

## Spooning Good Singing Gum: Meaning, Association, and Interpretation in Rock Music<sup>1</sup>

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Since at least the early 1950s, scholars and critics from widely varying backgrounds have attempted to come to terms with the musics collectively known as “rock,” returning again and again to the issue of meaning. Predictably, their answers to the implied question are as varied as their intellectual standpoints. Some scholars, for example, have viewed rock through the lenses of mass and youth culture, drawing on the work of Theodor Adorno and a large body of sociological writing. Others, coming to rock from cultural studies and literary theory, have conceptualized it as a series of “texts” that comment on and reflect current debates on cultural identity, hegemony, resistance, gender and sexuality (Frith and Goodwin 1990; Hesmondhalgh 1996). Writers for the popular press, meanwhile, have tended to focus on issues of authenticity, originality and rebellion, particularly in canonizing iconic figures like Elvis Presley, Sid Vicious, or Kurt Cobain. In reading all this work, some fans or aficionados of rock (including scholars and critics) are likely to be dissatisfied. To them it might seem that (other) rock commentators are either focusing on too narrow a portion of the musical landscape—discussing it in ways that render it nearly unrecognizable—or missing the point of the music altogether. Whatever the point, to such fans rock is potentially about more than youth culture, the (re)production of ideology, or authenticity and rebellion.<sup>2</sup> The question, of course, is what “more” there might be and, relatedly, how one gains access to and talks about it.

In previous attempts to discern rock’s meanings, three approaches have tended to dominate: content analysis of rock lyrics; study of rock’s relation to varied social, historical, and cultural contexts; and examination of rock’s formal and stylistic parameters. While each approach has the potential to illuminate different aspects of what rock might mean and how it achieves its effects, each is also manifestly incomplete. Their individual shortcomings cannot be addressed merely by producing analyses that combine them. To do so, in fact, would be to assume naively that in themselves those approaches exhaust all the questions that one might ask about rock. Getting at what rock means requires asking a different, but related, set of

questions, ones that go to the heart of what it means to *make* and *experience* rock.<sup>3</sup> How do those who record rock music make recordings? What intellectual and aesthetic choices are typically part of such processes? What contextual factors influence and constrain those choices? Similarly, when individuals listen to or otherwise experience rock, how do they interpret and evaluate their experiences? On what criteria are their interpretations based? To the degree that there exists consensus on aspects of interpretation, how is such consensus built, challenged, modified, or dismantled over time? These are not, of course, new questions, but examining them in light of one another can clear useful paths for approaching musical meaning.

The argument here will proceed through three stages. The first is a selective, critical survey of previous approaches to the study of rock. It is organized loosely around the three different analytic paradigms discussed previously and highlights the strengths and deficiencies of each. The second stage theorizes the making and experiencing of rock through a discussion of recording processes and listeners' individual and collective experiences of recordings. This section takes as its departure point ethnomusicological writing about musical meaning, particularly Steven Feld's discussion of the "interpretive moves" (1994) that listeners make as they experience music. The third explores the complexity and variability of meaning in rock through the example of the Scottish trio the Cocteau Twins. The group, active from 1979 to 1998, produced a series of recordings whose qualities, while not exceptional or singular, draw attention to the inadequacy of previous analyses.

Before consideration of such issues can begin, however, a few key terms in the discussion need to be more clearly fleshed out. The first is the term "rock." Regardless of the criteria scholars and critics have employed in defining it—instruments and technologies, structural or formal parameters of music-making, the economics of the recording industry, or the self-consciously "artistic" orientation of the music's performers—nearly all attempts leave the impression that rock is a category with fixed boundaries (Lakoff 1987), a container for musics that share certain attributes.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, if one considers the variety of music labeled rock in critical and popular discourse, it becomes difficult to imagine a bounded grouping that could accommodate, at one and the same time, Bob Dylan's *Blonde on Blonde* (1966), Van Morrison's *Astral Weeks* (1968), Joni Mitchell's *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* (1975), Prince's *1999* (1983), and Soundgarden's *Superunknown* (1994).<sup>5</sup>

When, however, we understand genre designations like "rock" as relying not on immutable sets of characteristics but on their material, social and cultural relationships to other designations, we might regard them as resizable umbrellas or genealogical and shifting markers of inclusion and

exclusion. With that understanding in mind, rather than posit a unifying rock “essence,” I follow Theodore Gracyk in aiming “to identify and theorize about . . . paradigm cases of rock music” (1996:xi) that a significant number of fans and critics have come—through whatever means—to include in their individual and collective canons. A paradigmatic definition has the virtue of not circumscribing too narrowly the universe of rock, allowing for variation in musical style and approach as well as historical change. Paradigmatic definitions are closely tied to “open concepts” capable of undergoing “alteration in their definition without losing their identity as new examples come to appear as standard” (Goehr 1992:93).<sup>6</sup> What is crucial is recognizing that genre designations are emergent, both shaping and being shaped by what they include as well as being informed by what they accommodate less easily (Briggs and Bauman 1992). It is for that reason that concepts like rock—or jazz, for that matter—can over time seem to cover a widely varying range of musical practices without disappearing as useful signifiers. The Morrison and Mitchell recordings mentioned previously—because they relied on jazz-derived instrumentation and harmonies, respectively—might have been difficult to square with paradigmatic notions of rock when they were released. They are now both considered landmark rock recordings at least partially because they have influenced musicians more easily labeled as rockers. Indeed, the genealogical maps that musicians and fans draw linking performers and recordings over time show the genre’s possible definitions to be as mutable as the ways in which connoisseurs and fans construct the past (Straw 1997; Weinstein 1997).

If anything unites the forms of music rock designates, it is that they, like the five examples above, exist and have their most enduring impact as recordings. In fact, discussions of rock, even when they use words like “song” or “performance,” are almost always about specific *recordings* which may or may not be the result of separate acts of songwriting and performing (Gracyk 1996:viii–xi).<sup>7</sup> Moreover, some researchers have convincingly shown that even the most dedicated singer-songwriters or live performers (like Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen) are so intensely self-conscious about the recording process that rather than write songs before recording, they record and assemble sometimes unrelated fragments which only later become “songs” that even they, like musicians in cover bands, must learn from recordings in order to perform live (Gracyk 1996:1–17, 47–50; Zak 2001).

For its part, “meaning” is a term that is perhaps even more resistant to definition or clear explication. Most simply, meaning is something that humans individually and collectively create as they navigate the shifting terrain in which sounds, symbols and concepts are embedded. In other

words, meanings emerge from processes of interpretation, from the often unconscious ways in which we relate individual terms or elements to larger patterns and structures (Kessels 1986–87:201). Rather than being inherent *in* particular genres, objects or activities, meanings are actively constructed from the ways in which we relate those genres, objects or activities to others. As such, particular items do not so much determine the kinds of meanings that can be attached to them as their qualities constrain the kinds of meanings we might construct. Consequently, while one is to some degree free to attach whatever meanings he or she wishes to particular items, those meanings seem appropriate only to the degree that they are shared or thought to be compelling by others. I might argue stridently that the lyrics of the Beatles' "Taxman" (1966) depict a failed romantic relationship, but few other people who know the recording would find that interpretation tenable.

### Analyzing Rock

In this sense, knowing about singer/songwriter/guitarist Chrissie Hynde's life and political leanings as well as early 1980s American social and economic conditions affects the number of compelling interpretations one might make of a lyrical excerpt from the recording "My City Was Gone" (The Pretenders 1983):

I went back to Ohio  
 And my pretty countryside  
 Had been paved down the middle  
 By a government that had no pride  
  
 The farms of Ohio  
 Had been replaced by shopping malls  
 And Muzak filled the air  
 From Seneca to Cuyahoga Falls.

Through content analysis, one might interpret the lyrics as relating a narrative of loss and destruction brought on by deindustrialization and suburbanization in the Reagan era.<sup>8</sup> In this account, the meaning of this lyrical excerpt proceeds from interpreting language and relating the connotative and denotative meanings of words to a larger social and historical context. Following that line of reasoning, one might say that the meaning of the recording lies in the way its words "reflect" or are closely connected to its contexts.<sup>9</sup>

For textually-minded analysts, such an interpretation of "My City Was Gone" might be the first-resort strategy for making sense of the recording. What justifies that strategy is perhaps the greater relative accessibility of

words for individuals who are neither musicians nor scholars of music. Useful, if provisional, analyses might result from employing that strategy. One can “read” the fourth and fifth verses of Bob Dylan’s recording “With God on Our Side” (1964), for example, as his questioning of the relations between God and country during the Cold War and link them—perhaps too facilely—to the emergence of a pervasive anti-war mood among youth and some folk and rock musicians in the early 1960s:

The Second World War  
 Came to an end  
 We forgave the Germans  
 And then we were friends  
 Though they murdered six million  
 In the ovens they fried  
 The Germans now too have  
 God on their side

I’ve learned to hate the Russians  
 All through my whole life  
 If another war comes  
 It’s them we must fight  
 To hate and to fear them  
 To run and to hide  
 And accept it all bravely  
 With God on my side . . .

A slightly expanded view might move away from reflection theories to allow that lyrics’ narratives show how their protagonists have navigated or might navigate their lives or that such narratives create empathy and identification (or resist them) through confessional, personally expressive writing. Thus, the opening verse of Joni Mitchell’s “Help Me” (1974) might offer the listener a glimpse into the exhilaration that can be part of falling in love as well as the uncertainty that might accompany it:

Help me, I think I’m falling  
 In love again  
 When I get that crazy feeling,  
 I know I’m in trouble again  
 I’m in trouble  
 ’Cause you’re a rambler and a gambler  
 And a sweet talkin’ ladies’ man  
 And you love your lovin’  
 But not like you love your freedom.

Such readings, however, potentially do rock a disservice. If an analyst reduces rock to its lyrical capacity to reflect social ideals or engender empathetic identification, s/he can do so only on the assumption that rock can effectively be read as a verbal text. To read it thus ignores the way listeners generally experience these excerpts: as *sounds* emanating from recordings rather than as printed poetry.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, those analyses that settle for the “easy terms of lyrical analysis” (Frith 1981:14), prominent in popular press rock discourse as well as in 1980s and 1990s scholarly articles concerned with the negative effects of heavy metal and gangsta rap, give us only part of the picture.

Moreover, an analyst focusing exclusively on lyrics ignores evidence that has been mounting since the 1960s that rock fans rarely comprehend or devote concentrated attention to the lyrics of the tunes that they like most.<sup>11</sup> Using words as the primary frame of reference can also produce a distorted vision when we confront the numerous recordings whose linguistic/poetic meaning is obscure enough to render them “meaningless.” The narrative qualities and/or coherence of the opening verse of Crowded House’s “Don’t Dream It’s Over” (1986) are at best episodic:

There is freedom within; there is freedom without  
 Try to catch the deluge in a paper cup  
 There’s a battle ahead; many battles are lost  
 But you’ll never see the end of the road while you’re traveling with me

More dramatically, David Bowie’s use of William Burroughs’s “cut-up” technique is a deliberate attempt to make songs like “Heroes” (1977) defy conventional readings. Rather than strive for narrative coherence, Bowie aims instead to “purposely fracture everything. . . . [On *Heroes*], I wanted a phrase to give a particular feeling. But never a song as a whole—I never had an overall idea of the feeling. Each individual line I wanted to have a different atmosphere, so I would construct it in a Burroughs fashion” (quoted in Thomson and Gutman 1993:xviii).<sup>12</sup>

Such examples might convince some to seek more refined ways of analyzing lyrics, methods that have convincingly confronted the obscurity of some twentieth-century literature. But such a search may be an obstinate attempt to avoid a by now foregone conclusion: that the meaning of the song does not lie exclusively or entirely in its lyrics.<sup>13</sup>

One possible way out of this impasse is to present an analysis that considers not just words, but how they are sung. Since it seems self-evident that rock listeners identify with the *voices* of singers and can identify with them even when they don’t know lyrics being sung (Frith 1987:144), we might be on firmer ground here. When Michael Jackson almost cryingly

sings “Damned indecision and cursed pride/ I kept my love for her locked deep inside” in “She’s Out of My Life” (1979), English-speaking listeners might feel that they know what he is “feeling,” even though his enunciation (particularly dropping the sounds of ending syllables) makes it difficult at points to know exactly what he is singing. Moreover, to the degree that musical instruments can imitate or produce voice-like sounds, this notion that we might label “communication by inflection” is extensible to them. Sometimes, perhaps, understanding *how* something means—in terms of pitch contour, timing, and timbre as they relate to regular speech—is enough. Those listeners embedded in the appropriate cultural matrices (or those who believe they are) might feel that they can understand *emotion(s)* behind particular sounds even when those sounds aren’t recognizable as words.

Philip Tagg (1982) has tried to understand such processes for instrumental music through adapting semiotic methods. He suggests the possibility of focusing attention on “musemes”: minimal units of musical meaning, the smallest musical elements or gestures necessary to communicate a certain notion or create a certain impression. Tagg explores, for example, how certain uses of the voice conventionally connote specifiable stances toward lyrics and larger meaning. He suggests as well that certain transformations of a piece of music—such as changing it from major to minor mode—have the potential to change our relationship to it, while others—like changing key—might go unnoticed. Thus, singing softly or whispering into a microphone—as Marvin Gaye does at the beginning of “Sexual Healing” (1982)—*can* communicate a certain level of intimacy. Likewise, singing a particular phrase in a portion of one’s vocal range where the voice wavers and cracks can be equated with emotional vulnerability—e.g., Robert Johnson’s falsetto singing of “My life don’t feel the same” in “Kindhearted Woman Blues” (1990, recorded 1936).

Where Tagg falters is in his attempt to pin down correspondences between certain performative conventions and meanings that might be inferred from them. In other words, his approach, as well as that presented with much greater nuance by David Brackett (1995), rests on application of Roman Jakobson’s communication model: put simply, recordings have *messages* to communicate, and the task of the analyst is to find the *codes* that allows *receivers* of messages to interpret them. While we might accept that whispers and falsettos have the conventional meanings discussed previously, we must also remember that they might be equated with less “positive” sentiments: whispers can connote fear or secretiveness, for example, while falsettos can equally correspond to fear or anger. It is impossible, therefore, to say what certain uses of the voice signify without, at the same time, specifying the wide range of variables that give them their signifying capacity.

Those scholars who possess facility with score-based musical analysis might believe that their greater ability to talk about “the music itself” enables them to produce analyses that do not suffer from the shortcomings of lyric-based research. Unfortunately, historical musicologists and music theorists tend to sabotage their arguments on rock with questionable assumptions about music-making. Middleton (1990:104–7) identifies three major problems in such work: (1) it relies on a terminology that valorizes concert-music-derived analytic approaches and concepts—e.g., counterpoint, harmonic complexity, unity, long-range development, etc.—while neglecting others; (2) it suffers from a “notational centrality” that, like terminology, privileges certain aspects of music (pitch, simple rhythms, hierarchical organization) while excluding others (timbre and instrumentation, for example); and (3) it encourages an overriding “score consciousness” that sees notation *as* music and analysis as a detached, seemingly “objective” act of reading. Using those methods, musicologists and music theorists have produced elaborate—and sometimes willfully obscure—analyses of notatable rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic devices used in popular music (see, for example, Hawkins 1992; Middleton 1990; Moore 1995). To a degree, such analyses can be illuminating. The changing time signatures in a Beatles recording like “She Said She Said” (1966), the microrhythmic variations in the harmonically static vamps of James Brown’s “The Payback” (1973), or the switches from A minor verses to C major interludes to A minor choruses in Van Morrison’s “The Way Young Lovers Do” (1968) are all elements that traditional methods might describe well. Those elements surely contribute to the impact that those recordings have on listeners.

Like their lyrically centered counterparts, though, formalist musical analysts who see the text as all that matters run the risk of overemphasizing issues—like the deep structures discovered via Schenkerian analysis—at the expense of other, equally important ones. Indeed, much analytical work implicitly posits the existence of what George Lipsitz terms the “maximally competent listener,” an individual capable of transforming “musical creations into mathematical schema and evaluating them on the basis of their complexity and originality.” The resulting relationship between the maker of music and the listener, he argues, is “abstract, detached, and technical” and rests on the assumption that explication of harmony, rhythm, and form is sufficient to describe that relationship (Lipsitz 1990:101). But when assessing such work, the analyst’s positionality becomes central: why are some issues singled out as important? Why are others excluded? How does s/he determine that, say, complexity or originality are highly valued attributes of the system under discussion? Might there be other values or attributes in music-making that are more highly prized—even to the exclusion of complexity and originality?



Much of what is meaningful about rock—and perhaps all other musics—lies outside what rhythmic, harmonic and melodic analysis alone can tell us.<sup>14</sup> In fact, even when we acknowledge the degree to which rock musicians are concerned with what traditional music analysis can reveal, we still have to resist the temptation to see their statements as validating those analytical paradigms. When Lou Reed, for example, announces proudly at the beginning of “Femme Fatale” on *Live at Max’s Kansas City* (Velvet Underground 1973) that it’s his first composition utilizing an augmented chord, we cannot make too much of the statement. Only after eliminating more logical possibilities—that he’s engaging in nervous between-song chatter or stalling while instruments are retuned—can we say that he related that information to an audience *because* he thought his “harmonic sophistication” was notable. In any event, I suggest that Reed might bristle at an analysis of that recording or any other by the Velvet Underground that charted his development based solely on his use of harmony and melody.<sup>15</sup> Such analysis might leave the impression that meaning is accessible via notated “musical substance.” Gary Tomlinson, in a discussion of formalist musical analyses, laments that

Behind [such analyses lurks] the absurd but hard-to-eradicate proposition that music alone, independent of the cultural matrices that individuals build around it, can *mean*—that a recording or transcription of a Charlie Parker solo, for example, or the score or performance of a Beethoven symphony, can convey *something* even in the hypothetical absence of the complex negotiations of meaning we each pursue with them. (1991:247)

The foregoing comments are not meant to suggest that we must give up on musicology or music theory as ways of analyzing rock or getting at meaning. Nor do they open a space to be filled by formalist approaches supplemented by psychological and philosophical insights, for many such works (e.g., Meyer 1956; Kivy 1990) have the same problems that Tomlinson has critiqued. One assumption behind such analytical techniques is that, being “neutral,” they are applicable to any musical genre or style (Nattiez 1990). What seems more true is that analytical schemes are well-suited to answer only the kinds of questions they were devised to answer. If anything, Tomlinson’s comments suggest that a different set of concepts and tools need to be brought to our confrontations with rock, ones that have more to do with the ways that musicians make rock and the ways that they and their fans listen to and otherwise experience it.

### **Recording, Listening and Interpretive Moves**

The activities that take place in recording studios, that make those entities we regard as songs become recordings, are often overlooked in

writing about rock. Because they are so central to the constitution of rock, however, they merit at least a cursory examination here. The following hypothetical sequence of events can serve as a model for the process whereby a recording is made for mass distribution. Once a band or recording artist decides or is contracted to make a new recording, the path to the final product is one filled with a seemingly infinite number of choices. They or their record label choose someone to produce the record, a person who will guide the musicians through the process of recording, keep them roughly on schedule and within the budget. The producer and/or the musicians also choose a recording studio (or several studios) for the project. Likewise, choices have to be made regarding who will engineer the recording, and therefore choose microphones, position them according to ideas about appropriate sound configurations, and operate the array of equipment available in the studio. The musicians may or may not come into the studio with songs already written. Whether they do or not, though, the musicians are in the studio to create, record and manipulate sounds. Once they deem the process of recording to be complete, the resultant tracks have to be "mixed down" to a two-track (stereo) pre-master by some combination of musicians, producers, engineers, and/or parties external to the recording process. That pre-master is then sent to a mastering engineer, who takes the two-track mix and creates a final master suitable for duplication on a mass scale.

The abbreviated description of recording just presented elides the most open-ended and amorphous portion of the process: the part that takes place in the studio and prior to mixing. It sometimes takes months to get the sounds "right" or to stumble upon the combination of equipment and processes that make a recording sound like (or much better than) what the musicians, producers, and engineers (hereafter referred to collectively as recordists) might have heard in their heads. For a particular track, does one want to use an electric guitar or an acoustic one? A six- or twelve-string guitar? If electric, should the guitar be a solid-, semi-solid, or hollow-body? Manufactured by Fender, Gibson, Martin, Paul Reed Smith, Gretsch, or Rickenbacker? Or will a series of guitars, chosen with the previous questions in mind, be used in combination? Will they be plugged directly into the mixing console or recorded via microphones placed in front of amplifiers? At what stage, if any, will the guitar signals be run through effects units (e.g., chorus, wah-wah, flanger, distortion, reverb) that will alter their timbres? If the tracks being recorded are to contain vocals, how are they to be recorded? Using what kind(s) of microphones? Should there be a single vocal line or should the singer's voice be double-tracked, so that he or she sings the same melodic line with him or herself? At what stage and how will the singer's voice be processed? Is

the singer's voice compressed "going to tape" to smooth out wide dynamic variations or does the engineer trust the singer's knowledge of when to move toward and away from the microphone? Will the recording use real drums recorded with microphones, programmed drums, or sampled drum and percussion sounds triggered by a live drummer's playing? If keyboard instruments are to be used, which ones will they be: piano, organ, Mellotron, vintage synthesizers, or state-of-the-art versions?<sup>16</sup> After choosing and recording the sounds of instruments and voices, recordists have to decide how further to process them. Are the vocals to be "dry" or enhanced with reverb? Are the guitar sounds to be distinct from one another or layered to form a dense sonic mass? Are the cymbal sounds to be bright and sizzling, or slightly less bright and crisp?<sup>17</sup>

In many cases, the sounds generated during the recording and mixing processes result equally from interesting applications of technology and from accidents. Thus, producer Tony Visconti, discussing his work with David Bowie in the late 1970s and early 1980s, details both the deliberation and fortuitous occurrences behind the sounds on albums like *Heroes* (1977) and *Scary Monsters* (1980). He explains that Bowie's ever-thickening vocals in successive verses of "Heroes" are the result of a deliberate and ingenious placement of microphones in a long corridor and the use of noise gates: as Bowie sang successive verses at higher dynamic levels, the more distant microphones were triggered, and their audio signals were added to the mix (B. Jackson 1997).<sup>18</sup> Likewise, the eerie synthesizer-like melody at the beginning of "Ashes to Ashes" (1980) is the result of a piano sound being run through a malfunctioning Eventide Auto-Flanger. The recordists liked the accidental effect so much that they made it part of the final recording (Molenda 1995). Myriad other discussions of the importance of getting particular sounds can be found in articles about the processes used for recordings by Portishead (Micallef 1997), Public Enemy (Dery 1990), and Ben Harper (Farinella 1997), for example.<sup>19</sup>

Strikingly, when recordists speak about sounds, they typically tend to describe them in the two ways mentioned thus far—instruments and processing—and in another: by referring to other recordings. Indeed, recordists might not waste time trying to find adjectives to describe sounds when they could say more directly, "I want the snare to sound the way it does on one of those funk records, like [James Brown's] 'Funky Drummer'" or "I want that guitar sound in 'Stairway to Heaven,' you know, the chorusy one in the part where Robert Plant starts singing 'ooh, it makes me wonder.'"<sup>20</sup> Robin Guthrie, the guitarist in the Cocteau Twins and a record producer of note, described in *Melody Maker* why certain records had "changed his life" (Guthrie 1993). Among the recordings he singles out for praise are the Birthday Party's "The Friend Catcher"

(“. . . it was that big guitar noise . . . that was one of the things that inspired us.”); the Pop Group’s “She Is Beyond Good and Evil” (“Again, it was the noise he [Mark Stewart] made.”); and The Ronettes’s “Be My Baby” (“I could have picked any number of Phil Spector tracks—I don’t suppose I need to explain why. I’ve been an obsessive collector of Phil Spector’s stuff, I’ve got loads and loads on vinyl, lots of rarities. Nice tunes, big sounds—yeah, it was an obvious influence.”). More than anything else, Guthrie’s comments reveal the degree to which “recording consciousness” (Bennett 1980:126–29) is an essential part of the rock enterprise. Recordists are alternately challenged, inspired, motivated, and fascinated by the possibilities of sound generation opened to them by the tools of the recording studio and their use by other recordists (cf. Zak 2001).

While I do not want to assert that these recordists’ ideas about the importance of sound are espoused equally by *all* rock musicians, producers and engineers, using sound as a point of departure enhances the earlier critique of lyrically and musicologically/theoretically centered analyses. Why does analyzing lyrics outside of their performance leave us cold? Why is it that seeing lyrics and music meticulously transcribed can leave us wanting? The simple answer is that the primary impact of recordings comes not so much from words or musical structure, but from *sound*, of which words and music are constituent elements. Even those people who claim to like recordings only for their lyrics and who explain that they do not understand or care about any of a recording’s other features share a commitment to and fascination with sound. When presented with an alternative—“Why not buy collections of lyrics or, even better, copy lyrics from friends’ CD inserts?”—many acknowledge that the sounds *do* attract them. One could reasonably assert that sounds get their attention and hold them captive long enough for lyrics to register.

Sounds, moreover, are not items that we simply relegate to the background as we apprehend lyrics. Perhaps in an age when music is everywhere available—in our homes, in cars, in supermarkets and waiting rooms, as well as on portable playback devices and computers—it is too easy to regard listening as an act of passive consumption. It is, however, a complex process not usefully explained by a communication theory, or any other model which regards recordings or other forms of cultural production as items to be deciphered. It is better understood as a culturally conditioned and individually inflected process intimately tied to (sometimes only tacit) ideas of what music is, how it functions, and what is valuable in it. Every listening experience, whether it involves an encounter with something new or something familiar, is a process of comparison, of association (Higgins 1991:18).

Steven Feld has suggested that listeners, as they attend to a recording or musical event, come to comprehend it and create its meanings through a series of “interpretive moves” (1994:86–89). Such moves, which he describes as locational, categorical, associational, reflective, and evaluative, can be highly individual and idiosyncratic, for they draw upon each individual’s past experiences. Locational moves literally locate a musical event or a recording, placing it in a field of like and unlike events; categorical moves may more specifically characterize the event or object—relating it to specific classes of objects or sets of events. Associational moves relate the object to other kinds of verbal, musical, or visual imagery, while reflective moves relate the event “to social conditions, political attitudes . . . or personal experiences that include similar or dissimilar sounds, mediated or live” (87). Evaluative moves are perhaps self-explanatory: they comprise qualitative judgments of the object or event, such as good/bad, appropriate/inappropriate, or moving/uninteresting. Feld poses no specific hierarchy or order in which one might make these moves, and it is perhaps clear that the boundaries between them, if any, are quite porous.

Interpretive moves function, in a sense, as a “series of social processing conventions” that “do not fix a singular meaning; instead they focus some boundaries of fluid shifts in our attentional patterns as we foreground and background experience and knowledge in relation to the ongoing perception of a sound object or event. Meaning then is momentarily changeable and emergent, in flux as our interpretive moves are unravelled and crystallized” (88). Moreover, Feld asserts that the interpretive process is inherently social:

A range of social and personal backgrounds, some shared, some complementary, of stratified knowledge and experience, and of attitudes . . . enters into the social construction of meaningful listening through interpretive moves, establishing a sense of what the sound object or event is and what one feels, grasps, or knows about it. At the same time, some very specific decisions (about seriousness, non-seriousness, intent, performer’s attitude and meaning) can also be made by drawing on interpretive moves and other kinds of social knowledge. (89)

Taking a cue from Erving Goffman, he says that “each hearing, like human social interaction generally has . . . a biography and a history, and these may be more or less important to the particular hearing in question at a specific time” (89). Thus, a lyrical excerpt, a harmonic progression, a melodic pattern, a choice of instrumentation, a series of timbral nuances,

the use of certain recording techniques or kinds of signal processing, or the setting(s) in which one hears a recording—any of these are capable of setting in motion the interpretive moves that give rock its meanings.

Lyrical associations, in many cases as dependent on melody, context and positioning as they are on words, are perhaps the easiest links that one can make between recordings. Such links may range widely across what are sometimes thought to be impermeable musical boundaries. When, for example, the rapper Q-Tip asks “What’s the matter with you, boy?” on A Tribe Called Quest’s “Description of a Fool” (1990), the words as well as the way he presents them bring to mind Mick Jagger’s asking of the same question in the Rolling Stones’ “Miss You” (1978) and connect hip-hop musical discourse to rock.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, lyrical associations can function in the seemingly smaller universe of one musician’s recordings over time. Fans of Sting’s work with the Police and as a solo artist might have observed how fond he is of inserting an early lyric into subsequent recordings. Anyone familiar with “Every Little Thing She Does Is Magic” (The Police 1981) and the excerpt that begins “Do I have to tell the story of a thousand rainy days . . .” might recognize its incarnations on later recordings—for example, “O My God” (The Police 1983) and “Seven Days” (Sting 1993). On a more subtle level, the background voices in the second verse of Prince’s “Space” (1994) might be read as homage to a classic late 1960s recording. Each of the first two lines of Prince’s verse begins with the word “I.” Underneath and above them, as it were, are background voices singing “T” on the first line and “Oh, I” on the second. Those listeners with a fair knowledge of Motown recordings might recognize the connection Prince’s recording has to “I Can’t Get Next to You” (1969) by the Temptations. His background vocals borrow both the lyrical content and the larger musical gesture from the background vocals of the Temptations’s recording.<sup>22</sup>

Sometimes the associations that listeners make are based on the parameters easily represented in terminology of European music theory: melodic configurations and simple rhythmic patterns, for example. “Everyday” by the group Lucy Pearl (2000), for example, has recurring lines—e.g., on the words “I’ve been waiting all day long/ I feel like you know what’s going on”—whose rhythmic and melodic patterning is nearly identical to recurring lines in Lenny Kravitz’s “Thinking of You” (1998)—e.g., “Would you live your life the same, or come back and rearrange?”<sup>23</sup> Likewise, someone listening to Shawn Colvin’s “Suicide Alley” (1996) might connect the electric piano figure near the track’s fade-out—a  $\hat{5}-\hat{6}-\hat{7}-\hat{6}$  melodic pattern—to another electric piano figure (with a similar melodic gesture) on both Stevie Wonder’s “Living for the City” (1973) and Joe Zawinul’s “Mercy, Mercy, Mercy,” as recorded by the Cannonball Adderley Quintet (1966).

It is also possible that associations can be based on stylistic or timbral characteristics that are less easy to define. A difficult-to-quantify constellation of rhythmic, harmonic, instrumental, processing and timbral nuances might lead many rock fans to hear a connection between PJ Harvey's "Good Fortune" (2000) and nearly any work done by Patti Smith—e.g., "Gloria" (1975). Similarly, a friend of mine once remarked, upon hearing Jeff Buckley's "Dream Brother" (1994), that a portion of it reminded her of the Doors. Though she never named the Doors' song she had in mind, her remark came suddenly back into my consciousness several months later as I listened to "Soul Kitchen" (1967). When Jim Morrison sang/chanted the words, "Well, your fingers weave quick minarets, speak in secret alphabets," I instantly understood why the Doors had sprung into my friend's mind. Buckley's declamatory delivery isn't a direct imitation of Morrison's, but one could very compellingly describe it as *evoking* the work of the Doors' singer.<sup>24</sup>

An even more striking example comes from Garbage's eponymous 1995 album. When I first heard "My Lover's Box," I recognized a correspondence to another recording. It took days of sporadically scanning my CD racks and LP crates to find the corresponding recording. In the end, the connection was one having less to do with harmonic, melodic, or structural parameters in any conventional sense than with a larger gesture. Garbage's recording begins with a phased drum loop playing at low volume with its lowest and highest frequencies attenuated. A sustained keyboard line enters shortly thereafter and gradually increases in volume, giving way to full-frequency percussion and a loud, dense mass of guitar chords, produced partially by layering several guitar tracks on top of one another in the mix. A very similar gesture—repeated drum loop with attenuated frequency content giving way to full drums and massed guitars—opens "Soon" by My Bloody Valentine (1991).

What matters in each of these examples is that, in order to grasp them, one need not be a scholar or a trained music analyst. All they require is that a listener be capable of connecting the sounds of recordings from different historical moments. Hearing what one feels to be a connection between two or more items—one currently under consideration and others not being heard at the same moment—is simply a matter of recognition, one that operates on the level that Middleton describes as that of "primary signification" (1990:220) and Peirce would view as iconic (Turino 1999:226–27). Either way, the kinds of relationships on this level, whether predicated on melodies, harmonic gestures, stylistic or timbral references, are metonymic and indexical (Middleton 1990:224–25). Metonymically speaking, recognizing a fragment in recording A that seems to come from recording B is sufficient to bring recording B in its entirety to mind—in other words, part of "Soon" evokes all of "Soon."

Indexically speaking, a perceived reference to "Soon" directs our attention toward it even as we continue to listen to "My Lover's Box." Thus, even in those moments when one is "freely associating," likening a particular configuration of sounds to vaguely defined notions of calm or terror, one is recognizing, on a primary level, a connection to other sound configurations one might describe similarly, and then secondarily (or simultaneously) attaching the impressions we have from remembered sounds to those currently at hand. The primary level is so named because it is not dependent upon the secondary level for its existence, just as signs described as those of firstness or secondness in Peircian semiotic theory do not require the mediation of linguistic symbols to be apprehended (Turino 1999:233). Attaching connotative meanings, on the other hand, requires—even in the most intuitive or unconscious ways—that one make interpretive moves that say something more about the connections one has always already made.

There remains one other salient point to be made regarding the interpretive moves that listeners make as they listen: there is no sense in which one's moves can be described as "right" or "wrong." Rather than speaking in absolute terms of correctness or incorrectness, it is more appropriate to speak in terms of *degree*, as when we describe some interpretations, based on whatever criteria, to be more compelling than others. Other listeners may not hear, even upon having them pointed out, the connections we make. Likewise, they may not arrive at the same understandings of what recordings mean even when they do recognize the connections we have made. Other individuals, possessing different kinds of knowledge and drawing from different banks of experience, therefore, might have had quite different associations for the examples presented above. It is in that sense that the meanings of rock are not fixed or immutable but emerge instead from processes of communication between individuals and groups about the meanings of recordings or any other objects or experiences. It matters less whether the connections we make were part of the recordists' intentions—though possessing such secondary knowledge may make our claims more compelling—than it does whether others agree with us. An idiosyncratic interpretation is still in some sense a valid one, but it, like any other, is subject to constant renegotiation.<sup>25</sup>

Listening and meaning-making are never-finished interpretive processes, constrained by the recordings that are their objects. While lyrical, contextual, and technical issues all have a part to play in such processes, none of them wholly determines how those processes will work. Those different vantage points place limits upon interpretations, offer keys or guides, that need not be adopted by the various social actors who engage with rock as recordists or listeners. Ultimately, however, the mean-



ings of rock are constructed by a wide range of listeners, interacting with one another in a wide variety of contexts. And crucially, those contexts are not only the ones accessible in academic journals or even the popular press. They are, more often, those constructed by listeners who discuss recordings with one another, make recommendations, attend concerts, and compare interpretations in a discursive space occupied by other listeners, each of whom brings something different to the discussion.

### **Case Study: Recording and Listening to the Cocteau Twins**

In order to describe the everyday world of rock discourse, I turn in the remainder of this article to a discussion of how one particular group, the Cocteau Twins, makes recordings and of the relationship their recording processes have to the ways that listeners interpret them. The principal focus is on writings in which the group members discuss studio techniques and on the observations fans of the group have posted to the Cocteau Twins mailing list and various pages on the World Wide Web.<sup>26</sup> Together, these two bodies of data open a window on rock rarely explored by academics or critics.

Formed in Grangemouth, Scotland in 1979, the Cocteau Twins have produced a body of recordings that offer an interesting challenge to anyone who wishes to interpret their work. The major difficulty their recordings present, especially those released between 1984 and 1990, is that the lyrics are not generally reconcilable with the words or syntax of English or any other language. Their playful and willfully obscure titles, like "Spooning Good Singing Gum" (1988), do little to clarify linguistic meaning. Elizabeth Fraser, who writes and sings all lyrics on their recordings, has advanced a number of different reasons why she prefers to eschew conventional linguistic usage in lyric-writing and performance.<sup>27</sup> Most prominently, she cites a lack of confidence in her abilities as a lyricist and a fascination with the sounds of words irrespective of meaning (Sutherland 1984:25; Morgan and Trimble 1994:113–15; Phoenix 1996:42). Fraser's approach to writing lyrics has led to some amusing attempts to decipher them, particularly for those who might feel themselves unable to confront a recording without knowing the words. The policies of the subsidiary responsible for releasing their recordings in Japan, for example, at one point mandated that each recording be released with a lyric sheet. When Fraser refused to comply, offering instead band photos or other items to fill CD booklets, the label hired transcribers to translate the lyrics. One unfortunate result, according to Fraser, was that there might have been dozens of people who thought that, on at least one song, she was singing "Yeah, baby, I'm a mud dancer" (Thompson 1994:28).

For their part, guitarist/drum programmer Robin Guthrie and bassist/keyboardist Simon Raymonde have focused on ambiguity of a different kind: that emerging from their creating densely textured sonic landscapes for each of their recordings. The sounds of guitars, for example, are routed through a lengthy chain of signal processing units, layered on top of one another and spread throughout the stereo spectrum. Sometimes the amount of signal processing makes it unclear exactly what instruments have been used to produce certain sounds. Steph Paynes, interviewing Guthrie about the techniques used on their 1990 album *Heaven or Las Vegas*, offers a description of Guthrie's studio (and live) setup and notes the confusion about sound it might create:

[Guthrie says,] "I use a Paul Reed Smith guitar, which goes into—let me get the order right—a Boss Exciter, a Boss chorus, a Yamaha D1500 delay, a harmonizer, a Boss phase-shifter, a Boss hi-band flanger, a regular Boss flanger, a Boss vibrato, a volume pedal, a [Jim Dunlop] Cry Baby wah-wah, and another delay." Everything runs through a pair of Rivera combo amps. "Then," continues Guthrie, "the whole system goes through noise gates, which I trigger from [a] sequencer. . . . That way I can get weird tremolo effects and things like that. . . ." You'd swear, for example, that the sixteenth-note pulsations that drive "Pitch the Baby" were generated by a keyboard. But according to Guthrie, "the opening oscillating sound is from noise gates—it's just my guitar getting chopped up. You gate the guitar like you normally would, but instead of keying it from the guitar sound, you key it from the sequencer using the hi-hat or whatever." (Paynes 1991:25–26)

Such sonic sculpting has led to florid attempts to describe the group's sound:

Cocteau Twins gush life's hues—the vermilion of sex, the charcoal shadows of fear, the icy cobalt of terror, and the erotic tangerine of sunsets. Their music caresses casino neon, skims lakes teeming with red algae, climbs into tree houses, creeps in the asylum. If you're susceptible to this kind of thing, you'll be hypnotized; if not, you'll shrug this Scottish trio off as New Age new wave. (Mandava 1990:70)

Picture a calm sea rippled by gentle waves. Overhead a balloon floats, buffeted aloft by gusts of wind, then swooping down lazily to skim the water's surface. As soothing as this scene would appear to the eye, so too is the music of the Cocteau Twins to the ear. While Robin Guthrie and Simon Raymonde provide a rhythmic back-

ground on guitars and synthesizers, singer Elizabeth Fraser leaps through octaves with vocals that sound like a cross between a lullaby, a yodel and a Middle Eastern chant. (Small 1989:31)

As tempting as it might be to dismiss these two examples as non-music-centered free association, it is more fruitful to contextualize and attempt to understand them. They each point to both the difficulty of characterizing sonic phenomena in words and the power of what Feld would call associative interpretive moves for listeners trying to describe their listening experiences. In other words, while the use of imagery and metaphor may strike us as hyperbole, the use of those devices *is* a response to the recordings.<sup>28</sup> While those responses to sound may be idiosyncratic, they are responses nonetheless. And in some ways, their imagery highlights certain aspects of the sound of the Cocteau Twins's recordings. Moreover, they strikingly illustrate the degree to which the critics responsible for those statements are as fascinated with sound as Guthrie's previously cited comments illustrate he is.

Indeed, in several descriptions of how he and the rest of the group approach recording, Guthrie has stressed "getting the sounds" as being the first and most important order of business. He and Raymonde generally begin working with guitar and piano/keyboards, running them through various signal processors to find sounds that interest them. From there, Guthrie explains, they tend to generate a firm "time base" on top of which to play, one that comes either from a vintage drum machine or a sampled percussion loop (Beyda 1993:130). The recording process is first and foremost one of discovery. Guthrie says,

In the getting-the-sounds stage, . . . I do use a lot of old pedals and old tape echoes and really just noise—getting all the knobs up to 11 just to see what stuff can do. I've got some bizarre old pedals like the Maestro guitar and rhythm box, where you plug in the guitar, and drum sounds come out. When you start messing around with things like that, with frequency analyzers and pulse modulators, you can get some good sounds. Then when I get some stuff on tape, I can start messing about with some of the more modern technology, just things as simple as gating. (quoted in Beyda 1993:131)

Raymonde amplifies Guthrie's statement by saying: "You've got to have the sound that suits the song in particular. Sometimes you don't know what that's going to be until you're fiddling about with the parameters. You just know by mucking about with something when you're there" (ibid.:131). After the two of them have recorded instrumental tracks, they

take turns at the mixing console recording Fraser's main vocals as well as any overdubbed background or harmony parts. Fraser, like Raymonde and Guthrie, writes only when there is a recording project underway. In reflecting on her eschewal of standard linguistic patterns, she notes that she compiled a dictionary of sorts, containing found and newly coined words, and explains the freedom she derived from using words in that way: "Combining words in different languages that I couldn't understand just meant I could concentrate on the *sound* and not get caught up in the meaning . . . But it got to be more fun because I was able to make up lots of portmanteaus, literally hundreds and hundreds of words. I was really into it. . . . And it just kept on getting bigger and bigger" (Morgan and Trimble 1994:115). She continues by saying that, for her, words are merely sounds: "They don't mean anything, though, that's the thing. You know all the transcendent sounds. It's all sound all the way through" (115).<sup>29</sup>

Once all the instrumental and vocal sounds have been recorded, the most crucial part of the process, mixing, begins. For the final mixes, Guthrie is concerned with layering sounds to create the aural equivalent of space. Equally important are stereo (left to right) width ("A little part of every Cocteau Twins record is an ambient project. . . . I like to create space and atmosphere. You can change the atmosphere of a song just by the sound, without changing the chords at all—that's fantastic") and sonic depth ("If you listen closely to my records, there's always something going on in the background: a guitar feeding back or a weird delay thing. You don't always hear it on the first few listens, but as you listen more you uncover layers and layers of stuff") (both quotations from Rotondi 1996:57). Guthrie describes mixing as a "building process": "I like to slot everything into its own little place—using EQ for setting instruments [in the frequency spectrum, low to high], using panners [to position sounds in the stereo spectrum]. And then there's a big smoothing-out process, taking the lumps out—compressing things that need it, compressing the whole mix . . ." (quoted in Beyda 1993:132). And like many other recordists, Guthrie has to hear a mix in different environments before he can be satisfied with it: "I . . . mix something and then listen to it at home, in the car, then come back the next day [and] do some fine tuning . . ." (ibid.:132).

With regard to the way that listeners might approach their recordings, the members of the group draw a distinction between interpretations that try to pin down the meanings of their work and those that stem from creative engagement with sound. In other words, they prefer and fully expect listeners to make whatever they can of the music—that is, as long as they don't overload their responses to it with the purely associative

kind of response quoted previously. One point of contention they have is with the British music press's characterization of *them* as "ethereal" and otherworldly largely on the basis of the promotional video for the recording "Pearly Dewdrops' Drops" (1985a), which depicted the band members in a large church and standing at the edge of a small waterfall. In response to such writing, Raymonde complained, "People see something like that and make up their minds. . . . All this pre-Raphaelite business, it's all made up, it doesn't mean anything. Just because we had some stained-glass windows in it . . . that kind of imagery wasn't intentional. We didn't say, 'Look, we want a lot of church windows and angels flying around it'" (Sutherland 1984:24). Instead, Raymonde would rather have listeners pay attention to the sounds *on the recordings* and make what they will of them, even if what they make up does not match what is "really" there: "It's great to see people mouthing words that you know are totally alien to what they really are. It's good because people are just fantasizing and enjoying themselves" (Sutherland 1984:25, 35). Speaking of interpretation in a larger sense, Guthrie has made similar though more forceful statements:

People tend to just want one song to be one message. It's all they can handle. They just want it all in black and white. Why can't they make up their own ideas about what some of the songs are about—that's what I do. I've got ideas about what some of the songs are about. They're probably a million miles from what they actually are about, but at least they're mine, y'know. (quoted in Sutherland 1990:18)

Interestingly, when Fraser returned to singing more intelligibly in the early 1990s, she confessed that she was apprehensive: "I thought it might spoil it for people if they could understand what I was singing" (Roberts 1993:26).

The thrust of such comments is that the band prefers interpretation to be an open-ended process, one that centers on a listener's engagement with the recording. One might say that they are most interested in the primary level of signification and the kinds of interpretive moves it sets in motion, that they are concerned with the comparisons listeners make between Cocteau Twins sounds and others in their auditory memories. In that sense, listeners are free to make up their own words. That same technique, after all, is part of the lyric-writing process. If listeners lose themselves in the width and depth of swirling instrumental textures, that is also part of what is intended by the recordings. Or, if at the same time, they listen repeatedly to hear all the sounds buried in the mix—each guitar overdub, each percussion part, each subtly panned effect—they are engaging with the recording

rather than trying to define it precisely in terms of received categories. What happens beyond that primary level is of less concern, provided the interpretations that emerge do not freight the recordings with associations that have less to do with them than with videos or reviews of their recordings in the press. In other words, they are most interested in listeners engaging with their recordings for whatever *they* think them to be.

Such a process is more or less what fans of the group favor in their discussions. They attempt to interpret the recordings based primarily on the sounds and secondarily on information about the group and its creative process. While much of what is presented here is culled from Internet-based discussions, it is important to contextualize such discourse. Prior to the proliferation of Internet mailing lists and web sites dedicated to specific musicians and groups, the meaning-making discourse of rock fans was largely carried out in untexted ways: through conversations at live performances, in record stores, or in various other social settings where music was a viable topic. My own experiences with the Cocteau Twins were a function of hearing recordings on the radio and in dance clubs in the early 1980s, seeking out those recordings, and enjoying them with friends who had similar musical tastes. Our conversations were as much about the band and how they did what they did as they were about other bands whose work inhabited for us a similar sonic universe (Dead Can Dance, Siouxsie and the Banshees, the Cure, the Smiths). Many of the fans who contribute to the email list, likewise, were drawn to the band either by the novelty of the recordings or by their similarities to work by other “dream pop” or “art” bands like Lush, My Bloody Valentine or Slowdive.<sup>30</sup> Quite frequently, a new list member tells the story of how s/he heard the band on a college radio station or acted on a suggestion from a friend and was thus introduced to music that touched them in striking ways. While “computer-mediated communication” has not supplanted those modes of discourse—for it employs the terms established in those prior settings—it has given them a new focus and enables larger numbers of fans with varying levels of listening experience to share and debate their ideas about music.<sup>31</sup>

Discussions on the Cocteau Twins mailing list, whose participants are primarily from North America, South America, Great Britain, and western Europe, have covered a wide range of topics. Musicians and recordists on the list discuss equipment and signal processing techniques in trying to understand and recreate the sounds on the recordings. All participants forward their reactions to and experiences with the work of the group, particularly when there are new releases (for example *Milk & Kisses* and *The BBC Sessions*). They discuss published interviews with band

members, televised appearances (e.g., on the *Tonight Show with Jay Leno* in May 1994), the ethnic and racial make-up of group's fans, and other recordings on which band members have worked (Guthrie as producer of Felt, Lush, and Medicine; Raymonde as performer and arranger on This Mortal Coil's *Filigree and Shadow*; Fraser as singer on recordings by Ian McCulloch, Massive Attack and Craig Armstrong). Likewise, they locate, categorize, associate, reflect upon and evaluate the group's sound by comparing it to that of other groups like those mentioned previously. They debate, as well, their favorite recordings by the group, the viability and necessity of lyrical interpretation, and the etymology of identifiable words and phrases used in lyrics and song titles, e.g., "Sugar Hiccup" (1983), "Great Spangled Fritillary" (1985b) and "Athol-brose" (1988). Finally, from time to time, members write about the ways in which they *use* the Cocteau Twins's recordings: to set a romantic mood, to cope with difficult times, and to measure the passage of time in their lives. Finally, even non-music-related topics are covered on the list, such as the financial and legal difficulties experienced by one list member and the depression and suicide attempts of another.

The most revealing threads of discussion have called for list members to vote on the songs which for them express the "essence of Twin-ness," the songs that most definitively capture the group's sound and approach to recording. In the postings that followed one such query, participants advanced a number of justifications why "Pur" (1993) is perhaps the best candidate. The recording (in  $\frac{4}{4}$ ,  $\text{♩} \approx 146$ ) begins with a programmed bass drum playing softly on each eighth note, the chords  $G^{\flat}$  and  $C^{\flat}$  being played on alternate, odd-numbered downbeats, different reverberated cymbal sounds panned hard-left and hard-right, and heavily processed guitar sounds best described as "atmospheric" swirling around and filling the rest of the sonic space. In trying to describe the impact of the opening, one poster wrote,

This is one of my favorite songs too, as you might have read before. While we [are] exchanging mental images, let me share mine. When the song starts, I feel like I am taking off into open space but not on a rocket but on something more beautiful (maybe diamonds, eh eh.) [B]ut it's sort of a lift off into beauty and space. I have never tried this (not yet anyway), but it is probably a great song to make love to.

Another contributor, attempting to describe "Sigh's Smell of Farewell" (1986a) says:

First off, I like the carousel whirls of guitar, and the sense of texture which creates movement of a spinning mechanical nature. And, of course, in true CT style the song just being a prologue to the unfurling of sound and sensation which so abruptly ends. . . . I mean, when that song finally hits—it is simply amazing—the endless layers and trails of vocals, the warping flange panned throughout the mix . . . it's just incredible to me, and it breaks my heart.

What is most clear in descriptions like those just presented is how clearly they emerge from listeners trying to “force awareness to words” (Feld 1994:93) based on an engagement with sound. Whether discussing specific recordings or the group's entire recorded output, list members are constantly attempting to relate their impressions of sounds by drawing upon a wide range of strategies, ones that result from the interpretive moves they make as they experience recordings. Noting how tracks like “Pur,” “Frou-Frou Foxes in Midsummer Fires” (1990), and “Seekers Who Are Lovers” (1996) all tend to mime the same larger gesture, for example, listeners insist on making sound paramount: “Don't you think that it is a wonderful thing, that the final track on any CT album is so absolutely fantastically anthemic? It kind of says ‘Bye bye. Do come back again soon.’ Or am I just having one of my moments?”

Even when the discussion centers on lyrical meaning (or the lack thereof), comments posted to the list share the same emphasis. While the next two comments seem to be divergent, they in fact fit closely with the kinds of interpretive moves the band members hope their fans will make as they listen to their recordings. The first is an argument against lyrical interpretation, while the second, posted by a list member who sometimes went to great lengths to decipher the lyrics on recordings, is an argument for the activity:

While I am very entertained by all the interpretations of CT lyrics, for me, it's not so much the words she uses, it's how she uses them with that beautiful voice, even words and phrases I recognize seem new the way she sings them. It reminds me very much of e.e. cummings, it's all very playful and free, and even when I (sometimes especially because) don't understand literally what's being said, I am struck more by how I connect with it emotionally[.] I think it's wonderful how much deeper a feeling and understanding I sometimes have for her singing when I can barely make out a recognizable word to my vocabulary.

For those who either really don't care what the lyrics they are listening to are . . . hey, more power to ya! After all, “ignorance is bliss,”



right? I totally follow that Liz would like her listeners to get their own experiences from a song rather than decipher the lyrics. It's sort of like looking at art, everyone sees things differently. I've already been there though! Been there done that. Liz has said that if you knew what was really being said then you would be less enthralled. I tend to disagree with her on that. The more I've found out the more excited I get. I think it's wonderful to realize the things that come from another mind. Her songs will always have a separate meaning for me that is all my own.

So that even though some participants find more to love and new avenues for interpretation upon learning that "Mellonella" (1985b), for example, is a listing of the genus and species names of butterflies, many others are equally happy with preserving the "mystery" of the words and their origins.

Such disagreements are an essential part of the discourse. When list members were polled in March 1999 to name their five favorite Cocteau Twins songs and one favorite album, forty respondents named over ninety-one songs and listed nearly every album the group produced from 1982 to 1996. The variance could not have been more striking. List members who had a long-term engagement with the group tended to be partial to earlier work like *Treasure* (1984), while more recent fans of the group favored *Heaven or Las Vegas* as the most popular of the eight full-length albums the group released while still active. Contributors were often surprised by the favorites of others but typically advanced alternate choices in terms that said, "I see what you mean, but I think . . ." or "Hmmm. I'll have to listen to that again." Even more telling was the companion poll started by another contributor, one that asked for list members' least-favorite tunes. When one poster placed "Sugar Hiccup" (1983) at the bottom of the list and asked others to explain its appeal, the following was among the replies she received:

I can only tell you what I "feel" when I listen to the song. I like it because of a couple [of] factors. It has a large concert hall sound that I don't hear in every one of their songs. I like the melody of the vocals. At the time it came out (early 80's), I thought it defied everything else being written or recorded by other bands. Although not a very prolific song in terms of lyrics, I like it. Now I say prolific with hesitation because I really don't understand for certain what the lyrics are about (if anyone else does, please share it with us, 'cause I would love to get another perspective). My interpretation of the lyrics or rather what I "feel" is that Liz may be singing about a feeling of love, of being so in love, so much infatuated with a sweetheart to

the point of getting a sugar hiccup. This is probably a very romantic, cute and perhaps even sick interpretation but I like it. But I know the lyrics imply other things perhaps . . . and of course, some of the members on this list have offered their fantasy interpretation of the words (i.e. Sugar Hiccup on Cheerios) which I find myself singing from time to time.

A consensus of sorts emerged from both discussions. "Favorite" and "least favorite" were to be seen as relative designations rather than absolute judgments. Many contributors suggested, as did the following, that the former category designated the tracks they most wanted to hear while the latter referred to those they did not feel as strong a desire to hear:

Other ones I tend to skip are "Essence" [1993] and "Otterley" [1984] (I seem to be in cahoots with the other person who dislikes the whispery songs . . . however I *love Victorialand* [1986b] and I can't ever skip over a song on that or put it on random, I need to listen to it from start to finish). I also tend to skip past both "Ups" and "Eperdu" [both 1996] but I've just noticed that most of these songs precede ones I particularly enjoy . . . Summerhead [1993], Donimo [1984], Treasure Hiding [1996] . . . which is usually why I'll be compelled to pass over some . . . I'm impatient to get to the other songs.

Such consensus was not necessary for the discussions on the list to continue. Indeed, it was a temporary moment in the ongoing discussions on the list. It would, in fact, be modified a year later, the next time a similar topic was broached.

If on the list there is any grasping for a larger meaning, any attempt to mine a more weighty significance from musical engagement, it is perhaps best summed up by one poster's comment about music, taste, and sociability on the heels of the discussion of favorites:

In the film *True Stories*, David Byrne asks the audience: "Do you like music? Everybody says they do. . . ." Nice line. Everybody likes music, but we sometimes do not want to believe it. That's because when we ask someone "Do you like music?" the real question behind it may actually be "Do we have something in common?". Or it might mean further . . . something like "Do you feel the same way I do about certain things?" A little as if our feelings will be at risk of never being valid if we never get a chance to confirm them with someone else. Therefore, it's hard for us to accept other people's taste for music at

times. Music means different things for different people. Indeed, many just see it as “words-in-a-tune,” with words being a lot more important. CT freaks will favor other aspects of music.

This comment suggests that (rock) music is not so much a thing-in-itself as it is a way for listeners to engage with one another and to make their way through the world. To the degree that analysts, whether journalists or scholars, try to connect music to a wider world, they perhaps miss what is paramount for rock fans: how their musical experiences place them in the world, how their preferences connect them to other listeners and allow them to develop a sense of who they are and how they relate to others (Frith 1987; Stokes 1994). Asking Byrne’s question, even about a specific recording or a specific group, is an invitation to share one’s reactions, experiences, and interpretations—an invitation to make rock meaningful. While the recordings and the sounds in them are the focal point of discussion, the interpretive moves that they engender form the basis of rock’s meanings. Those meanings change depending on the discussants involved and what they bring to their engagement—their knowledge of the techniques used to make them, their interpretations of what the recordings say to them, the ways in which music functions in their lives.

For rock listeners, in the end, music may indeed be about youth, sub-cultural resistance, or the parameters usually discussed by musicologists and music theorists. Its meanings, however, are neither exhausted nor contained by those ways of seeing it. Recordists and others may attempt to relate rock (and its lyrics) to wider social and cultural contexts, to decipher its meanings in the terms favored by academics and journalists. Far more frequently, however, they are engaged in a much more fluid and contingent process. As they engage with recordings, they experience sounds, relate them to others, make evaluations, generate interpretations and perhaps enter into a discourse about what makes the music they like work for them. Sounds become the basis for assertions about inclusion and exclusion, belonging and not belonging, about pleasure and pain, about beauty and ugliness, and all that lies in between those extremes. The problem with previous approaches to meaning is that they unnecessarily foreclose the possibilities for meaning in rock. In the world of rock fans, however, rock is not merely something produced for their decoding or leisurely consumption. It is the beginning of a process that can result in temporary consensus or disagreement and is filtered through what they bring to recordings and how recordings function in their lives. Meaning is not something *in* recordings: it is something that recordings allow listeners to make.

*Notes*

1. Albin J. Zak, III, Mark Clague, Erik Santos, and Aaron Fox deserve thanks for helping shape my ideas in conversation over the last three years. Stratton Davis and Leesa Beales from the Cocteau Twins Discussion List have my undying gratitude for helping me locate difficult-to-find magazine articles about the Cocteau Twins. I thank Cynthia Wong, Jerusha Ramos, and the journal's reviewers for discerning suggestions.

2. Of course, there are many instances where the selfsame group of fans might protest that *any* analytical standpoint would be suspect, given the numinous character of their most prized music. One might regard such moments as an index of the degree to which Romantic discourses on art have combined with a broader anti-intellectual climate to invalidate all talk or writing about music not purely descriptive of experience. Alternatively, one might adopt the view that "mediated, word-based evaluations . . . do not provide the feeling or direct experience" (Turino 1999:241) of music.

3. The use of the words "make" and "experience" is a deliberate attempt to escape the limitations of sociological studies predicated on the production and consumption of rock. As mass culture-based approaches, each tends to obscure the agency of recordists and music listeners and to efface the complexity and variability of the processes so described. For a nuanced discussion of the problems with the production/consumption dyad, see Laba (1986).

4. For varying approaches to defining rock, see Frith (1981), Grossberg (1990), and Middleton (1990).

5. Discographical information for these and most other recordings mentioned in the body of the article can be found in the discography at the end. Note that a year indicated in the discography corresponds to the year of the original release of the cited recording.

6. The historical dimension is crucial. As Goehr observes, paradigmatic examples can be described thus "not because they are associated with an unchanging set of essential properties, but because . . . they play, for a given time, a particular role in the practice in which they exist" (1992:95–96).

7. Music videos, while arguably an important part of how fans experience rock, are not as essential to interpretation in the long term, particularly since as promotional tools they are more transient than recordings and less widely distributed. For discussions of the role and interpretation of music videos, see Frith, Goodwin and Grossberg (1993).

8. Interestingly, despite the song's decidedly left-leaning meditation on such issues, conservative radio host Rush Limbaugh, much to Hynde's dismay, used "My City Was Gone" as the theme song for his radio program (Corn and Munger 1997).

9. Frith (1989:78–79) traces "reflection theories" to content analyses of song lyrics done in the 1950s. He also details a number of the problems with such analysis.

10. See, for example, Desmond (1987) and Greenfield (1987). Beginning in the late 1960s and inspired by the work of songwriters like Bob Dylan, literary scholars, rock enthusiasts and poetically oriented rock musicians have published

collections of lyrics (Goldstein 1969; Pichaske 1981; Springsteen 1998) that present them as entities capable of enduring scrutiny detached from their recorded manifestations. One extreme example of regarding rock lyrics as poetry is composer John Corigliano's setting of Dylan's lyrics to music reportedly without ever having heard them sung (Kozinn 2000).

11. Sarah McLachlan, for example, has lamented that "Possession" (1993) has been regarded as a love song. According to her, the lyrics are an adaptation of threatening letters she received from an "obsessed fan" who claimed that she'd been betrothed to him before birth and that he would "stop at nothing" to make his marriage to her a reality (Mundy 1998:42). The Police's "Every Breath You Take" (1983), intended by Sting to be a chilling account of stalking and surveillance, has been similarly misread (Connelly 1984:20).

12. Bowie's adaptation of the technique involves writing more or less conventional prose or lyrics and then deliberately rearranging sentences and phrases in order to create a collage-like, non-narrative text. In the past, some of his lyrics were literally cut-ups that involved his rearranging pieces of paper. More recently, he has used a specially written computer program to accomplish similar aims.

13. If such a position were defensible, it would almost require that we develop entirely different modes of analysis for instrumental rock recordings, which, lacking lyrics, would have nothing to reflect—except perhaps their titles. One wonders, for example, whether Johnny Marr's instrumental "Money Changes Everything" (1986) became somehow *more* meaningful when Bryan Ferry added lyrics and retitled it "The Right Stuff" (1986).

14. Allan Moore's skepticism regarding such analysis is instructive (1995: 185–87). Demonstrating that rock musicians think in long-range terms like concert music composers has less to do with the substance of rock than with legitimating it for those who see European concert music as the prime measure of musical value.

15. David Brackett (1995:157–59) examines a similar case in discussing Elvis Costello's disdain for technical writing about music. Brackett goes on to note, however, that Costello is quite at home with the use of terminology familiar to music theorists. Brackett's insight resonates well with Leslie Gay's discussion (1991) of the use of music-theoretical terminology—particularly chord names and formal designations—among New York rock musicians.

16. The technological issues involved with electronic keyboards and drum machines in particular are discussed by Goodwin (1990) and Théberge (1997).

17. Thomas Porcello's work (1996) has been extremely important for mapping out the discursive terrain that musicians use in describing sound and negotiating the process of recording. He details, among other things, the importance of certain kinds of adjectives and how they "fit" the timbral nuances they describe.

18. A noise gate is a device that can be configured to effectively "mute" a microphone or instrument until its dynamic level exceeds a certain threshold, measured in decibels. In simpler terms, low-level sounds, such as the rustling of clothing or the "airiness" of a room, can be filtered out of an audio signal before it goes to tape. Other processing and technical terms are defined by Bartlett and Bartlett (1998).

19. Discussions of sound are prominently featured in *Electronic Musician*, *EQ*, *Mix* and a number of other periodicals for recording professionals and enthusiasts. *Mix*, for example, has long been publishing two columns dedicated to explicating such processes: one called "Classic Tracks" and the other "Recording Notes." In each issue, writers discuss the processes involved in the making of classic and new recordings, respectively, based on interviews with the musicians, producers and engineers involved.

20. In fact, Roland's VG-88, introduced in the mid-1990s, allows guitarists, using a special pickup, to emulate a nearly infinite combination of guitar, amplifier and effects settings. Using their unit, one could literally use a pre-programmed "Stairway to Heaven" patch without having to investigate the recording equipment and processes used by Jimmy Page.

21. This connection is less surprising than it might seem. I remember hearing "Miss You" on Nashville's primary rhythm and blues station, WVOL-AM, in the late 1970s. One could reasonably expect that people listening to R&B stations in other markets might have had similar experiences.

22. The Temptations' recording differs slightly in that their "I/Oh, I" pairings come on the first and third lines of verses. Prince's recording extends the gesture by using the words "You/Oh, you" on the third and fourth lines of his verses.

23. Both examples syllabically distribute the words over these scale degrees:  $\hat{3}-\hat{5}-\hat{4}-\hat{3}-\hat{2}-\hat{1}-\hat{1}$ .

24. A similar evocative gesture can be identified when one compares "This Is the Sea" (1985) by the Waterboys with "Sweet Thing" (1968) by Van Morrison.

25. For further discussion of some of these issues, see T. Jackson (1998:15-17, 233-34), Higgins (1991), and Crafts, Cavicci, and Keil (1993).

26. As of early February 2001, the Cocteau Twins Discussion List <COCTEAU@NS.PHAET.COM> is maintained by Stratton Davis. Subscription requests go to <LISTSERV@NS.PHAET.COM>. The band's official web site is <<http://www.cocteutwins.com>>. A separate fan site, maintained by Leesa Beales, can be found at <<http://www.cocteutwins.org>>. Crafts, Cavicchi, and Keil (1993) is one work that does focus specifically on the views of listeners. Robinson (1997) contains essays that do related work for concert music.

27. I should make clear that I am not claiming that the Cocteau Twins are the only group whose music presents such a challenge. They are one convenient example among a host of others (early R.E.M. recordings, for example). Where whimsical titles are concerned, Simon Raymonde revealed, in a private message to a member of the Cocteau Twins e-mail list, that Fraser had a habit of switching titles, for instance, using a phrase from the third track of a recording to title the second.

28. One might well argue that the enigmatic and evocative design of Cocteau Twins record sleeves suggests such interpretations to writers. None of the group's record sleeves has ever featured photos of the group, lyric sheets, or any but the most basic information: track listings and running times, copyright notices, songwriting and production credits. Instead, they contain ambiguous images, washes of color and texture crafted by Vaughan Oliver's design firm, 23 Envelope. Poynor (2000) discusses the visual identity Oliver constructed for their recordings.

29. She also asserts that wordless singing still communicates something: "Even when I'm not using words, I think people can understand what lies beneath [what I am singing]" (Paphides 1993).

30. The sonic character of work by such bands is discussed by Felder (1993: 115–42).

31. For discussion of varied issues related to computer-mediated communication and the establishment of "virtual communities" via web sites, mailing lists and Usenet groups, see Jones (1995) and Baym (1995).

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