Encoding Emotional Turbulence in the Music of Soundgarden: An Analysis of ‘Outshined’

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This essay will seek to analyse, understand and interpret the unique compositional aspects of the Soundgarden song ‘Outshined’ (1991). The song is notable for its contrasting sections and mood changes that shift back and forth from a heavy sluggish monotony in the verse to a much greater sense of melody and power in the chorus sections. What part does the construction of modal riffs play in affecting the sense of tonality and feeling within the song?

Previous analytical research on modal subversion by Chris McDonald (2000, pp. 355 -363) and the melodic-harmonic ‘divorce’ in rock by David Temperley (2007, pp.323-342) have examined the ways that implied and non-functioning harmony operate within the musical and structural aspects of riff-based rock music, thus creating a much looser sense of a tonal centre.

Does the variety found in sectional changes and musical devices reflect and express a wider discourse within the song lyrics regarding emotional instability? Could this be, in part, due to an eclectic set of musical influences on the composer (Chris Cornell)? Robert Walser has previously noted that ‘Nowhere are genre boundaries more fluid than in popular music’ (1993, 28), whilst Alan Moore has discussed the concept of ‘friction’ within popular music that intentionally seeks to subvert and challenge the listeners expectations (2012, 163). It could be argued that the range of stylistic influences on the song, as well as its historical context within wider popular music, are a significant contributor to the songs ability to successfully communicate the fluctuating emotional states of the composer.
The early 1990s in rock music were marked by a shift away from the excesses and ostentatious displays exhibited by numerous rock artists in the 1980s. This was not just regarding the actual music that was written, but also the wider aesthetic of rock music. Virtuosic guitar solo’s and larger than life stage personas were quickly being replaced by a much more grounded and thoughtful approach that placed greater emphasis on mundane and everyday universal experiences (Unsworth, 1992). This was being expressed in the music, lyrics and image of a growing number of bands, most notably from the city of Seattle in the U.S.A. The music from this area came was later termed as ‘grunge’ music, but this consolidatory term does little to reflect the diverse set of bands that were active at the time. If there were musical traits that linked these bands to a common sound, it was their combination of distorted heavy metal guitar riffs inspired by British hard rock bands of the 1970s such as Black Sabbath and Led Zeppelin (Waksman, 2009, 273) and on the other side, a more chaotic and discordant approach to song writing that was influenced by the music of The Stooges and MC5.

Soundgarden, and the song ‘Outshined’, exemplify an ability to harness and fuse the conflicting cultures of heavy metal and art-rock to utilize and re-appropriate the most emotionally potent aspects of both genres (Natanael, 1991). The bands overall sound is heavy and down-beat but also displays a very melodic sensibility towards songwriting and structure.
Andrew Cope’s study of the influential riffs of Black Sabbath, observed that the notes from which the riffs are constructed do in fact imply a sense of modality and tonality in place of the absence of traditional triadic resolutions that make up most other forms of popular music (2010, 51-60). The riffs of Black Sabbath hold particular importance in relation to Soundgarden, as Black Sabbath have been noted by the Soundgarden themselves as being a major influence on their riff construction and overall timbre (Cromelin, 1991).

Chris McDonald has previously examined the concept of modal subversion in alternative
music. His observations refer to the concept of what he calls ‘cross relations’ in power-chord orientated rock which he describes as ‘obscurring the sense of mode, occurring especially in grunge and related forms of alternative music’ (2000, pp. 356). He notes that ‘cross relations’ are defined by contradicting an already established modality within the construction of a particular riff or section of the song (ibid, 357).
The strongest sense of contradiction is found in the use of what are known as parallel fifths, wherein the harmonic make-up of the power chords riff is made up of Perfect fifth intervals that do not adhere to a strictly diatonic system of pitch relation. It could be argued that this is partly the result of use of the Drop-D tuning, which enables the guitarist to use single finger chord shapes to enable a greater freedom and ease in producing fluid and consistent power-chord based riffs, as opposed to the two-finger shape needed to play the same standard root-fifth power-chord in a standard open tuning (Waksman, 2009, 272). In a wider sense the very nature of composing at the guitar can be a contributing factor within itself, with the layout of the instrument being a vastly different prospect than composing at the keyboard. This creates its own set of possibilities and restrictions that inform the construction of the language within the song (Moore, 2001, 59).

**Application and Meaning**

When broken down in its entirety, the verse riff contains the scale:

D, Eb, F, G, Ab, A, C

Though the key signature any many of the chord root notes imply the D Aeolian mode, the power chord-based construction of the riff results in a series of parallel fifths that go outside of the defined key. Most significant of these in affecting an ambiguous tonal centre is the use of an Ab5 chord. Use of the flattened fifth chord in metal is common due to its unsettling
nature and functions as a key stylistic aspect as opposed to functioning as a passing chord (Berger, 1999, pp.166). The use of the Ab note in isolation within the key would imply a blues derived tonality, but with the added perfect Fifth (Eb) adding an implied flattened second interval to the overall scale construction, a diminished tonality is momentarily implied. This could be seen as a partial shift from an Aeolian to a Locrian mode, lending it a feeling of unresolved tension or instability and demonstrating a sense of modal fluidity and ambiguity. The instability expressed by the modal shifting is complimented and emphasised by the 7/4 time signature throughout the verse that continually trips up the listener and has a disorientating effect.

Walser (1993, 26) states that ‘…verbal meanings are only a fraction of whatever it is that makes musicians and fans respond to and care about popular music.’ and that ‘…musical details can be evaluated in relation to interlocked systems…’. In considering the vocal and lyrical content of the verse, in parallel with the riff constructed, a couple of observations can be made. Firstly, the lyrical content of the verse clearly tells a story of starting the day in a depressed and sluggish state. The vocal melody for the verse is almost entirely a unison with the root notes of the guitar riff and has a generally narrow tessitura. These various musical elements in conjunction with each create an overall sense of monotony, repetition and instability in line with the wider discourse of the song. Although on the surface the verse section contains many genre traits that constitute a ‘metal’ sound (a distorted/down-tuned guitar riff, a lack of explicit harmony etc.), the overall context of all the musical elements express a vulnerability and sensitivity that is at odds with the arguably more cynical and shallow preceding popular rock/metal bands that were more concerned with the satisfaction of primal pleasures in terms of their lyrical subject matter and formulaic songwriting. From a historical perspective, this could be indicative of a wider move away from the materialistic and superficial culture of western society in the 1980s, towards something more terrestrial
and organic that evokes a feeling that is closer in line with the early rock bands of the late
1960’s.

“Gets mystified”: Changing the tonality

The harmonic and melodic contrast in the pre-chorus section of ‘Outshined’ is stark and
immediate. David Temperley (2007, pp.336) has previously examined the way in which
certain rock-based song forms utilize a system of riff based modality (often but not always
pentatonically inclined ) in the verse and then shift towards a more traditional approach to
tonal movement in the chorus sections, creating a strong sense of light and shade that displays
an emotional complexity within the song. He refers to this as the ‘loose verse/ tight chorus
model’. Whilst Moore (2012, 163-178) has discussed the idea of ‘friction’ within popular
music, that seeks to subvert the standard or generic practices within a genre and actively
challenge the listener. Using these analytical approaches regarding ‘Outshined’ may enable a
greater understanding of the both the overall discourse of the song and its socio-historical
connotations.
Figure 2. Verse into pre-chorus.

Figure 2 contains the last bar of the verse as the song changes section, this helps in displaying the sudden change of mood in the song. The D major chord played as a semibreve almost acts as a micro-interlude that allows the new key signature of D major/D Ionian to be established. The new keys relation to the verse section is that of a parallel major rather than a relative F major key, lending the song a much stronger feeling of change in emotional context, especially considering the very metal-based approach to composition in the preceding verse. As well as the key change, the time signature changes to 4/4. The change from 7/4 in the verse to 4/4 in the pre-chorus allows the song to exhibit a greater sense of stability and when in conjunction with the simple D major triad. In terms of these notable changes, the verse section of the song has been subverted and potential friction created towards the listeners expectation of the song. The initial promise of a metal-based song form has been interrupted by the pre-chorus’ intentional shift in overall construction and tone. This is a challenge towards the typical notions of rock/metal compositional techniques at the time.
which were largely static and sparse in harmonic and emotional nuance. The change from the unison approach to the top-line in the verse to an increase in vocal range and sophistication in the pre-chorus lends the section a sense of lift.

**Chord Progression and Top-line**

Moving beyond the clearly established change at the beginning of the pre-chorus, it is pertinent to analyse the harmonic movement using the roman numeral system of chord representation and their relationship to the vocal melody. This aids the analysis in seeing if there is a clear sense of a tonal centre that is in line with Temperley’s ‘loose verse/tight chorus’ model.

The chord progression of the pre-chorus can be represented by the following numerals:

I - IV – I – ii – i

In analysing the harmonic relationships in the pre-chorus, it is evident that the I – IV – I chords might usually imply a plagal cadence. So far this is in line with Temperley’s proposed model, but the concept is complicated when considering the vocal melodies interactions with these chords. The C natural note in the top-line that falls on the G major 7th (IV) chord adds an 11th compound interval to the concerned chord and also contradicts the D major key in general, implying a D Mixolydian with the naturalised C note acting as a flattened seventh to the stated key. The ii chord is still diatonically correct within the home key, but in following this with the i chord the sense of pure scale tone harmony is interrupted. As within the verse, there is a clearly modal fluidity at work within the composition that can be observed as mostly Ionian but temporarily passing through Dorian. The fact that the strongest lyrical
emphasis in this section is on the word “Mystified” adds weight to the sense of contradiction and confusion present in the pre-chorus.

Though the feeling of explicit tonality is stronger in this section there is still a harmonic ambiguity at play that doesn’t quite fit Temperleys’ model but is similar in the way it shifts from loose implied harmony in the verse to more specific chord qualities in the pre-chorus.

“Up on my feet again”: Rhythm and Reformation
The chorus section of ‘Outshined’ is in ways a reforming to the core building blocks that make up the verse section. There is a return to the utilization of a riff made up of parallel 5ths and mostly unison top line but with notable differences in the implied feeling of the way these elements are being used and it would seem to be as a result of rhythmic changes that create a re-configuration of the verse section. The 4/4 time signature of the chorus gives the section a greater sense of stability than the verse section. Walser has observed that the 4/4 time signature in rock-based styles as representing single-mindedness and draws parallels between this time signature and the use of military marching drums in the mobilisation of soldiers. This sense of single mindedness is further informed by not just by the mostly unison approach to the chorus vocal melody but also its rhythmic value which is virtually identical to the guitar riff. The short semi-quaver pedal riff that interrupts the chorus is in conjunction with a rest in the top-line vocal, but on the last beat of this bar the vocal returns (“Yeah it…”) almost acting as a call to attention that cues a repeat of the chorus riff. In relating this to the lyrical content, the strongest sense of meaning may be found in the line “till I’m up on my feet again.” The chorus ends in 7/4 with the song title almost shouted in tandem with the stabs on the C5 chord. Though the lyrics of the chorus section on the whole are far from a complete recovery from the depressive lows of the verse, the feeling rhythmic power and greater emotional nuance point towards a sense of determination (or as Walser would...
observe, single-mindedness) on behalf of the composer to overcome the emotional turbulence implied in the songs discourse.

**Contemplation: Static Embellishments**

*Figure 4. Interlude*
The interlude section of the song again may be aligned with Moores’ observations on friction within popular music. The key signature has returned to D major as it is in the pre-chorus section but in this case the whole section is denoted as N.C. (D). In actuality the section is made up of several contradictory chordal embellishments that pass through multiple qualities of D based chords, it is in essence both static, fluid. Again, as mentioned earlier, guitar-based composition is a possible contributing factor but this concept cannot entirely account for the interludes paradoxical dimensions.

Moore (2001, 53) notes that ‘Rock practice maintains a strong tendency to treat harmonies as indivisible units. Listeners are, therefore, in an either/or situation…’. It may be easier to musically interpret the interlude as entirely N.C due to the difficulty in trying to break it down into explicit units. To simply observe the first 4 bars of the interlude (see Figure 4.) it can be seen that the chord quality is in constant flux, to break it down it could be viewed as containing the following implied qualities:

   Bars 1 and 2. = D5, Dsus4, D

   Bar 3. = D7, Dsus4

   Bar 4. D7, Dsus4, Dm, D9

 Attempting to apply any type of traditional music theory-based analysis or logic towards this section would be a misnomer, the interlude like the rest of the song can only be understood on its own terms as a musical language unto itself. The lyrically sparse content of the section feels improvised and, when considered with the static aspects of the musical content, lend the interlude sense of quiet contemplation in both its dynamics and static nature. Though even with these observations in mind, the level of subtle harmonic embellishment continue to feed the songs overall feeling of emotional instability.
The nature of guitar solos in preceding popular rock styles in the 1980s were virtuosic and almost formulaic in their placement within a song, often performed over the harmonic material of the final verse (Moore, 2001, 149). In outshined there is a brief guitar solo interlude after the first chorus performed over the verse riff. Though the solo is pentatonically inclined as is standard for the wider rock genre, it is notable for its imperfect technique that is at odds with the virtuosic approach of the preceding era. In part this could be a lack of technical polish on behalf of the guitarist, but also could a rebelling against the highly codified and standardized nature of this feature in popular rock bands.
Conclusions: Art Metal?

Every aspect of ‘Outshined’ seems to feed into a feeling of instability that becomes apparent with the application of a variety of analytical methods, although fitting the song into any particular analytical model is difficult. The metal-influenced riff-based modality and use of parallel fifths in the verse and chorus lend the sections a feeling of looseness and fluidity in their scalar construction. The pre-chorus and interlude sections create stark variations in the structure that create friction and potentially subvert the listeners expectations by utilizing various triadic and seventh chord qualities (though non-functioning) in conjunction with a greater melodic sensibility in the vocal melody.

When the instrumental and sectional constructions are considered in parallel with the lyric themes of depression and emotional turbulence, a wider discourse is created that has the overall effect of making the song feel unsettled or unstable throughout. The disregard for some of rock music’s most standardized practices (shallow/machoistic lyrical themes, excessive and ostentatious musical displays) are replaced by terrestrial discussions of emotional sensitivity and elements of musical minimalism. Both the eclectic musical influences and lack of music theory knowledge are possibly another contributing factor to the bands highly unique coding that can only be understood within its own musical language.

Bibliography


