to include a wider range of styles and cultures has perhaps

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In order to examine the question of analytical paradigms in music theory, I would like to turn first to a brief consideration of the work of the Viennese theorist Heinrich Schenker. I do so in part because his theories form one of the dominant paradigms within the discipline of music theory, and if one can propose that theorists have been fooled to some extent by their own theories, then one should expect that this situation may be found in the work of Schenker and his various students and followers. I also choose to consider Schenker because the relationship of his theory to the musical literature it addresses is clear cut. This is important because I will focus below on whether or not Schenker’s theories—and analytical theories generally—can be separated from a literature with which they are intimately bound.  

As one surveys Schenker’s written work, and especially his theoretical writings after 1904, one notes that Schenker is principally concerned with the music of a relatively limited group of composers, all of whom are German, Austrian, or strongly identified with the German musical tradition. Schenker’s notion of the superiority of the German musical genius is in fact central to his musical world view. Schenker’s well-known position, in a nutshell, is that a certain group of German composers, living over a period of roughly two-hundred years, raised music to the status of the masterwork; music before Bach is viewed as evolving toward the masterwork, music after Brahms (as well as the music of Wagner and his followers) is degenerate.  

Many critics of Schenker’s view would probably label it “ethnocentric” and “elitist.” Conservative supporters of Schenker’s position might suggest that Schenker was right; the music he discusses is superior to other music. More moderate supporters of Schenker’s theories might claim that whether or not Schenker was right about the literature he explored, we must study his writing as if he were right, suspending judgment for the sake of a hermeneutic understanding. But I am not concerned here with engaging the question of Schenker’s musical values in any absolute sense. I would merely suggest that the success of Schenker’s theories—and by Schenker’s theories I mean not only the Ursatz-dominated late writings, but also the early- and middle-period works—depends in large part on the constraints Schenker placed on the body of musical works that he considered. Schenker’s writings are as powerful as they are because Schenker was able to draw out generalizing principles from a body of musical works that he knew were related to one another before he ever began. Schenker started with a repertoire of German masterworks and, with the famous exception of Wagner’s works, studied these masterworks—or other works in the same tradition—throughout his entire career. His theory is not intended to prove that these pieces truly are masterworks—for after all, Schenker felt it was his responsibility not to test masterworks, but to learn from them—his theory instead tells us with only a few exceptions how these masterworks are related to one another.

9In the United States, theorists tend to view Schenker’s theoretical work as culminating in Free Composition and the Masterwerk essays. Thus, earlier writings tend to be viewed as teleologically oriented toward the later writings, and Oswald Jonas’s annotations in the English translation of Schenker’s Harmony are just the most obvious instance of this teleological approach. When one therefore speaks of “Schenker’s theory,” one almost always means Schenker’s late theory, and so the Schenkerian paradigm with which American theorists work is essentially one founded on Schenker’s late work. For a discussion of the issues surrounding the reception of Schenker’s work in the United States, see Rothstein (1986). For a critique of what Alan Keller calls the “teleological straightjacket” in Schenkerian writing, see Keller (1989). See also McCreedie (1997).

10In the Harmonielehre, Schenker describes a passage from Wagner’s Tristan und Isolde as a “masterpiece of poetry and articulation” ([1906] 1954, 112). Cook (1989) discusses Schenker’s later, more negative assessment of Wagner.

11Throughout his writings Schenker maintains a high level of respect for the music he considers to be of masterwork caliber. Schenker assumes that it is he who must rise to the greatness of the masterwork, not that the masterwork must be vindicated by analytical scrutiny.

12I do not mean by making this claim to also assert that Schenker himself would necessarily have seen his theory in this way. Instead, I posit that a Schenkerian graph "situates" the particular musical work within the much larger group of works that constitute Schenker’s masterwork literature. Graphing a piece, then, tells us less about the piece in isolation from other works (i.e. in an absolute sense) than it does about how that piece is similar or differs from other works within the specified literature. According to this interpretation of Schenker’s theory, meaning in a graph is
caused some theorists to explore the analysis of nonwestern and popular musics.\footnote{Lewis Rowell's work on the music of India, for example, culminates in his 1992 book devoted to music in early India.}

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In Theory Only

Now if Schenker's theories can really be seen as generated from a specific literature, then one might wonder how effective Schenker's theories can be when applied to literatures other than the one upon which he focussed. While Schenker certainly believed, as he states in *Free Composition*, that his "concepts present, for the first time, a genuine theory of tonal language* (Schenker [1935] 1979, 9), one is tempted to add "in pieces that are important to me." Of course from Schenker's point-of-view, there are no great tonal pieces outside the tradition with which he is concerned is a priori, so the whole question is—for him at least—meaningless. One might, however, accuse Schenker of making too broad a claim for his theory; perhaps there are pieces that are tonal but operate according to principles that are in some significant way different from those principles that Schenker describes.

Considering the relationship of Schenker's theories to the specific repertoire that it describes and generalizes, two approaches have tended to dominate Schenkerian thought: theorists stick with the analysis of pieces within the repertoire circumscribed by Schenker himself; or theorists attempt to modify Schenker's late theory in order to apply it to the analysis of music outside of that repertoire. The pioneering work of Felix Salzer (1952) is a clear instance of this second practice, and in recent years Lori Burns's work on modal middlegrounds in Bach (1993) and Matthew Brown's analyses of Wagner (1989), Debussy (1993), and Jimi Hendrix (1997) have helped revitalize this approach. But if there is a real danger of a Schenkerian being fooled in some sense, it lies in the alluring analytical power of Schenker's theory when it is applied to the repertoire for which it was designed. Schenker's late theory provides the theorist with a powerful analytical apparatus for approaching the music of Mozart, Beethoven, and Brahms. Is it any wonder that some theorists are only too happy to remain within the world of the great German masterworks and rarely stray into other repertoires?

All of this discussion of Schenkerian theory has ultimately been in the service of making a very simple point: when a theorist has a strong paradigm from which to work—and this is not restricted to the Schenkerian paradigm—repertoire decisions can sometimes be made on the basis of what pieces are likely to work best within that paradigm. The paradigm under consideration could just as easily be pitch-class-set theory or twelve-tone theory; in either of these cases it is perfectly possible to choose repertoire in terms of the theoretical paradigm itself. In pointing this out I do not also mean to object to such a practice; but a common image (or caricature) of music theorists held outside the discipline—and held especially, as I will argue below, by popular-music scholars—is that the only music that theorists value is music that they can get to fit into their established analytical models. Ultimately, this opinion goes, theorists ignore any music that does not fit into one of their pre-established conceptual molds. While this characterization of the discipline is certainly exaggerated, it is not entirely without foundation. To return to the issues outlined a moment ago, theorists may at times determine what music they study by how they plan to study it.

If we return for a moment to Pete Townsend's lyrics (and work the metaphor of political revolution for paradigm shift a little harder), the established theoretical paradigms can be thought of as a kind of "old boss"—an old boss that may have the effect of overdetermining the repertoires to which a theorist is drawn. But as theorists endeavor to expand their work to include the analysis of new repertoires—in this case popular music—the question that might follow naturally is: What threatens to assume the role of the "new boss"? And How can music theorists avoid being fooled again? As the traditionally trained theorist turns his analytical attention to popular music, are there traps lying in wait that need to be identified and avoided? In order to pursue these questions, I will now turn to two arguments that have been made outside the field of music theory with regard to the relationship between analysis and popular music.

III

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14Poplar-music scholar John Shepherd states the case as follows: "historical musicology's tendency to neglect popular music as a legitimate object of enquiry is in turn symptomatic of a number of fundamental and related premises within the discipline, namely, that all music conforms to one set of technical criteria...that all music can be judged in terms of these criteria, and that in terms of these criteria 'serious' art music emerges as inherently more valuable than popular music" (1982, 147-48). Shepherd considers theorists to be specialists within historical musicology, and it is clear from the remarks that immediately precede this quotation that this critique is specifically directed at theorists.


That Schenker's theory arises from the pieces themselves, and not from preconceived theoretical notions that are subsequently applied to pieces, has a number of striking parallels with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's scientific method, a method that falls into sharp relief in Goethe's critique of Isaac Newton's scientific methodology. See Sepper (1988).
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essentially to be a response to Milton Babbitt's 1958 essay, "The Composer as Specialist" (an essay frequently referred to by the title given it by the editors of High Fidelity, "Who Cares If You Listen?"). McClary argues that avant-garde composers—she quotes Arnold Schoenberg, Roger Sessions, Pierre Boulez, and Babbitt—essentially relish the difficulty of their music. The average concert-goer finds this music impossible to understand, and this is something McClary contends provides this cerebral music with a kind of vindication in the eyes of its avant-garde composers. The problem, as McClary sees it, is that these composers insist that their music be understood strictly in terms of its structure; any attempt to understand this music in more "human terms" (whatever that is supposed to mean) is discouraged by the very composers themselves, despite the fact that such a perspective might actually provide a kind of aesthetic entrée for at least part of this alienated audience. The prestige of this music depends on its difficulty, and since relatively few are listening, avant-garde composers suffer from a condition McClary diagnoses as "terminal prestige."

I will not consider here the many problems in McClary's portrayal of Schoenberg, Sessions, Boulez, and Babbitt. Instead, I want to focus on the way McClary employs popular music rhetorically in the course of her argument. There is much with which the advocate of popular music can agree in McClary's article. She points out that music scholars in the academy, or at least those in music theory, have tended to ignore almost all forms of popular music; while avant-garde composers are predicting the end of music, vital music is breaking out all around them. McClary claims that various popular musics have played a crucial role in musical life in the twentieth century and calls for the serious and careful study of popular music. So far, then, we know what music she thinks we need to study, but the big question is how we should study it; and it is the answer to this second question that I find troubling in McClary's argument.

McClary examines an Earth, Wind, and Fire song, "System of Survival."15 She is mostly interested the way the tune addresses social and political issues, and in her perception that it was conceived, in contrast to the music of Babbitt, by musicians who do care if you listen. McClary is careful to stress the fact that "System of Survival" is not a simple song; it is carefully produced and recorded. But she adds, "the kind of intelligence that shines through this song is of quite a different order: it is an intelligence that accepts the experiences of the body—dance, sexuality, feelings of depression and elation—as integral parts of human knowledge that accrue value as they are shared and confirmed publicly" (1989, 80). McClary is referring mostly to the lyrics of the song, though she also makes some very brief remarks about the rhythm tracks, the singing, the harmonic structure, and various other aspects of the tune.

What I find troubling about McClary's reading of this Earth, Wind, and Fire song is: she seems to have accepted uncritically the notion that popular music is uncomplicated in the traditional sense, or if it is complicated structurally, or engages our attention along structural lines, then this is not how the song was meant to be heard anyway. In fact, McClary seems to be saying to those difficulty-mongering avant-garde critics of popular music, "OK, you're right, this stuff isn't very interesting structurally, so here are some ways in which it is interesting." Based on her description, one might think that a large part of the Earth, Wind, and Fire album on which this track appears is given over to the type of hip political statements that she praises so warmly in her article. But in fact there are only three other numbers that contain lyrics addressing social issues.16 For the most part, the rest of the album is, like much art music, music about itself or music about other music. There are a number of extremely interesting structural moments, some clever references to other tunes and styles, and a lot of masterful playing, singing, production work, and song-writing. As McClary states, this music is popular, and that popularity is certainly the result of a number of factors, including such things as the marketing of the product, radio and MTV airplay, etc. But surely one factor that accounts for the effect of this music is the way the pitches and rhythms go—the structure of the music itself.17

Along with McClary, I believe we need to devote more scholarly attention to popular music, and I agree with most of the historical reasons she gives for doing so.18 But in McClary's argument a "new boss" emerges that threatens to replace the old one; for her, the most valuable interpretation of a piece is the one that is most informed by its social and cultural context. Like the Schenkerian paradigm

15The lyrics to "Evil Roy," "Money Tight," and "Touch the World" suggest that the individual needs to rise above material circumstances. In the case of "Touch the World," the lyrics by Rev. Oliver Wells suggest turning to Jesus. These songs, then, are not nearly as cynical as "System of Survival" and cannot be thought of as political in the sense of suggesting the need for change in one's external circumstances.

16Think, for example, the instrumental cut "New Horizons," composed, produced, and arranged by Bill Meyers.

17This position is further argued in McClary and Wales (1990).
essentially to be a response to Milton Babbitt’s 1958 essay, “The Composer as Specialist” (an essay frequently referred to by the title given it by the editors of High Fidelity, “Who Cares If You Listen?”). McClary argues that avant-garde composers—she quotes Arnold Schoenberg, Roger Sessions, Pierre Boulez, and Babbitt—essentially relish the difficulty of their music. The average concert-goer finds this music impossible to understand, and this is something McClary contends provides this cerebral music with a kind of vindication in the eyes of its avant-garde composers. The problem, as McClary sees it, is that these composers insist that their music be understood strictly in terms of its structure; any attempt to understand this music in more “human terms” (whatever that is supposed to mean) is discouraged by the very composers themselves, despite the fact that such a perspective might actually provide a kind of aesthetic entrée for at least part of this alienated audience. The prestige of this music depends on its difficulty, and since relatively few are listening, avant-garde composers suffer from a condition McClary diagnoses as “terminal prestige.”

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discussed a moment ago, a strong sociological paradigm can also attract the scholar to a certain repertoire; in this case, McClary is drawn to consider this particular Earth, Wind, and Fire tune because it can be shown to do some of the things that she presumably wants music to do. But if there was a chance of being fooled before, it is equally possible in the present instance. McClary's choice of a musical example in this case is just as motivated by ideology as are the choices of any theorist she might care to cite, and I am not sure that she would disagree on this point. By carefully considering her examination of "System of Survival," the reader unquestionably comes to a greater understanding of McClary's intellectual position, but I am not sure one learns very much about the music of Earth, Wind, and Fire, or about popular music generally.

McClary clearly directs the reader's attention to popular music because it raises issues that are routinely ignored in the professional discourse of academic musicology and music theory. In McClary's argument, popular music constitutes a kind of disciplinary disruption to the standard picture that scholars routinely paint of music in the twentieth century. But while the example she chooses is effective in such a role, it is certainly not the case that all popular music—or even all Earth, Wind, and Fire music—would have such a marked disruptive effect. Casting popular music in the role of the significant disruption, and in so doing emphasizing the ways in which it is different from art music (a difference that is asserted rather than argued), proves ultimately to be just as distorting as any attempt to emphasize the similarities between the two broad styles could ever be.  

IV

While McClary devotes only a few sentences to an examination of the music-technical aspects of "System of Survival," she does use technical terms that are usually employed in the analysis of European art music. She writes, for example, of "pungent dissonances that refuse to resolve," of the "continual resistance to harmonic closure," and of the "absence of the secure harmonic foundation that usually grounds such music" (1989, 78). These technical descriptions are, of course, used to support her sociologically informed reading of the song. But there are a number of scholars in the discipline of popular-music studies who might advise McClary to be cautious in her use of such traditional analytical terms. For popular-music scholars such as Richard Middleton, John Shepherd, or Peter Wicke, descriptive terms derived from the study of western art music are ideologically loaded; by even employing such technical terms and the conceptual prejudices that they are thought to imply, one risks interpreting the music according to analytical criteria that are foreign to the music itself. In other words, since most of our music-analytical paradigms have been developed to examine music in the European tradition, they are inherently unsuited for the analysis of popular music.

Here, surprisingly, our conservative Schenkerian and radical cultural theorist take a similar position with regard to the what and how of analysis. Both maintain that an analytical system and the musical repertoire it describes should be perfectly matched: the analytical system should be developed out of the specific repertoire under consideration. The Schenkerian may avoid analyzing rock music because the music may not produce satisfying results according to the paradigm; the sociologically oriented popular-music scholar will likely be glad to see the conservative analyst avoid popular music altogether. For example, in proposing that rock music must not be analyzed according to what he terms "the Beethoven tradition," Peter Wicke writes, "Thus, in order to take rock seriously as music, we need to investigate the conception of music which underlies it rather than apply aesthetic criteria and musical models that are completely alien to its cultural origins" (Wicke 1990, 2). Along similar lines, John Shepherd writes, "While it is true that historical musicology has developed a formidable range of analytic techniques and terms for coming to grips with the internal parameters of 'music,' such techniques and terms have a very limited application. It is not possible, for example, to agree with Wilfrid Mellers [1973, 15-16] that there are such things as objective 'musical facts,' necessarily susceptible to explanation through a terminology which has been evolved by professional musicians over some centuries" (1982, 146).

Richard Middleton, in a careful and instructive assessment of the applicability of traditional modes of analysis to popular music, writes, "On the other hand, terms are commonly ideologically loaded. 'Dissonance' and 'resolution' immediately suggest certain harmonic procedures, and a string of associated technical and emotional consent.
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associations. 'Motive' immediately suggests Beethovenian symphonic development technique" (1990, 104). I will return below to Middleton's position in regard to the application of traditional analytical techniques to popular music. For now, however, I would like to focus on the problem that these popular-music scholars have posed for music theorists interested in the analysis of rock music. According to Middleton, Shepherd, and Wicke, the application of analytical paradigms developed in the study of art music to popular music (and rock) is likely to produce distorted interpretations.

A common target for this kind of criticism is the work of Wilfrid Mellers. Mellers's books on the music of the Beatles and Bob Dylan are often accused of presenting the music of these artists as if it were art music. Middleton, for example, takes Mellers to task for privileging "the areas of tonality, melodic contour and, especially, harmony" (Middleton 1990, 113). Middleton is especially concerned with Mellers's Beatles analyses, where "almost any analysis can be taken as an example of the way harmonic progressions are automatically seen as the most interesting, the most interpretively important, aspects of the music" (113). Rock critic and sociologist Simon Frith finds Mellers's lack of attention to the social dimension of this music troubling. Frith states that "Wilfrid Mellers's scholarly books on the Beatles and Bob Dylan, for example, describe in technical terms their subjects' transcendent qualities; but they read like fan mail and, in their lack of self-conscious hipness, point to the contradiction at the heart of this aesthetic approach" (1987, 136).

I find at least two serious problems with this critique of traditional analytical approaches. First, none of these authors demonstrate a close familiarity with music theory and analysis as it has been practiced in the discipline recently; one often wonders about whom they might be writing.

22 Middleton does devote a considerable amount of discussion to possible applications of Schenkerian analytical techniques to popular music; still though, he writes not as a professional theorist, but rather as someone who has explored theoretical approaches to popular music.23 Writers in popular-music scholarship sometimes set up the theorist or musicologist as a straw man, as a caricature that serves as a foil to their own ideas. It is as if these writers were against the idea of theorists examining popular music as a matter of principle.

The second problem I find with this approach has to do with the theme I have been following throughout this paper; that is, by insisting that we cannot view popular music through our current set of analytical lenses, these scholars risk allowing a set of a priori assumptions to dictate methodology. It seems clear that the time to judge the fruitfulness of an approach is after a significant amount of sophisticated work has been done, not before it has been done. If such work is to be done, it seems obvious that music theorists and analysts possess the technical skills to do it.

V

To summarize my argument up to this point, then: it is a mistake to ignore the analysis of rock music because it does not fit current music-theoretical and analytical paradigms in obvious ways; it would also be unwise to take up the study of rock music simply because it works nicely according to a more sociologically oriented paradigm and to insist in so doing that rock music cannot work in more traditional ways too. Finally, rejecting the applicability of current analytical methods to rock music is premature and ultimately unnecessarily limiting.

In considering why theorists might be interested in the analysis of popular music in general, and rock music in particular, it is helpful to return to the questions, What music should we study? and How should we study it? Is it, for example, possible to adapt current analytical approaches to the task of analyzing rock? Recent analytical work has suggested that it is. Brown (1997), Everett (1985, 1986, 1992, 1995, 1997), Kaminsky (1992), and Burns (1997) have used modified Schenkerian approaches in work examining the music of Jimi Hendrix, the Beatles, Paul Simon, and k. d. lang.24 Far from demonstrating that this music is somehow just like art music, these analyses have suggested that while rock music can at times hold certain structural characteristics in common with Schenker's masterwork literature, it also has certain musical characteristics that are all its own. Rock music raises issues in tonal theory that simply do not come up in the consideration of the masterworks, and that this music is different in these often tacit ways is partly what we mean.

22 In light of this, one might even wonder whether these critics are reacting principally to the discourse of music theory at all; it sometimes seems as if these writers are reacting against the way theory and analysis were taught when they were students.

23 The chapter on analysis in Middleton (1990) is, along with Moore (1993), Brackett (1995), and Tagg (1982), undoubtedly the best music-analytical work to come out of the field of popular-music studies.

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when we say that rock constitutes a different style of music. To the extent that theorists are interested in developing their theories of tonal music in ways that cross repertory boundaries, the analysis of rock music can make a significant contribution. As mentioned above, Schenker's theory is one that arises from a particular repertoire. There are other theoretical approaches, however, that do not arise from some specific body of works. Style theory, for example, especially as articulated by Leonard Meyer (1989), considers how styles can evolve in general ways. Meyer's notion of style change, for example, generalizes across a number of historically and geographically situated styles. Rock music provides a ready testing ground for many of Meyer's notions of how styles change; because rock music is disseminated almost immediately after it is produced, the timeframe within which style change can and does occur is drastically shortened. Consider, for example, the amazing development of rock music from the British invasion of the 1964-66 period, to the psychedelia of the 1967-69 period, to the explosion of widely divergent rock styles in the early 1970s. One only needs to compare an early Beatles album with, say, King Crimson's In the Court of the Crimson King of some five years later to underscore the speed and magnitude of this stylistic transformation. This rapid style change is sometimes thought to be due to a superficial demand on the part of the rock consumer for constant variety. But one might also posit that styles changed so quickly because innovation was absorbed and adopted almost instantaneously by the musicians involved. In any case, I am convinced that the general music-technical mechanisms of style change in the rock music of the 1960s and 1970s are ultimately not much different from those operative in other historical periods.

As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, music theory has begun to incorporate techniques and methods drawn from other disciplines. Rock music can serve as a focal repertory for testing the effectiveness of some of these ideas in musical analysis, especially because approaches borrowed from other disciplines are not as repertoire-dependent as those developed inside the discipline. Thus, as I have attempted to show in recent articles (Covach 1990, 1995, and 1997a), notions of stylistic competency and intertextuality can be very useful in unpacking the effect of certain kinds of rock music. Intertextuality and stylistic competency are especially applicable, for instance, to the new-wave groups of the latter third of the 1970s—groups whose music depends upon the listener's ability to identify references to earlier styles in rock music. In addition to enriching our perspective on current analytical paradigms, the study of rock music also suggests that there are particular analytical issues that arise in the study of rock that may not arise as obviously in other, more traditionally studied repertoires. Consider tone color and instrumentation, for example. A large part of the aesthetic effect of much rock music depends upon certain precise timbres: what would the Moody Blues be without their Mellotron, Jimi Hendrix without his Stratocaster, or the Byrds without Roger McGuinn's Rickenbacker electric twelve-string guitar? These sounds can become referential in precise ways and this referentiality in the work of later groups can take on a tremendous significance. An analytical apparatus that accounts for these and other kinds of timbral relationships in rock music could in turn be applied to other repertoires, even those in the art-music tradition. Thus, while rock music benefits from the application of established analytical approaches, it also, potentially at least, has something to give in return; it can perhaps address our attention to aspects of familiar repertoires that have been less carefully examined within the discipline.

In short, my position is not that theorists and analysts should consider rock music simply because it is there, although that may be a good enough reason for musicologists to consider it. Theorists should pay more attention to rock music because it is interesting, and it is interesting because as a repertory it challenges disciplinary assumptions about what music is, how it can work, and how we experience it. I do not think one should use rock or popular music as a kind of club with which to beat the avant-garde and the structuralism or formalism that that music may be seen to represent. I also do not think that one must necessarily adopt a sociological orientation in the study of rock music. Certainly the socially

\[26\] Moore (1993) and Brackett (1995) also employ style-based approaches that depend on notions of competency in the analysis of rock music.

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27In making this point I do not mean to suggest that I am opposed to approaching popular music in a way that is essentially sociologically oriented. McClary's discussion of Madonna's music (1991), for example, employs analytical techniques usually associated with the analysis of art music in the service of a sociologically oriented approach. Walser (1992, 1993) also uses technical analysis effectively in studies that ultimately focus on social and cultural issues. I am merely arguing that an investigation of popular music need not be motivated exclusively or
determined elements in rock music must be considered and this will enrich analysis, but whether or not the analytical argument principally addresses sociological concerns is ultimately a question of interpretive emphasis and, ultimately, an issue of intellectual freedom.

While I have argued that music theory would benefit greatly through a closer engagement with popular music, popular-music studies would also be tremendously enriched by the kind of careful and close musical analysis that theorists could bring to the field. As John Shepherd has pointed out, popular-music scholars often treat the music itself as a kind of "inscrutable black box"; they are keenly aware that music works its effect on some particular audience, but are at the same time almost totally unaware of how these effects are achieved in music-technical terms (1991, 206). In his important 1981 book Sound Effects, Simon Frith characterizes the situation as follows: "Most rock musicians lack formal training, and so do all rock commentators. They lack the vocabulary and techniques of musical analysis, and even the descriptive words that critics and fans do use—harmony, melody, riff, beat—are only loosely understood and applied. I share this ignorance" (1981, 15). Later in the book, Frith argues that the primary focus in the critical evaluation of rock music should always be a social one; he does, however, admit that music-theoretical analyses of rock music that address what he calls the "aesthetic question"—"how does music achieve its effects"—could be included as a secondary concern (54-55). In fact, most popular-music scholars would not object to the suggestion that some kind of analysis of the actual musical text needs to be done; the real questions thus become: What kind of analysis should this be? and Can analysis be a primary focus?

Popular-music scholar Allan Moore has argued that musical analysis must be considered a key component in the study of popular music. Reacting against the position taken by Frith in the passages cited above, Moore writes, "The problem is that a commentary that does not have a sound theoretical underpinning is liable to be of uncertain quality at best" (1993, 16). In a later passage, Moore argues that the analyst should be "clearly aware that the meaning of the music is not the meaning of the notes" (1993, 17) but rather the way the notes are "put together" (1993, 17).

In terms of the analytical techniques employed by rock music critics, it seems clear that attempting to force popular music into models created for the analysis of European art music is bound to produce distortions; at the same time, however, asserting that an entirely new approach to musical analysis needs to be devised especially for popular music seems extreme. One problem with the project of developing entirely new modes of analysis is that it precludes that popular and art music are entirely different from one another. This certainly need not be the case, however, as work by Peter Van der Merwe (1989) has suggested. In considering the question of using analytical approaches developed in the study of European art music to study popular music, the matter comes down, in large part, to disciplinary assumptions and prejudices. Popular-music scholars are quick to note what they take to be the silent assumptions of theorists and analysts, and clearly the analyst must admit that there are significant differences between the music of, say, Elvis Presley and Richard Wagner. Residing outside the discipline of music theory, these scholars are able to detect interpretive biases that often go undetected within it.

But the crucial point in sounding out our silent prejudices is to avoid replacing one set of assumptions with another, equally insidious

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21See Middleton 1990 (172-246), however, for a broad survey of analytical techniques for popular music. Despite the wide range of approaches Middleton explores, there is little in these pages that could not be represented equally well by relatively mainstream analytical techniques. Earlier in his book, Middleton suggests that once the musical field is "freed from the distorting grip" of what he considers to be an ideology that is inscribed on musicoalogy as a discipline, then "the ground is cleared for a useful musicoalogy to emerge" (122). If the disciplinary assumptions associated with mainstream analytical techniques are thus uncovered, it remains unclear why one would adopt new techniques that merely produce similar analytical results in a different way—unless the difference is important, and in that case one might question how effective and complete the initial uncovering of assumptions had been.
determined elements in rock music must be considered and this will enrich analysis, but whether or not the analytical argument principally addresses sociological concerns is ultimately a question of interpretive emphasis and, ultimately, an issue of intellectual freedom.

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In his keynote address at the recent conference of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music (1993) at the University of the Pacific in Stockton, California, Frith seemed to stake out an even more conciliatory position with regard to close music-technical analysis, suggesting, for instance, that the work of Leonard Meyer might be useful in such endeavors. In his most recent book (1996), Frith draws on the music-theoretical work of Nicholas Cook.

In terms of the analytical techniques employed in such close textual readings, it seems clear that attempting to force popular music into models created for the analysis of European art music is bound to produce distortions; at the same time, however, asserting that an entirely new approach to musical analysis needs to be devised especially for popular music seems extreme. One problem with the project of developing entirely new modes of analysis is that it assumes that popular and art music are entirely different from one another. This certainly need not be the case, however, as work by Peter Van der Merwe (1989) has suggested. In considering the question of using analytical approaches developed in the study of European art music to study popular music, the matter comes down, in large part, to disciplinary assumptions and prejudices. Popular-music scholars are quick to note what they take to be the silent assumptions of theorists and analysts, and clearly the analyst must admit that there are significant differences between the music of, say, Elvis Presley and Richard Wagner. Residing outside the discipline of music theory, these scholars are able to detect interpretive biases that often go undetected within it.

But the crucial point in sounding out our silent prejudices is to avoid replacing one set of assumptions with another, equally insidious
set. Thus we must be cautious of too quickly rejecting an entire approach to musical analysis, with all the sophisticated techniques that theorists have developed for accounting for the musical text, on the assumption that because such techniques were developed to study art music they could never produce anything but a distorted reading of popular music. Indeed, if we as theorists or as popular-music scholars do not want to be fooled again in regard to musical analysis, we must resist the temptations that disciplinary paradigms can create, or at least be keenly aware of the ways in which these pressures can operate. As musical scholarship pays increasing attention to popular music, we need to be sure that we avoid falling into traps that silently reside within our own disciplines: we must avoid creating a "new boss, just like the old boss."

References


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31 Though I have been considering these assumptions as disciplinary ones—which in itself is a kind of distancing technique of which one must constantly be aware—it should not be overlooked that the assumptions to which I refer are also likely to have some basis in each scholar's own personal experience and background. Thus, for a popular-music scholar the assumption may not simply be that the discipline of music theory has nothing interesting to say about rock music, but also that music theorists like the ones I've known couldn't possibly have anything interesting to say. This, of course, applies equally to the biases of music theorists and analysts. The argument then is not just about bringing disciplines together—something that seems comfortably abstract—but also about bringing people together.


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