

Original Paper

Purpose and Innovation in Family Guy's Musical Numbers

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Abstract

Seth MacFarlane is well known for his groundbreaking animated series Family Guy (Fox, 1999-), a trademark of which is the inclusion musical numbers that reflect MacFarlane's knowledge of the film musical. While many criticize the controversial approach and seeming arbitrary nature of not just the show's jokes, but also its musical numbers, the way MacFarlane integrates them into his animated series allows today's cynical audience to enjoy a taste of the rather dormant genre. MacFarlane does so by employing elements of the Warner Brothers/Berkeley musical, the integrated and aggregate musical forms, the myth of integration, The Great American Songbook, the folk musical, the backstage musical, the MGM musical, and studio-era-style choreography. Through the analysis of some of Family Guy's most impressive musical numbers, I propose to show that Family Guy boasts the most musically informed and detailed numbers in an animated television series today. MacFarlane employs these numbers for either one, two, or all three of the following purposes: to create a sense of community among the characters of the narrative and in the show's audience, to simultaneously pay homage to and satirize the traditional film musical genre, and to facilitate controversial sociopolitical commentary.

Keywords

musicals, popular culture, animation, family guy, hollywood studio era

1. Introduction

Seth MacFarlane is well known for his groundbreaking animated series *Family Guy* (Fox, 1999-), a trademark of which is the constant inclusion of carefully crafted musical numbers that reflect MacFarlane's knowledge of the film musical. According to an interview Terry Gross conducted with MacFarlane on *Fresh Air*, "When *Family Guy* creator Seth MacFarlane was growing up, his parents exposed him to Broadway, movie musicals and the Great American Songbook". Clearly, music and

musicals are something MacFarlane has been heavily exposed to since childhood.

Family Guy first aired in 1999 and has since accrued millions of fans, adolescent and adult alike, do in great part to its merciless humor and witty writing. While many criticize the controversial approach and seeming arbitrary nature of not just the show's jokes, but its musical numbers, the way MacFarlane integrates musical numbers into his animated series allows today's cynical audience to enjoy a taste of the long-dormant genre.

According to Elizabeth Thomas from *Liberty Park Music*, "Seth had to fight for his musical vision ... Fox executives did not think that *Family Guy*'s mostly male teenage viewers would appreciate the high level of music or the lengthy musical numbers in the show". The executives from Fox were wrong, the musical numbers now being a staple of the show both adolescents and adults enjoy. MacFarlane employs these numbers for either one, two, or all three of the following purposes: to create a sense of community among the characters of the narrative and in the show's audience, to simultaneously pay homage to and satirize the traditional film musical genre, and to facilitate controversial sociopolitical commentary. All three of these functions and MacFarlane's musical genius are evident in *Family Guy*'s opening sequence. According to Thomas, network executives also thought an opening theme song would only hurt the show, as "They reasoned that the audience would grow bored of sitting through the same song at the beginning of each episode". Once again, the executives proved to be wrong, as "*Family Guy*'s opening song has become iconic, to the point where most of our younger American generation would recognize it" (Thomas).

2. Method/Analysis

The introductory sequence begins with Lois Griffin singing and playing the piano in the Griffin home. Peter Griffin, the protagonist, soon joins followed by the rest of the family (Stewie, Meg, Chris, and Brian the dog). The sequence then quickly switches location and goes from the living room to an enormous studio complete with an elaborate set, dozens of dancers, orchestral music, and flamboyant costumes. Immediately, we have a shift from isolation to integration as the Griffin family is relocated from their "private" living room to a large scale musical number with dancers that can be interpreted as representing the fictional community of Quahog, Rhode Island; this interpretation is supported by the introductory sequence of the episode "He's Bla-ack" that presents the secondary characters of the show as the dancers lining the grand staircase the Griffin family ascends.

MacFarlane's reverence for the film musical genre is evident in the Berkeleyesque character of the introductory sequence. According to Martin Rubin in his essay "Busby Berkeley and the Backstage Musical", "Berkeleyesque" refers to "those elements of spectacle that would later become identified with Berkeley's name, such as large-scale chorus formations, geometric patterns, and giant props" (p. 54). Like the Berkeley backstage musical, the *Family Guy* opening sequence "establishes a space (or a series of homologous spaces) that are, to a certain extent, self-enclosed and independent of the surrounding narrative" (Rubin 56). The opening sequence also showcases the impressive orchestral

music that has become a hallmark of *Family Guy*. According to Dave Itzkoff of the *New York Times*. At a time when most television series employ a single composer, each armed with little more than a computer sequencing program and a synthesizer, “*Family Guy*” has two composers, Walter Murphy and Ron Jones, whose works are played by a live 40-piece orchestra, in scenes that may call for quick melodic cues or full-scale parodies of scenes from stage and movie musicals gone by.

Thus, MacFarlane is praised and recognized for utilizing a full orchestra not just for musical numbers, but for the entire show’s musical score.

In addition to paying homage to the film musical, the music in the introductory sequence also contains social critique. According to M. Keith Booker in his book *Drawn to Television*, the ironic lyrics of the theme song “apotheosize precisely the kind of old-fashioned values that *Family Guy* overtly flouts” (p. 89). Therefore, the theme song’s lyrics inform the audience of what the show will be predominantly criticizing: the stereotypical and thus heteronormative suburban existence of most Americans and their outdated values.

Family Guy’s musical numbers function much like the introductory sequence taking on anywhere from just one to all three of the purposes previously mentioned (create community, satirize and praise the musical, mediate sociopolitical commentary). “My Drunken Irish Dad” from the episode “Airport ‘07” is a perfect example of the musical number reintegrating a protagonist into a community. Reintegration into a community is part of what Jane Feuer calls the “myth of integration” and is one of the elements necessary for what Feuer considers a successful performance alongside “success in love” and “the merger of high art with popular art” (p. 35). In the episode, Peter travels to Ireland in search of his biological father, Mikey. Initially, Mikey dismisses and mocks Peter, refusing to believe he is his son. Since Mikey is celebrated as the town drunk, Peter challenges Mikey to a drinking contest in order to prove he is his progeny. When Peter wins, Mikey welcomes Peter into the family and they burst out in song to celebrate. Through the number, Mikey “integrates the individual [Peter] into a unified group [Irish bar community] ... (and moves the individual) from isolation to the joy of being part of a group” (Feuer 35). According to Feuer, this “vision of musical performance originat(es) in the folk, generating love and a cooperative spirit which includes everyone in its grasp and which can conquer all obstacles” (36). Of course, in juxtaposing the folk form with the ironic lyrics of “My Drunken Irish Dad”, which applaud alcoholism and dead-beat fathers, MacFarlane is also parodying the folk musical and the values it adheres to; he problematizes Feuer’s myth of integration by incorporating Peter into a community that is the opposite of the utopian group protagonists are reintroduced to in traditional folk musicals.

In addition to reestablishing a sense of community and reintegrating a protagonist into a group, *Family Guy*’s musical numbers also work to give the audience a sense of inclusion and identification. The collectively produced episodes of *Family Guy* establish continuity and encourage audience identification by presenting the same characters in different situations week after week. Additionally, featuring musical numbers that cover recognizable songs from already established film musicals also

contributes to audience identification, inclusion, and unification. For example, “Somewhere That’s Green” from the episode “The Courtship of Stewie’s Father” is from Frank Oz’s *Little Shop of Horrors* (1986), a very popular cult musical adolescent and adult viewers alike recognize. MacFarlane reimagines the number from secondary character Herbert the Pervert’s perspective establishing Herb as Audrey and Chris Griffin as Seymour. It is an exact shot-for-shot recreation of “Somewhere That’s Green” that uses the same lyrics, a decision made so viewers that recognize the allusion to *Little Shop of Horrors* could feel “in the know” and pick up on the additional layer of understanding the allusion provides. Similar to the introductory sequence, a sense of irony is created by juxtaposition; in this case, MacFarlane has a sexual predator sing wholesome lyrics that celebrate old-fashioned values.

Considering *Little Shop of Horrors* is a self-aware camp movie that overtly mocks not only traditional American values, but also the musical genre and its tropes, MacFarlane’s recreation of “Somewhere That’s Green” approximates the work of Judy Garland in “When I Look at You” from Norman Taurog’s and Roy Del Ruth’s *Presenting Lily Mars* (1943). Like in the introduction to “San Francisco” in Garland’s concert at Carnegie Hall (1961), Garland employs excessive trills in “When I Look at You” to mock what Richard Dyer calls an “already camp genre, operetta” (p. 108). MacFarlane also taunts an already camp genre, the cult musical, by reproducing it in an even more ridiculous way. Dyer argues Garland “seem[s] to be reflecting back either on her own image in the film or on the vehicle in which she has been placed” (p. 109). MacFarlane not only reflects on the musical genre, but also on the values it propagates, values that are shared by the traditional family sitcom which *Family Guy* parodies. *Family Guy* is overtly self-aware in this way, both in narrative and in many of its musical numbers; the show sometimes even draws attention to “behind-the-scenes processes”. In fact, many of the variations of the introductory theme song sequence, such as the one in the episode “Whistle While Your Wife Works” call attention to how the number is set up with characters somehow mucking up or interrupting filming.

Like “Somewhere That’s Green”, “The Worry Song” from the episode “Road to Rupert” also works to involve the audience through familiarity and celebrate the musical, however more overtly. MacFarlane’s variation of “The Worry Song”, originally from George Sidney’s *Anchors Aweigh* (1945), features Stewie dancing alongside Gene Kelly in the place of Jerry Mouse. Instead of going for the shot-for-shot approach of “Somewhere That’s Green”, MacFarlane inserts Stewie right into the iconic live-action scene. Thus, this musical number clearly pays homage to the traditional film musical, as it not only incorporates a number starring one of the studio era’s top musical performers, but also takes on a quality characteristic of Warner Brothers/Berkeley films.

According to Rubin, “the numbers in the major Warner Brothers/Berkeley musicals do not create discursive difficulties in terms of the numbers’ placement within the narrative” (p. 57).

Similarly, Macfarlane’s version of the “The Worry Song” does not disrupt the narrative as “the major shift in discourse ... occurs not in the transition from narrative to performance but within the performance itself” (Rubin 58). In the episode, Stewie and Brian are attempting to rent a helicopter to

fly to Aspen, Colorado where the man Brian accidentally sold Stewie's teddy bear to resides. Stewie discovers that they can pay with a showtune and, of course, chooses to pay with song. Stewie breaks into song in the rental shop and about twenty seconds into the number it cuts from the shop to the scene from *Anchors Aweigh*. Like in Warner Brothers/Berkeley musicals, "the performance space is kept separate from narrative space, with each having its own qualities, laws, and modes of address" (Rubin, p. 58). As a result, "the impossible discourse of the numbers does not encroach on the realistic discourse of the narrative" (Rubin 58). That is, the major shift in reality happens during the performance and is thus part of the performance, leaving the integrity of the narrative discourse intact. That is not to say that MacFarlane's "The Worry Song" and similar numbers do not create any impossibility, only that the impossibility lies in the "theatrical space in which ... [the numbers] are taking place" (Rubin 58).

As previously mentioned, *Family Guy*'s musical numbers also function to ease what most consider rather harsh sociopolitical commentary. According to LaChrystal Rieke, "*Family Guy* has been the target of significant criticism and Federal Communication Commission (FCC) complaints over the show's abrasive language, perceived indecent content, and sexual overtones" (p. 1). However, "Because the show is animated and often uses music as a means to deliver its twisted sense of humor, the writers ... [are] able to get away with jokes that would otherwise not be ... allowed to air on television" (Thomas). While some of *Family Guy*'s numbers like "Prom Night Dumpster Baby" from the episode "Airport 07" can certainly be considered offensive, MacFarlane's blend of musical performance and abrasive humor nonetheless serves to bring controversial subject matters to the forefront thus drawing attention to society's maladies. Following the lead of Trey Parker and Matt Stone's *South Park* (Comedy Central, 1997-) and Matt Groening's *The Simpsons* (Fox, 1989-), MacFarlane knowingly incorporates the humorous and sometimes crude musical number to ease the discomfort that often accompanies controversial discourse.

The number "Bag of Weed" from the episode "420" exemplifies how MacFarlane utilizes musical numbers to mediate his sociopolitical commentary and bring attention to controversial topics such as the legalization of marijuana. The musical number is part of Brian's campaign to legalize marijuana after being arrested for drug possession. A wildly enthusiastic number, it embodies the Berkeleyesque by incorporating a large-scale chorus formation and a vaudeville review style. The number takes place in a park where Brian, with the help of Stewie, is attempting to garner support for his "Legalize Pot" campaign. After Brian and Stewie begin to sing, the crowd joins and becomes the chorus for the number. They dance, perform a number of stunts, and come together to form a human marijuana leaf, clearly embodying Berkeley's musical style. During the number, Brian and Stewie play a row of glass bongos as if they are a xylophone, proceed to tap dance on the bongos, and then perform a number of stunts which include Brian juggling five bongos and Stewie artfully leaping about and playing the suspended bongos. This particular sequence approximates the numbers characteristic of a vaudeville show. According to Rubin, vaudeville shows can have the same format as revues which are "a mélange

of self-contained acts, with a general emphasis on music and comedy” (p. 53). “Fit as Fiddle” from Kelly’s and Stanley Donen’s *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952) is a clear example of vaudeville with Kelly and Donald O’Connor playing fiddles, dancing, and stunting in impressive and comedic ways. Brian’s and Stewie’s sequence is very reminiscent of this, their rhythmic stunts and comedic choreography suggesting MacFarlane was clearly reproducing the vaudeville form.

MacFarlane’s reproduction of the vaudeville form is one of the many ways he shows reverence for traditional musicals. In an interview with *GQ* magazine’s Benjy Hansen-Bundy, MacFarlane reveals himself to be quite the traditional musical junkie. In fact, MacFarlane argues the only great musicals were created during what he calls “the golden age of musicals”; that is, only “The shows that were written in the ’40s, ’50s, and ’60s have withstood the test of time and can truly be called great shows” (qtd. in Hansen-Bundy). Hansen-Bundy states, we asked him if there was literally one song out of all the songs that were sung in the past ten years that he thought showed promise for the future. He said no. According to him, songwriting and scoring have been on a heavy decline since the golden era of Rodgers and Hammerstein.

This is a bold claim considering the Tony-award-winning *Book of Mormon* by *South Park* creators Parker and Stone was first staged in 2011. Furthermore, Parker and Stone have been in the animated musical number game longer than MacFarlane. Not only has *South Park* been making use of the animated musical number since 1997, but their 1999 animated movie musical hit, *South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut*, was nominated for an Academy Award in 2000; *Family Guy* was just beginning at this point.

Though MacFarlane is “a bigger musical junkie than Ryan Murphy” according to Kimberly Kaye of *Theater Mania*, he has yet to create an award-winning musical production like Parker’s and Stone’s; though, he does boast four Primetime Emmy Awards for *Family Guy*, four Grammy Award nominations for his recorded albums, and one Academy Award nomination for co-writing “Everybody Needs a Best Friend” featured in his film *Ted* (2012). When discussing MacFarlane’s work hosting the 2013 Academy Awards, Kaye states that “one thing was clear: Seth MacFarlane wants to do Broadway. Or, more accurately, wants you to know he could Broadway ... if he wanted to”. Despite “The blow back against MacFarlane’s theoretical Broadway chops, as prominently demonstrated by the Oscars” (Kaye), it is evident MacFarlane is no wannabe. His animated musical numbers demonstrate knowledge of movie musical conventions and an unparalleled attention to detail. MacFarlane makes use of both the aggregate and integrated musical forms, detailed studio-era-style choreography, and a compositional musicality inspired by the orchestration characteristic of the 50s, which, according to MacFarlane in an interview with Gross, “was the peak of high musicality as far as what singers and orchestrator were doing with relatively old songs from the ’20s and 30s ... they discovered what they really could do with an orchestra in popular music”.

Of the animated musical numbers previously discussed, “My Drunken Irish Dad”, “Bag of Weed”, and “Somewhere That’s Green” all represent the integrated musical form; that is, the “song, dance, and

story ... [are] artfully blended to produce a combined effect” (Mueller qtd. in Cohan 9). Conversely, “The Worry Song” represents the aggregate musical form. In the aggregate form, “numbers ... [function] ‘as a series of self-contained highlights that work to weaken the dominance of a homogeneous, hierarchical narrative continuity” (Rubin qtd. in Cohan 9). MacFarlane’s use of the aggregate musical form and overwhelming use of cutaways, which at times are musical numbers, has often been dismissed as lazy writing which uselessly interrupts the narrative for the sake of a cheap laugh. This has led other shows such as *South Park* to parody *Family Guy* and its perceived incongruity.

In the episode “Cartoon Wars, Part 2” from *South Park*, Parker and Stone mock *Family Guy* and its creative team by presenting the staff writers as manatees living in a tank with “idea balls” on the right side and a “joke combine” on the left. The manatees choose random idea balls, which have a verb, noun or pop culture reference written on them, and swim them over to the joke combine; once the ball is dropped in, it forms part of a new script. In the episode, the resulting joke is “Laundry, date, winning, Mexico, Gary Coleman”. The episode then cleverly cuts away, as *Family Guy* does, and shows the finalized manatee constructed joke. According to Eric Goldman of *IGN*, Parker and Stone received no complaints from MacFarlane and a flood of praise and gratitude from shows such as *The Simpsons* and *King of the Hill*, the latter claiming they “were doing God’s work” (Parker and Stone qtd. in Goldman 4). While this could be a valid critique for non-musical cutaway gags, it is an oversimplification of MacFarlane’s intent when directed at musical numbers that exemplify the aggregate musical form.

A perfect example of the aggregate form that also embodies not one but all three of MacFarlane’s musical purposes is “Shipooopi” from the episode “Patriot Games”; “Shipooopi” is originally from Morton DaCosta’s *The Music Man* (1962). MacFarlane’s version of “Shipooopi” is a celebratory number Peter performs after scoring a touchdown for the New England Patriots who recruited him after Tom Brady saw Peter’s tackling skills. After scoring the touchdown, Peter decides to sing a victory tune and breaks into song. Since Peter sings the same lyrics from *The Music Man*, it is not surprising the number has nothing to do with the episode’s narrative or thematic. Instead, “Shipooopi” is a complete embodiment of MacFarlane’s musical intents: to create a sense of community among the characters of the narrative and in the show’s audience, to simultaneously pay homage to and satirize the traditional film musical genre, and to facilitate controversial sociopolitical commentary.

“Shipooopi” reintroduces Peter into the community which had rejected him for becoming too much of a braggadocious show boater upon joining the New England Patriots. The scene starts with Brady and the Patriots angry at Peter for not making kick-off. Peter soon arrives making his entrance by driving onto the field in a red convertible. After Brady scolds Peter for showboating, Peter goes on to score a touchdown and do a victory dance much to Brady’s chagrin. After this, the musical number is performed, and Peter wins the Patriots’ forgiveness in the process. Furthermore, like with “Somewhere That’s Green”, by recreating a number from a popular film musical like *The Music Man*, MacFarlane also allows for audience identification.

“Shipooopi” parodies the musical by disrupting the gendered stereotypes it relies on and having Peter randomly break into a number that has nothing to do with the narrative. “Shipooopi” problematizes the heteronormative gender stereotypes characteristic of what MacFarlane calls “the golden age of musicals” by having both heteronormative and same-sex dance couples populate the performance space; that is, he queers a hetero trope of the musical to comment on its obsolescence. This queering of heteronormativity also serves as sociopolitical commentary since MacFarlane is an avid LGBTQ supporter.

By having Peter break into song and dance out of nowhere, MacFarlane is commenting on this notorious trademark of the film musical most people criticize and cite as the main reason they do not enjoy film musicals. Cohan confirms this in “How to Solve a Problem Like the Film Musical”, “it may seem ‘unrealistic’ and hence laughable for characters to break the ‘unitary flow of the narrative’ by breaking out in song or dance” (p. 4). Even musical greats like Stephen Sondheim have issues with musical numbers in films believing “they find a comfortable home on stage but work against the cinematic medium” (Cohan 4). Though MacFarlane might not agree with Sondheim, he manages to validate his opinion by sending up this musical trope. MacFarlane honors the film musical by having the number follow musical convention. However, he also parodies the film musical by having the number enact that convention in an unorthodox and satirical way. Thus, in “Shipooopi”, the mocking of the musical number is part of MacFarlane’s tribute to it.

Also part of MacFarlane’s tribute to the “golden age of musicals” is the detailed choreography and Berkeleysque elements “Shipooopi” employs. Peter recruits the packed football stadium and creates a large-scale chorus formation consequently calling to mind the grandiosity of Berkeley’s musical numbers; there are also cheerleaders on the field that create grand geometric patterns through stunt work. The choreography in “Shipooopi” reproduces the choreography from the original number in *The Music Man* and includes variations of the Charleston, barrel rolls, grapevines, step-ball-changes, and fouetté turns. The result is a number reminiscent of those featured in recognizable greats such as *The Music Man*, *Singin’ in the Rain*, and *Anchors Aweigh*.

3. Results

While MacFarlane has yet to create a feature-length musical production like Parker and Stone, be it live action or animated, it is clear he has the ability to do so; whether or not it would measure up to Parker’s and Stone’s feature-length musical productions is another story. The opening sequence of *Family Guy*, “My Drunken Irish Dad”, “Somewhere That’s Green”, “The Worry Song”, “Bag of Weed”, and “Shipooopi” are all proof of this. In this selection of numbers alone MacFarlane flexes his musical muscles and tips his hat to the Warner Brothers/Berkeley musical, the integrated and aggregate musical forms, the myth of integration, The Great American Songbook, the folk musical, the backstage musical, the MGM musical, and studio-era-style choreography. Of course, that is not to say MacFarlane simply imitates; his talent lies in his reinvention and ability to incorporate elements of the traditional film

musical into an animated television show with the same level of detail. Parker and Stone and Groening have not created musical numbers that match MacFarlane's in terms of their attention to musical detail; while critically acclaimed, their numbers' composition and choreography are not as meticulously crafted as MacFarlane's and rarely show any kind of reverence for the traditional film musical as part of their satire. Therefore, *Family Guy* boasts the most musically informed and detailed numbers in an animated television series. Intertwine this with the creation of a community and sociopolitical commentary and you have a show that is truly innovative in its creation and use of the animated musical number.

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