

“Weed Crumbles into Glitter”: Representing a Marijuana High in Frank Ocean’s *Blonde*

Introduction

Frank Ocean released his second full-length album, *Blonde*, in August 2016.¹ As the follow-up to his critically-acclaimed 2012 debut *Channel Orange*, *Blonde* entered the Billboard album charts at the number one position and received glowing reviews from fans and critics. With hints of rhythm and blues, soul, rap, pop, and experimental/avant-garde soundscapes, many reviewers remarked upon *Blonde*’s stylistic eclecticism. Along with D’Angelo’s *Black Messiah* (2014), Kendrick Lamar’s *To Pimp a Butterfly* (2015), and Beyoncé’s *Lemonade* (2016), *Blonde* has been lauded for its progressive experimentalism, an experimentalism that pushes at the stylistic boundaries associated with contemporary pop, hip hop, R & B, and soul. Writing in *The Guardian*, for example, critic Tim Jonze describes how “...texture and experimentation are given free rein” in *Blonde*, comparing it to celebrated “avant-garde” rock records such as Radiohead’s *Kid A* (2000) and Big Star’s *Third* (recorded in 1974; released in 1978).² Writing in *Consequence of Sound*, critic Nina Corcoran describes *Blonde* as “minimalist, avant-garde R & B.”³

With its sparse instrumentation, unique timbral qualities, constantly shifting textures, and unconventional forms, one can infer that the songs on *Blonde* were not conceived as club hits

¹ The album title is variously referred to as *Blond* and *Blonde* in reviews, on streaming sites and internet radio stations, and on Ocean’s website. The title is stylized as *Blond* on the album artwork/cover.

² Online at <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/aug/25/frank-ocean-blonde-review-a-baffling-and-brilliant-five-star-triumph>. Accessed 20 November, 2016.

³ Online at <http://consequenceofsound.net/2016/08/album-review-frank-ocean-blonde/>. Accessed 20 November, 2016.

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conducive to dancing. *Blonde* can be characterized as a “headphone album” that invites a form of “deep listening” that recalls the musical aesthetic of progressive rock musicians from the late 1960s and 1970s. Similar to albums by Genesis, Yes, Pink Floyd, and other progressive rock pioneers, the songs on *Blonde* draw attention to themselves as musical objects to be pondered and examined (and, perhaps, valued and admired) for their arrangements, formal properties, and production qualities. Indeed, Ocean’s list of contributors and “inspirations” for *Blonde* would seem to support this interpretation. In the credits to *Blonde* that appeared in the accompanying *Boys Don’t Cry* magazine, Ocean identifies a number of “classic,” progressive, and art-rock luminaries, including David Bowie and Brian Eno. The Beatles also exert a strong influence on *Blonde*. The song “White Ferrari” includes an interpolation of The Beatles’ “Here, There, and Everywhere” (*Revolver*, 1966) and “Siegfried” uses a sample from “Flying” (*Magical Mystery Tour*, 1967). Portions of *Blonde* were recorded at Abbey Road Studios, the recording studio most often associated with The Beatles and many other canonical recordings by artists and bands commonly associated with classic rock.

Blonde is also similar to many progressive and classic rock recordings from the late 1960s and early 1970s in that it can be considered a “drug” record. Throughout *Blonde*, there are numerous lyrical references to a variety of drugs, including quaaludes (“Nights”), cocaine (“Self Control”), acid/LSD (“Solo”), and “magic” mushrooms (“Siegfried”). The drug referenced most often on *Blonde* is marijuana. Lyrical references to marijuana/pot/weed are so prevalent throughout *Blonde* that critics Tricia Kilbride and Martha Tesema have recognized, what they

call, “*Blonde*’s weed fixation.”⁴ Recalling Brian Wilson’s memorable description of the songs on The Beach Boys’ *Smile* as comprising a “teenage symphony to God,” critic Ann Powers refers to *Blonde* as a “teenage symphony to weed.”⁵ Table 1 includes many of the obvious lyrical references to marijuana that appear on *Blonde*.⁶

Table 1 About Here

Of course, many “classic rock” bands - including The Beatles, The Grateful Dead, Pink Floyd, and many others - have created music conceived as a functional analog to a drug experience.⁷ But, despite the fact that a great deal of music has been and created and enjoyed by people “under the influence” of one drug or another (or multiple drugs at the same time), there is not an established methodology within the academic study of music for describing music “as” a drug experience. Indeed, as activities traditionally concerned with the tasks of “generalizing” and “normalizing,” the constraints and expectations commonly associated with the discipline of

⁴ Online at http://mashable.com/2016/08/23/frank-ocean-blonde-track-by-track/#UlofKJR_vPq5. Accessed 20 November, 2016.

⁵ Online at <http://www.npr.org/sections/therecord/2016/08/22/490918270/detangling-frank-oceans-blonde-what-it-is-and-isnt>. Accessed 20 November, 2016.

⁶ This is by no means a complete list of the many references to marijuana on *Blonde*. There are probably many more slang references that would be obvious to “insiders.”

⁷ For an excellent overview, see Jim DeRogatis, *Kaleidoscope Eyes: Psychedelic Rock From the '60s to the '90s* (Secaucus, NJ: Carol Publishing Group, 1996).

music theory and the practice(s) of music analysis often fall short when attempting to characterize the qualitative features of such an experience.⁸

The many lyrical references to marijuana throughout *Blonde* suggest an analytical perspective for “making sense” of the album’s musical eclecticism. By considering how the lyrics and other musical parameters function together, *Blonde* can be conceived as the musical representation of a marijuana high. In an attempt to describe how *Blonde* can be “heard” as a marijuana high, I will draw upon studies that describe both the effects of marijuana and common experiences associated with a marijuana high. Unlike hallucinogenic drugs that often produce highly individualized, subjective experiences for users, researchers have identified a number of effects commonly experienced as part of a marijuana high, effects that can be represented

⁸ This tension between the desire to “normalize” the unique aspects of songs with clear drug associations/implications is present in many analytical studies devoted to rock music. See, for instance, Graeme M. Boone, “Tonal and Expressive Ambiguity in ‘Dark Star,’ in *Understanding Rock*, ed. John Covach & Graeme M. Boone (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 171-210; Mark S. Spicer, “Large-Scale Strategy and Compositional Design in the Early Music of Genesis,” in *Expression in Pop-Rock Music*, ed. Walter Everett (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000), 77-111; and Shaugn O’Donnell, “‘On the Path:’ Tracing Tonal Coherence in *The Dark Side of the Moon*,” in *“Speak To Me”: The Legacy of Pink Floyd’s The Dark Side of the Moon*, ed. Russell Reising (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 87-103.

For an account of musical representations of experiences commonly associated with hallucinogenic drugs in music by British psychedelic and house musicians from the 1960s to the 1990s, see Sheila Whiteley, “Altered Sounds,” in *Psychodelia Britannica: Hallucinogenic Drugs in Britain*, ed. Antonio Melechi (London: Turnaround, 1997), 121-142.

musically.⁹ In the analyses that follow, I will show how the fluid and shifting approach to pulse and meter on select songs on *Blonde* reflect the enhanced, drawn-out experience of time described by many users of marijuana. Also, associative (or directionless) thought processes, or “flights of fancy,” commonly experienced during a marijuana high are reflected in the nonconventional formal designs of many songs on *Blonde*.

Finally, I will briefly consider how the focused, attentive form of listening that accompanies a marijuana high resembles the type of listening and attention to detail often assumed, expected, and associated with the act(s) of music analysis. The trance-like state of “deep listening” commonly associated with music analysis can be considered an altered state of consciousness that, like the marijuana high, allows for previously unrecognized or hidden musical details, structures, and processes to become perceptible or experienced in new ways.

“Cannabis Time,” Tempo, and the “Here-and-Now” in *Blonde*

Frank Ocean’s vocal performance on “Nikes,” the opening track on *Blonde*, sounds like a vinyl record being played at the wrong speed. The distinctive “warble” associated with Autotune and the pitch-shifting effect applied to Ocean’s vocal parts create a deliberately artificial, synthetic timbre that floats above the relaxed backbeat of the drum machine and the laid-back

⁹ Of course, the subjective quale of experiences and states of consciousness brought about by drugs are informed not only by the physiological and chemical changes associated with the drug but also, and perhaps more significantly, by the user’s past experiences, setting, and expectations. Psychologist Lester Grinspoon described these variables as “set and setting” in his foundational *Marihuana Reconsidered* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971). On the functions and contributions of “set and setting” as they relate to drug usage, see also Nathan Adler, *The Underground Stream: New Life Styles and the Antinomian Personality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972); Andrew Weil, *The Natural Mind* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972); and Norman E. Zinberg, *Drug, Set, and Setting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

mood suggested by the soft chordal swells of the synthesizer. Ocean's lyrics move quickly from one American cultural reference to another: from the status associated with Nike sneakers ("the real ones"), to professional basketball player Carmelo Anthony's continued quest for an NBA championship ring, and memorial toasts for members of the hip hop community (executive A\$AP Yams and rapper Pimp C) and slain Florida teenager, Trayvon Martin.

As if suddenly aware of the steady stream of seemingly random associations and references, Ocean seems to "step outside" of the song at 1:40. At this moment, Ocean speaks directly to the listener by explaining that he is "fuckin' buzzin'." As the first obvious reference to drug use on *Blonde*, the "buzz" is also considered to be the first stage of the marijuana high. As described by Joseph Berke and Calvin Hernton, the "buzz" is often described as a "... 'tingling' sensation, a kind of vibrating that is felt in the body..." that is "... similar to the first few sips of alcohol that stimulate the body and the brain and cause the drinker to 'shudder,' followed by a slight 'tipsy' feeling in the head."¹⁰ The reference to the initial "buzz" in "Nikes" prepares the listener for the many lyrical references and musical representations of a marijuana high that appear throughout *Blonde*.

Beginning in the late 1960s, a number of studies describing the various physiological, phenomenological, and behavioral effects of marijuana were carried out by medical

¹⁰ Joseph Berke and Calvin C. Hernton, *The Cannabis Experience* (London: Peter Owen Limited, 1974), 33-34.

professionals, researchers, and sociologists.¹¹ In studies addressing the phenomenological effects of the marijuana high, many users describe how marijuana effects their perception of time and temporality. Berke and Hernton, for example, describe the elastic and elongated experience of time commonly experienced by those under the influence of marijuana as “cannabis time.” “Cannabis time,” they explain, “can be likened to an elastic band which has stretched to several times its own length. When stretched, parts of the band, the interval between parts, and the band itself, expand. The same holds true for the duration of events, activities, or sensations - as well as the interval between them - after getting high. They expand.”¹²

Additionally, many users describe how their experience of events in time are disrupted, producing a sense of “timelessness” while under the influence of marijuana. In a study published in 1971, for example, Frederick T. Melges, *et al*, described how marijuana’s ability to alter a user’s “temporal span of awareness” and “changes in the sense of duration” contributed to “a confusion of past, present, and future” and “changes in temporal perspective.”¹³ For those under

¹¹ One of the earliest studies to utilize standardized empirical methods and procedures in the examination of the physiological effects of marijuana is Andrew T. Weil, Norman E. Zinberg, and Judith M. Nelson, “Clinical and Psychological Effects of Marihuana in Man,” *Science*, New Series, Vol. 62, no. 3859 (13 December 1968), 1234-1242. On the experiential effects of marijuana, see Berke and Hernton, *The Cannabis Experience*; Grinspoon, *Marihuana Reconsidered*, 185-217; and Erich Goode, *The Marijuana Smokers* (New York and London: Basic Books, Inc., 1970), esp. 139-179. For a more recent overview of common experiences and effects of marijuana, see Leslie L. Iverson, *The Science of Marijuana* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), esp. 82-114 (“The Effects of Cannabis on the Central Nervous System”).

¹² Berke and Hernton, *The Cannabis Experience*, 165-166.

¹³ Frederick T. Melges, Jared R. Tinklenburg, Leo E. Hollister, Hamp K. Gillespie, “Marihuana and the Temporal Span of Awareness,” *Archives of General Psychiatry* 24 (June 1971), 564-567. An earlier account by the same authors was published as “Temporal Disintegration and Depersonalization During Marihuana Intoxication,” *Archives of General Psychiatry* 23 (September 1970), 204-210.

the influence of marijuana, the confusion - or conflation - of past, present, and future creates an experiential state researchers described as the “here-and-now,” an experience of “temporal disintegration” where users were unable to “keep track of goal-relevant information.” Based on their studies, the authors concluded that:

when a subject becomes less able to integrate past, present, and future, his [*sic*] awareness becomes more concentrated on present events; these instances, in turn, are experienced as prolonged or timeless when they appear isolated from the continual progression of time - that is, when the present events no longer seem to be transitions from the past to the future.¹⁴

For many users, the experience of “temporal disintegration” suggests a sort of “opening up” as time is experienced spatially, creating a sense of the “here-and-now.” As the marijuana user’s sense of personal time drifts from geophysical time, the user is able to explore aspects of the “here-and-now” in depth. A compelling literary description of time appearing to “open up” appears in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*.

Once when I asked for a cigarette, some jokers gave me a reefer, which I lighted when I got home and sat listening to [Louis Armstrong’s “What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue”]. It was a strange evening. Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you’re never quite on the beat. Sometimes you’re ahead and sometimes behind. Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its

¹⁴ Melges, *et al*, “Marihuana and the Temporal Span of Awareness,” 566. On the experience of time under the influence of marijuana, see also Weil, *et al.*, “Clinical and Psychological Effects of Marijuana in Man,” 1240; Goode, *The Marijuana Smokers*, 158-160; Berke and Hernton, *The Cannabis Experience*, 165-172.

nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around. . . . So under the spell of the reefer I discovered a new analytical way of listening to music. The unheard sounds came through, and each melodic line existed for itself, stood out clearly from all the rest, said its piece, and waited for the other voices to speak. That night I found myself hearing not only in time, but in space as well. I not only entered the music but descended, like Dante, into its depths.¹⁵

Ellison's description of the "nodes" of time where it is possible to "slip into the breaks and look around" corresponds with the experience of "temporal disintegration" associated with a marijuana high.¹⁶

The experience of "temporal disintegration" is represented in the song "White Ferrari." "White Ferrari" can be interpreted as a two-part design. As shown in Figure 1, Part 1 - from the beginning of the song until 1:25 - features Ocean's lead vocals, overdubbed backing vocals, and a synthesized keyboard part. A sense of meter is supplied by the harmonic changes in the

¹⁵ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage International, 1995), 8-9.

¹⁶ Like Ellison in *Invisible Man*, many writers have sought to mimic the effects of the drug high in works of fiction and literature. Scholar Erik Mortensen has described how passages in works by Beat poets and authors, for example, alter "...temporal perception through the written word..." and provide "...the 'nonuser' with a means to experience the altered drug reality." (Erik Mortensen, "High Off the Page: Representing the Drug Experience in the Work of Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg," in *The Philosophy of the Beats*, ed. Sharon N. Elkholy (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2012), 163-178; 175.)

Throughout I distinguish between attempts to represent/mimic attributes associated with the drug experience with artistic creations that recount drug experiences, such as Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821), Fitz Hugh Ludlow's *The Hasheesh Eater* (1857), Baudelaire's *Les Paradis Artificiels* (1860), Aldous Huxley's *The Doors of Perception* (1954), Henri Michaux's *Miserable Miracle* (1956), and many others. For a critical overview of drug-related fiction and literature, see Marcus Boon, *The Road to Excess: A History of Writers on Drugs* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

keyboard, where it is possible to infer a four-bar loop. The metric interpretation suggested by the repeated four-bar progression is reinforced with the introduction of drum machine hi-hats (marking off beats 2 and 4 of the bar) beginning at :17 (and again at :50). At :27 (and briefly repeated at 1:05), a full drum machine part fades confirming the metric interpretation that has been slowly emerging (refer to Figure 1).

Figure 1 About Here

Part 2 of “White Ferrari,” beginning at 1:26, is constructed as three-part design. The pulse, tempo, and meter established in Part 1 is initially carried over in Part 2a (from 1:26 until 2:04). Built upon a four-measure chord progression played by an acoustic guitar, Part 2a is dominated by Ocean’s lead vocals and numerous vocal overdubs. The dramatic intensity that has been building over 2a finally reaches a climax in Part 2b (2:04-2:45). Here, Ocean’s lead and backing vocals ascend to a higher register and are delivered in a manner that sounds strained and forced. In contrast to the more intimate vocal performance of 2a, all of the vocal parts in 2b are drenched in reverb, creating an artificial sense of space and distance. At the same time, the lyrics take a decidedly surreal turn at 2:13 as Ocean sings “One too many years, some tattooed eyelids on a facelift / Mind over matter is magic, I do magic.”

The “magic” referenced in the lyrics is reflected in the subtle transformation that occurs in the perceived tempo of “White Ferrari.” In the transition from 2a to 2b, listeners experience a sense of slowing down as the perceived pulse now corresponds to approximately 54 or 55 beats per minute (bpm), a feeling of half-time compared to the pulse previously established in Parts 1 and 2a (approximately 109 bpm). The listener’s attention is drawn to the newly realized, slower tempo as the drum machine from Part 1 returns at 2:46. Upon returning, however, the drum

machine part (still buried deep in the mix) seems to “float” independent of the surrounding music. The reappearance of the drum machine at 2:46 seems “out of time” with the surrounding music as it does not correspond with the new, slower tempo of the implied meter (represented in Figure 1).

The “out of time” drum machine heard at 2:46 accompanies a varied reprise of 2a. During the varied reprise, the acoustic guitar and a keyboard/organ repeat a I-V-IV progression in C over a single bar in the new (slower) tempo. Ocean’s vocal part is mixed so as to sound very close to the listener creating an intimate, almost whisper-like quality to the final section. As the song concludes, the listener is presented with the solo drum machine part now heard as a succession of undifferentiated pulses, none of which are emphasized so as to project any sort of metric hierarchy or organization. For the listener, time seems to “open up” as any sense of meter and the associated impression of directed motion created by a metric hierarchy gradually gives way to pure pulse. At the end of “White Ferrari,” the listener is left to float as the drum machine fades away (see bottom of Figure 1).

The song “Solo” is another example of how the experience of time under the influence of marijuana can be represented musically. “Solo” features Ocean’s lead vocals, overdubbed backing vocals, a Hammond organ, and various sound effects. Formally, “Solo” is a heavily modified verse-chorus design. In the first half the song (from the opening until 1:52), four verses are followed by the pairing of a pre-chorus and a chorus (beginning at :57). Following a reprise of the post-chorus material (1:39-1:52), four more verses are followed by a second chorus and a coda comprised of chorus and pre-chorus musical material (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 About Here

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In the verses, the rhythm of the descending scalar passage in the lower register of the organ and Ocean's quick, clipped vocal delivery work together to suggest a pulse of approximately 134 bpm. With the onset of the pre-chorus following the lyric "Smoking good, rollin' solo," however, the perceived pulse appears is dramatically reduced. At this moment, sustained organ chords and a section of call and response between Ocean's lead vocals and his overdubbed backing parts (repeating the word "Solo") are heard at approximately 67 bpm that, as experienced in "White Ferrari," suggests a feeling of half-time. With the appearance of the chorus at 1:11 ("It's hell on Earth and the city's on fire"), the original, quicker pulse returns. The listener is pulled back once again, however, as the pre-chorus music returns at 1:40 before returning to the original pulse (134 bpm) and the onset of Verse 5 (1:53).

This experience of a "back-and-forth" of the basic pulse returns in a modified form in the second half of the song. Whereas the pulse and music of the pre-chorus music originally served as a point of contrast distinguishing Verse 4 and the first chorus, Verse 8 is immediately followed by the second chorus; there is no intervening pre-chorus. In the absence of a contrasting pre-chorus, the supporting music and the established pulse (134 bpm) are maintained in the transition from Verse 8 to the second chorus (2:52). The pre-chorus music that originally appeared as a re-transition to Verse 5 returns at 3:19. From here until the end, the listener experiences the half-time feel and slower pulse of the pre-chorus.

Whereas the listener experiences a sort of "floating" at the end of "White Ferrari," the experience of "Solo" is that of a transformation, or a sense of confusion, as to how to hear the pulse. The pulse of the pre-chorus intrudes upon the quicker pulse established at the song's opening and appears to be the primary, referential pulse as the song concludes. This ambiguity as

to how to interpret the pulse is also reflected in the lyrics. Throughout the song, Ocean plays with the similar sounds of the word “Solo” and the phrase “so low.” Ocean employs a similar form of word play with the phrase “in hell” and “inhale.” The second line of the chorus can be variously interpreted as “In hell, in hell there’s heaven” or “inhale, inhale there’s heaven.” The former hearing is supported by the opening line of the chorus as Ocean sings “It’s hell on earth.” Hearing “inhale,” however, is supported by the song’s many lyrical references to marijuana.¹⁷ In addition to “smoking good, rollin’ solo,” the lines “green leaf turn to vapors” (2:10) and “brought trees to blow through” (2:39) refer to smoking (and vaporizing) marijuana and the temporal effects that accompany a marijuana high.¹⁸

“Marijuana Thinking” and Episodic Forms in *Blonde*

The experience of “temporal disintegration” described above is closely connected with the ways marijuana affects cognitive processes, especially those associated with short-term, or immediate, memory.¹⁹ In an early study that examined the effects of marijuana on memory and recall, researchers observed that many users had “...difficulty maintaining sequential thoughts

¹⁷ According to the lyrics included on the *Boys Don’t Cry* magazine, the lyric is “Inhale, inhale there’s heaven.” (Frank Ocean, *Boys Don’t Cry*, Issue 1 / Album 3 (2016), 184.

¹⁸ “Be Yourself,” the song that precedes “Solo” on *Blonde*, features a recording of a mother warning her child of the dangers of using alcohol and drugs, especially marijuana. “Solo” suggests that the mother’s warnings were ignored.

¹⁹ See, for example, Lincoln D. Clark, Ronald Hughes, and Edwin N. Nakashima, “Behavioral Effects of Marihuana,” *Archives of General Psychiatry* 23 (September 1970), 193-198; 198. See also Andrew T. Weil and Norman E. Zinberg, “Acute Effects of Marihuana on Speech,” *Nature* 222 (3 May 1969), 434-437.

[caused by the] intrusion of irrelevant associations....”²⁰ Moreover, it was observed that “... immediate recall of preceding thoughts in order to keep on track, and [the] capacity for goal-directed systematic thinking are particularly sensitive to ... marijuana.”²¹ As described in another study, such “... impairments in immediate memory [related to marijuana use] do not follow a smooth time-function but, rather, are episodic, brief in duration, and not always under volitional control.”²²

The associative, episodic cognitive experiences described by researchers corresponds with what author David Foster Wallace has described as “marijuana-thinking.” As Wallace writes in *Infinite Jest*, a

tendency to involuted abstraction is sometimes called “Marijuana-thinking” ...

Marijuana-[Thinkers think] themselves into labyrinths of reflexive abstraction that seem to cast doubt on the very possibility of practical functioning, and the mental labor of finding one’s way out consumes all available attention and makes the [marijuana smoker] look physically torpid and apathetic and motivated sitting there, when really he [*sic*] is trying to claw his way out of the labyrinth.²³

²⁰ Clark, *et al.*, “Behavioral Effects of Marihuana,” 198. See also Berke and Hernton, *The Cannabis Experience*, 86-89; and Goode, *The Marijuana Smokers*, 159-160.

²¹ Clark, *et al.*, “Behavioral Effects of Marihuana,” 198.

²² J. R. Tinklenberg, F. T. Melges, L. E. Hollister, and H. K. Gillespie, “Marijuana and Immediate Memory,” *Nature* 226 (20 June 1970), 1171-1172; 1172.

²³ David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2006), 1048. Similar to Foster’s notion of “marijuana thinking,” David Lenson has described how, “[where] psychedelics gives the user the sensation of reaching cosmic conclusions, cannabis drugs can produce trains of inference that simply lose steam and eventually stop dead in their tracks.” See David Lenson, *On Drugs* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 79.

The experience of “goallessness” and the labyrinthine flights of fancy associated with “marijuana thinking” are reflected in the formal designs of many of the songs on *Blonde*. None of the songs on *Blonde* correspond to traditional musical forms commonly employed in popular music.²⁴ As I have shown in the analysis of “Solo,” there are sections within songs that resemble standard form-defining units, specifically verses or choruses. However, these sections and the formal functions they project are not arranged according to standard popular music designs. Instead, as seen above with “White Ferrari,” most of the songs on *Blonde* exhibit unique formal designs. Attending to the formal design of many songs on *Blonde* can be a disorienting experience for the listener. Instead of the (somewhat) predictable sequence of verses alternating with choruses, many of the songs on *Blonde* are arranged as discrete “episodes.” The sense of expectation and anticipation that typically accompanies the impending return of a chorus, for example, is replaced by a sense of uncertainty as to where a particular song may lead next. When taken together, these discrete sections (or “episodes”) do not project an overriding formal design and, as a result, the listener may experience the form of select songs on *Blonde* as “goalless,” “rambling,” or unpredictable.²⁵

The song “Nights” is an example of an episodic formal design that mimics the unpredictable unfolding of thoughts characteristic of “marijuana thinking.” As shown in Figure 3, “Nights” is arranged as four episodes with a brief transition between Episodes B and C. A four-bar repeated progression establishes C minor as the tonal center of Episode A. A drum

²⁴ For an overview of formal designs common to many forms of popular music, see John Covach, “Form in Rock Music,” in *Engaging Music: Essays in Musical Analysis*, ed. Deborah Stein (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 65-76.

²⁵ The extended version of the song “Pyramids” on *Channel Orange* hints at the episodic formal designs that appear on *Blonde*.

machine in Episode A provides a clear backbeat that supports Ocean's rap-like vocal delivery. At 1:41, Episode B enters with the lyrics "new beginnings...." The pulse established in Episode A carries over into Episode B (approximately 79 bpm) as the drum machine continues to play a standard backbeat pattern. Ocean's vocal part in Episode B is more melodic and is sung in contrast to the rapped rhythmic delivery of Episode A. The tonal center of Episode B shifts to Ab as the bright, "jangly"-sounding guitar from Episode A fades in and out of the mix.

Figure 3 About Here

During Episode B, Ocean sings about "rolling marijuana, my every day shit, every night shit, every day shit" (2:25). Shortly after singing this line, the prevailing mood of Episode B begins to change. A high-pitched synthesizer enters at 2:52 as Ocean's vocals reach into a higher register. At least two loops of distorted guitar parts gradually fade in at 3:00 as Episode B begins to dissolve before our ears. The distorted guitar loops are heard out of time and do not project a strong tonal center. The atonal, a-metric guitar loops of Episode C are all that remain beginning 3:11 until, at 3:30, they are abruptly interrupted by a new contrasting section. Compared to the previous episodes, Episode D (beginning at 3:30) has a slightly quicker pulse (approximately 90 bpm) and is in a different key (oscillating between eb minor and Gb major). Ocean delivers the lyrics in a lower range and in a relaxed, singing manner. Although the music, textures, and timbres of Episode D are new to the unfolding form of "Nights," a reprise of lyrics originally heard in Episode B return at 4:28. Here, Ocean recalls the lyrics heard at 2:00, including the lines "rolling marijuana, that's a cheap vacation."

The form of "Nights" is arranged as a series contrasting formal episodes. By contrast, the form of the song "Seigfried" is formally static, representing the spiraling, goalless thought

processes associated with “marijuana thinking.” “Seigfried” features Ocean’s lead and overdubbed backing vocals, a guitar, bass guitar, various “sound effects,” strings, and organ. Although a click track is buried deep in the mix, there are no percussion instruments. A sense of meter is projected by a repeated four-bar progression that provides the harmonic foundation for much of the song (shown in Figure 4). The opening of the song has a “dreamy” quality as a variety of unidentifiable sound effects drift in and out of the mix. The heavy reverb applied to the electric guitar and vocal parts contribute to the song’s dream-like, relaxed feeling.

Figure 4 About Here

At 2:48, the song appears to “drift” away from the previously established mood. As the music from the opening gradually fades away, a sped-up snippet of Ocean “tripping” over a repeated, indecipherable lyric is accompanied by the introduction of a string section. From 2:50 until 3:34, there is no regular pulse, meter, or tonal center. The music appears to “float” during this section as sounds, instruments, and timbres introduced earlier in the song are interspersed and overlaid with new music and lyrics (“This is not my life, it’s just a fond farewell to a friend”).²⁶

The music slowly comes back into focus at 3:35 as the recently concluded contrasting section gives way to a varied repetition of the opening. At the opening of this varied return, Ocean’s vocal part sounds as if it is sung through a cheap transistor radio as the lyrics recall the dream-like quality of the opening:

Dreaming a thought that could dream about a thought

²⁶ This lyric is borrowed from the song “A Fond Farewell” by Elliott Smith on the posthumous release *From a Basement on the Hill* (2004).

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That could think of the dreamer, the thought that could think of dreaming and
getting a glimmer of God,
I be dreaming of dreaming a thought,
That could dream about a thought,
That could think of dreaming a dream where I cannot,
Where I cannot ...

The spiraling and multi-layered dream-state Ocean describes is supported by the harmonic progression from the opening now played by an electric organ. Listening closely to the ordering and phrasing of the four-chord progression, however, the listener will notice that it has been “rotated.” That is, instead of the ordering of the chords shown in Figure 4, the progression begins on what had been the final chord. From 3:35 until the end of the song, the phrasing and the perceived hypermetric accents associated with the four-bar progression correspond to the ordering shown in Figure 5. The reprise at 3:35, therefore, is perceived by the listener as “the same but different.” The floating, unmoored contrasting section functions as the musical equivalent of letting our ears go out of focus so as to experience the music from a different perspective. The lyrics “Inhale the vapor / exhale once and think twice” (4:15) capture the experience of “marijuana thinking” and the changed perspective for hearing the underlying harmonic progression and its relation to the unfurling musical form of “Seigfried.”

Figure 5 About Here

The Marijuana High and/as Music Analysis

Proceeding from the many lyrical references to marijuana that appear on Frank Ocean’s *Blonde*, I have described how aspects of musical time and musical form can be interpreted as

representations of experiences commonly associated with a marijuana high. Although the lyrics might have initially “tipped me off” to such an interpretation, it was not until I assumed an “analytical” mode of attending to the music that I could find musical support for my pharmacomusical hunch. From this perspective of “analytical listening,” musical connections, processes, and subtle details that had gone unnoticed during more “passive” forms of listening were uncovered. Of course, it is this stance of “analytical listening” that is commonly associated with the preliminary act(s) of music analysis. Furthermore, the insights uncovered while in the altered state of “analytical listening” are those very things often represented (and valued) in music analysis. As Nicholas Cook notes, “...the point of analysis is to explain what is obvious... in terms of structures that are not obvious and can only be deduced from analytical study.”²⁷ Tracing this foundational premise to Freudian theories of the unconscious and structural linguistics, Cook continues by explaining that musical analysis - as a “model of unconscious perception” - seeks to clarify, or uncover musical features or properties “...of which the listeners have no immediate awareness.”²⁸

The insights revealed via “analytical listening” are similar to fictional representations of hearing/experiencing music under the influence of marijuana. As observed above, the protagonist in Ellison’s *Invisible Man* describes a “...new analytical way of listening to music” brought about by marijuana. In Terry Southern’s short story “You’re Too Hip, Baby,” a stoned listener describes listening to a jazz performance where

²⁷ Nicholas Cook, *A Guide to Musical Analysis* (New York: George Braziller, 1987), 222.

²⁸ Cook, *A Guide to Musical Analysis*, 222.

...every note and nuance came straight to him ... as though he were wearing headphones wired to the piano. He heard subtleties he had missed before, intricate structures of sound, each supporting the next, first from one side, then from another, and all being skillfully laced together with a dreamlike fabric of comment and insinuation; the runs did not sound either vertical or horizontal, but circular ascensions, darting arabesques and figurines...²⁹

Like the fictional accounts of Ellison, Southern, and others, reports by test subjects included within research studies on the effects of marijuana often describe experiencing and attending to music in a way that can be characterized as “analytical listening.” In a study from 1970, for example, one test subject described the ability to “...hear more subtle changes in sounds, for example, the notes of music are purer and more distinct, [and] the rhythm stands out more.” Another subject described how “...with my eyes closed and just listening to sounds, the space around me becomes an auditory space, a space where things are arranged according to their sound characteristics instead of visual, geometrical characteristics.”³⁰

In his pioneering critical study *On Drugs*, literary theorist David Lenson has described how marijuana users often experience music through a pattern of “estrangement and reconciliation” that is not unlike a mode of attending/listening often described in analytical discussions of music.

²⁹ Terry Southern, “You’re Too Hip, Baby,” in *Red-Dirt Marijuana and Other Tastes* (New York: New American Library, 1968), 74-84; 76.

³⁰ Charles T. Tart, “Marijuana Intoxication: Common Experiences,” *Nature* 226 (23 May, 1970), 701-704; 702. See also Berk and Hernton, *The Cannabis Experience*, 163-164; and Goode, *The Marijuana Smokers*, 74-76; 156-158.

First the fabric of the music comes apart, with each instrumental or vocal line momentarily isolated and alone, standing out in the sharpest clarity. Then, when the movements of the various parts have been made separately observable in this way, their relationship is freshly perceived on what feels to be a more complex level. A harmony greater than that of pitch alone seems to be developing; a harmony of purpose, timbre, and denotation replaces the narrower original technical unity.³¹

A “dialectical pattern of reconcilable estrangement” whereby the listener initially experiences a “new distance and then a new relationship that closes the distance” describes the cognitive and experiential relationship between music and the user and music and the analyst.³² The user/analyst encounters music through an altered state of consciousness - a drug high or “analytical listening” - whereby the obvious is explained in terms of “structures that are not obvious.” Although the settings may be different - a person high on marijuana listening on headphones and the music theorist/analyst, head down and eyes closed in her office, absorbed in the music - the “set,” or expectations, are similar as the familiar is suddenly made strange and subsequently reconfigured and re-presented from a new perspective.

³¹ Lenson, *On Drugs*, 104.

³² Lenson, *On Drugs*, 103.

Track Number/Song Title	Lyrical Reference(s)
1. "Nikes"	"Fuckin' buzzin'" "Weed crumbles into glitter"
4. "Be Yourself"	Extended warning about the dangers of drugs and alcohol, particularly marijuana
5. "Solo"	"Smoking good, rolling solo." "White leaf on my boxers, green leaf turn to vapors" "I brought trees to blow through"
6. "Skyline To"	Sporadic exhortations to "Smoke!"; descriptions of "Haze"
9. "Nights"	"Rolling marijuana that's a cheap vacation My every day shit, every night shit, every day shit"
14. "White Ferrari"	"Your dilated eyes watch the clouds float"
15. "Seigfried"	"High flights, inhale the vapor, exhale once and think twice"
17. "Futura Free"	"Keep me high, smoke som'n" "I ain't smoked all year This is the last song, so I'm finna wipe that off, Tolerance is so low Still smoke a while [cigar]"

Table 1: Lyrical References to Marijuana on *Blonde*

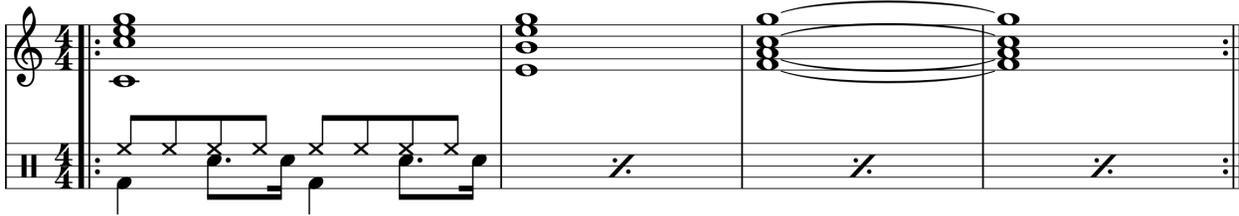
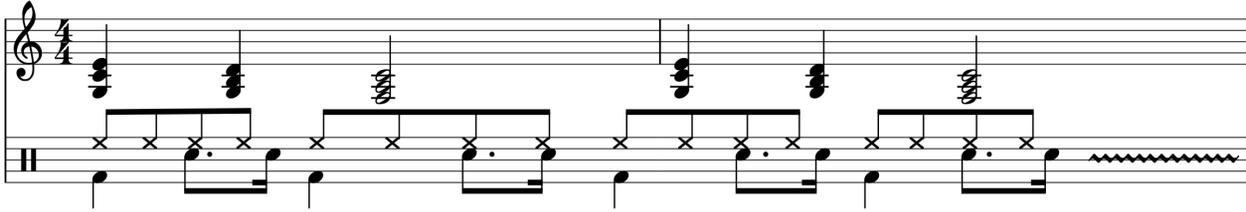
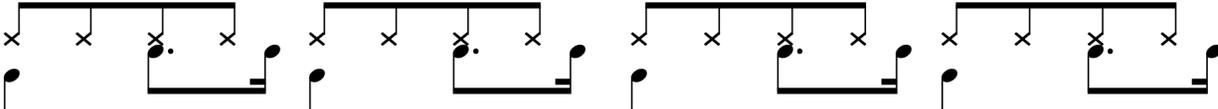
Section	Characteristics/Features
Part 1 (0:00 - 1:25)	<p>Lead and backing vocals, drum machine and hi-hats, sustained chords by synthesizer, random sound effects <u>Metric interpretation when drum machine enters (at :27 and 1:05); Quarter note = 109 ppm</u> (Synthesizer)</p>  <p>(Approximation of drum machine; top to bottom: hi-hats, snare, bass drum)</p>
Part 2 (1:26 - 4:08)	<p>2a (1:26-2:04) - Lead and backing vocals (mixed to sound close, “intimate”), acoustic guitar, sound effects <u>Harmonic Reduction of Acoustic Guitar; Quarter note = 109 bpm</u></p>  <p>2b (2:04-2:45) - Lead and backing vocals (higher range, strained delivery, heavy reverb); gradual shift in perceived pulse from 109 bpm to ~54/55 bpm (half-time feel)</p> <p>2a' (2:45-end) - Lead vocals (recalling 2a), reduced role of backing vocals, acoustic guitar and keyboard/organ <u>Drum machine heard “out of time” in relation to surrounding music (2:46)</u></p> <p><u>Tripartite Design</u></p>  <p>Return of drum machine at end; heard “outside” of meter (3:58 until fade)</p> 

Figure 1: Form of “White Ferrari”

Section/Timing	Characteristics/Features
Verse 1 (0:00-0:13)	Lead vocals, organ (Quarter note = 134 bpm)
Verse 2 (0:14-0:27)	Same as Verse 1
Verse 3 (0:28-0:41)	Same as Verses 1/2; addition of whistling sound
Verse 4 (0:42-0:56)	Same as Verse 3
Pre-Chorus (0:57-1:09)	Harmonic change in organ part; addition of backing vocals; repetition of “Solo” (Quarter note = 67 bpm)
Chorus (1:11-1:38)	Music from verses (Quarter note = 134 bpm)
Pre(Post?)-Chorus (1:39-1:52)	Same as above (Quarter note = 67 bpm)
Verse 5 (1:53-2:07)	Same as Verses 3/4; addition of various sound effects (Quarter note = 134 bpm)
Verse 6 (2:08-2:21)	Same as Verse 5
Verse 7 (2:22-2:35)	Same as Verses 5/6
Verse 8 (2:36-2:49)	Gradual reduction in texture (resembling verses 1/2)
Chorus (2:50-3:18)	Same as above (Quarter note = 134 bpm)
Coda (3:19-end)	Pre-chorus followed by alternation with verse/chorus music (Ambiguity between quarter note = 134 bpm or 67 bpm?)

Figure 2: Form of “Solo”

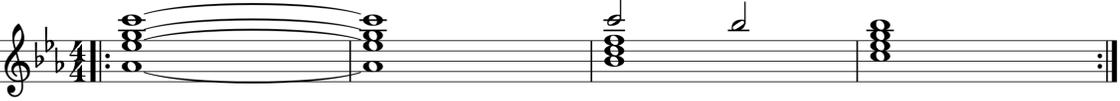
Section/Timings	Characteristics/Features
Episode A (0:00-1:40)	<p>Lead and backing vocals; multiple guitars, bass; drumset</p> <p><u>Repeated progression in C minor</u></p> 
Episode B (1:41-2:40)	<p>Lead and backing vocals, sustained synthesizer chords; occasional appearances of “jangly” guitar from Episode A; shift to Ab major</p> <p>Begins with lyric “New beginnings...”</p>
Transition (2:41-3:10)	<p>Vocals switch to falsetto; gradual fade-in of atonal, distorted electric guitars; low-pitched drums</p>
Episode C (3:10-3:29)	<p>Distorted electric guitars; low-pitched drums; no clear tonal center or meter</p>
Episode D (3:30-end)	<p>Lead and backing vocals; synthesizer/piano; bass; drumset/drum machine plays a half-time feel; pulse quicker than preceding episodes (quarter note = 90 bpm); tonal shift to eb minor/Gb major</p> <p>Begins with distinct change in vocal timbre/delivery; more expressive vocal delivery; reprise of lyrics from Episode B (“Droppin’ baby off at home...”) at 4:28.</p>

Figure 3: Form of “Nights”

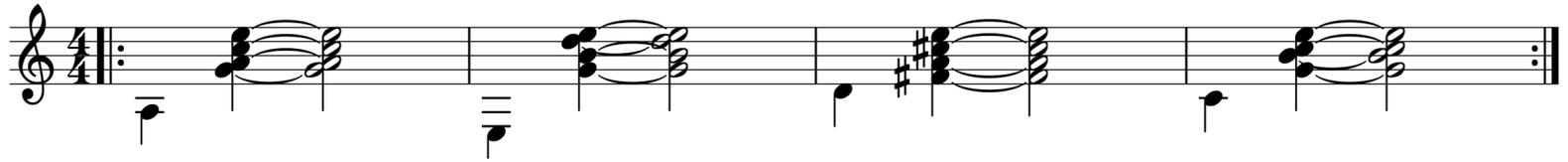


Figure 4: Reduction of Harmonic Progression from "Seigfried" (Opening)



Figure 5: Rotated Version of Figure 4 ("Seigfried," 3:35-end)