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Dr. Lance Brunner, Director of Graduate Studies

GENDER, POLITICS, MARKET SEGMENTATION, AND TASTE: ADULT CONTEMPORARY RADIO AT THE END OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
College of Fine Arts
at the University of Kentucky

By
Saesha Mary Senger

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Donna Lee Kwon, Associate Professor of Ethnomusicology

Lexington, Kentucky

2019

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

GENDER, POLITICS, MARKET SEGMENTATION, AND TASTE: ADULT CONTEMPORARY AT THE END OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

This dissertation explores issues of gender politics, market segmentation, and taste through an examination of the contributions of several artists who have achieved Adult Contemporary (AC) chart success. The scope of the project is limited to a period when many artists who figured prominently in both the broader mainstream of American popular music and the more specific Adult Contemporary category were most commercially viable: from the mid-1980s through the 1990s. My contention is that, as gender politics and gendered social norms continued to change in the United States at this time, Adult Contemporary – the chart, the format, and the associated music – was an important, if overlooked or even trivialized, arena in which these shifting gender dynamics played out. This dissertation explores the significance of the Adult Contemporary format at the end of the twentieth century through analysis of chart performance, artist image, musical works, marketing, and contextual factors. By documenting these relevant social, political, economic, and musical factors, the notable role of a format and of artists neglected by scholars becomes clear.

I explore these issues in the form of lengthy case studies. Examinations of how Adult Contemporary artists such as Michael Bolton, Wilson Phillips, Matchbox Twenty, David Gray, and Mariah Carey were produced and marketed, and how their music was disseminated, illustrate record and radio industry strategies for negotiating the musical, political, and social climate of this period. Significantly, musical and lyrical analyses of songs successful on AC stations, and many of their accompanying promotional videos highlight messages about musical genre, gender, race, and age. This dissertation ultimately demonstrates that Adult Contemporary-oriented music figured significantly in the culture wars, second and third wave feminism, expressions of masculinity, Generation-X struggles, postmodern identity, and market segmentation.

This study also illustrates how the record and radio industries have managed audience composition and behavior to effectively and more predictably produce and market music in the United States. This dissertation argues that, amid broader social determinations for taste, the record industry, radio programmers, and *Billboard* chart compilers and writers have helped to make and reinforce certain assumptions about who listens to which music and why they do so. In addition, critics have weighed in on what different musical genres and artists have offered and for whom, often assigning higher value to music associated with certain genres, socio-political associations, and listeners while claiming over-commercialization, irrelevance, aesthetic insignificance, and bad taste for much other music.

KEYWORDS: Adult Contemporary Format, Radio, Gender Politics,
Popular Music Studies, Music Criticism

Saesha Mary Senger

December 9, 2019

GENDER, POLITICS, MARKET SEGMENTATION, AND TASTE:
ADULT CONTEMPORARY AT THE END OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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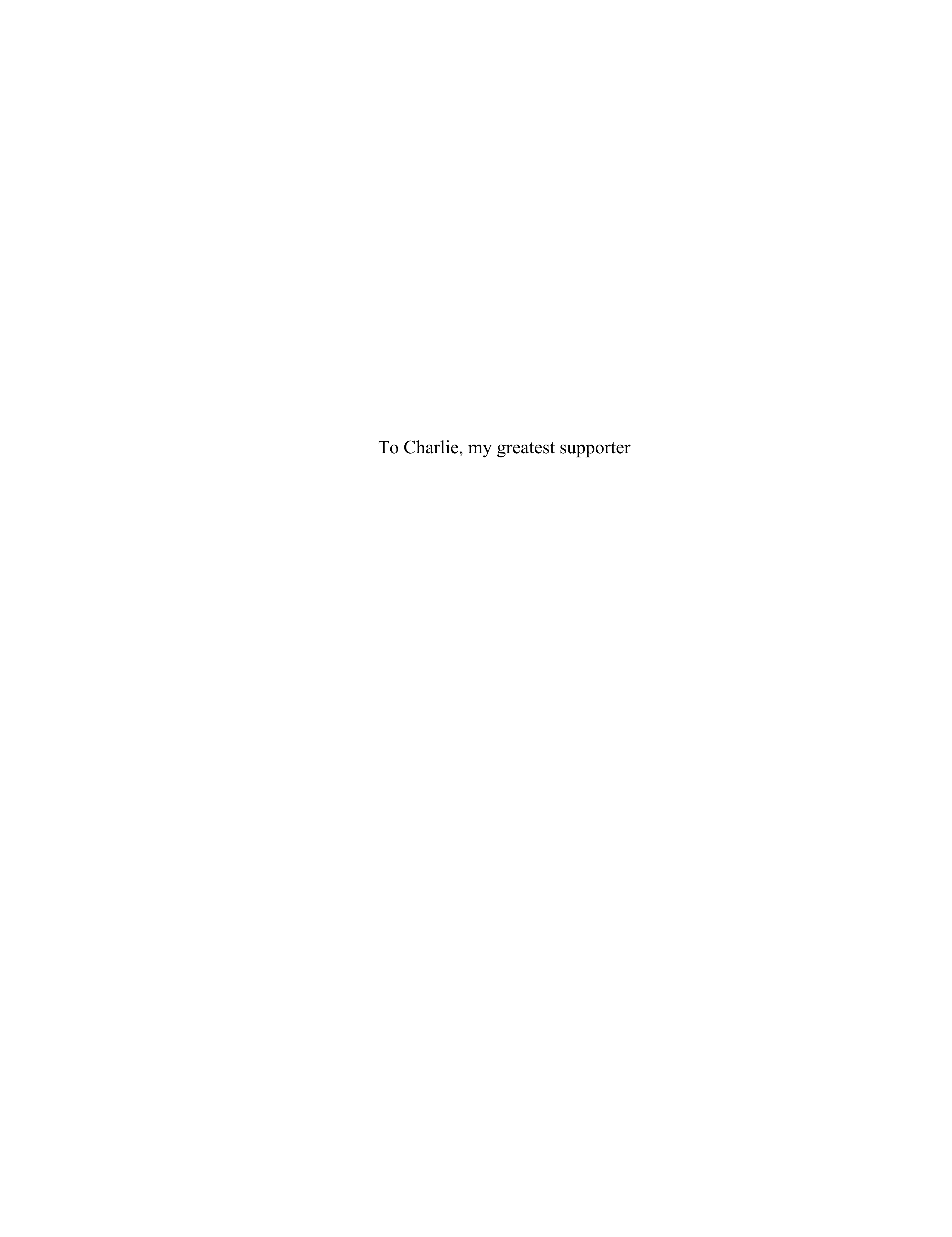
December 9, 2019



To Charlie, my greatest supporter

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I could not have completed this dissertation without the support of my advisor, Dr. Donna Lee Kwon. She has supported my work throughout this process, which in many cases meant patiently waiting for me to complete a draft, and then reading through a very long chapter. The members of my advisory committee – Dr. Jonathan Glixon, Dr. Kevin Holm-Hudson, Dr. Ron Pen, Dr. James Revell Carr, and Dr. Jeffrey Peters – also supported this project, allowing me to research a subject that some might consider unworthy of study. I am grateful that these scholars saw the value in my ideas and allowed me the freedom to explore them to the best of my ability.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Figure 1.1: Gary Trust, "50 Years of the Adult Contemporary Chart," Excerpt[1]

> *Obviously: People mock Adult Contemporary radio. It's called "vanilla" and bland. Tedious. Monotonic. Strictly for the elevator. We beg to differ. AC is absolutely captivating. Aside from being one of the most successful formats in the histories of recorded music and commercial radio, our AC chart is home to hall of famers. Home to big-betters and hard rockers. Home to soulful sweethearts and songwriting superstars. AC isn't a place songs go to die. As programmers and radio professionals and songwriters (and fans) well know – AC is the place where songs go to live forever.*

The quotation above precedes a 2011 article by *Billboard* writer Gary Trust titled "50 Years of the Adult Contemporary Chart." After restating negative claims about the chart (which tracks airplay on the Adult Contemporary (AC) radio format), Trust defends it on its 50th anniversary, describing the combination of musical styles as "captivating," and praising the coexistence of "hard rockers" and "soulful sweethearts." Far from a sad refuge for past hits, this format, designed to appeal to women age 25-49, "is the place where songs go to live forever."[2]

However, the heading for the first section of the article is "Vanilla is Licking the Competition"[3] – a phrase that hardly disproves negative conclusions about AC programming. Going on, the piece includes ratings statistics, statements from artists and

---

[1] Gary Trust, "50 Year of the Adult Contemporary Chart," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, July 23, 2011, 12.

[2] Christopher H. Sterling and Michael C. Keith, "Cloud in the Air (Since 1995)," in *Sounds of Change: A History of FM Broadcasting in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 188; Gary Trust, "50 Year of the Adult Contemporary Chart," 12.

[3] Ibid., 13.

industry representatives, historical summaries, and lists of top artists that help to validate both the importance of sales to *Billboard* and its readers and the "vanilla" nature of AC programming. The article's praise of the contributions of pop-oriented artists who have achieved AC airplay success fails to demonstrate the format's programming variety and focuses on commercial success as an end unto itself – a troublesome concept for many music critics and listeners, especially those who disdain pop and its ostensible industry connections.[4]

To better demonstrate the contributions of AC and its artists, this dissertation properly explores the stylistic variety, critical reception, audience reach, social and political import, and musical and lyrical content of music by several artists who have achieved Adult Contemporary chart success. The scope of the project is limited to a period when many artists who figured prominently in both the broader mainstream of American popular music and the more specific Adult Contemporary category were most commercially successful: from the mid-1980s through the 1990s. My contention is that, as gender politics and gendered social norms continued to change in the United States at this time, Adult Contemporary – the chart, the format, and the associated music – was an important, if overlooked or even trivialized, arena in which these shifting gender dynamics played out.

Many of the issues discussed in this dissertation have grown from the following two conclusions: the first is that men and women of different ages and ethnicities are segmented by the radio and record industries and by marketing into different audiences who truly tend to listen to and purchase different music. The second is that men listen to

---

[4] Ibid., 13-18.

critically sanctioned rock (and rap), while women listen to "insipid" pop. However, the chart performance of many songs suggest that the case is otherwise – in many instances, a song that performs well on AC can also chart on the Hot 100 or even Mainstream Rock. Such examples of chart (and format) overlap explored in this dissertation suggest that stylistically uniform playlists and gendered and age-related listening habits are less a reality than an ass m tion. And if men and women are often listening to the same songs, negative conclusions that have been made by critics about particular artists and their music, as well as assumptions about women and female musical taste, should not be taken for granted. Because this dissertation mostly analy es music associated with a predominantly female audience – music that critics of the period in question (and later in some cases) deemed unworthy of critical praise – the chapters that follow illuminate to what extent music and lyrics inform reception, and how significantly marketing influences this process. At the very least, the documentation of varied musical consumption and songwriting inspires reconsideration of both the critical faculties of white adult women (and even women in general) and the aesthetic contributions of artists who have been denied critical praise and canonization. In short, this project explores these issues in detail by illuminating the connections between musical style, marketing, gender, and social and political issues.

In addition to providing a wealth of significant musical, social, and political issues for study, research and writing on the Adult Contemporary format creates an opportunity to advance knowledge of a relatively unexplored subject. Other formats and the music played on them, Album-Oriented Rock in particular, and other pop artists, such as Madonna, have received scholarly attention in terms of their musical, social, and political

import. This dissertation explores this overlooked subject through analysis of chart performance, artist image, musical works, marketing, and contextual factors. As a result of these efforts, the significance of a format and of artists neglected by scholars becomes clear.

I explore these issues in the form of case studies. Examinations of how Adult Contemporary artists such as Michael Bolton, Wilson Phillips, Matchbox Twenty, David Gray, and Mariah Carey were produced and marketed, and how their music was disseminated, illustrate record and radio industry strategies for negotiating the musical, political, and social climate of this period.[5] Significantly, musical and lyrical analyses of songs successful on AC stations, and many of their accompanying promotional videos, form integral components of this project, as they highlight messages about musical genre, gender, race, and age. Ultimately, this dissertation demonstrates that AC oriente m sic re istere mainstream et n re ictab e res onses to t ese societa c an es an in str strate ies eca se o t is, it is an im ortant mar er o o t ese iss es a e o t in mainstream societ an o t ese artists ere not on t e ront ines o c an e, b t t e re resente o t ese c an es act a a e o t in t e s erc t re

This study also discusses the continuing effort in popular music journalism to support the illusion of veracity conveyed by interconnected popularity charts and genre

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[5] Michael Bolton is an American pop/rock singer and songwriter; Wilson Phillips is an American pop vocal group; Matchbox Twenty is an American rock group; David Gray is a British singer-songwriter; Mariah Carey is a songwriter and vocalist.

[6] The second wave of feminism of the 1960s and '70s fought for access to safe abortion and rape hotlines, equal participation in athletics in public schools, and equal access to education and employment opportunities, and so forth; Third wave feminism emerged partly in response to the treatment of Anita Hill during the Clarence Thomas Supreme Court confirmation and focused on sexual harassment, open sexuality, and the intersection of race, gender, class, sexuality, and other factors. Please see Rory Dicker, "Feminism's Legacy," and "Third Wave Feminism" in *A History of U.S. Feminisms* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2016), 6, 57-101, and 116-129 in particular.

distinctions, while questioning the use of charts and categories to determine aesthetic value and audience competence through association with commercial success and particular genres. Such tactics illustrate the record and radio industries' management of audience composition and behavior as a means for more predictably producing and marketing music in the United States. This dissertation argues that the record industry, radio programmers, and *Billboard* chart compilers, and music critics have made and reinforced certain assumptions about who listens to which music and why they do so. The audience also plays a role in this process, one discussed in this document as one determined in part by the social and economic causes and consequences of musical taste.[7]

The following section provides background information about radio formats, segmentation, charts, and programming, as well as the history and characteristics of the AC format. Discussion of the fragmenting American public along social and political lines helps to explain how marketers, record industry personnel, and radio programmers further segmented American consumers into niche groups to increase the predictability of listeners. The introduction will then proceed with a summary of the methodology and theoretical framework utilized in this dissertation and continue with a literature review that covers texts in radio and record industry scholarship, marketing studies, feminist literature, and musical analysis. To conclude, chapter summaries provide focused descriptions of case study content.

It is important to note at this point that any time period (whether a decade or a year) can be isolated by prominent issues and events, so the scope of this dissertation

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[7] This statement references Pierre Bourdieu's "The Forms of Capital."

could be different than that indicated if I had made different choices. However, I find that this period of the mid-1980s through the 1990s is worthy of a focused study because factors such as the culture wars and backlash against second-wave feminism, the development of third-wave feminism, Gen-X cynicism, and the passage of the industry-friendly Telecommunications Act of 1996, all shaped cultural, political, and economic life in ways that continue to resonate.[8] Analysis of musical compositions and their social and political import generates valuable perspectives on musical style and broader tides of change, since this serves both as a reflection of the times and as something that inspires beliefs and actions. This is true even for something as seemingly innocuous as AC-friendly songs. Such a study has not been completed for this period, so this dissertation will fill a void in the literature on American popular music.

Americans are still grappling with issues related to the culture wars, media consolidation, generational conflicts, economic uncertainty, and a host of other issues that often have their roots as far back as one cares to reach. Cultural studies scholar Gilbert B. Rodman states that "the beginnings of the stories that we tell about popular music, whether they are about today's hit makers or turn-of-the-century minstrels, are always the endings of other stories that we have not told."[9] This document is the result of a multitude of choices of which stories to tell, where to begin and end, and how to interpret the facts.

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[8] The backlash against second-wave feminism was prominent in the 1980s, while the third wave become prominent in the early 1990s; Generation-X cynicism arose among the children of baby boomers who felt pessimistic about their economic and social conditions. This became a prominent topic in American culture in the 1990s.
[9] Gilbert B. Rodman, "Histories," In *Key Terms in Popular Music and Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1999): 36.

History of Radio Formats

In *Early 70s Radio: The American Format Revolution*, Kim Simpson writes that the term "format" has been used since the earliest days of radio. "In the 1920s," she writes, "it referred to a station's program schedule, which was usually filled in in a patchwork manner, hour by hour."[10] This disorganized programming changed in 1955 when station operator Todd Storz and his program director Bill Stewart created the Top 40 format. When they realized that the waitresses working after closing time in a diner chose to listen to the same songs their customers had been selecting on the jukebox all day, they decided to play a list of about forty songs in an attempt to appeal to their audience the same way hearing the same hits appealed to the waitresses at the diner.[11] While country is the oldest organized format,[12] Top 40, because of the smaller, more predictable playlist it introduced, has had a tremendous impact on radio in the United States. Ken Barnes notes that this method of programming was "adopted by legions of imitators" and was designed to give listeners a good chance of "hearing their favorite song."[13]

This outlines the basic premise of modern radio programming, and the various formats that have sprung up since Storz's discovery – basically, listeners want to hear their favorite songs repeatedly, and taste across the United States is similar enough that the same format (perhaps with a few tweaks) will succeed in different markets.[14] In fact,

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[10] Kim Simpson, *Early '70s Radio: The American Format Revolution*, 8.
[11] Ibid., 11.
[12] Keith Negus, "Plugging and Programming: Pop Radio and Record Promotion in Britain and the United States," *Popular Music* 12 (1993), 58.
[13] Ken Barnes, "Top 40 Radio: A Fragment of the Imagination," In *Facing the Music: A Pantheon Guide to Popular Culture*, ed. Simon Frith (New York: Pantheon, 1988), 11.
[14] Ibid., 9.

Eric W. Rothenbuhler and Tom McCourt point out that stations are more efficient when they standardize the playlist because "an audience that is attracted by one song will remain tuned in for the next one, *if it is familiar*. As a result, radio concentrates on airing familiar and 'least objectionable' material in hopes of avoiding audience 'tuneout.'"[15] All radio stations are driven by the need to attract and maintain a discrete audience, and this method has proven helpful for accomplishing this.

Another innovation brought about by Storz and by later programmers such as Bill Drake was creating formats that serve smaller segments of the available audience. Thus, the term "format" came to describe a selection of music that draws in certain listeners. These listeners appeal to advertisers as potential consumers for the marketed products. Rothenbuhler and McCourt write that money is made in radio by "selling ratings points to advertisers…the stations play music that is designed to lead the target audience to the commercials that are sold."[16] In spite of a great deal of industry research and improvements in methodology, predicting and controlling audience listening and purchasing habits still lacks the precision desired, and ratings can vary depending on the ratings service used.[17]

Over the years, ratings have been determined through a variety of means. Marc Fisher writes that "in the 1930s, opinion research was crude – samples were small and not quite random, and questions were usually designed to capture basic information…rather

[15] Eric W. Rothenbuhler and Tom McCourt, "Commercial Radio and Popular Music: Process of Selection and Factors of Influence," In *The Popular Music Studies Reader*, ed. Andy Bennett, Barry Shank, and Jason Toynbee (London: Routledge, 2006) [Original 1987], 311. Emphasis in original.

[16] Ibid., 311-312.

[17] Ibid., 311.

than to understand who was listening and why."[18] In the 1930s and 1940s, psychologists and ratings companies experimented with methods for determining listening habits. Some methods were far from sophisticated and included asking people at traffic lights what they were listening to and having participants record their listening habits in diaries (a method currently in use). By 1942, though, Nielsen offered a machine that could record when respondents changed stations.[19] In 1993, ratings company Arbitron introduced the Portable People Meter (PPM), which records what participants are listening to by analyzing station frequencies.[20]

John Wallace White writes that "formats create and sustain communities of listeners that identify with the aesthetic values represented by the music and, by extension, the stations that play the music."[21] White argues that this style is consistent enough to "signify…a set of musical features" as well as "*demographic* [sic]…and *psychographic*…traits."[22] This suggests a certain amount of reliability for advertisers, as well as for the record industry that relies on radio to advertise the music being played and to determine which acts to sign. As previously suggested, this comes not just from general stylistic similarity within a format, but also from repeating a lot of the same songs. This lack of variety has been lamented by many under the general theme of "why radio sucks," but as Marc Fisher writes in *Something in the Air: Radio, Rock, and the*

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[18] Marc Fisher, "Playing the Numbers," in *Something in the Air: Radio, Rock, and the Revolution that shaped a Generation* (New York: Random House, 2007), 192-193.
[19] Ibid., 193-194.
[20] William A. Richter, "Who is Listening and Why," in *Radio: A Complete Guide to the Industry* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 85-86.
[21] John Wallace White, "Radio Formats and the Transformation of Musical Style: Codes and
Cultural Values in the Remaking of Tunes," *College Music Symposium* 37 (1997): 1.
[22] Ibid., 1. Emphasis in original.

Revolution that Shaped a Generation, when audiences have the opportunity to choose different songs for a radio playlist, they end up requesting familiar options, even as they complain about repetitive programming. As an observer at an auditorium test for a radio station (another method of understanding listening habits that gathers potential listeners and asks them questions about various musical selections), Fisher recounts the following interaction:

> Those who linger [accepting an invitation to become a focus group] plead for songs they can sing along with, songs that will "mellow me out," and, repeatedly, "my favorite songs." And then the same people complain that the stations they listen to play "the same songs over and over," that there are way too many commercials, and that they are sick to death of Motown.[23]

As much as the limited musical content on radio is the subject of complaints, listeners tend to choose more of the same through sessions such as the one Fisher describes.

"Perceptual studies" also play a role in playlist formation, since this form of audience research questions "extremely narrow demographic groups…in detail about their attitudes toward radio and music."[24] This makes one wonder why radio playlists are the subject of so much complaint, and why lack of variety is cited for reduced listenership since 1995, as Fisher notes.[25] To some extent, the problem with playlists arises from a conflict between some listeners' and critics' idealization of radio as a form of media that should promote musical experimentation, and the research that shows that listeners tune out when they hear unfamiliar music. In fact, building playlists based on this latter premise is an important component in attracting and maintaining desirable listeners, and

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[23] Fisher, "Full of Sound and Fury," in *Something in the Air*, 276.
[24] Ibid., 277.
[25] Ibid., 273.

for keeping commercial radio stations running. Joseph Turrow writes that programmers "[build] into the format material designed to alienate the wrong people while attracting the right ones" so that a "pure group of intended consumers" would be attracted.[26] Research proves that this is best accomplished by playing whatever is least offensive to desired listeners, generally with a loss of variety. This helps to explain the appeal of the AC format and its variants, since it "mixes current songs with recurrents, songs returning to the station's airplay list after several months to two years."[27] The newer songs are mixed with those that are pleasantly familiar (and in some cases no longer played on other available stations). This practice influences songwriting as well, since artists are more likely to achieve continued success by releasing material similar to that of previous releases.

Consistent content means a consistent audience, which translates, when added to offering ratings data, to greater ease in selling advertising. While some lament the bland musical content of radio, others write about the explosion of formats and how the segmentation of the radio audience has led to "narrowcasting." Targeting specific audiences with material least likely to offend has led a more narrow experience as a consumer, and perhaps as a citizen.[28] John Rockwell writes that, although some listeners, mainly musicians, listen to music outside of that which is produced and disseminated with them in mind, "the vast majority of the populace sinks back in upon itself, lazily

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[26] Joseph Turrow, "Signaling Divisions," in *Breaking up America: Advertisers and the Rise of the New Media World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 102.
[27] William A. Richter, "Radio Comes of Age," in *Radio: A Complete Guide to the Industry*, 63.
[28] Christopher H. Sterling and Michael C. Keith, "Dominance: FM is Radio (1980-1995)," in *Sounds of Change: FM Broadcasting in America*,167; William A. Richter, "Radio Comes of Age," in *Radio: A Complete Guide to the Industry*, 60.

content with its own traditions and only vaguely aware of more vital, unfamiliar, challenging music just a few notches away on the dial."[29] Some music transcends narrow formatting, for instance crossing over from pop to rock-oriented formats, because of stylistic features, radio edits (that make a song a better fit for a particular format), and marketing, and this leads to increased sales for the industry. However, if listeners are dialed in so narrowly this broad appeal may not be apparent to them.

Rockwell's comment, written in 1984, reflects a state of segmentation that was long in the making, both in terms of radio and in a broader sense. Kim Simpson documents how this segmentation was rooted in the social changes of the 1950s and later. Images of unruly teenagers in the 1950s were followed by the counterculture of the 1960s, and by the 1970s, Top 40 (often still on AM) was competing with freeform FM, MOR (Middle of the Road), and eventually the more tightly formatted AOR (Album-Oriented Rock).[30] Even though, as Simpson notes, the 1970s saw a more "reflective national mood" than the 60s, this could have been associated with the splintering of the counterculture into smaller groups, what she describes as "the growing marginalization of identity politics."[31] These smaller groups can be described as being more self-interested, which was reflected in the popularization of self-help groups and literature, in the work of confessional singer-songwriters, and in Tom Wolfe's famous description of the 70s as "The Me Decade."[32]

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[29] John Rockwell, "In Pop Music, the Races Remain Far Apart," *New York Times*, May 18, 1984. H22.
[30] Kim Simpson, *Early '70s Radio: The American Format Revolution*, 20-34, 55, 121.
[31] Ibid., 60.
[32] Ibid., 58-59.

Early country formats, Top 40, Beautiful Music (a format that Joseph Lanza writes was "launched in the mid-to late 1960s that provided soft and unobtrusive instrumental selections),[33] MOR, free form, AOR, AC – all of these options and more had been offered in some form by the 1970s, with more to come as radio was increasingly deregulated starting in the early 1980s.[34] After the 1996 Telecommunications Act was passed, deregulation allowed a greater degree of what Sterling and Keith describe as "the splintering of…music formats."[35] By 2004, "ratings companies were by now monitoring the machinations and permutations of nearly fifty recognized formats on both AM and FM station."[36]

This multitude of formats was intended to provide varying slices of the audience to advertisers. Adult Contemporary was an example of how this functioned – this format was a ratings leader between 1996 and 2004, partly because of now many formats qualified as AC. Additionally, with a few media corporations owning an ever larger share of stations, advertisers could purchase time on many AC subformats in one transaction (and often for less money). Sterling and Keith list "hot, lite, adult, smooth, alternative, urban, mix, and spectrum" among the varieties of AC, and they all claimed to reach slightly different groups of consumers.[37] Theoretically, listeners had a great deal of choice, especially in larger markets with more of these options available. The record

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[33] Joseph Lanza, "'Beautiful Music:' The Rise of Easy-Listening FM," in *The Popular Music Studies Reader*, ed. Andy Bennett, Barry Shank, and Jason Toynbee (London: Routledge, 2006 [Original 1987]), 156.
[34] Christopher H. Sterling and Michael C. Keith, "Dominance: FM is Radio (1980-1995)," in *Sounds of Change: FM Broadcasting in America*, 156.
[35] Christopher H. Sterling and Michael C. Keith, "Clouds in the Air (Since 1995)" in *Sounds of Change: A History of FM Broadcasting in America*, 187.
[36] Ibid., 187.
[37] Ibid., 188.

industry could also use these avenues to promote a variety of records to a more precise demographic.

A major complaint, however, even before the 1996 Telecommunications Act and the consolidation it brought, was that in reality, radio played a lot of the same music on differently labeled formats. More formats didn't mean more music when ownership and formatting restrictions were loosened beginning in 1982 (likely influenced by a 1981 Supreme Court ruling).[38] Such events allowed stations greater freedom in formatting that increased segmentation. Lifting the national station ownership cap in 1996 hardly improved the situation. This change allowed one owner to take over many more stations per market than was previously allowed, with no limit to how many stations a company could own nationally.[39] In a piece from 2003, Jenny Toomey notes that a company operating more than one station in the same market with the same overall playlist content became common, writing that "format variety is not equivalent to true diversity in programming, since formats with different names have similar playlists."[40] Fisher notes that some programs "analyze audiences by zip code, income, and ethnicity, allowing stations to fine-tune formats into ever-narrower slices."[41] These formats offer just enough

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[38] Fisher, "Playing the Numbers," *Sounds of Change: A History of FM Broadcasting in America*, 212. Fisher describes this Supreme Court case as one that concluded that station owners were free to format and program as they saw fit, regardless of listener complaints. See Fisher p. 349-350, footnote 17.
[39] Christopher H. Sterling and Michael C. Keith, "Dominance," *Sounds of Change: A History of FM Broadcasting in America*, 156; Christopher H. Sterling and Michael C. Keith, "Clouds in the Air (Since 1995)," 179.
[40] Jenny Toomey, "Empire of the Air," *The Nation*, from Opposing Viewpoints in Context, January 13, 2003. link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/A96441782/OVIC?u=txshracd2598&xid=6d46a29b [accessed June 14, 2017]
[41] Fisher, "Full of Sound and Fury," in *Something in the Air: Radio, Rock, and the Revolution that Shaped a Generation*, 278.

differentiation to capture a certain segment of the audience, even if it means that many of them will play similar music.[42]

As before, radio sold advertisers an audience, but because corporations could offer a larger audience from the nationwide variety of stations (and formats) available, and because the research had become more precise and therefore more reliable, ad revenue increased. Although the precision of ratings was debatable, the use of methods such as those described above improved the accuracy of these assessments and increased advertisers' confidence that they were getting the demographic they wanted by advertising on certain stations.

The next section will explore in greater detail how the factors described above relate to the Adult Contemporary format.

Adult Contemporary: Its Labels and its Listeners

In his above-cited 2011 article on the AC chart with which this chapter began, Gary Trust includes a small section on the various names used for the stations tracked by this airplay performance report: "lite," "fresh," and "magic" are among the more common names. One station used "car" to identify itself, since much of the audience listened while driving.[43] Of course, this applies to many more years of chart and format history than "Adult Contemporary" can claim, since this name was not used for the fifty years celebrated by Trust's piece. In his collection of Adult Contemporary chart information,

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[42] Ibid.
[43] Gary Trust, "50 Year of the Adult Contemporary Chart," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, 15.

Top Adult Contemporary 1961-2001, Joel Whitburn includes a chapter, "Synopsis of *Billboard*'s Adult Contemporary Charts 1961-2001," that notes changes in the name of *Billboard*'s chart for adult-oriented music that was created in 1961. These include "Easy Listening," "Middle-Road Singles," "Hot Adult Contemporary," and (finally) "Adult Contemporary."[44] Although the AC moniker is relatively recent, communications scholar William A. Richter notes that for radio, "this format can trace its roots back to the 1950s, when stations wanted to keep playing current music but did not want to play the louder, rhythmic rock music."[45] The "mellower"[46] playlists were meant for an older (white female) audience that favored such selections, and to some extent this term still describes these stations (by 1975 called Adult Contemporary).[47] This has remained true even with adjustments for the changes in the music and the tastes of the audience. In any case, an important point emerges from this paragraph: the "Adult Contemporary" chart only tracks radio airplay. Even in 2019, the *Billboard* website describes this chart as such. Among other things, this means that sales among this group of consumers is less certain, because AC truly indicates a radio-specific strategy for attracting a desired audience for advertisers. This has necessitated adjusting the playlist, and even the format name, to either influence the audience or meet its demands. For the purposes of this dissertation, it is important to note that by the mid-1980s the music and its marketing had adjusted for changing consumers.

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[44] Joel Whitburn, "Synopsis of *Billboard*'s Adult Contemporary Charts 1961-2001," In *Top Adult Contemporary 1961-2001* (Menomonee Falls, WI, 2002): 6.
[45] William A. Richter, "Radio Comes of Age," in *Radio: A Complete Guide to the Industry* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 63.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Kim Simpson, *Early '70s Radio: The American Format Revolution* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 51.

Although many AC stations included current hits in their playlists in this period, the perception that romantic ballads or romantically themed mid-tempo songs have clearly defined the format persists. In some cases, writers have even described Adult Contemporary as demonstrating a degree of stylistic consistency that normally defines a genre. Christopher H. Sterling and Michael C. Keith, for example, describe the format (respectively) as "Adult-Contemporary (AC) music,"[48] while Eric Weisbard writes that it is "the closest music got to a targeted format" for women.[49] William Ruhlmann uses the term "adult-contemporary singers" to describe Phil Collins, Wilson Phillips, and others.[50]

Nevertheless, a multitude of songs and artists have appealed to a broader range of musical taste than what the writers cited so far have suggested, since even Michael Bolton, who rose to fame in the late 1980s as a writer and performer of pop and pop-rock songs, also often placed respectably on the Hot 100.[51] His use of rock's stylistic features crossed over (appealed simultaneously) to listeners who normally favored genres of

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[48] Christopher H. Sterling and Michael C. Keith, "Dominance: FM is Radio (1980-1995)," in *Sounds of Change: A History of FM Broadcasting in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008): 164.

[49] Eric Weisbard, "Contemporary Adults: A&M Records and Middle of the Road," in *Top 40 Democracy: The Rival Mainstreams of American Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 11; The disco chart (and radio format) also referred to a large female audience, but issues of sexual orientation, race, and musical style also factored into the format's appeal (or lack thereof for some). See Alice Echols, "One Nation Under a Thump: Disco and its Discontents," in *Hot Stuff: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 195-232.

[50] William Ruhlmann, "The 1990s: The Digital Revolution Begins" in *Breaking Records: 100 Years of Hits* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 196.

[51] "Michael Bolton, Columbia, How Can We Be Lovers," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, https://www.billboard.com/charts/search?artist=michael+bolton&title=how+can+we+be+lovers&label=columbia&chart_name=&chart_date= [accessed August 15, 2019]. These search results include all chart performance for Bolton's 1989 release "How Can We Be Lovers," as well other songs, organized by chart name.

music with different cachets – rock instead of pop, and young and hip instead of older and moderate, for example. In addition, many of Bolton's romantic ballads also achieved massive success with the broader mainstream.[52] This dissertation, Chapter Two in particular, discusses how some AC-identified songs have achieved widespread appeal when another narrative has been constructed around them. Other chapters, particularly Chapters Four and Five, analyze songs (both musical/lyrical content and broader context) that seem an odd fit for AC (and even Adult Top 40, an "adult-female-friendly format" that "has found a place for rock acts"[53]) but enjoyed considerable airplay on this format nonetheless.

Since 1961,[54] *Billboard*'s "Adult Contemporary" chart has tracked radio play for a format that has centered, for most of its existence, around appealing to middle-class women aged 25-49.[55] Even if the chart and format have been labeled in a manner that obscures this fact, the target demographic has been acknowledged by the radio and record industries. In terms of radio, Richter notes that "two thirds of the listeners" of AC stations

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[52] "Michael Bolton, Columbia, How am I Supposed to Live Without You," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, https://www.billboard.com/charts/search?artist=michael+bolton&title=+how+am+i+supposed+to+live+without+you&label=columbia&chart_name=&chart_date= [accessed August 15, 2019].
[53] Melinda Newman, "It's a Good Time to be Modern Pop: Mixing Bits of Rock into Top 40 Radio," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video and Home Entertainment*, September 23, 2000, 5, 23.
[54] Gary Trust, "The Top 100 Adult Contemporary Songs Ever," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, July 15, 2011, https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/chart-beat/469226/the-top-100-adult-contemporary-songs-ever, [accessed August 31, 2019].
[55] Kim Simpson, *Early '70s Radio: The American Format Revolution*, 87-89, 67; Christopher H. Sterling and Michael C. Keith, "Cloud in the Air (Since 1995)," 188.

are female.[56] These songs have resisted and reinforced, to varying degrees, adult women's changing circumstances and the movements that helped inspire these changes, including the continuing development of second-wave feminism, the advent of third-wave feminism, and the accompanying push-back. The variety of music, from romantic ballads, to mid-tempo pop-rock, to dance-pop, suggest that women's lives, and their musical preferences, have been at least as complicated as the processes of production, marketing, and programming that generate, promote, and disseminate so-called "Adult-Contemporary music."

Although many women joined the workforce during World War II, another important change in women's economic circumstances began in earnest in the 1970s, when an increasing number of women entered the workforce. At this point, it became necessary for advertisers to see these consumers differently than they had previously. Because it survived on advertising income, radio necessarily followed suit.[57] Eventually, the MOR format consistently became known as Adult Contemporary, synonymous with *Billboard*'s airplay-tracking chart. While this format aimed to some extent, as Simpson notes, "to please the widest possible demographic, as well as the highest possible age group," the content was still intended to draw in the adult female listener since women listened to radio longer, and more loyally, and they made more purchase decisions for the household.[58] As women's lives changed, the kind of music played on stations that were targeted with increasing precision towards them reflected the impact of both feminism

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[56] William A. Richter, "Radio Comes of Age," in *Radio: A Complete Guide to the Industry*, 63.
[57] Ibid., 69-70.
[58] Ibid., 87-89, 67.

and the continuing influence of traditional roles and aspirations. Helen Reddy's "I am Woman" reinforced the idea (and reality) of strong, independent women. This played on the same format (and appeared on the same chart) as Harry Nilsson's "Without You," a romantic ballad.[59] These songs reflected both stylistic development within popular music and social, economic, and political issues in the United States.

By the mid-1980s, AC radio was playing music by artists such as Whitney Houston, followed later in the decade by Michael Bolton, a one-time heavy metal musician, and by the first half of the 1990s, Céline Dion, Mariah Carey, Bryan Adams, Wilson Phillips, Ace of Base, and others achieved notable AC airplay, their songs mixed in with older material. In the late 1990s, pop-rock groups such as Matchbox Twenty, Vertical Horizon, and Train[60] crossed over to AC or Adult Top 40 with music that often described the seemingly frazzled and troubled independent woman supposedly produced by the changes brought about by feminism. Even though the AC format still offered the relative mellowness of the earlier MOR and Easy Listening formats with "lite" AC, further segmentation into sub-formats such as "hot" AC maintained relevance and stylistic variety overall, while allowing many songs to broaden their audience with format crossover. The charts meant to track this radio play, and the writing that interpreted these charts and the music they tracked, have played an important role. This material has

[59] Gary Trust, "The Top 100 Adult Contemporary Songs Ever," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, July, 15 2011. https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/chart-beat/469226/the-top-100-adult-contemporary-songs-ever [accessed July 5, 2017].

[60]Céline Dion is a Canadian singer; Mariah Carey is an American singer and songwriter; Bryan Adams is a Canadian pop/rock artist; Wilson Phillips is an American pop vocal group; Ace of Base is a Swedish pop/dance group.

reflected how the record industry, and American radio listeners, have negotiated musical style, as well as social, political, and economic issues.

Although it is tempting to take the popularity charts' conclusions at face value, the data and methods used to compile this information matters, too. For instance, much of this dissertation covers the period after the implementation of Nielsen SoundScan in 1991, which allowed scans of barcodes to report sales at numerous locations, rather than retail worker tallies and reporting at a smaller number of stores. The consequences of this technological innovation have been significant: N. Anand notes that SoundScan changed "the dynamics of charting…with albums climbing more swiftly to the top of the chart, and staying in the slot for a much shorter period."[61] It was also more difficult for new artists to chart well, so *Billboard* introduced the "Heatseakers" chart to highlight the chart performance of these songs and help increase their popularity.[62]

Long before SoundScan, however, radio itself shortened the shelf life of a song. Susan J. Douglas notes that, "before radio a hit song would sell between 50,000 and 2 million copies of sheet music and stay a hit for as long as eighteen months; radio had slashed sheet music sales and sped up the rate at which hits rose and fell."[63] Considering the increased pace of exposure of the public to musical works, Joseph Lanza writes that "before radio, millions of people could encounter a symphony performance within a time frame of perhaps 100 years. But a single radio broadcast could reach the same number of

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[61] N. Anand, "Charting the Music Business: *Billboard* Magazine and the Development of the Commercial Music Field," in *The Business of Culture: Strategic Perspectives on Entertainment and Media* (London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006): 149.
[62] Ibid., 152.
[63] Susan J. Douglas, "The Invention of the Audience," in *Listening in: Radio and the American Imagination, from Amos 'n' Andy to Edward R. Murrow to Wolfman Jack and Howard Stern* (New York: Random House, 1999), 153.

people in one hour."[64] Radio changed the pace at which a piece reached obsolescence in part because so many listeners could encounter a work in a much shorter period of time, and they could hear it many more times in a shorter period (versus playing it from sheet music, or seeing it performed live). The development of increasingly segmented popularity charts and radio formats that gained momentum in the 1970s, and other changes in how music singles have been disseminated and consumed since 1961 (from AM to FM radio, and from 45s to various tape formats and later to CD, MP3, and streaming), have only exacerbated this trend. Chart data will be further problematized in the literature review section later in this introduction.

Segmentation

Simpson writes that at the beginning of the 1970s "commercial radio's format offerings numbered in the single digits," but increased to "133 formats by the end of the decade, all but six of which could be classified as 'popular music' in one sense or another,"[65] Ken Barnes locates radio's transformation farther back, with the advent of the Top 40 format in the early 1950s. He writes that "radio's history is one of fragmentation,"[66] and this seems to square with what Douglas writes on the subject. She notes that radio helped listeners "create internal maps of the world and our place in it,

[64] Joseph Lanza, *Elevator Music: A Surreal History of Muzak, Easy-Listening, and Other Moodsong* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 37.
[65] Kim Simpson, *Early '70s Radio:The Ameircan Format Revolution*, 2.
[66] Ken Barnes, "Top 40 Radio," in *Facing the Music: A Pantheon Guide to Popular Culture*, 10.

urging us to construct imagined communities to which we do, or do not, belong."[67] Douglas describes earlier programs that first allowed Americans to identify with others "on the basis of location and family ties," in addition to ethnic and racial differences. Later, Americans came to shape identity even more through their consumer choices, and commercial radio, and the advertising that financially sustained it, played an important role in this.[68]

Radio's role in this process was not played in isolation. Lizabeth Cohen describes the concern about continuing the post-World War II economic boom: marketers began to worry whether, "as more and more American bought a house, car, refrigerator, and washing machine…markets get saturated and ebb."[69] Developing new products for consumers to buy was not quite enough. Cohen notes several attempts to increase revenue: more portable (and color) television sets, increased prices, and planned obsolescence encouraged the general trend of making superficial changes to products. Cars, clothing, and other products were "restyled," and those products were advertised as the latest and best.[70]

The audience, however, was still seen as fairly homogeneous. The assumption was that income affected buying habits, but only to the extent that someone with more money could buy more, and higher quality, versions of the same products. Researchers such as Wendell Smith (described by Cohen as a "marketing expert") countered this view

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[67] Susan J. Douglas, "Introduction," in *Listening in: Radio and the American Imagination, from Amos 'n' Andy to Edward R. Murrow to Wolfman Jack and Howard Stern*, 5.
[68] Ibid., 6.
[69] Lizabeth Cohen, "Culture: Segmenting the Mass," in *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, 293.
[70] Ibid., 293-294.

of class and purchasing choices with market research intended to solve the problem of mass market saturation: In 1956, he suggested marketing to segments of the market to ensure continued growth. In 1958, sociologist Pierre Martineau suggested that people of different economic and social standing had markedly different buying habits and should be marketed to (and produced for) accordingly.[71]

These conclusions of the late 1950s led to the market segmentation that is now often taken for granted, which worked "toward acknowledging, even reifying, social differences." The counterculture of the 1960s, the identity politics of the 1970s, and the culture wars that followed were not the only inspiration for and expression of the genuine splinter in the ideological positions of Americans. In addition to supporting various political, social, and economic viewpoints more directly, "individuals gained more opportunity to express their separate identities through their choices as consumers."[72]

This is illustrated by the "Pepsi Generation" of the 1970s: buying Pepsi suggested membership in a certain group of American citizens whose identity was shaped by the lifestyle associated (through marketing) with consuming Pepsi. In American media, segmentation in 1970s radio was followed by that of cable television in the 1980s, which "only exacerbated the carving up of television programming and audiences into market niches, and moved segmentation to a whole new level."[73] In terms of radio specifically, segmentation not only allowed for greater precision in marketing, it also encouraged people to identify with both purchasing and listening choices, thus seeing themselves as

[71] Ibid., 293-295.
[72] Ibid., 306-307, 309.
[73] Ibid., 296, 304.

part of smaller groups centered on more focused interests.[74] Of course, this would not be possible without the real-world differences that these people saw between themselves and others.

Taking advantage of existing divisions of the audience happened alongside the creation of "market niches." Fisher writes that "popular culture found itself with a chicken/egg question: did the music split into niches – lite rock, modern rock, active rock, adult alternative rock, hard rock – because radio divided itself so narrowly, or did radio merely adapt to changing listener demands?" [75] In favor of the former argument, Eric W. Rothenbuhler writes, "radio airplay of songs leads to – and therefore cannot be a response to – audience members liking and buying popular music. Radio programmers largely create the tastes they claim to be serving."[76] John Wallace White's previously cited statement that "formats create and sustain communities of listeners that identify with the aesthetic values represented by the music"[77] also supports this. Weisbard also suggests that radio has engaged in a "formatting of publics" to create "multiple mainstreams," described as "distinct, if at times overlapping, cultural centers."[78] However, it does bear repeating Simpson's observation about identity politics, since the philosophical "chicken/egg" question described by Fisher has no answer. The American

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[74] Marc Fisher, "Playing the Numbers," in *Something in the Air: Radio, Rock, and the Revolution that shaped a Generation*, 213.
[75] Ibid., 213.
[76] Eric W. Rothenbuhler, "Programming Decision Making in Popular Music Radio," *Communication Research* 12 (1985): 213.
[77] John Wallace White, "Radio Formats and the Transformation of Musical Style: Codes and Cultural Values in the Remaking of Tunes," 1.
[78] Eric Weisbard, *Top 40 Democracy*: *The Rival Mainstreams of American Music*, 1-2.

public changed as we were divided into niches, and this likely encouraged further segmentation of the populace.

As much as the 1970s may have been a tipping point, a period in which radio formats were increasingly programmed to draw in a particular demographic, this practice, and the research that led to it, began much earlier. It did not end there, either. In his 2012 book *The Sounds of Capitalism: Advertising, Music, and the Conquest of Culture*, Timothy D. Taylor writes that "increased market segmentation and niche marketing…has insinuated itself ever more effectively into people's everyday lives…Consumption has become, therefore, far more than the simple acquisition of goods, but the mean mode of relating to goods, and to one another."[79] As described by Thomas Frank and others, consumerism became a way of proving one's hipness (or conservatism). Frank writes that, "…hip consumerism" generates "powerful imperatives of brand loyalty and accelerated consumption."[80] According to Frank, this brand of consumerism, which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four, creates the impression of having engaged in subversive activity when really one has supported the status quo by purchasing something.

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[79] Timothy D. Taylor, "New Capitalism, Creativity, and the New Petite Bourgeoisie," in *The Sounds of Capitalism: Advertising, Music, and the Conquest of Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 239; "mean mode" refers in this case to the role of consumption as the central factor that relates individuals to the factors listed above.

[80] Thomas Frank, "Hip as Official Capitalist Style," in *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*, 231.

Popularity Charts

Associated with audience segmentation, radio formats are also connected to the charts *Billboard* (and other companies) have produced. These ranked lists of music sales and radio play are a product of segmentation, even as they reproduce its effects. Ernest A. Hakanen describes them as "ever expanding and approaching ubiquity," expounding the importance of these charts for marketing music, shaping radio playlists, and connecting radio, the record industry, and consumers.[81] Hakanen counted thirty-nine *Billboard* charts as of 1998; in 2019, I counted 237 on the magazine's website (including international and decade-end rankings). Based on the titles of these charts, to some extent the increase results from the incorporation of new technologies such as online streaming, the recognition of different ethnic groups (most notably Hispanic), and the increased popularity of different genres of music (such as Electronic Dance Music). However, some of these charts, such as "Adult R&B," suggest that other factors, such as age and race, influence the accumulation of charts as well.[82]

In any case, the existence of many highly targeted charts suggests a clear response to, and support of, niche marketing that has become a common and effective tool for the music, radio, and advertising industries. This situation contrasts greatly with that which inspired the compilation of the first "Easy Listening" charts (an early precursor to the Adult Contemporary chart), which *Billboard* compiled merely by taking relevant songs

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[81] Ernest A. Hakanen, "Counting Down to Number One: The Evolution of the Meaning of Popular Music Charts," *Popular Music*, 95-96.
[82] "Charts," Billboard-Hollywood Reporter Media Group, http://www.billboard.com/charts (Accessed August 8, 2017).

out of the Hot 100 chart.[83] Keir Keightley notes that *Billboard* "began to collect distinct data for the chart" in 1965.[84] The need for more precise data reflects a more diverse musical landscape in addition to the use of targeted marketing – in the case of Easy Listening in particular, listeners often sought out the music of artists like Frank Sinatra to avoid the rock and pop of the period.

This need to categorize could have been inspired by more than diverging musical taste and a desire to improve the effectiveness of marketing and expand consumer spending. According to Anand, they are inspired by the "fundamental social impulse" to "understand ourselves in relation to our community and society," which "rest[s] on our ability to make categories."[85] The result of this impulse reflects what those categories mean to us, amounting to more than just objective tabulation. David Brackett writes that charts are "profoundly ideological," presenting musical popularity "in hierarchies, categories, and divisions of style and taste."[86] The use of more than one chart creates the impression that some music is more popular (and that the industry is less racist and sexist) than it really is. The existence of separate R&B, Rock, and Country charts creates the possibility of a song or album charting well, even when it has not placed well on the Hot 100 or *Billboard* 200 (top-selling songs and albums, respectively). Charts such as "Songs of the Summer" and "Emerging Artists" reflect this practice as well, while also suggesting specific listeners that the music on these charts may appeal to. And the Adult

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[83] Keir Keightley, "Music for Middlebrows: Defining the Easy Listening Era, 1946-1966," 323.
[84] Ibid., 323-324.
[85] N. Anand, "Charting the Music Business: *Billboard* Magazine and the Development of the Commercial Music Field," 144.
[86] David Brackett, "Family Values in Music? Billie Holiday's and Bing Crosby's 'I'll Be Seeing You," in *Interpreting Popular Music*, 36-37.

Contemporary chart, which tracks radio play on the AC format that has been geared toward women, could be alternatively described as a "white women's" chart.

Charts also connect popularity to aesthetic value, since personal choice is assumed, and public taste is valued. That is, public choice supposedly determines which songs are popular, and what the public likes is better than what it doesn't. As Anand writes, "if you are at the top, you are the best."[87] Hakanen writes that, because listeners assume that their choices have created the charts' content, they see themselves in the chart. For popular music, charts have been effective in encouraging consumers to continue purchasing music in a manner that creates meaning for the consumer outside that of a musical experience. Jacques Attali notes that "people buy more records than they can listen to. They stockpile what they want to find the time to hear."[88] As Hakanen notes, this is because the music (and the charts) have become connected to consumer identity. That is, the consumer is purchasing a product that allows the expression of identity as a consumer.[89] When a song is popular, the consumer feels a connection to this success: "'Popular' comes to describe the audience as it delivers itself to the market."[90] This reflects Cohen's observations about the effects of marketing to create consumers that will buy in order to express themselves through purchasing choices. Attali writes about this as well, labeling music marketing as "manipulation and promotion" that must "produce the consumer." Because consumers must purchase more music than they can

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[87] N. Anand, "Charting the Music Business: *Billboard* Magazine and the Development of the Commercial Music Field," 146.
[88] Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, Trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985): 101.
[89] Earnest A. Hakanen, "Counting Down to Number One," 99.
[90] Ibid., 107.

hope to listen to, “this kind of consumption announces…the production of demand, not the production of supply.”[91] In other words, “the market now produces consumers at the consumer’s expense and compliance.”[92]

All this writing about the “illusion of personal choice,”[93] or what Theodor W. Adorno described as “pseudo-individualization,”[94] reflects a perspective about what we are offered and how we define ourselves as citizens under late capitalism. Adorno describes the audience for mass-disseminated music as “regressed, arrested at the infantile stage.”[95] These people, according to Adorno, avoid music that differs from what they are familiar with, from “more important music.” Such people are “childish” in their interactions with music and react to films with “a great formless mouth with shining teeth in a voracious smile, while the tired eyes are wretched and lost above.”[96] Adorno describes them as part of the system that they labor to reproduce. They demand certain forms of culture because they are “themselves objects” whose “spare time serves only to reproduce their working capacity.”[97]

Some of this criticism is clearly valid. Planned obsolescence informs a number of production and purchasing choices, resulting in the endless production of slightly different denim plants to define ever-changing styles, and producing new songs because

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[91]Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, 101, 103.
[92] Earnest A. Hakanen, “Counting Down to Number One,” 100.
[93] Ibid., 97.
[94] Theodor W. Adorno, “On Popular Music,” in *On Record: Rock, Pop, and The Written Word*, ed. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (New York: Routledge, 1990), 308.
[95] Theodor W. Adorno, “On the Fetish-Character of Music and Regression of Listening,” in *Essays On Music*, ed. Richard Leppert. Trans. Susan H. Gillespie (Berkley: University of California Press, 2002), 303.
[96] Ibid., 303-304.
[97] Theodore Adorno, “On Popular Music,” in *On Record: Rock, Pop, and The Written Word*, 310.

each one is only appealing for so many repetitions. The new jeans and the new songs may bear only superficial differences from what they replaced. Such items are marketed not as necessary goods in a practical sense; if they were, we would never buy enough of them to sustain the system. They are meant to fulfill another need: to mark identity. Often, a pair of jeans is not just a pair of jeans.

However, according to a great deal of scholarship on how individuals use music, modern personal identity is comprised of numerous activities and associations, and these involve more agency than Attali, Hakanen, and Adorno allow for in their writing. Theodore Gracyk writes that "members of the audience for popular culture… 'perform' identity, articulating personal identity in each act of consumption: purchasing a CD, getting up to dance to a certain song a club, singing along on the car radio."[98] So Gracyk does not define these acts solely as consumption. He writes that with behavior expressing identity, "each person operates from a range of social positions; in negotiating these differences, each person's response is informed by a complex network of social positions."[99] Beyond tangible associations, David Brackett notes that individuality is constantly reformulated to create novel adaptations, such that "the subject incessantly restages (as in fantasy) the assumption of an identity."[100] This interior activity interacts with the public display of identity, both of which are shaped by incorporating media that either reinforces demographic and/or psychographic characteristics ("homologous"), or

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[98] Theodore Gracyk, "Rebel Rebel: Proliferating Identities," in *I Wanna be Me: Rock Music and the Politics of Identity*, 202.
[99] Ibid., 197.
[100] David Brackett, "Introduction: They Never Even Knew," in *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music*, 24.

goes against them ("imaginary").[101] Listeners also engage with music "ironically," either to express legitimate dislike for it, or to avoid judgment from those who may not approve of a more ostensibly sincere engagement with these songs or artists.[102]

Clearly, each person constantly reformulates identity within the context of late capitalism. The tone of the last two statements is contrary to that of Adorno, and to some extent Hakanen as well. Steven Quartz and Anette Asp articulate this viewpoint further in *Cool: How the Brain's Hidden Quest for Cool Drives Our Economy and Shapes Our World*. These authors cite "cultural biology," or "the interplay between instincts … and our capacity for cultural learning" for the use of products to form identity and demonstrate status.[103] This departs from the views of those who describe the workings of consumerism as connecting our drive to consume with natural instincts, not with an artificially produced demand for products that do not fulfill needs, products that can only generate demand within an artificial system. Basically, they argue that this system, and the needs we strive to fulfill within it, are not artificial, but driven by innate sociability and our need to establish status.[104] Like market segmentation and the evolution of radio formats, industry forces must consider social factors and personal choice when constructing and utilizing popularity charts. As Keightley writes, "radio formats and

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[101] Ibid., 24-25.
[102] Andy Bennett, "Cheesy Listening: Popular Music and Ironic Listening Practices," in *Redefining Mainstream Popular Music*: 202-213, ed. Sarah Baker, Andy Bennett, and Jodie Taylor (New York: Routledge, 2013); Mitchell Morris, "Introduction," in *The Persistence of Sentiment: Display and Feeling in Popular Music of the 1970s* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2013), 1-33.
[103] Steven Quartz and Anette Asp, "The Consumption Mystery," in *Cool: How the Brain's Hidden Quest for Cool Drives our Economy and Shapes our World* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2015), 8-9.
[104] Ibid., 9-12, 18.

audience formations are mutually constitutive."[105] Given the arguments presented above, it should be clear that one can accept that individuals could see themselves as fans of "alternative" music because they identify with that consumer profile, which itself relates to a number of musical, physiological, and social factors.

It is also important to recognize that musical differences that seem superficial to some (such as Adorno) may be legitimately significant to listeners who have acquired a greater deal of competency. The different sub-genres of heavy metal music, for instance, blur together for some, while for others they are easy to distinguish. The less the listening experience, the easier it is to say, "it's all the same." In fact, as much as formats and charts serve to segment the public and make these groups easier to market music and other products to, they also serve to organize music that sounds very different to many listeners. White writes that the system of formats "allows the audience to organize the vast array of style features" with which they are presented. It "helps reinforce a listener's competency in *instantly* identifying style features associated with his or her preferred musical diet."[106] Depending on the person, this could be limited or varied, but either way listeners generally know what they will hear from a station.

The fact that listeners can differentiate between formats by the musical selection offered is evidence of radio's (and the charts') effect on the development of musical style. As Keith Negus writes, "The requirements of radio do not simply limit the music that audiences hear, they directly affect the priorities and repertoire policies of record

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[105] Keir Keightley, "Music for Middlebrows: Defining the Easy Listening Era, 1946-1966," 322.
[106] John Wallace White, "Radio Formats and the Transformation of Musical Style," 2. Emphasis in original.

companies."[107] Negus quotes an Artists and Repertoire (A&R) executive at a record label who wanted to sign a band but could not because they did not fit into a format (or chart) category.[108] This brings to mind Anand's statement that, concerning categories, "when particular domains of activity are inappropriately or not at all categorized, they suffer from lack of attention and are perceived to be less attractive." This illustrates how "the various categories of *Billboard*'s charts are more than mere labels reflecting the industry's market segments – they are party to attempts by actors to [alternately] reproduce and reshape the field."[109] If a group does not fit a format or chart, they stand little chance of success. This is why, as White notes, "tunes are created in the production process to fit into these predetermined formats."[110]

There is still a lot of work to getting a song played as much as possible on the stations that will reach the most receptive listeners. With a new song, Gabriel Rossman notes that the strategy is to get airplay "in one format or a few closely related formats."[111] Because the song can only be played so many times to the same listeners, and each format only offers so many listeners, "crossing over to additional formats allows a song to grow further." Negus confirms this process, also indicating that a song might be promoted first in an area of the country in which it might be more popular. It does not make sense to promote a hard rock song where country or rap is more popular. Another

[107] Keith Negus, "Plugging and Programming: Pop Radio and Record Promotion in Britain and the United States," 66.
[108] Ibid., 62.
[109] N. Anand, Charting the Music Business: *Billboard* Magazine and the Development of the Commercial Music Field," 150.
[110] John Wallace White, "Radio Formats and the Transformation of Musical Style," 2.
[111] Gabriel Rossman, "But Which Chart Do You Climb?", in *Climbing the Charts: What Radio Airplay Tells Us about the Diffusion of Innovation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 77.

method Negus describes is creating different mixes (or edits) for different formats, as well as offering several singles at the same time, but pushing them to different formats because the style throughout the record varies. Such strategies solve problems created when songs initially fit a given format, since a track can be altered for appeal to different listeners, and different tracks on an album can be promoted elsewhere. This increases the audience for single and album purchase.[112]

Throughout the time period in question (and after, to some extent) radio play was a crucial component of the marketing strategy for any single and/or album. However, like consumer choice, airplay did not operate outside this system of social and personal activity. This dissertation incorporates chart data with an understanding of the criticism detailed in this section, and in the context of discussions of relevant social, political, and musical issues.

Methodological and Theoretical Framework

The methodological approaches of scholars Kim Simpson and Eric Weisbard have informed this dissertation. In Simpson's book *Early '70s Radio: The American Format Revolution*, the author writes that she "present[s] a top-down overview" by using sources such as trade magazines *Billboard* and *Record World* as a guide to how the industry tried to track trends in radio, advertising, and musical style in the early 1970s.[113] Using such resources, she explains the connection between social and musical change, and how

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[112] Keith Negus, "Promotional War Games: Pop Radio in Britain and North America," in *Producing Pop: Culture and Conflict in the Popular Music Industry* (London: Edward Arnold, 1992): 104.
[113] Kim Simpson, *Early '70s Radio: The American Format Revolution*, 4-5.

advertising and radio adapted to reach consumers making purchasing and listening choices in this context. In *Top 40 Democracy: The Rival Mainstreams of American Music*, Weisbard describes the evolution of formats and genres through a case study approach, using the A&M Records archives at UCLA to supplement writing about acts such as Elton John and various radio formats. This allows him to make important observations about how social, economic and political changes were manifested in changes in record production and marketing, as well as radio formatting. This dissertation utilizes *Billboard* charts, journalistic articles, published scholarly writing, and archival sources within a case study approach.

The resources of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum, specifically the Clive Davis Letters help to convey insider perspectives on how record industry personnel develop, produce, and market artists. I also draw upon *Billboard*, *Rolling Stone*, and other publications' attempts to reflect song and artist popularity (and how that popularity is produced). Music critic Steve Knopper's book *Appetite for Self Destruction: The Spectacular Crash of the Record Industry in the Digital Age* also provides an insider perspective, including financial information, that strengthens the discussion in Chapter Two.

Relevant academic scholarship provides more reflective, and less (explicitly) financially motivated, efforts to understand the role of these artists in the industry and in society. Examples of this are Kembrew McLeod's paper "'★ 1/2': A Critique of Rock Criticism in North America" and Ernest A. Hakanen's "Counting Down to Number One:

The Evolution of the Meaning of Popular Music Charts."[114] Respectively, these articles discuss issues of gender and musical style within American rock journalism and the political and economic function of popularity charts. Both authors describe the influence of these sources as influential on both the production and reception of American popular music.

For song analysis, I utilize analytical skills gained through several years of formal and self-guided study, in addition to several printed sources. For basic formal guidelines, I use *What's That Sound: An Introduction to Rock and its History* by John Covach and Andrew Flory and Covach's article "Form in Rock Music: A Primer."[115] For clarity and consistency, each song analysis refers to a table that includes lyrics and musical form. Some tables are more detailed than others, but each is used as part of a thorough explanation of how the music functions and how it relates to various social and political issues.

Analysis of music video utilizes screenshots that accompany written explanations. For guidance, I have primarily referenced *Gender Politics and MTV: Voicing the Difference* by Lisa Lewis and *Experiencing Music Video: Aesthetics and Cultural Context* by Carol Vernallis. The latter text explores the various ways music and image interact in music videos, while the former considers the influence of gender politics on

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[114] Kembrew McLeod, "'★ ½': A Critique of Rock Criticism in North America," *Popular Music* 20 (2001): 47-60; Ernest A. Hakanen, "Counting Down to Number One: The Evolution of the Meaning of Popular Music Charts," *Popular Music* 17 (January 1998): 95-101.

[115] John Covach and Andrew Flory, *What's that Sound: An Introduction to Rock and its History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2015); John Covach, "Form in Rock Music: A Primer," in *Engaging Music: Essays in Musical Analysis* (New York, Norton, 2015), 65-76.

the production and reception of popular music and music videos. In particular, Lewis's book explores how music videos in the 1980s evolved to communicate aesthetic value and either align with or resist conventional gender codes to appeal to desired viewers. This added to how stars were branded, creating a more significant visual component to popular music consumption than existed before the advent of a channel meant to play nothing but music videos and interviews. [116]

John Corbett, in "Free, Single, and Disengaged: Listening Pleasures and the Popular Music Object" explores this territory as well but focuses on how music videos attempt to restore the experience of an audio/visual musical performance. Even though these videos are not necessarily reflective of a real musical performance, viewers suspend disbelief and incorporate these portrayals into their understanding of the song and artist.[117] This material has provided guidance for my own interpretation of such factors in the music videos of various artists.

On the topic of taste and how it may be formed by individuals, guided by social norms, economic conditions, and other factors, Pierre Bourdieu's discussion on cultural and social capital, "The Forms of Capital," and Carl Wilson's *Let's Talk About Love: Why Other People Have Such Bad Taste* (which draws heavily upon the work of Bourdieu) proved helpful in guiding this part of the discussion. While Bourdieu's work forms the foundation for Wilson's exploration of taste, the latter author expands upon Bourdieu's contribution with his discussion of how Céline Dion's music (and, implicitly,

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[116] Lisa A. Lewis, *Gender Politics and MTV: Voicing the Difference* (Philadelpha: Temple University Press, 1990); Carol Vernallis, *Experiencing Music Video: Aesthetics and Cultural Context* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).
[117] John Corbett, in "Free, Single, and Disengaged: Listening Pleasures and the Popular Music Object," *October* 54 (Autumn 1990): 79-101

pop music like hers), appeals to some listeners and turns others away because of age, class, gender, and other factors. In addition, Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh's chapter "Music and the Representation of Sociocultural Identities" and "Techniques of the Musical Imaginary," *Music in Everyday Life* by Tia DeNora, and *The Sounds of Capitalism: Advertising, Music, and the Conquest of Culture* and *Music and Capitalism: A History of the Present*, both by Timothy D. Taylor, examine the relationship between popular culture and identity formation.[118]

Many chapters in this dissertation also include in-depth discussion of marketing and how public personae are created and expressed by artists (with the help of the record industry, radio, VH1, and MTV). In *Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry*, Kristin J. Lieb discusses how "brands" are created through a complicated process that involves "consumers, professional handlers, and the cultural intermediaries who sit between them, such as journalists, bloggers, and critics."[119] Each actor behaves with varying amounts of agency and effectiveness, as musical production and consumption reinforces and reshapes identity and social standing. Lieb also discusses Fournier, Solomon, and Englis's theory of "multivocality," which describes how a song or artist can appeal to different people for different reasons, and Erving Goffman's theory of

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[118] Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh, "Music and the Representation of Sociocultural Identities" and "Techniques of the Musical Imaginary," in *Western Music and its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music*, ed. Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 31-47; Tia DeNora, "Music as a Technology of the Self," in *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: 46-74. Cambridge University Press, 2000), 151-163; Timothy D. Taylor, *Music and Capitalism: A History of the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); Timothy D. Taylor, *The Sounds of Capitalism: Advertising, Music, and the Conquest of Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).
[119] Kristin J. Lieb, "Critical Frameworks for Considering Pop Stars," in *Gender, Branding, and the Popular Music Industry* (New York: Routledge, 2013): 19.

"impression management," which describes how people behave to influence the behavior of others.[120] Multivocality helps to explain the appeal, for some, and disregard, for others, of Michael Bolton discussed in Chapter One.

These sources, as well as those for feminism and the culture wars (both described below), are prominent influences on my writing, as I discuss mass consumption and the relationship between music and gender, among other issues.

Literature Review

This section highlights the significant relevant literature that has informed this project while also introducing prominent themes that I cover in the text. I have divided this content into the following sections: context; radio formats; marketing and segmentation; taste, gender, and identity; pop and authorship; popularity charts; musical analysis; and feminism. Before these sections, I provide a summary of the social and political context in mid-1980s and 1990s America.

Social and Political Context

This section will function both to establish the context for the period covered by this dissertation (the late 1980s and 1990s in the United States) and to describe the principle sources I will rely on and their methodology.

In "The Popular Music Industry," Simon Frith writes, "the music industry cannot be treated as being somehow apart from the sociology of everyday life – its activities are

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[120] Ibid., 24, 5-6.

themselves culturally determined."[121] While Frith discusses these cultural factors in a manner more directly related to long-term changes in the economic and technological conditions of the industry, I would like to focus on the larger context of the time period that this dissertation will cover (the late 1980s and 1990s). Many of the issues summarized here will be explained in greater detail in relevant chapters, so this section will be brief, leaving the fleshing out of various issues to later chapters of this dissertation.

In *Sounds of Change: A History of FM Broadcasting in America*, Christopher H. Sterling and Michael C. Keith describe radio in the 1980s and 1990s as "rudderless and uninspired," suggesting that, "the ferment of the 1960s and the struggles of the 1970s were supplanted by ennui and self-absorption, with more emphasis on 'me' rather than 'we.'"[122] Using trade publications and general historical observations, these authors link the larger context of the 1980s and 1990s to developments in radio. Although there is some merit to such observations of the 1980s and 1990s, it should be noted that even as Americans were more concerned with individual gains than they had been in the 1960s and 1970s, coordinated political movement also shaped the period to some extent. Thus, if the 1980s were characterized by a move toward conservatism that overwhelmingly shaped politics and policies, fundraising efforts to alleviate hunger and illness, and protests urging the Reagan administration to take action on AIDS countered this trend. In the 1990s, conservative gains in areas such as welfare reform were countered with events

[121] Simon Frith, "The Popular Music Industry," in *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 27.
[122] Christopher H. Sterling and Michael C. Keith, "Dominance: FM is Radio (1980-1995)," 163.

such as the World Trade Organization protests in 1999 and the development of third-wave feminism.[123]

Graham Thompson, in *American Culture in the 1980s* and David Sirota, in *Back to Our Future: How the 1980s Explain the World We Live in Now – Our Culture, Our Politics, Our Everything*, use similar methods to describe the 1980s, including referencing newspaper and magazine publications, as well as the reflections of scholars, to make both large-scale and more detailed observations about the political, social, economic, and cultural climate of the period.[124] Neo-conservatism (or the New Right), militarism, and the backlash against both feminism and progressive social programs are all tied by these authors to a rejection of the changes advanced in the 1960s and '70s. After experiencing the intense social issues of the 1960s and 1970s and the economic problems of the 1970s and early 1980s, a nostalgic longing for the 1950s drove many efforts to restore a sense of national unity and prosperity that were presumed to exist in that decade. It should be noted that many significant technological advances also shaped life in the 1980s, including the introduction of more affordable home computers and the development of the Internet.

Regarding the 1990s, Andrew Hartman considers Patrick Buchanan's 1992 announcement of a "war for the soul of America" in his speech at that year's Republican National Convention an important perspective on the continuing culture wars. He writes

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[123] Colin Harrison, "Introduction: The Intellectual Context," in *American Culture in the 1990s* (Edinburg: Edinburg University Press, 2010), 6-13.
[124] Graham Thompson, "Chronology of 1980s American Culture," in *American Culture in the1980s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), x-xix; David Sirota, *Back to Our Future: How the 1980s Explain the World We Live in Now – Our Culture, Our Politics, Our Everything* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2011).

that "the history of America, for better and worse, is largely a history of debates about the idea of America."[125] Buchanan's idea of America is that of a country divided between good people (like those in his audience) and people who do not love America – that is, those supporting more liberal worldviews and policies.

This event was not the first to challenge progressive policies. Historian Albert Camarillo notes that resistance to the progressive politics of the 1960s began even earlier, triggered in part by Barry Goldwater's loss in the 1964 presidential election, but also inspired by issues such as racial integration and changing sexual mores. The ideals of this resistance remained prominent throughout the late 1980s and into the 1990s presidency of Democrat Bill Clinton.[126] However, it should be noted that events such as Clinton's Welfare Reform Act of 1996, which reduced welfare aid, coincided in this decade with not only the previously mentioned protests of the WTO, but also the 1998 National Organization of Women's Declaration of Sentiments. Clearly, the issues of the 1990s spanned more than just this decade and included a wide variety of ideological positions, many of which were legacies of not only the 1980s but also the 1960s and '70s.[127] Differentiating this period from that in which the counterculture thrived, Americans' concern about larger issues was not informed by the hope of creating a utopia of sorts, but by a sense that the 1990s were what Colin Harrison describes as a "'twilight'

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[125] Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture of Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 1.
[126] Albert Camarillo, "Neoconservatism and Culture Wars of the 1980s and 1990s" (lecture, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, February 25, 2014), c-span.com, https://www.c-span.org/video/?317879-1/neoconservatism-culture-wars-1980s-1990s [accessed July 15, 2018].
[127] Colin Harrison, "Introduction: The Intellectual Context," in *American Culture in the 1990s*, 13.

moment, a period of transition in which anticipation of the future is mixed with a sense of decline."[128] Harrison notes that sixteen million Americans were laid off during the "downsizing" period of 1992-1998, and they found that they earned less when hired to new jobs. This trend exacerbated rising inequality, which increased more in this decade than in the previous one.[129]

Gains made for gender equality were challenged in the 1970s and '80s by opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment, among other things,[130] while the increasingly common use of the term "feminazi," and the publication of books like *The Rules: Time-Tested Secrets for Capturing the Heart of Mr. Right* (in 1995) confirmed that economic and social battles were still being fought in the 1990s.[131] In this continuation of the culture wars, some felt as though America was returning to common sense, while others felt that hard-won victories were in jeopardy.

Radio, Segmentation, and Popularity Charts

Several scholars have written about the evolution and operation of radio formats. The works that have most influenced my approach to radio's historical, theoretical, and practical factors are Kim Simpson's *Early '70s Radio: The American Format Revolution* and Eric Weisbard's *Top 40 Democracy: The Rival Mainstreams of American Music*. Both books take a historical approach, meaning that these authors incorporate discussions

[128] Ibid., 4.
[129] Ibid., 7.
[130] Andrew Hartman *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture of Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 134-137.
[131] Colin Harrison, "Introduction: The Intellectual Context," in *American Culture in the 1990s*, 16.

of the technology and business of radio with descriptions of how social, political, and economic factors relate to radio. Both authors use industry publications to a significant extent, but Weisbard also uses the A&M Records archives at UCLA, which provides a first-hand record industry angle that Simpson's work lacks. In terms of theory, both authors describe the radio industry as one that has constantly worked to improve how it utilizes demographic groups to appease advertisers while also describing these groups as citizens consciously making choices, as consumers and otherwise.

Marc Fisher, in *Something in the Air: Radio, Rock, and the Revolution that Shaped a Generation*, uses similar methodology, but adds interviews with radio industry personnel and even sits in on an auditorium testing session to understand how these groups of potential listeners have helped to shape radio playlists. As with *Sounds of Change: A History of FM Broadcasting in America* by Christopher H. Sterling and Michael C. Keith, Fisher organizes his chapters more chronologically, while themes such as the development listener surveys also figure prominently in the book's organization. Sterling and Keith's book is strictly chronological, and while it provides some commentary on broader changes in the United States in their study of FM radio from its invention to the early 2000s, these authors favor discussion of more practical matters, such as deregulation and changes in programming methods.

Other works on radio using a more straightforward approach include the monographs *Radio: A Complete Guide to the Industry* by William A. Richter, *Breaking Records: 100 Years of Hits* by William Ruhlmann, and *Climbing the Charts: What Radio*

Airplay Tells Us about the Diffusion of Innovation by Gabriel Rossman.[132] These works describe deregulation, ratings calculations, radio formats, and other such issues, using a mixture of industry publications and monographs for information and are organized more thematically than chronologically.

In terms of smaller-scale studies, Ken Barnes's "Top 40 Radio: A Fragment of the Imagination" and Keith Negus's "Plugging and Programming: Pop Radio and Record Promotion in Britain and the United States" take on specific practical issues related to radio.[133] Barnes writes about the general history, content, and target audience of various formats. Negus discusses the connection between record promotion and airplay, writing that an artist's music often needs to fit at least one format to inspire a company to offer a contract. Percival writes about the domination of radio over the record industry in the production and marketing of music. Shane reports on trends in mid-to-late 1990s radio, commenting on various formats' audiences and programming, as well as the consequences of the 1996 Telecommunications Act. Barnes uses industry publications and relevant monographs to inform his writing. Negus and Percival use industry

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[132] William A. Richter, "Radio Comes of Age," in *Radio: A Complete Guide to the Industry* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 53-78; William A. Richter, "Who is Listening and Why?" In *Radio: A Complete Guide to the Industry* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 79-102; William Ruhlmann, "The 1980s: The Rise of the Music Video Star," in *Breaking Records: 100 Years of Hits* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 173-194; William Ruhlmann, "The 1990s: The Digital Revolution Begins," in *Breaking Records: 100 Years of Hit*s (New York: Routledge, 2004), 195-212; Gabriel Rossman, *Climbing the Charts: What Radio Airplay Tells Us About the Diffusion of Innovation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); Keith Negus, "Plugging and Programming: Pop Radio and Record Promotion in Britain and the United States," *Popular Music* 12 (January 1993): 57-68.

[133] Ken Barnes, "Top 40 Radio: A Fragment of the Imagination," in *Facing the Music: A Pantheon Guide to Popular Culture*, ed. Simon Frith (New York: Pantheon, 1988), 8-50. All discussion in this paragraph references these sources.

publications, monographs, and interviews with industry personnel to ground their work. These sources also tend to be critical of deregulation, discussing the effects of the 1996 Telecommunications Act on the diversity of radio programming.

The type of formatting that has shaped radio for some time arose in part from the methods of market segmentation that have been cultivated since the mid-twentieth century. Simpson discusses how radio became more segmented starting in the early 1970s, while some of Weisbard's chapters would not exist in their current form without the advent of targeted formats such as Adult Contemporary or Contemporary Hits Radio (Top 40). However, these resources lack in-depth discussion of the research that inspired this segmentation, focusing instead on how radio manifested the splicing up of an increasingly divided American public into ever smaller demographic groups. Thus, I utilize monographs and smaller-scale works that specifically address segmentation and marketing.

Susan J. Douglas, Lizabeth Cohen, Joseph Turow, and others document market segmentation in their monographs. These works rely on industry and academic publications and monographs for their source material and organize chapters thematically, moving chronologically within them. In *Listening in: Radio and the American Imagination, from Amos 'n' Andy to Edward R. Murrow to Wolfman Jack and Howard Stern*, Douglas discusses how communications research revolutionized advertising companies' conceptualization of consumers, and how radio compiles ratings and creates formats.[134] Lizabeth Cohen, in *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass*

[134] Susan J. Douglas, "The Invention of the Audience," *Listening in: Radio and the American Imagination, from Amos 'n' Andy to Edward R. Murrow to Wolfman Jack and Howard Stern* (New York: Random House, 1999), 3-21.

Consumption in Postwar America, provides greater depth on this subject, describing how many smaller groups of consumers with their own purchasing practices were defined by psychologists and communications scholars from what was originally viewed as one mass-market group that used the same decision-making processes.[135]

In *Breaking up America: Advertisers and the Rise of the New Media World*, Turow discusses how targeted advertising and media outlets have segmented Americans into groups that, to an increasing extent, interact mostly with ideas and people they're comfortable with. This involves both drawing in the desired audience and pushing away those who do not fit the target demographic. Both advertising industry publications and interviews with those working for advertising and media companies inform Turrow's work.[136]

Timothy D. Taylor, Thomas Frank, and others offer observations of how the social sciences, advertising, and the changing media landscape have developed in the 20th century and influenced one another. In *Music and Capitalism: A History of the Present*, Taylor endeavors to describe the underlying theoretical and ideological underpinnings of scholarship on how music and capitalism relate to one another, as well as Taylor's contribution to that scholarship. He uses advertising industry and scholarly publications as well as case studies to examine how music and musicians, and those who write about them, function within capitalism.[137] Thomas Frank, in *The Conquest of Cool: Business*

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135 Lizabeth Cohen, "Culture: Segmenting the Mass," in *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 292-344.
136 Joseph Turow, *Breaking up America: Advertisers and the Rise of the New Media World*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).
137 Timothy D. Taylor, *Music and Capitalism: A History of the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism, describes how capitalism is related to culture more broadly, clearly making the case that, largely because of marketing, consumerism has become the dominant avenue for self-expression.[138] Taylor's work *The Sounds of Capitalism: Advertising, Music, and the Conquest of Culture* more explicitly describes how advertising works to encourage such associations. These monographs all utilize industry and scholarly publications. While chapters in each of these books tend to focus on a specific period, the overall format is not necessarily chronological, except for Taylor's *The Sounds of Capitalism: Advertising, Music, and the Conquest of Culture*.[139]

Countering the commentary on how radio, advertising, and other forces influence the choices of consumers is writing on ironic listening habits – that is, listening to music with the explicit intent to make light of it, even when listeners might actually enjoy the music (but not the status that being a fan of it might give them). In particular, "Pop Music, Racial Imagination, and the Sounds of Cheese: Notes on Loser's Lounge" by Jason Lee Oakes in the edited collection *Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate* discusses "*who* supposedly makes and listens to bad music, *how* people talk about and perform bad music, and *why* and by whom the music is labeled 'bad.'" Oakes explores

[138] Thomas Frank, "Hip as Official Capitalist Style," in *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 224-236.
[139] Timothy D. Taylor, *The Sounds of Capitalism: Advertising, Music, and the Conquest of Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

the constructed nature of race and gender, and how labelling music as "bad," or even liking it because it is "bad," is a form of privilege.[140]

Popularity charts can aid in analysis of listening and purchasing choices, but this source is not without its problems. Writing on this subject tends to be either matter of fact, merely reporting chart data, or highly critical, questioning theory and methodology. Sources such as *Top Adult Contemporary: 1961-2001* by Joel Whitburn, which collect and present *Billboard* chart data uncritically, fall into the former category.[141] This resource provides quick access to data that takes time to compile otherwise, but all it does is reformat existing data on airplay performance on AC formatted stations (since the AC chart and earlier iterations have only measured airplay, not sales).

In the latter, more critical, group are David Brackett's "Family Values in Music? Billie Holiday's and Bing Crosby's 'I'll Be Seeing You," in *Interpreting Popular Music* and "Counting Down to Number One: The Evolution of the Meaning of Popular Music Charts" by Ernest A. Hakanen.[142] These authors reference philosophers such as Jacques Attali and Jean Baudrillard to criticize how popularity charts such as those provided by *Billboard* present themselves as collections of objective data, even though they are categorized in ways that have reflected broader social issues (the many iterations of charts for black music, for instance, or even the AC chart), and tend to imply the

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[140] Jason Lee Oakes, "Pop Music, Racial Imagination, and the Sounds of Cheese: Notes on Loser's Lounge," in *Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 47-64. Emphases in original.
[141] Joel Whitburn, *Top Adult Contemporary 1961-2001* (Menomonee Falls, WI, 2002).
[142] David Brackett, "Family Values in Music? Billie Holiday's and Bing Crosby's 'I'll Be Seeing You.'" In *Interpreting Popular Music* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2000), 34-74; Earnest A. Hakanen, "Counting Down to Number One: The Evolution of the Meaning of Popular Music Charts," *Popular Music* 17 (January 1998): 95-101.

qualitative value of music with quantitative information about radio play and sales, as though what sells must be good. I use *Billboard* charts and articles in this dissertation, but I do so informed by the commentary of these authors. However, the top-down approach of my research and writing has required relying on these charts as a guideline for reception and genre distinctions.

Taste, Gender, and Identity

The effectiveness of market segmentation is rooted in this practice's ability to inspire association between a product, in this case music, and the values and aspirations of a person or a group of people. The product is purchased to express one's identity in some way. The work of Lizabeth Cohen in *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, Timothy D. Taylor in *Music and Capitalism: A History of the Present* and *The Sounds of Capitalism: Advertising, Music, and the Conquest of Culture*, and other publications focuses on how radio and advertising try to take advantage of or create these associations. This becomes especially important in a society in which personal and group identities are strongly shaped by consumption choices. They document the work of programmers and researchers, as well as changes in the products themselves and the social and economic consequences for consumers.[143]

[143] Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*; Timothy D. Taylor, *Music and Capitalism: A History of the Present*; Timothy D. Taylor, *The Sounds of Capitalism: Advertising, Music, and the Conquest of Culture*.

Simon Frith, Theodore Gracyk, David Brackett, and others focus more on the effects of what these industries do – that is, they consider the meaning that might be created by segmented radio programming, record industry calculations based on radio formats and audience composition, and the influence of advertising agencies (and those doing research for them). This work often incorporates the research of other such scholars, and of those whose approach conflicts with that of the cultural studies approach. The topics covered include music video, love songs, genre, and gender. Frith's "Music and Identity," Gracyk's *I Wanna be Me: Rock Music and the Politics of Identity*, and Brackett's *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music* are examples of works by these authors that will significantly inform such observations in this dissertation.[144]

Among these issues, that of gender is especially significant for this dissertation, since the label Adult Contemporary has referred to music for women, whether as a radio format, the music, or the charts ostensibly created to track popularity. In the works mentioned above, among others, both Frith and Gracyk discuss music and gender, discussing how music both supports and resists traditional notions of femininity. David Tetzlaff, Allison McCracken and Melissa A. Click and Michael W. Kramer discuss gender in relation to particular artists or genres, including Madonna,[145] Céline Dion, male

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[144] Theodore Gracyk, *I Wanna be Me: Rock Music and the Politics of Identity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001); David Brackett, "Introduction: They Never Even Knew," in *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 1-40; David Brackett, "Crossover Dreams: From *Urban Cowboy* to the King of Pop," in *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 280-323.

[145] David Tetzlaff, David Tetzlaff, "Metatextual Girl: → Patriarchy → Postmodernism → Power → Money → Madonna," in *The Madonna Connection: Representational*

ballad singers (such as Michael Bolton), and Shania Twain. For these studies, McCracken, in *Real Men Don't Sing: Crooning in American Culture*, uses contemporary publications and later reflections on gender in the United States to describe how acceptable expressions of masculinity have been constantly renegotiated at least since the early 20th century.[146] Click and Kramer describe how women and men are portrayed differently in both song and music video, with women appearing as less mature and identified by superficial features and men sometimes maturing and acquiring wisdom in the course of a song or video.[147]

In "Music for Middlebrows: Defining the Easy Listening Era: 1946-1966," Keir Keightley uses industry and academic publications to discuss the history of pop's feminine coding. According to Keightley, this has affected pop's aesthetic value for many authors and consumers.[148] Another significant resource, especially for Chapter One, is Robert Walser's "Forging Masculinity: Heavy Metal Sounds and Images of Gender," since he discusses, among other things, the work of groups such as Bon Jovi, which fused musical and thematic material of heavy metal and romantic ballads to create widespread appeal among men and women. This material is useful when discussing the genre

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Politics, Subcultural Identities, and Cultural Theory (Oxford: Westview Press, 1993), 239-264.

[146] Allison McCracken, "Conclusion," in *Real Men Don't Sing: Crooning in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 311-332.

[147] Melissa A. Click and Michael W. Kramer, "Reflections on a Century of Living: Gendered Differences in Mainstream Popular Songs," *Popular Communication* 5 (2007): 241-262.

[148] Keir Keightley, "Music for Middlebrows: Defining the Easy Listening Era, 1946-1966," *American Music* 26 (2008), 309-335.

identification and critical reception of Michael Bolton in Chapter One.[149] For more general commentary on gender and music, Marion Leonard's *Gender in the Music Industry: Rock, Discourse, and Girl Power* uses industry publications, including some interviews, to comment on women working in the music industry, specifically women in rock.[150]

Pop and Authorship

Authorship and pop music are often connected in both industry publications such as *Billboard* and *Rolling Stone* and in scholarly publications with the problematic concept of authenticity. In industry publications, the degree of authority that performers and their music are assigned is often connected rather uncritically to the degree of authorship that is assigned to the artist. In this dissertation, I utilize these publications to demonstrate how artists' aesthetic contributions are assessed by publicly accessible sources. However, for more in-depth analysis of this issue, my primary sources will be Allan Moore's "Authenticity as Authentication," Ron Moy's *Authorship Roles in Popular Music: Issues and Debates*, Keith Negus's "Authorship and the Popular Song," and Lori Burns's "Vocal Authority and Listener Engagement: Musical and Narrative Expressive Strategies of Female Pop-Rock Artists, 1993-1995."[151] In these works, these authors discuss how

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[149] Robert Walser, "Forging Masculinity: Heavy Metal Sounds and Images of Gender," in *Running With the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1993), 108-136.
[150] Marion Leonard, "Introduction," in *Gender in the Music Industry: Rock, Discourse, and Girl Power* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 1-22; Marion Leonard, "Rock and Masculinity," in *Gender in the Music Industry: Rock, Discourse, and Girl Power* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007)), 23-42.
[151]Allan Moore, "Authenticity as Authentication," *Popular Music* 21 (2002): 209-223; Ron Moy, *Authorship Roles in Popular Music: Issues and Debates* (New York:

gender, assumed real-life connections, and the preference given in Western culture to composition over performance have influenced the aesthetic evaluation of popular music. Each of these authors discusses the work of other scholars on this topic and focuses on the reception of various performers. This dissertation will highlight these elements using similar approaches for the artists focused on in each chapter.

Music Analysis

Dai Griffiths's article "Elevating Form and Elevating Modulation" provides analyses of modulations in popular song that inform this dissertation.[152] In "Vocal Pop Pleasures: Theoretical, Analytical, and Empirical Approaches to Voice and Singing in Popular Music," author Martin Pfleiderer discusses various elements of personal and vocal identity and explores the connection between the voice and "the human boy and various affective states."[153] This paper influences interpretations of recorded vocals in the last chapter of this dissertation, as does the doctoral dissertation "One Sweet Day: Vocal Ornamentation and Style in the African-American Ballad, 1991-1995" by Richard Allen Rischar. This author explores the musical style of 1990s vocalists such as Mariah Carey

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Routledge, 2015); Keith Negus, "Authorship and the Popular Song," *Music & Letters* 92 (2011): 607-629; Lori Burns, "Vocal Authority and Listener Engagement: Musical and Narrative Expressive Strategies in the Songs of Female Pop-Rock Artists, 1993-95," in *Sounding Out Pop: Analytical Essays in Popular Music* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 154-192.

[152] Dai Griffiths, "Elevating Form and Elevating Modulation," *Popular Music* 34 (2015), 22-44.

[153] Martin Pfleiderer, "Vocal Pop Pleasures: Theoretical, Analytical, and Empirical Approaches to Voice and Singing in Popular Music," *IASPM Journal* 1 (2010), 1-16.

and Boyz II Men as a means for defining what Rischar calls "musical blackness."[154] Of course, this text also informs elements of the last chapter that deal with race..

Feminism: Second Wave, Third Wave, and Third World

Since I will discuss music produced and marketed primarily for women in this dissertation, it will be necessary to include discussion of the perception and impact of feminism during the period in question, for how this affected views on gender. For this, I will rely on the work of Rory Dicker, Judith Butler, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Simon Frith, Theodore Gracyk, Susan Faludi, Andrew Hartman, Susan J. Douglas, and others for perspectives on feminism, the culture wars, and relationship among gender, music, and critical reception.

In *A History of U.S. Feminisms*, author Rory Dicker summarizes the broader impact of feminism from the First Wave, which began in the nineteenth century and largely focused on women's suffrage, through the third wave, which was still in progress when this book was published in 2008. Dicker describes the emergence of the second wave as beginning in the early 1960s with liberal feminism[155] as an outgrowth of the Civil Rights and New Left movements, when women grew frustrated with both the gender discrimination within these movements and an apparent lack of concern for issues that were important to them.[156] As the movement grew and faced the challenges of representing an increasingly wide array of issues, distinct groups formed to advocate for

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[154] Richard Allen Rischar, "One Sweet Day: Vocal Ornamentation and Style in the African-American Ballad, 1991-1995" (PhD diss., University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, 2000).
[155] Rory Dicker, *A History of U.S. Feminisms* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008), 58.
[156] Ibid., 66, 76.

different issues. This had the effect both of addressing numerous valid concerns and of spreading the movement among groups with somewhat dissimilar goals and tactics. One reason for the formation of groups other than the National Organization for Women was that liberal feminists did not want to take on the risk of advocating for groups such as lesbians or women of color. Such groups eventually advocated for themselves, even during the 1980s backlash.

The 1980s did bring challenges to feminist causes, from restricting abortion access to subverting the goal of using collective action to improve the lives of women. Dicker writes that the 1980s were shaped in part by concern for the individual, and many women responded to this ethos by determining that they, not activists or the government, were responsible for solving their own problems.[157] Journalist Susan Faludi's *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* offers a compelling and thorough account of how the media, among other forces, threatened the advances of second-wave feminism for American women during this decade. Published in 1991, Faludi's description of how various journalists either manufactured various crises for American women (such as the man shortage), or blamed problems caused by a lack of equality on women having reached equality (when this had not yet happened) can be applied to analyses of both musical and lyrical content, especially for music that seems to describe women suffering from these problems.

[157] Ibid., 107-108.

In addition to shaping my discussion of the overall context, Andrew Hartman's *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* also describes similar issues but homes in on how the culture wars have affected changes in policy (such as the rejection of the Equal Rights Amendment in 1982) and public opinion, many of which relate to the goals of feminism and efforts to compromise that movement.[158]

The third wave of feminism began in the early 1990s, according to Dickers and others, partly as a response to the treatment of Anita Hill by the Senate Judiciary Committee.[159] Because of the continuing work of scholars and activists, many more perspectives were included than had been during the second wave, and both academic writing and practical activism had the advantage of being shaped by the changes brought about during that period. Chandra Talpade Mohanty's "Cartographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism," published in 1991, illustrates the extent to which gender was considered dependent on social conditions rather than determined by culturally neutral biological processes. This book also suggests how a larger group of women, with their varying concerns, were included in the formulation of theory and practice.[160]

Judith Butler's 1990 book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* is well known for proposing that both sex and gender are shaped by cultural practice. Butler writes that sex is not purely biologically determined, without preexisting

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[158] Andres Hartman, "The Trouble with Gender," in *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture of Wars*, 134-170.
[159] Rory Dicker, *A History of U.S. Feminisms*, 117.
[160] Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Cartographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism," in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, eds. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, Lourdes Torres (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 1-50.

cultural associations, and gender is not inherent. Butler's description of sex and gender as performance (and as inextricable) has influenced scholars (such as McCracken and Keightley, both of whom were discussed previously) who write about the feminine and masculine coding in music as representing something that is constantly renegotiated.[161] My work will also demonstrate this influence as I discuss the relationship between gender performance and Adult Contemporary's artists, marketing, and radio formatting. Of course, these ideas have often been resisted along with renegotiations of gender roles. This last issue will be taken up most directly in Chapter Two (described below).

In "Cartographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism," Mohanty discusses third-world feminism, with "third world" in this case "defined through geographical location as well as particular sociohistorical conjunctures." Continuing, she notes that "it thus incorporates so-called minority peoples or people of color in the U.S.A."[162] She discusses how different contextual factors, such as race, class, and the political climate, must be incorporated into theory and practice for feminism to serve the needs of women from a variety of backgrounds.[163] Dicker describes this as the "interlocking nature of identity" and "intersectional" identity,[164] while Mohanty uses the term "relationality" for those many issues that collectively shape identity for women, and thus their needs and ideological positions.[165] These statements highlight the relationship

[161] Judith Butler, "Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire," in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge: 1990), 1-34.
[162] Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Cartographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism," in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, 2.
[163] Ibid.
[164] Dicker, "Third Wave Feminism," in *A History of U.S. Feminisms*, 127-128.
[165] Mohanty, "Cartographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism," in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, 12-13.

between third-wave and third-world perspectives. While some second-wave feminists have been criticized for mostly considering the needs of white, middle-class women because they ignored some issues that women outside this group might face, third-wave feminists (and third-world feminists) continued work to rectify this shortcoming.

The marketing, production, and consumption of the music that I will discuss in this dissertation is also shaped by such complicated factors. I have written in an earlier section about how advertisers, radio programmers, and record industry professionals use information on consumers that allows them to market to specific groups, such as women who listened to AC formatted radio and purchased the singles and albums of the artists associated with these stations. Decisions have also doubtless been made on these matters that were informed by personal biases about what a demographic should find appealing. The work of third-wave feminists, and those who oppose them, will productively influence my work, since it will at the very least serve as a reminder to consider the "intersectional" nature of identity for those involved in the production,[166] dissemination, and evaluation of this music.

The connections between these events and music are not always related in a clear-cut way, but they exist nonetheless, sometimes suggested in the tone of lyrics or the character of musical stylistic choices. John Street writes that "music's politics cannot be read straight from its context because music-making is not just journalism with a backbeat. The music is the result of the interplay of commercial, aesthetic, institutional,

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[166] Intersectionality refers to various elements of a person's identity unavoidably interacting because of social norms. For example, an Asian woman cannot focus on just being a woman, because her ethnicity will always affect how she sees herself and how others treat her.

and political processes."[167] This suggests a complicated interplay (or intersectionality, to repurpose the term) between the factors he lists, leading him to conclude that "music establishes a context through which politics is viewed and judged."[168] The chapters in this dissertation will examine how this context is established in the work and public image of various artists.

Men and Gender

While much of this dissertation focuses on women as artists and audience members, Chapters Three and Four highlight the challenges faced by male artists. Sources for this subject area include *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* by Michael Kimmel, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* by Susan Faludi, "Reality Bites?: The Cultural Politics of Generation X and Youthful White Masculinities in Sport and Popular Culture in 1990s America" by Kyle William Kusz, and "The Singsong of Undead Labor:' Gender Nostalgia and the Vocal Fantasy of Intimacy in the 'New' Male Singer/Songwriter," by Ian Biddle in *Oh Boy! Masculinities and Popular Music*.[169]

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[167] John Street, "Rock, Pop, and Politics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 246.
[168] Ibid., 247.
[169] Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999); Kyle William Kusz, "Reality Bites?: The Cultural Politics of Generation X and Youthful White Masculinities in Sport and Popular Culture in 1990s America" (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2003); Ian Biddle, "'The Singsong of Undead Labor:' Gender Nostalgia and the Vocal Fantasy of Intimacy in the 'New' Male Singer/Songwriter," in *Oh Boy! Masculinities and Popular Music*, ed. Freya Jarman-Ivens (New York: Routledge, 2007), 125-144.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter Two explores the themes of female desire and musical taste, and how artists are marketed to meet expected demands of this demographic. Pop artist Michael Bolton's music, marketing, and reception provide an example of an artist whose genre designation and audience composition have allowed critics to identify his music as pop, of low quality, and enjoyed by women with bad taste. This transpires despite the rock orientation of much of Bolton's music and his widespread popularity (demonstrated through *Billboard* chart performance and RIAA[170] sales figures). Analysis of music journalism and scholarly works on reception inform a discussion on taste formation within the rock versus pop dichotomy and associations between genre and aesthetic worth. That is, pop has been deemed inferior to rock, so assigning music to the former category generally brings negative critical attention. Musical and lyrical analysis of several of Bolton's songs, from the 1970s to the 1990s joins examinations of music videos and record jackets to provide insight on Bolton's evolution as an artist and how his image changed to draw in the AC audience. Ultimately, this chapter reveals connections between gender, musical/lyrical content, image, reception, and taste.

Chapter Three discusses the influence of the culture wars and the New Right on early 1990s pop in general, and AC playlists in particular, through analysis of the music and marketing of pop group Wilson Phillips and the mid-1990s releases of the dance-pop group Ace of Base. Wilson Phillips, formed by the daughters of famous 1960s pop/rock musicians, utilized familial connections to achieve celebrity and critical attention. Their

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[170] Recording Industry Association of America. This organization tracks records shipped to stores and online sales.

music combines both the music of the counterculture with their harmonized vocals and 1990s pop with accompanimental elements. However superficial readings of their lyrics suggest a conservative ideological position opposed to ideas supported by many progressives. Close analysis reveals that the group's first two singles, "Hold On" and "Release Me," communicate a preference for self-sufficiency, alignment with anti-victim discourse, and self-centeredness. This analysis suggests that, conscious or not, the group's sympathies may lay with the politically and socially conservative New Right, which emerged in the 1970s, dominated during the 1980s, and retained a great deal of influence in the 1990s. With its dance and reggae influences, Ace of Base's music incorporates appropriated and modern elements. The group's lyrics have been interpreted as being aligned with conservative principles – critical of "welfare queens" and representative of the focus on self-centeredness that is part of the 1980s' legacy. This chapter analyzes two of the group's singles, "All That She Wants" and "The Sign," to better explain both compositional elements and reception.

Issues of authorship and production also shape this chapter. As a pop group with a large female fan base, Wilson Phillips may have struggled to acquire recognition for writing their songs, but their familial connections, which were widely advertised, made it imperative to advertise their role as songwriters. Ace of Base's music was eventually shaped by their producers, but initially they wrote and recorded their music without much assistance. This discussion illustrates that the collaborative nature of popular song recording makes accurately assigning authorship difficult. It also highlights that these songs found a place on AC despite speculation about their aesthetic credibility because they were deemed appealing to the target demographic.

Chapter Four discusses the role of popular music in the context of the ongoing culture wars and the crisis of masculinity experienced by some Generation-X men in the 1990s. By implicitly questioning of some tenets of feminism, some male groups such as Matchbox Twenty and Train reinforced the idea that women are irrational and need rational men for stability and happiness. Andrew Hartman writes that the idea that "women were unhappy with their liberation" was perpetrated by the media throughout the 1970s and '80s;[171] this continued into the '90s. Frequently in this music, "difficult" women are portrayed by reliable, sensitive men, who tolerate problematic behavior because of their condescending understanding of it. Despite this approach, many of these songs achieved chart placement on either Adult Contemporary or Adult Top 40 in addition to other charts – meaning that these artists held appeal for women. This chapter analyses several relevant songs, and their music videos and CD liners.

Chapter Five further explores the crisis of masculinity in the late twentieth century through a discussion of what I call a "mainstream subculture," or "comfortable cool." This chapter argues that men in postindustrial economies have appropriated feminine-coded modes of music-and-image making to establish new economic social roles that express a "new" masculinity. In this way, they reassert dominance by reshaping the methods of a subjugated group (women) into something they claim as their own. Some male singer-songwriters appealed to both rock-oriented critics and pop-oriented AC audiences by appropriating feminine-coded musical and lyrical practices.

[171] Andrew Hartman, "The Trouble with Gender," *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture of Wars*, 138.

To elaborate on these concepts, the English artist David Gray's reception, music videos, and music are analyzed in detail. Artists like Gray were marketed to appeal to the predominantly female AC audience as well as predominantly male individuals who express their privilege through their music consumption – that is, those who avoid what they describe as supposedly feminine "pop," preferring to listen to typically male "authentic" artists such as Bob Dylan, whom Gray has been compared to. This music has walked a line between appealing to an AC demographic and a Triple A[172] or indie (or in some cases mainstream pop or rock) audience, and sometimes various singles have been played on more than one format. This seems especially relevant for the 1990s, when the alternative label allowed mainstream rock to be marketed as music uncorrupted by the industry.

Because consumers identify themselves through their musical selection, some individuals seek identification with music that has been marketed as aesthetically superior, even if musically it may fit in with pop, a genre not associated with the audience's assumption of privilege. Others hear in this music the familiar themes of AC-appropriate pop, and that shapes their acceptance (or disapproval). By creating cultural/social capital with careful production and targeted marketing, the industry has been able to create reputations for these artists that can transcend the limitations that many pop artists face in terms of gender, genre, chart, and format, while still appealing to the typical pop listener.

[172] Triple A refers to the "Adult Album Alternative" format, which plays music with less mainstream recognition. In a sense, it functions as an "alternative" station for fans of genre-bending pop and rock.

Chapter Six explores the intersection of race and gender through an examination of the contributions and reception of virtuosic female singers frequently described as "divas." These African-American (or African-American influenced) artists typically performed well on the AC chart with relatively subtle references to modern black musical culture, but struggled for pop success when the music conveyed more explicit racial associations (such as rap). Focusing specifically on Whitney Houston and Mariah Carey allows for analysis of lyrical and musical content and their relationship to broader subjects of gender and racial politics, vocal technique, music criticism, and scholarly works as they relate to the Adult Contemporary format.

Beginning with Houston's second album *Whitney*, released in 1987, continuing with Mariah Carey's second album *Emotions* (1991), and ending with the emergence of the next generation of divas (such as Christina Aguilera in 1999), these analyses suggest how these artists navigated a complicated and highly judgmental environment that both encouraged and criticized female artists' sexualization, alternately celebrated and disapproved of commercial success, and often highlighted personal flaws to the detriment of aesthetic assessment. That Houston and Carey achieved their strongest AC airplay earlier in their careers, before developing a more R&B or hip-hop-oriented style, indicates that race also significantly informed reception. In a period in which many Americans believed (or hoped) that gender and racial inequality had been left in the past, the music, marketing, and reception of these virtuosic singers suggests that the reality for women in music – black (or biracial) women in particular – was tainted with discrimination.

The conclusion ties together the many themes explored in this dissertation within a discussion of the relatively recent approach to popular music studies known as "Poptimism." Poptimism's practitioners have provided more in-depth studies of pop music that has previously been neglected by many scholars, who have focused more on rock.[173] This provides an arena in which artists like those discussed in this dissertation can be taken seriously, but some scholars use the term cheekily and assume that this music is enjoyable but still aesthetically inferior to rock.

Gender, genre, and taste have often been connected to one another in music criticism. These factors contribute to conclusions about who listens to which music, which music is better, and who is most capable of making that distinction. As this exploration of the Adult Contemporary format reveals, many of these conclusions do not accurately reflect what the AC audience listens to in comparison to other demographic groups, and most of the writing does little to illuminate details about musical content. This dissertation provides a starting point for combining musical analysis and social and political commentary to better understand how radio formats relate not only to their audiences, but also to other means of marketing (such as music videos) and to the music.

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[173] Poptimism's emergence as a prominent trend in music criticism and scholarship can be traced to Kalefa Sanneh's 2004 *New York Times* article "The Rap Against Rockism." Many other critics and scholars have followed, including Carl Wilson, Elizabeth Keenan, Mitchell Morris, Jason Lee Oakes, and Andy Bennett.

CHAPTER TWO:
POSTMODERN IDENTITY, CRITICAL RECEPTION, AND POP'S POLITICS IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY – MICHAEL BOLTON'S MASCULINE MELODRAMA

Introduction

In a *Billboard Magazine* article from May 4, 1991, Michael Bolton comments on his female listenership, attempting to explain in a few sentences why more women than men are drawn to his music:

> "My music, even the up-tempo stuff, is emotionally driven, and the content frightens men. Guys don't want to deal with that kind of emotional expression, most of them. I think that's what women love about my music – and I think that's how they perceive me: as someone who says things that they would like to hear a man express, but with conviction and strength."[1]

Here, Bolton asserts a few presumptions about what both he and his label state is a primarily female fan base.[2] First, they lack men in their life who communicate deep and intense romantic feelings. Second, Michael Bolton's music and persona fill that void with his earnest, often romantically themed messages and masculine yet vulnerable image. Perhaps the most important supposition is the tacit acceptance in the article that the appeal of music that appeals disproportionately to women needs a special explanation.

While Bolton is clearly more openly critical of men than women in this statement, his suggestion that women are looking to him to find elements of a masculine presence missing in their lives lack is simplistic, since it views the role of his music as a sort of puzzle piece. It also inadvertently draws on perceptions of female musical taste long tainted by condescension. An example of this (one of many) is conveyed in an article for

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[1] Dave DiMartino, "Michael Bolton Hits Hard with His 'Tender' Touch," *Billboard: the International Newsweekly of Music, video, and Home Entertainment*, May 4, 1991, 31.
[2] Ibid., 30.

Spin Magazine titled "Hated in the Nation: The 30 Biggest Punching Bags in Pop History." In this piece, comic Dave Attell is quoted as saying "'I listened to a Michael Bolton tape and I got my period,'" but only after the authors compare Bolton's music to "a flavorless, gray paste."[3] The message of the article is that the music is unexceptional and listening to it can make a man display undesirable feminine traits.

Such writing also suggests that, rather than enjoying this music for a personally or aesthetically justifiable reason, the appeal must stem from the poor musical judgement of those with bad taste and underdeveloped emotional intelligence. As popular culture journalist Sheryl Garratt notes, such messages relate to music journalism's history of male domination, since men tend to direct their comments toward other men (a comparable situation can describe Dave Attell's stand-up comedy). From this perspective, writers frequently ridicule female experience and the music that speaks to it.[4] Garratt concludes that, "on the whole, the word 'fans,' when applied to women is derogatory. It is always assumed that they are attracted to a person for the 'wrong' reason, that they are uncritical or stupid."[5] The conclusion in this case is that, without the kind of love they want or need in life, women listening to artists like Bolton try to find it in a song.

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[3] Spin Staff, "Hated in the Nation: The 30 Biggest Punching Bags in Pop History," *Spin Magazine*, March 22, 2012, https://www.spin.com/2012/03/hated-nation-30-biggest-punching-bags-pop-history/10/ [accessed April 14, 2018).
[4] Sheryl Garratt, "Teenage Dreams," in *On Record: Rock, Pop, and The Written Word* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 400.
[5] Ibid., 409.

This appeal is probably accurate for a portion of the fans of any song or artist – surely some women have listened to Michael Bolton because they felt comforted by his combination of emotional vulnerability and hairy-chested masculinity. But how a mass audience of listeners identify with a performer and his music tends to be more complicated than simply hearing a song and plugging it in to meet a clearly corresponding emotional need. This begs the question of whose needs, and which methods of meeting them, maintain integrity and which deserve ridicule. Clearly, the criticism says at least as much about the critics as it does about what they assess.

It bears noting that Bolton refrains from ridiculing his audience or aggressively trying to engage a different one. In the interview quote above, he defends the women who love his music and suggests that it is in fact men who lack maturity – they are unable to satisfy women, who know what they need and where to find it. Of course, this defense of his audience extends to his music, making his words somewhat self-serving.

Regardless of Bolton's motivations, his answer and the issues of taste and gender that inspired it recall a range of issues. These include the connections between genre and the promotional methods of the record industry and radio as well as some broader concerns within the American political climate of the late 1980s and 1990s. At the height of his fame, this artist conveyed simultaneously conservative and progressive messages through an assortment of musical and visual influences. These were marketed on relevant radio formats, in music videos, and through select side-projects and interviews, to project mainstream-friendly musical and political values of this period.

Coming out of the decade of "greed is good," responding to the shifting orientation and public perception of feminism, in the era of President George H.W. Bush and the Gulf War, Americans found themselves trying to reconcile the recent and not-so-recent past. In this chapter, Michael Bolton's rise to pop success from long-term rock obscurity illustrates individual development, as the music that brought him fame rings with the influence of the cultural and political context. Bolton's music of the late 1980s through the mid-1990s demonstrated changing musical taste and genre conventions, concerns of contemporary romance, and political expression in a popular music culture that often avoided provocative political statements. The material that follows will reveal Bolton's connections to past musical trends and various genres, the role of image in genre identification the common biases of music critics, and pop's more subtle engagement with politics.

Feminism and Popular Culture in the Late Twentieth Century

In the late 1980s and 1990s, the neoconservative ideology oriented toward states' rights on the one hand, and those seeking rights for marginalized groups and funding for social programs on the other, clashed in a period described by Colin Harrison as one in which image increasingly dominated the political arena.[6] In terms of gender relationships in the late 1980s, the accomplishments of second wave feminism continued to face challenges from conservatives, in terms of both policy and popular culture. Early 1980s policy victories for the new right included the rejection of the Equal Rights Amendment

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[6] Colin Harrison, "Introduction: The Intellectual Context," in *American Culture in the 1990s* (Edinburg: Edinburg University Press, 2010), 4-5.

in 1982 and the passage of the Hyde Amendment, which restricted federal funding for abortions.[7] Such defeats for feminists turned back progress on equality under the law and on access to safe and legal abortion, both of which had been important causes of the second wave.

In addition to other ideological factors of the new right (such as reinforcing traditional gender roles), the focus on the individual in the 1980s was also a key factor in the weakening of feminism as a movement, as many women tried to change their circumstances with their personal choices rather than participating collectively as feminists (or even openly identifying as one).[8] In spite of this, the movement continued and became more inclusive. This is suggested by the publication of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* in 1990 and journalist Susan Faludi's *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* in 1991. These and other texts, and what Dicker describes as "a response to the hostility to feminism represented by the outcome of the Clarence Thomas Supreme Court Confirmation hearings," helped support the emergence of the third wave in the early 1990s.[9] This wave confronted issues of sexual orientation, race, nationality, and other factors that had been avoided by some second wave feminist organizations.

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[7] Rory Dicker, *A History of U.S. Feminisms* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008), 100, 105.
[8] Rory Dicker, *History of U.S. Feminisms*, 17-18, 108; Susan Faludi, "The 'Trends' of Antifeminism," in *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1991), 109.
[9] Rory Dicker, *History of U.S. Feminisms*, 103, 116-117.

This diversity of perspectives reflected what different women wanted and needed from the movement, signifying the importance of intersectionality as a way of understanding the various challenges women faced.[10]

Popular culture reflected this change in the status and standpoints of feminism, while still offering the kinds of representations Susan Faludi describes in her book: depictions in the 1980s and early 1990s of women unable to handle the stress of a career, lonely single women, barren women, all supposedly suffering from the consequences of what some assumed was true equality.[11] By citing television and print journalism, government policies, and books, Faludi illustrates how "these so-called female crises had their origins not in the actual conditions of women's lives but rather in a closed system that starts and ends with the media, popular culture, and advertising."[12] It should be noted that such reporting has also supported the derision of women as popular music fans (described above) by labelling some adult women, namely those whose taste does not reflect that of rock critics, as suffering greatly from the lack of a traditional male presence in their lives.

Media in the late 1980s through the 1990s continued to reflect public perception of feminism and women's lives. Magazines, movies, television shows, and other formats hinted at the complicated perspectives and choices of women in this period. Of the 1990s, Harrison writes that this decade "was one of relative progress: a general improvement of living standards and liberties, but always within limits."[13] Below, the cover from the

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[10] Rory Dicker, *History of U.S. Feminisms*, 7.
[11] Susan Faludi, "Introduction: Blame it on Feminism," in *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*.
[12]Ibid., xv.
[13] Colin Harrison, "Introduction: The Intellectual Context," 13.

September 1989 issue of *Cosmopolitan*, a popular women's magazine with a large readership in the 18-34 demographic,[14] visually juxtaposes this progress within limits with its attempt to reflect the perspectives held by various members of the magazine's readership.

Figure 2.1: *Cosmopolitan* Cover, September 1989[15]

The headlines for articles contained in this issue include two conflicting messages: "Taking Charge of Your Life Without Waiting for a Man" and "How You Can Tell if He's in a Marrying Mood."

[14] Claire Cozens, "Cosmopolitan," *The Guardian US Edition*, December 17, 2000, https: //www.theguardian.com/media/2000/dec/18/mondaymediasection1 [accessed May 25, 2018].
[15] Bonnie Fuller, ed. Magazine Cover. *Cosmopolitan*. September 1989; All discussion of this cover references this source.

Such articles suggest the uncertainty some women felt in shaping their careers and relationships, and the ambivalence with which these topics could be addressed by the media – in this case, on a single magazine cover adorned by the seductively posed Cindy Crawford.

Continuing trends of the 1980s, some 1990s movies offered messages similar to that of the 1987 movie *Fatal Attraction*, which features an intelligent, career-focused woman who becomes emotionally unstable, as historian Andrew Hartman notes, because she is desperate to have a child with her married lover (played by Michael Douglas).[16] Douglas also starred in two other films which ultimately highlight the dark motives of liberated women: *Basic Instinct* in 1992 and *Disclosure* in 1994. On the other hand, the film *9 to 5* (1980) approaches the issues of women's roles in the workforce and workplace sexual harassment (albeit comedically). That the women in this movie worked to improve working conditions relates to the theme of female friendship in Thelma *and Louise* (1991).

On television, programs such as *Murphy Brown*, airing from 1988-1998,[17] provided images of a strong, intelligent, independent career-focused woman. Criticism of this show for presenting the title character having a child out of wedlock by then-Vice President Dan Quayle during the 1992 presidential campaign illustrates conservatives' family values ideology.

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[16] Andrew Hartman, "The Trouble with Gender," in *War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 138.
[17] Graham Thompson, "Chronology of 1980s American Culture," in *American Culture in the 1980s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), xix.

While Quayle's statements were far from unanimously supported, many conservatives voiced their agreement, highlighting two diverging perspectives on the modern family.[18]

In the popular music field, the riot grrrl punk movement and female singer-songwriters asserted feminist viewpoints through musical style, lyrical content, and stage presence. Heavy metal, rap, and more edgy pop (that of Prince in particular) inspired the establishment of the Parents' Music Resource Center in 1985. This group, formed initially by Tipper Gore (then-wife of then-senator Al Gore) and other wives of politicians, successfully lobbied to provide warning labels and limit the record buying audience for offending groups.[19]

The artists that pushed obvious boundaries and inspired controversy contrasted with larger-than-life pop vocalists such as Céline Dion, Mariah Carey, Whitney Houston, and, of course, Michael Bolton. These singers' public images and musical content hint at a negotiation between progressive and conservative approaches, as traditional lyrical and musical elements contrast with depictions of sensitive men and strong women. Many top performing singles and albums explored the familiar topic of romantic relationships from a modern perspective while utilizing accessible vocabulary, contemporary pop timbres, and succinct yet compelling form. Performers of this music often convey exaggerations of conventional gender roles and power imbalances within the context of their promotional videos. However, at times they transcend these boundaries by more broadly interpreting male and female gender roles – as described above, sensitive men and strong women. In addition, the songs that male and female artists perform offer powerful

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[18] Andrew Hartman, "The Sacred and the Profane," in *War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars*, 198-199.
[19] Ibid., 175.

expressions of individual experience while testing the boundaries of emotional and intellectual independence. Romantically oriented lyrically yet often physically and vocally stereotypically male, Michael Bolton rose to fame in the late 1980s by combining elements of a conservative performance of masculinity with a sense of vulnerability associated more with female performers.

Transitions: When Rock Meets Pop

Bolton's role as a pop star with worldwide recognition began in 1987, when he was thirty-four years old. His cover of Otis Redding's "(Sittin' On) the Dock of the Bay," which spent seventeen weeks on *Billboard*'s Hot 100 chart, peaking at number eleven,[20] is the result of embracing a new role as a mainstream artist. He notes that this cover "was getting airplay on rock stations, on Adult Contemporary stations, on Top 40 stations, and it started out strong on the R&B stations."[21] Figure 2.2 below demonstrates the reach and longevity of this song by providing comparative performance on the Mainstream Rock, Hot 100, Adult Contemporary, and Hot R&B and Hip-Hop Songs charts.

[20] "Michal Bolton Chart History: (Sittin' On) the Dock of the Bay," *Billboard: the International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, https://www. .billboard.om/music/michael-bolton/chart-history/hot-100/song/331588 [accessed April 15, 2018].
[21] Michael Bolton, *The Soul of it All: My Music, My Life* (New York: Center Street, 2012), 183.

Figure 2.2: Michael Bolton, "(Sittin' On) the Dock of the Bay" Chart Performance[22]

	Dec '87	Jan'88	Feb'88	March '88	April'88	May'88
Mainstream Rock	12/19 | 42/50		2/6 | 12/50	3/14 | 41/50		
Hot 100		1/23 | 72/100		3/26 | 11/100		5/14 | 100/100
Adult Contemporary		1/30 | 40/50		3/19 | 19/50	4/23 | 43/50	
Hot R&B & Hip-Hop Songs				3/22 | 82/100	4/16 | 58/100 4/30 | 91/100	

Though far from Bolton's biggest success, "(Sittin' On) the Dock of the Bay" charted from December of 1987 to May of 1988, with placement on three of these charts simultaneously from January 23rd of 1988 to April 23rd of that year. Thus, this visual highlights the overlapping chart performance (and radio airplay) that results from crossover. This sort of widespread success continued, heralding an era in which much of the music Bolton released, and his public image, reached a large audience, and this success could be represented to some extent by chart placement in the manner demonstrated here.

Less well known is the previous incarnation of his career, in which he struggled to make a living since signing his first recording contract at age fifteen.[23] Bolton writes in his autobiography *The Soul of it All: My Music, My Life* that as he was dropped from one label after another, he continued recording but also built a reputation composing advertising tunes as well as hit songs for artists such as Cher, Barbara Streisand, and Laura Branigan. Songs such as "How am I Supposed to Live Without You" achieved

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[22] "Michael Bolton, '(Sittin' On)' the Dock of the Bay Chart Performance," *Billboard: the International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, https://www.billboard.com/charts/search?artist=bolton&title=%28sittin%27%29+dock+bay&label=&chart_name=&chart_date= [accessed November 25, 2019].

[23] Ibid., 62-63.

success as pop ballads, with this composition delivering Branigan a number twenty-five peak in 1985 on the Adult Contemporary chart.[24] Eventually, Bolton started recording more of these ballads himself and allowing this material and its corresponding image and audience to shape his career. Rather than a rock artist who wrote pop songs for singers, he became perceived as a pop singer himself.

In the period of mass popularity that followed, his image and music frequently referenced his roots in past musical, sartorial, and social trends, even though many overt associations of this material belonged to the contemporary pop milieu. By adapting some conventions of mainstream rock and R&B to those of contemporary mainstream pop, Bolton's music and image revealed the relationship between these genres, and how differences between them were marketed to the different segments of the public. Ultimately, Bolton's rise to success in the late 1980s illustrates how he made some explicit changes to compete more effectively in the mainstream, even as certain elements of his long-term aesthetic approach came to complement his commercially successful music of this period.

Citing his name change – from Bolotin to Bolton – as an important signal of coming adjustments, Bolton cites the name he was born with as an element that kept him from achieving "brand clarity." "I wanted results, so I changed my approach and reaped the benefits."[25] These benefits (selling millions of records and building a devoted fan base) are well known. The less commonly recognized changes in his musical style and image are explored at length below, but Bolton has explained the deciding factor that

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[24] Ibid., 147-149, 155.
[25] Ibid., 123.

compelled him to make these changes in both his autobiography and in multiple interviews: Al Teller, then-head of CBS records, encouraged the overall stylistic shift first heard on the 1987 album *The Hunger*. He suggested that Bolton release the songs he wrote for others – many of them his now-trademark romantic ballads – on his own albums, and to adopt a more pop-oriented production aesthetic that moderated the presence of electric guitars and drums on his albums. He states, "I'd done these more soulful songs before, but they were usually buried among harder rock songs and didn't get much attention.[26]

That effect is clear considering that Michael Bolton's earlier work with the group Blackjack and as a solo artist has been recognized for high energy, mid-tempo songs rather than the "soulful songs." Blackjack's singles reflected the conventions of late 1970s and early 1980s mainstream rock, beginning with the group's complement of electric guitars and bass, drum set, and vocals. "Without Your Love," from Blackjack's 1979 eponymous first release, addresses the typical generic romantic interest with romantic lyrics and a highly energetic performance. The song begins with a melodic guitar riff that helps to introduce the boogie-woogie inspired syncopated drum set figures, both of which are consistently played through most of the song. It also helps create interest in the instrumental background in the intro and choruses, since most of the backing is nondescript, to make room for Bolton's soul-influenced vocals. For the most part, verses feature guitars alternating between two chords and drum set playing a consistent syncopated rhythm. On top and in front of this in the stereo field, Bolton's occasionally melismatic, but more frequently syllabic, elaborations provide a passionate

[26] Ibid., 177-179.

performance of unexceptional lyrics peppered with clichés. From the song's beginning to its end, this vocal performance digs deep to exhibit the intense feelings of a "man's man who's bad with words but knows what love is." (See Table 2.1 for the formal outline and lyrics of "Without Your Love.")

Table 2.1: Blackjack, "Without Your Love" 1979[27]

0-:18 8 mm.	Intro.	Guitar figure on beat 3 Begins anacrusis pattern 2-chord alternation	
:19-:46 8 mm. x 2	Verse 1	I don't know what it is you got But it's plain enough to see Whatever it is sure Means a lot to me, oh yeah // I try to turn and walk away But it does no good, I've gotta stay This feeling that you give Won't let me be, oh no	**A**
:47-:54 5 mm.	Pre-chorus 1	You really got a hold on me, yeah, yeah	
:55-1:13 10 mm. (8 mm. + 2 mm. extension)	Chorus 1	I can't live without your love I can't live without your love I can't live without your love I don't know what it is you give But I can't live without your love	
1:14-1:42 8 mm. x 2	Verse 2	Everywhere I see your face Even though my foolish pride I must admit I've got No place to hide, oh no // You're even living in my mind It's getting to the point where I find A day without you is like A long lonely ride, yeah, yeah	**A**

[27] Michael Bolotin, "Without Your Love," 1979, track six on *Blackjack*, Polydor, 1979, compact disc. All discussion of this song references this recording; "Michael Bolton – Without Your Love Lyrics," AZLyrics.az., https://lyrics.az/Michael bolton/blackjack/without-your-love.html [accessed April 28, 2018].

Table 2.1: Blackjack, "Without Your Love" 1979, Continued

1:43-1:50 5 mm.	Pre-chorus 2	You really got a hold on me, yeah, yeah
1:51-2:08 10 mm. (8 mm. + 1 m. extension and 1 m. transition/modulation)	Chorus 2	I can't live without your love I can't live without your love I can't live without your love I don't know what it is you give But I can't live without your love
2:09-2:28 11 mm.	Bridge	Way that you're coming to me **B** Amazes me to no end I turn my back on your love And people tell me now That I look like I done lost my only friend, yeah
2:29-2:42 8 mm.	Guitar Solo	
2:43-2:53 8 mm.	Partial Chorus	I don't know what it is you give but I can't live **A^1** I don't know what it is you give but I can't live I don't know what it is you give Can't live without your love
2:54-3:07 8 mm. (mm. 5-8 build-up)	Instrumental Break	
3:08-3:45	Chorus 4/Fade-out	I can't live without your love (x 8)

This song reflects the conventions of mainstream rock of the period – or at least, rock with any hope of getting radio play on late 1970s Album Oriented Rock (AOR) stations. This format replaced that of free form, which Kim Simpson states "was dying a

slow death by the mid-‘70s.”[28] These stations increasingly relied on research, rather than instinct or personal taste, to create playlists that would attract more listeners and bring in more advertising revenue. These playlists differed from those of free-form stations in that they were tighter, with fewer songs that were often officially released singles of a shorter length. This supported the popularity of groups such as Styx and REO Speedwagon, Simpson notes, while discouraging rock airplay of longer tracks, as well as black and women artists.[29] As an example, Eric Weisbard describes a successful Cleveland, OH radio station that “played from a constrained list of arena-rock anthems.”[30] Along with increasing pressure in the 1970s on albums to sell several million units, radio’s preference for shorter songs that appealed to more listeners led to the production of more material that met this demand (as opposed to longer and more complex tracks).

John Covach and Andrew Flory note that “groups in the last half of the decade compressed large-scale formal designs commonly associated with progressive music into the length of a radio-friendly single.”[31] This includes varied compound AABA designs, which Covach notes became more common in the 1970s.[32] He describes compound AABA form as one in which “the features of a contrasting verse-chorus form are

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[28] Kim Simpson “All the Young Dudes: Progressive Rock Formats and the Taming of the American Male,” in *Early ‘70s Radio: The American Format Revolution* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 120.
[29] Ibid., 120-122.
[30] Eric Weisbard, “The Wrath of the Buzzard: WMMS and Rock,” in *Top 40 Democracy: The Rival Mainstreams of American Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 208.
[31] John Covach and Andrew Flory, “Mainstream Rock, Punk, and New Wave,” in *What’s that Sound: An Introduction to Rock and its History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2015) 380.
[32] John Covach, “Form in Rock Music: A Primer,” in *Engaging Music: Essays in Musical Analysis*, ed. Deborah Stein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 75

combined with those of an AABA."[33] In "Without Your Love," drum set and bass play similar rhythmic material in the verses, pre-chorus, and chorus, but the harmonic patterns and the overall instrumental accompaniment change in these sections, making the closer-level form contrasting verse-chorus with pre-choruses. However, by grouping these sections together, it is possible to interpret the large-scale form as compound AABA that has been modified to include the bridge and guitar solo in the B section and the partial chorus, instrumental break, and chorus and fade-out as an A^1 section. In particular, grouping the last smaller sections of the song together as A^1, or a sort of partial reprise, provides a more coherent understanding of these segments than assuming that they are additions to a contrasting verse-chorus design.

Along with compound AABA form, this song features several other elements common among mainstream rock songs of the late 1970s and early 1980s. These include lyrics with a generally romantic theme (rather than philosophical or political) and an easily reiterated chorus with a lot of melodic and lyrical repetition (in this case the entire band sings this section, encouraging participation). The driving but simple instrumental backing, brief, mostly melodic guitar solo, and Bolton's distinctive vocal timbre and emphatic delivery add to what makes this song more comparable to work released by radio-friendly Boston, Journey, and revamped Yes than to material (such as the earlier work of Yes) that would have been too long and complex for many AOR stations of this period to play.

[33] Ibid., 74.

After the breakup of Blackjack in 1980, Bolton moved on as a solo artist. "Fool's Game," released as a single in 1983, maintains his position within hard rock by utilizing vocals that maintain similar volume and vocal timbre employed during his Blackjack years, the same basic rock group formation of lead and rhythm guitars, bass, and drum set. This song does include synthesizers as part of the ensemble, echoing the work of rock groups such as Foreigner, who often added electronic instruments to the hard rock ensemble in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Table 2.2: Michael Bolton, "Fool's Game" 1983[34]

0 – -:22 4 mm. x 2	Introduction	Synthesizers, guitar, drum set
:23 – :55 8 mm. x 2	Verse 1	When I met you, oh You know at first you had me so confused We used to lay awake at night Strugglin' with the feelings I so long refused When I surrendered my love I saw you turn your heart too cold to ice, darlin' I put my heart on the line for you Oh I did, I put my heart on the line, yeah
:56 – 1:05 5 mm.	Pre-Chorus 1	First you take me to the highest ground Then you keep me hanging like some foolish clown
1:06 – 1:27 6 mm. x 2	Chorus 1	It's such a fools' game, yeah It's such a fools' game I keep playing such a fools' game, yeah I keep on playin', keep on playin' this fools' game Yeah, this fools' game
1:28 – 1:45 8 mm.	Verse 2	I can't take another sleepless night Tryin' to light the fire down inside of you I don't mind, I had to swallow my pride To get us feeling like you never knew You never knew

[34] Michael Bolton, Craig Brooks, and Mark Mangold, "Fool's Game," 1983, track one on *Michael Bolton*, Columbia, compact disc. All discussion of this song references this recording; "Michael Bolton – "Fool's Game Lyrics," AllTheLyrics.com, http://www.allthelyrics.com/lyrics/michael_bolton/fools_game-lyrics-53251.html [accessed June 14, 2018].

Table 2.2: Michael Bolton, "Fool's Game" 1983, Continued

1:46 – 1:55 5 mm.	Pre-Chorus 2	Got the secret in the palm of your hands Will you keep it woman, will you break this man
1:56 – 2:11 8 mm.	Chorus 2	It's such a fools' game, yeah It's such a fools' game I keep playing such a fools' game, forever I keep on playin', keep on playin' this fools' game Yeah, this fools' game
2:12 – 2:27 8 mm.	Guitar Solo	
2:28 – 2:35 4 mm.	Bridge	Girl I know, you're playin' full time But it may be too late, when you make up your mind
2:36 – 2:51 8 mm.		
2:52 – 3:52 8 mm. x 3, plus fade-out	Introduction Reprise	
	Chorus 3 and Fade-Out	Yeah You keep me in this fools' game Forever in your fools' game You got me caught up in this fools' game Such a fools' game,.. How long... fools' game How long ..will you keep me in this smooth game Forever such a smooth game...Yeah Fools game There's no way to win As long as I'm in- to such a fools game You waste my precious time I put my heart on the line You better make up your mind Girl, don't try to keep me no more You're tryin' to keep me in your…

This song (see Table 2.2 above) more effectively creates interest from one section to the next than "Without Your Love" because of the variety of volume, timbre, and texture in both the vocal and instrumental performances. For instance, the synth-dominated instrumentation of the introduction builds to verse 1, which features more prominent distorted guitars, and this builds through the pre-chorus to the chorus. These sections are divided into two sub-sections that change, and sometimes add, instrumental layers to the texture as rhythmic pacing signals the progression to a new, more emotive

statement. The repeat of the last eight measures of the introductory material after the bridge (instead of moving directly to the chorus) is relatively unpredictable, and it allows the song to build to the third chorus, which sounds fresh again after four contrasting sections and a second introduction. Bolton's vocals reinforce this variability by building from a more pensive tone in a lower range to passionate exclamations at the peak of the melodic ascent. It is important to note, however, that Bolton's lower, more baritone-oriented vocal range and the generally rough timbre of his vocals set him apart from other, more successful rock singers of the mid-1970s through early 1980s. For example, Steve Perry of Journey and Geddy Lee of Rush both sing more in the tenor range and with much greater timbral clarity.

The effective formal structure and expressive vocals support lyrics that offer little in the way of novelty but would be easy for a listener to follow. Since "Fool's Game" addresses the cruel game of love, the subject matter replicates what popular music has utilized as subject matter since before the advent of rock and roll. This includes the figure of the "dangerous woman" that has played a prominent role in the culture and lyrics of both hard rock and heavy metal. Robert Walser writes that "one of the most important items on the heavy metal agenda has long been to deal with what patriarchy perennially perceives as the 'threat' of women."[35] The music and promotional materials demonstrate this by rearticulating masculine dominance and control, sometimes through lyrics and images that criticize or exclude women. This includes featuring what Walser describes as

[35] Robert Walser, "Forging Masculinity: Heavy Metal Sounds and Images of Gender," in *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1993), 111.

"one of the more successful representations of women in metal…the femme fatale."[36] Of course the figure of the femme fatale predates the advent of heavy metal, and even rock 'n' roll. In terms of its use in heavy metal, Walser describes this portrayal of women as facilitating "narratives of male victimization" and presenting women "as essentially mysterious and dangerous."[37] The second stanza of the first verse section of "Fool's Game" (included above) illustrates how this familiar theme is explored in this song.

Bolton's role as a victim of the actions of a romantic partner also incorporates the more general love-as-irrational-game theme as well as the lover-as-cruel-player archetype. Numerous rock songs, such as Foreigner's "Head Games" and Bon Jovi's "You Give Love a Bad Name,"[38] have explored this material as well. Even though the popularity of these songs suggests a broad identification with the musical style and the struggles described in the lyrics, that the subject of these songs is misbehaving women adds elements of gender politics to the text. These women can apparently "love 'em and leave 'em," which suggests that they possess a great deal of freedom in choosing romantic partners, and may be comfortable without one, or at least without considering marriage in the immediate future. This sort of mobility could be credited to some degree to changes brought by second-wave feminism, although songs about unmoored women predate "women's liberation." (An example of this is "Runaround Sue" from 1961.[39]) Such changes to the norms of interpersonal relationships, which were intensified by the

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[36] Ibid., 118.
[37] Ibid., 118.
[38] Lou Gramm and Mick Jones, "Head Games," track six on *Head Games*, Atlantic, 1979; Jon Bon Jovi, Richie Sambora, and Desmond Child. "You Give Love a Bad Name," track two on *Slippery When Wet*, Mercury/Vertigo, 1986.
[39] Dion DiMucci and Ernie Maresca, "Runaround Sue," Laurie, 1961.

more widespread acceptance and introduction of the birth control pill in the 1950s and 1960s, changed the balance of power, leading some men to think that they were victims of empowered women. Walser describes the manifestation of this in metal as one of "a variety of compensatory experiences and opportunities for bearing or resolving the contradictions of masculinity as they have been constructed by societies that are aligned by patriarchy, capitalism, and mass mediation."[40]

Walser's text ostensibly discusses the specific genre heavy metal, but the line between metal and hard rock tends to fluctuate depending on one's perspective. Long standing debate among fans, critics, and scholars about which music can be described as "metal," continues with some musical features figuring more prominently for some. Walser notes "loudness and intensity," the power chord, and instrumental virtuosity as some of metal's defining musical characteristics, while gothic or occult associations influence the often fantastical lyrical and visual parameters of this genre.[41] However, both rock and metal have been dominated by male artists and have been ostensibly male-oriented in terms of message and target audience, even if in metal these features have been more pronounced.

Noting a historical precedent suggested by Walser, Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie wrote earlier, in 1978, that "…in terms of control and production, rock is a male form."[42] That women often have embraced this music as well highlights the

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[40] Ibid., 110.
[41] Robert Walser, "Metallurgies: Genre, History, and the Construction of Heavy Metal." in *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*, 2-4.
[42] Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie, Rock and Sexuality," in *On Record: Rock, Pop, and The*
Written Word (New York: Routledge, 1990), 373.

complicated manner in which audiences identify with culture by embracing a variety of experiences, including "alienation, fear, and empowerment."[43] Listening to "Fool's Game," some women may feel a sense of power in identifying with the song's "femme fatale," while others might relate more readily to the victim of a manipulative lover. This demonstrates what Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh describe as a more "transformative" process of identification.[44]

Alternatively, Kristin J. Leib describes this as "multivocality," writing that "the way in which a brand (or a pop star) is presented to us in all its forms – through songs, videos magazines, clothes, or fragrances – frames the way in which we see and experience it. But our own experiences and issues also provide a frame for how we make sense of such presentation."[45] This explains how music that has ostensibly been oriented specifically toward the fears and desires of men has appealed to many women as well, since these listeners used the source material to meet their needs. It also supports the contention of Born and Hesmondhalgh that "identification is always imaginary"[46] because music "allows a play with, a performance of, and an imaginary exploration of

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[43] Ibid., 118.

[44] Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh, "Music and the Representation of Sociocultural Identities" and "Techniques of the Musical Imaginary," in *Western Music and its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music*, ed. Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 36.

[45] Kristin J. Lieb, *Gender, Branding, and the Popular Music Industry* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 25.

[46] Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh, "Music and the Representation of Sociocultural Identities" and "Techniques of the Musical Imaginary," in *Western Music and its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music*, 36.

identities."[47] This applies both to identities like those of the listener as well as contrasting ones.

Multivocality plays a significant role in popular music, considering the extent to which this realm has been dominated by men in terms of production, performance, marketing, and critical evaluation and the continued support of female listeners. In part, this may reflect what Barbara O'Dair describes as a general assumption that a (white) male point of view is actually "universal." For the most part, men have made music that reflects a male worldview in a society in which men have typically occupied positions of leadership (cultural and otherwise), but many outside this group identifies with this music.[48] The dominant cultural position of men contributes to the sense of aesthetic condescension discussed previously (and later) in this chapter. The result is that some involved in the music industry view music that appeals to women as reaching a specialized, and less sophisticated, audience, and male-centered music communicates universal messages, to an audience with higher standards. Supporting this position, O'Dair writes that it is men who seem to represent American experience and transcend their gender, while "women are…relegated to a subset of 'American.' The female experience is rarefied, extraordinary, and ironically, less meaningful."[49] To reiterate Lieb's observations on multivocality, larger social forces, as well as personal experience, shape how a musician (or a musical genre) is received by individuals. In this case, gender

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[47] Ibid., 31.
[48] Barbara O'Dair, "Across the Great Divide: Rock Critics, Rock Women," in *Stars Don't Stand Still in the Sky: Music and Myth*. Ed. Karen Kelly and Evelyn McDonnell (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 248.
[49] Ibid., 248.

constructions seem inextricably linked to popular music production, dissemination, and reception.

Though a more female-centered association lay waiting in his future, Bolton maintained his position as an artist producing male-oriented material with his transition to heavy metal by 1985, as demonstrated in the single "Everybody's Crazy" from the album *Everybody's Crazy*.[50] This single's form is similar to that of "Without Your Love," with an overall compound AABA structure, high-octane vocals throughout, and a memorable chorus. However, "Everybody's Crazy" utilizes the rougher vocal and instrumental timbres and the brief but dramatic display of electric guitar virtuosity characteristic of glam metal. (Though Bolton refers to this music as "arena rock" in his autobiography and describes himself as a rock artist, probably because he perceived himself more as exploring an edgier style than as contributing to the glam subgenre.[51])

As discussed previously, songs like this one encouraged radio play on AOR (and hard rock) stations in the 1980s, in part because of their stylistic features. In this regard, this song fared somewhat well, spending four weeks on the mainstream rock chart and peaking at number 38.[52] Brevity, easy-to-grasp (and relatively benign) lyrics and form, and dramatic performing conventions made this music appealing to radio programmers, who wanted to offer hard rock and metal selections while maintaining listener loyalty and the advertising schedule. This appeal to rock radio and its audiences is reflected in

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[50] Michael Bolton, "Everybody's Crazy," 1985 track two on *Everybody's Crazy*, Columbia, compact disc. All discussion of this song references this recording and liner notes.
[51] Michael Bolton, *The Soul of it All: My Music, My Life*, 174.
[52] "Michael Bolton Chart History," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, https://www.billboard.com/music/michael-bolton [accessed April 17, 2018].

mainstream rock charts from the period, which list both "Fool's Game" and "Everybody's Crazy" only in this category.[53] Both songs discouraged mainstream pop and Adult Contemporary popularity, primarily because of their sonic qualities. This proved especially true for "Everybody's Crazy," but the lyrics, provided below, differ from many 1980s metal songs, since they have been written from the perspective of an elder offering guidance to a younger person. Rather than the more overtly sexualized subject matter and presentation one expects from this subgenre, Bolton may have thought of his own daughters when composing and performing this song – or at least, of listeners who might be offended by typical metal lyrics.

Michael Bolton, "Everybody's Crazy" Lyrics

> Everybody's crazy, everybody's crazy
> Everybody's crazy
>
> Sweet little girl, she's the high school queen
> She lives tonight, in every school boy's dream
> Oh, but nobody knows how she's cryin'
> She's just a child goin' on seventeen
> She gets so confused by her friends and their scenes
> They don't mean what they say
> They don't say what they mean
> She reads the signs, reads between the lines
> But it makes no difference
> There's no reason or rhyme
>
> Just hold on girl, as long as you can
> In time you'll learn what you don't understand
> It's the human condition, it's the nature of man
>
> Everybody's crazy, everybody's crazy
> Everybody's crazy, everybody's crazy
>
> This city boy, he don't want no control
> He just wanna party and play his rock 'n' roll

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[53] Ibid.

But here they come to turn the pressure on
Say'n son, your partyin' days are gone
The time has come now to be a man
Find your place in the world, gotta take what you can
You've got no ambition, take a look at yourself
When ya gonna straighten out, be like everybody else

The boy said listen dad, you're bringin' me down
I am who I am, I've had a good look around
There's one thing in the world I can tell you I've found

Everybody's crazy, everybody's crazy
Everybody's crazy, everybody's crazy

It ain't no wonder things are so out of hand
Sooner or later, ya come to understand
The human condition, it's the nature of man

Everybody's crazy, everybody's crazy
Everybody's crazy, everybody's crazy

At this point, Michael Bolton was in his early thirties and had been married for a decade. In addition to defining himself professionally as a rock artist, he was also a father doing whatever he could to support a family. That life experience is both musically and lyrically obvious from some selections on the album *Everybody's Crazy*, even if the musical elements of the title track suggest otherwise.[54] In fact, examining the content of his albums up to this point reveals that Bolton did indeed consistently release at least one slower, romantically themed track on each of his albums, including his first release *Michael Bolotin* from 1975. As noted previously, the singles released from these albums highlighted rock or heavy metal influences, leading those less thoroughly familiar with Bolton's body of work to describe his eventual change in style as a rather drastic one from rock to pop, or from a male-centered aesthetic and target audience to a women-

[54] It is important to emphasize at this point that Michael Bolton played a songwriting role in many of the songs he recorded.

centered orientation. Pat Pemberton wrote in *Rolling Stone* that Bolton changed styles to achieve success, "and soon his mullet was mesmerizing women everywhere."[55] This kind of reference hints at a lack of in-depth examination of musical output and an ignorance of this varied rock and metal audience. Instead, Pemberton relies on a common remark about women passively spellbound by Bolton's physical appearance.

Closer scrutiny of Bolton's albums yields findings that contradict such conclusions about a straightforward stylistic change. For instance, *Everybody's Crazy*, the album with the glam metal single, also includes songs like "Call My Name," a blues-influenced ballad with lyrics that offer unconditional support for a loved one. Electronic keyboard, synthesizer, and simple percussion provide a relatively thin texture during verses, with the addition of electric guitar playing longer note values and a more active drum set for choruses. Virtuosic saxophone solos in the middle of the song and the outro suggest a sense of emotional investment while pulling the timbral profile of the song further away from the guitar-dominated one associated with rock. Fitting most of Bolton's other work, even tracks with faster tempi and more prominent rock instrumentation on this album directly address relationship issues from the first-person perspective of a man communicating with his romantic interest.[56]

This sort of lyrical continuity, combined with the diversity of style incorporated on his albums, makes explaining Bolton's sudden mass popularity with a mainstream pop

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[55] Pat Pemberton, "10 Artists Who Switched Genres: The Byrds Go Country, Katy Perry Ditches Christian Music, and More," *Rolling Stone*, May 21, 2013, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/10-artists-who-switched-genres-20130521 [accessed April 16, 2018].
[56] Michael Bolton and Mark Radice, "Call My Name," track four on *Everybody's Crazy*, 1985, compact disc.

audience less straightforward. In short, his overall style did not change as dramatically as a comparison between singles like "Everybody's Crazy" and "How am I Supposed to Live Without You" would indicate. The important fact is that, even though he had incorporated various musical styles into his work, moving from blues-rock, to hard rock, to mainstream metal, he had been reticent to abandon his overall rock aesthetic, and his identification as a rock artist, until Al Teller firmly suggested this path for him.

It is important to note that, in addition to Teller's influence, Bolton also indicated that his desire for success was not his only motivation for a change in style. He notes in his autobiography that he had enjoyed recording demos for his own compositions, that "singing the songs I'd just written had become so gratifying that I'd be chomping at the bit to step up to the microphone."[57] The increased commercial success that began in 1987 (just two years after *Everybody's Crazy* was released to indifferent reception) was initiated when Bolton released his cover of Otis Redding's "(Sittin' On) the Dock of the Bay" as the second single for the album that Teller wanted Bolton to make: *The Hunger*.[58] This marks the point at which he had committed to consistently recording and, perhaps most significantly, to promoting the material and public image that would identify him as a pop and melodic rock artist.

Additionally, in interviews with Charlie Rose and radio personality Valerie Smaldone, he makes it very clear that he derived satisfaction from communicating with a supportive audience. In the Rose interview, from 1995, Bolton responds to a question about having a passionate, mostly female, audience at concerts by stating "I love the fact

[57] Michael Bolton, *The Soul of it All: My Music, My Life*, 177-178.
[58] Ibid., 181-182.

that I have a very warm, loud, appreciative, affectionate audience."[59] Describing his fan mail, he notes that most of it describes how his music has resonated with his listeners: "…how important this song was to me at this point in my life." Noting the change in stylistic emphasis, Bolton told Smaldone that not only was he willing to engage more with pop material, but, reiterating his statement from the paragraph above, he enjoyed recording that music and had become comfortable being identified with it. "I love doing this, I love writing that music. I was writing R&B, I was writing country, writing pop."[60] Considering how flexibly he had explored musical styles in the past, and this enthusiasm for pop and melodic rock, this statement is believable from both a standpoint of artistic growth and of a broader musical palette than he had previously worked to highlight as a performer.

Overall, Bolton included a diversity of material on *The Hunger*, adapting to changing musical trends as he had previously. Rock elements common in the early and mid-1980s dominate on some tracks, highlighting a desire to maintain involvement in that musical style. At the same time, the album also includes songs with potential appeal for the mainstream pop audience of this period with material similar to that which appealed to that group.[61]

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[59] Michael Bolton, interview by Charlie Rose, *Charlie Rose*, December 12, 1995, https://charlierose.com/videos/6184. [accessed April 17, 2018].
[60] Michael Bolton, interviewed by Valerie Smaldone, *Music Legends*, September 9, 2013.https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=huxX6YRR5Ng&t=9s. [accessed April 17, 2018].
[61] Michael Bolton, *The Hunger*, 1987, Columbia, compact disc. All discussion of this album references this compact disc and album liner notes.

In the former (rock) category, "You're All that I Need" incorporates a heavy, syncopated chordal piano part with a rock backing, and rhythmically contrasting formal sections, recalling the band Journey's song "Don't Stop Believing." This is not surprising considering that Jonathan Cain of Journey played keys on this record, and both Cain and Neal Schon produced.[62] In the latter, pop-oriented group, the mixture of distorted electric guitars, synthesizers, and thinner texture in "Gina" bear similarities to John Waite's "Missing You (I Ain't Missing You at All"). In addition, "That's What Love is All About" bears similarity to many 1980s pop ballads, with a slow tempo and synthesizer-dominated instrumentation. Bolton's vocals dominate the texture, as a highly strophic and simple melody delivers lyrics that unmistakably define true love as perseverance in a long-term relationship.

Adding variety to the rock/pop duality, "Wait on Love" and the Otis Redding cover provide references to R&B and soul.[63] The former song includes some electric guitar backing and flourishes, but keyboards and horns dominate the instrumental texture. Bolton's vocals through most of the verse material are more moderate in terms of volume and timbre. This had the effect, combined with the 12/8 meter and tempo of around 109 beats per minute, of creating a more relaxed ambiance. Bolton's Redding cover also includes a large horn section, as well as an electric-blues guitar solo and vocal expression ranging from soft reflection to heightened striving. These two tracks were some of the biggest hits on this album, as well as "That's What Love is All About" and "Walk Away," all of which focus either on general personal reflections or on romantic

[62] Ibid., 179-180.
[63] Otis Redding and Steve Cropper, "(Sittin' On) The Dock of the Bay," track three on *The Hunger*, 1987, Columbia, compact disc.

relationships. Gone is the "femme fatale." This dynamic has been replaced by a more nuanced description of interpersonal struggles and triumphs.

Moving on from the more transitional *The Hunger*, the album *Soul Provider*, released in 1989, is comprised almost entirely of pop-radio friendly songs about romantic relationships, except for the "Georgia on My Mind" cover.[64] Many of these songs are performed in slower tempi and feature dominant synthesizers instead of electric guitar. "How am I Supposed to Live Without You" and "When I'm Back on my Feet Again" follow the ballad archetype and charted well on both pop and AC charts.[65] "You Wouldn't Know Love" and "How Can We be Lovers" both maintain connections to Bolton's history as a rock musician, allowing one to connect the stylistic range of this album more clearly to past collections. In fact, some elements of the latter song (and its video, analyzed later) demonstrate rock's ongoing influence on Bolton, even as he appealed to a mainstream pop audience. For clarity, the basic form of this song appears in Table 2.3 below.

Table 2.3: Michael Bolton, "How Can We Be Lovers" 1989[66]

0 – :32 4mm. x 8 mm. x 2 mm.	Introduction	How can we be lovers if we can't be friends How can we start over when the fighting never ends, baby How can we make love if we can't make amends How can we be lovers if we can't be, can't be friends	**EbM**
:33 – :46 6 mm.	Verse 1	Look at us now, look at us baby Still trying to work it out, never get it right We must be fools, we must be crazy	**am**

[64] Michael Bolton, *Soul Provider*, 1989, Columbia, compact disc. All discussion of this song references this recording and album liner notes.
[65] "Michael Bolton Chart History," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*.
[66] Michael Bolton, Diane Warren, Desmond Child, "How Can We Be Lovers," 1989, track give on *Soul Provider*, Columbia, compact disc. All discussion of this song references this recording and album liner notes.

Table 2.3: Michael Bolton, “How Can We Be Lovers” 1989, Continued

:47 – :56 4 mm.	Pre-Chorus 1	Woah, whoah, when there’s no communication Whoah, woah, it's a no-win situation **CM**
:57 – 1:19 8 x 2 mm.	Chorus 1	How can we be lovers if we can't be friends **EbM** How can we start over when the fighting never ends, baby How can we make love if we can't make amends, tell me How can we be lovers if we can't be, can't be friends
1:20 – 1:33 6 mm.	Verse 2	We lie awake, this wall between us **am** We're just not talking, we've got so much to say Let's break these chains, our love can free us
1:34 – 1:42 4 mm.	Pre-Chorus 2	Whoah, woah, ain't it time we started trying **CM** Whoah, woah, gotta stop this love from dying
1:43 – 2:01 8 mm.	Chorus 2	How can we be lovers if we can't be friends **EbM** How can we start over when the fighting never ends, baby How can we make love if we can't make amends How can we be lovers if we can't be, can't be friends
2:02 – 2:19 8 mm.	Guitar Solo	Somewhat virtuosic playing with highlighted drum set fills
2:20 – 2:38 8 mm.	Bridge	Baby love is tough but we can take it How can we be lovers Baby times are rough but we can make it We can work it out
2:39 – 3:56 8 mm. choruses to end	Chorus 3 to Fade-Out	How can we be lovers if we can't be friends **FM** How can we start over when the fighting never ends, baby How can we make love if we can't make amends, tell me How can we be lovers if we can't be, can't be friends…

Like other songs discussed in this chapter, “How Can We Be Lovers” incorporates synthesizers, overdriven electric guitar, drum set, and both solo and collective vocals. Combined with romantically themed lyrics, these elements combine the period’s hard rock aesthetic with that of mainstream pop. Most of these components appear in the E-Flat Major introduction, in which xylophone-like synthesizers supported by organ complete the first four measure phrase. The next four-measure phrase introduces Bolton’s vocals and acoustic guitar. Then, cymbal and increased drum set elements begin to fill out the texture.

In a two-measure conclusion of sorts, electric guitar plays chords in a syncopated rhythm like that played by the synthesized harpsichord. This section ends with a half cadence in E-Flat Major.

Like "Everybody's Crazy," the introduction presents the lyrics and solo vocal melody of the chorus, while each chorus section is supplemented by additional vocals from other members of the ensemble. The message is communicated with an overall sense of urgency, which is supplemented by a moderately virtuosic guitar solo and a bridge that serves as a vocal solo melodically mirroring the guitar performance that precedes it. The two verses, beginning in the distant key of A Minor after the misleading half cadence in E-Flat Major, provide a temporary respite from the high energy level conveyed in the rest of the song, as these sections build from a more somber vocal timbre, thinner instrumental texture, and pared-down rhythmic activity to the texturally dense and more timbrally complex pre-choruses in C Major and choruses in E-Flat Major. The lyrics reflect two states within the song, with the verses (printed below) making statements about the relationship and the chorus commenting on the tense situation with questions.

Michael Bolton, "How Can We Be Lovers" Verse and Pre-Chorus Lyrics

Verse 1 to Pre-Chorus 1:
Look at us now, look at us baby
Still trying to work it out, never get it right
We must be fools, we must be crazy
Woah, woah, when there's no communication
Woah, woah, it's a no-win situation

Verse 2 to Pre-Chorus 2:
We lie awake, this wall between us
We're just not talking, we got so much to say
Let's break these chains, our love can free us
Woah, woah, ain't it time we started trying
Woah, woah, gotta stop this love from dying

Overall, the song moves from doubt to optimism, with the bridge functioning as the musical tipping point before the direct modulation to F Major in the last chorus. This and the other direct modulations in this song, such as that between the introduction in E-Flat Major to the first verse in A Minor, reinforce changes in mood while also recalling the use of abrupt modulations in many rock songs of this period. These changes in outlook are also achieved through lyrical content, such as that of the second verse and bridge and the incorporation of additional vocal elements like the vocable "na-na-na-na," that is sung during the final repeats of the chorus.

Several elements of this song recall Bon Jovi's 1986 hit "Livin' on a Prayer," including the more exposed eighth-note bass figure, the multi-tracked vocals in the chorus, and a similar lyrical relationship between verses and the chorus. In addition, a sort of call-and-response element in both songs is very similar – in "Livin' on a Prayer," we hear "Woah, we're half way there," etc., in the chorus,[67] and in the verses of "How Can We Be Lovers," the pattern is "Woah, woah, when there's no communication," and so forth. The overall character of both songs masculinizes the theme of working through these personal issues by portraying that point in the relationship as a battle. For Bolton, the war is fought between the lovers, but for Bon Jovi, the couple must surmount outside

[67] Jon Bon Jovi and Richie Sambora, "Livin' on a Prayer," track 3 on *Slippery When Wet*, Mercury Records, 1986, Compact Disc.

obstacles to "make it," both as a unit and as individuals coping with working class struggles. Bon Jovi's lyrical framing, as well as some of the harder musical elements of the song (harsher and more dominant electric guitar, for instance), encouraged success as a rock song,[68] while the timbre and texture of Bolton's song kept if off the Mainstream Rock chart, even as it reached the number three spot on both the Hot 100 and Adult Contemporary charts.[69]

The categorization of this song surely reflected the general perception of Bolton's music. In this period, he released material that would at least convey an Adult Contemporary appeal, with some songs potentially reaching a broader audience like that tracked on the Hot 100 and Mainstream Top 40. Lyrics describing romantic issues appealed to a broad range of listeners (gauging by the popular rock songs of the period). Songs such as "Ain't Got Nothing if You Ain't Got Love" and "Steel Bars" (written with Bob Dylan for *Time, Love, & Tenderness*) describe such struggles lyrically with a careful balance of mid-tempo rock, soul, and pop elements. Such moderation, combined with the release of slower ballads, made it less likely Bolton's rock-oriented material would get rock airplay.

"How am I Supposed to Live Without You" and "Said I Loved You…But I Lied" serve as excellent examples of what became Bolton's signature style, while also providing approximate bookends for Bolton's period of mass popularity. Like many such

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[68] "Bon Jovi Chart History." *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, https://www.billboard.com/music/bon-jovi/chart-history/pop-songs [accessed April 19, 2018]. Selecting from the pull-down menu provides chart performance on all charts, for all songs and albums by this artist that charted.
[69] "Michael Bolton Chart History," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*.

songs produced in this period, the accompaniment for both is dominated by synthesized instruments, with minimal backing during verses, as well as melodic instrumental solos, a bridge that highlights the singer's expressive capabilities, and a partial reprise in the outro that quickly ends the song after the climactic volume and textural density in the last chorus. Use of a thin texture and slower instrumental rhythms places the focus on Bolton's vocals as well as the lyrics, which provide crucial details for understanding the context of both songs. Both songs also utilize noticeable reverb on instrumentals and vocals that is most obvious in the verses. This serves the verses in "How am I Supposed to Live Without You"[70] by aurally suggesting that the song was recorded in a small space, and perhaps reinforcing an insular world of reflection as a result. In this space, the protagonist – a heartbroken Bolton – carries on a one-way "conversation" with his love interest. The first verse, included below, begins to explain Bolton's reason for grieving.

Michael Bolton, "How am I Supposed to Live Without You," Verse One

> I could hardly believe it, when I heard the news today
> I had to come and get it straight from you
> They said you were leavin', someone's swept your heart away
> From the look upon your face I see it's true

These statements eventually lead to Bolton confronting this woman more directly in the choruses about the struggles he will face without her (see lyrics below).

[70] Michael Bolton and Doug James, "How Am I Supposed to Live Without You," 1989, track four on *Soul Provider*, Columbia, compact disc; All discussion of this song references this recording and album liner notes.

Michael Bolton," How am I Supposed to Live Without You," Chorus

Tell me how am I supposed to live without you
Now that I've been loving you so long
How am I supposed to live without you
And how am I supposed to carry on
When all that I've been livin' for is gone

Verses that feature keyboards and synthesizers with a prominent bass guitar progress to the filled-in texture of the choruses, both between the pitch level of the electronic instruments and the bass, and in terms of adding a synthesized horn section, drum set, and greater rhythmic activity to fill in space temporally. In short, there is less "space" in these segments of the song. This complements the increased volume and emotionality of Bolton's vocals. The addition of occasional electric guitar melodic figures contributes to the progression of the song as it prepares the listener for an electric guitar solo in a song otherwise dominated instrumentally by synthesizers. While this sort of build-up is not unusual, such a formal device is useful for a song with a slower tempo (approximately 71 beats per minute), since it creates a sense of forward motion where a sensation of stasis might otherwise prevail.

Overall, "How am I Supposed to Live Without You" describes the myopic perspective of someone experiencing the loss of a (potential) romantic partner. The verses explain the reasoning for this feeling of loss, disappointment in oneself, and a complicated sense of betrayal. To some extent, devices such as reverb call attention to themselves, but, for the most part, the lyrics are the focus, and Bolton performs them with a clear vocal timbre and minimal elaboration. The choruses focus on expressing heightened emotions, with the increased volume and thicker orchestration supporting Bolton's rougher vocal timbre and change in dynamic level from *piano* to *forte* in a period of just a few measures.

The contrasts between the highs and lows in this song are one of its defining features, but different elements distinguish "Said I Loved You…But I Lied." The former single was released on the album *Soul Provider* in 1989, and the latter track was released on *The One Thing* in 1993. As previously described, these share a great deal, but comparing them reveals a modification of musical style from one conveying an extreme sense of musical drama to one describing a dramatic romantic realization in more nuanced manner. "Said I Loved You…But I Lied" demonstrates how Bolton may have adapted to reflect the smoother musical aesthetic at the time, and possibly to the popularity of Latin-inspired or even New Age music – just as Bolton's earlier work relates to the contemporaneous rock and pop-metal releases mentioned earlier in this chapter.

Compared to the use of reverb on "How am I Supposed to Live Without You," the employment of the device on this track indicates a different goal for the use of dramatic musical materials that follows. Here, the striking use of this effect adds to the sense of mystery first created by the instrumentation and rhythm and later reinforced by the lyrics. The overall message conveyed is that love is a temporary human construct, powerful yet defined by superficial feelings. What Bolton feels for the woman he addresses moves beyond love to something as seemingly eternal as the elements of nature he describes clearly in the verses and more generally in the choruses. Below, the verse and chorus in Table 2.4 highlight these lyrical strategies.

Table 2.4: Michael Bolton, “Said I Loved You…But I Lied,” 1993 [71]

Section	Lyrics
Verse 1: *G Minor*	You are the candle, love's the flame A fire that burns through wind and rain Shine your light on this heart of mine Till the end of time
Pre-Chorus 1: *B-Flat Major*	You came to me like the dawn through the night Just shinin' like the sun Out of my dreams and into my life You are the one, you are the one
Chorus 1: *E-Flat Major*	Said I loved you but I lied 'Cause this is more than love I feel inside Said I loved you but I was wrong 'Cause love could never ever feel so strong **Said I loved you but I lied**
Verse 2: *G Minor*	With all my soul I've tried in vain How can mere words my heart explain This taste of heaven so deep so true I've found in you
Pre-Chorus 2: *B-Flat Major*	So many reasons in so many ways My life has just begun Need you forever, and I need you to stay **You are the one, you are the one**
Chorus 2: *E-Flat Major*	Said I loved you but I lied 'Cause this is more than love I feel inside Said I loved you but I was wrong 'Cause love could never ever feel so strong **Said I loved you but I lied**
Solo	Latin-inspired acoustic guitar solo
Bridge: *E-Flat Major*	You came to me like the dawn through the night Just shinin' like the sun Out of my dreams and into my life You are the one, you are the one
Chorus 3: *F Major to A Minor*	Said I loved you but I lied 'Cause this is more than love I feel inside Said I loved you but I was wrong 'Cause love could never ever feel so strong **Said I loved you but I lied**

The use of reverb is most noticeable in the accompaniment, beginning in the introduction and continuing through verses, as well as in transitions from chorus sections to verses and from the last chorus to the outro. It adds to the aura of exotic mystery that is also reinforced by a synthesized bell-like instrument with a syncopated rhythm and layers of timbrally diffuse synthesizers. Like many pop songs, including those described in this chapter, the build-up to each chorus progresses through the verses and pre-choruses.

[71] Michael Bolton and Robert John “Mutt” Lange, “Said I Loved You…But I Lied,”1993, track one on *The One thing*, Columbia, compact disc; All discussion of this song references this recording and album liner notes.

Clearly, these segments mark important tipping points in the song between the previously described lyrical content of the verses compared to that in the pre-choruses and chorus. These progressions are supported by an increase in volume that is produced mostly by greater textural density and timbral variety. In addition (as seen in Table 2.4 above), a change in temperament is signaled by a modulation from G Minor in the verses to its relative B-flat major in the pre-choruses at :50 when Bolton sings “You came to me like the dawn through the night.” This change pairs well with phrases such as “dawn through the night” and “out of my dreams and into my life.” In the last line of the B-flat major chorus, at 1:41, another modulation occurs with the return to G Minor and to the accompanimental material from the introduction. The Latin-inspired acoustic guitar solo that begins at 3:14 after the second chorus fits smoothly within the song because of previous acoustic guitar figures, such as the arpeggiations in the choruses, and the more rhythmic figures in the verses.

These modal and tonal modulations clearly contribute to the emotional shifting between earnest reverence and ebullient celebration described by the lyrics. When Bolton repeats the second portion of the first verse as a bridge, beginning at 3:36, the suggestion is that this section, now in E-Flat Major, will continue through the last chorus until a transition to G Minor mirroring that of previous choruses. However, the last chorus shifts suddenly to F Major. While this indicates a joyful emotional state, the song shifts dramatically to A Minor, which returns the song to the sober state in which it began. Because of this modulation, and because of the pause after the first half of the sentence, this last iteration of “Said I loved you…But I lied” seems especially ominous, as Bolton accepts his vulnerability to this enigmatic force.

Overall, this conclusion helps to convey the overall sentiment of the song, one of both exhilaration and awe in the face of a feeling described as "more than love."

These analyses make clear that whether through the theme of struggles in romantic relationships, or shared musical elements such as rock instrumentation, much is held in common in this body of work. However, Bolton achieved widespread recognition as a pop artist rather than a rock-oriented one, regardless of the overall musical qualities of his output. This leaves one to wonder about the extent to which Bolton's reception was shaped by the shift to a pop aesthetic on songs like the two just analyzed and how much an apparent change in target audience to a female-dominated demographic also changed Bolton's image. The next section will review audience targeting and describe how changes Bolton's public persona may have affected interpretations of his music through a change in generic and demographic association.

Image and Audience

Chapter One describes in detail how maximizing the potential of an artist and their work in a marketplace saturated with options requires the integration of musical performance and producing with marketing. These processes combine considerations of industrial imperatives with aesthetic rationale to create music and public personae that reach existing demographic groups, while also reinforcing or even creating them, by producing appealing content. Keith Negus writes that signing artists in the first place requires the potential for popularity with one or more demographic groups, which are reached through radio formats as well through visual-oriented media, such as the audio-

visual marketing offered on MTV and VH1.[72] Negus writes that, depending on how a record company hopes the artist will fit into the popular music field, personnel determine the "musical direction, visual identity, and…the media which might be approached"[73] that will allow an artist to create an appealing musical and visual persona for the anticipated audience.

Consider the previously described discussion between Al Teller and Michael Bolton, in which Teller, then-head of CBS records, told Bolton that he would be more successful moving from hard rock or metal to mainstream rock and pop. Of course, Bolton's own aesthetic interest in this music was an essential component of its appeal to a large audience. Teller asserted that Bolton's rock orientation failed to appeal significantly to rock listeners, but the pop songs he wrote might find the same success with a mainstream audience as the demos he recorded did with secretaries and other employees at Columbia. The enjoyment Bolton felt when recording these tracks conveyed a sincerity to those at the company who appreciated them, and this transferred to the larger audience that Teller had identified.[74]

While less enthusiasm from Bolton about this aesthetic change may have yielded different results, careful marketing conveyed this sincerity to people who typically responded positively to this music. As Negus writes, "not only does the artist have to feel

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[72] Keith Negus, "Plugging and Programming: Pop Radio and Record Promotion in Britain and the United States," *Popular Music* 12 (1993): 62; Keith Negus, "Images, Identities, and Audiences: Marketing and Artist Development," in *Producing Pop: Culture and Conflict in the Popular Music Industry* (London: Edward Arnold, 1992), 64-67.
[73] Keith Negus, "Images, Identities, and Audiences: Marketing and Artist Development," in *Producing Pop: Culture and Conflict in the Popular Music Industry*, 64.
[74] Michael Bolton, *The Soul of it All: My Music, My Life*, 177-178.

comfortable with and committed to their image in some way, but the audience has to believe it."[75] The continuing influence of rock's musical conventions described above certainly maintained an overall sense of continuity. Rather than an abrupt change, this came across to some extent as an adjustment within a milieu Bolton had already explored. Musically, mid-tempo tracks with electric guitar solos featured Bolton's vocals; ballads, even those that prominently employed the synthesized instruments and reverb common in pop in this period, sometimes included electric guitar solos. Clearly, generating such massive public awareness of Michael Bolton in this period required more than altering the musical direction of his records. Marketing also needed to change.

These alterations to Bolton's music and image were made in the service of appealing to an anticipated audience. In short, the slicing up of the radio audience that became common by the 1970s was achieved in part by offering music and public images that would appeal to a focused demographic. As time went on, these target groups became smaller, with the phenomenon of crossover becoming increasingly important for achieving mainstream success.[76] Sometimes segmentation reflected existing divisions, but gatekeepers such as record industry executives, radio programmers, and advertisers also tried to encourage division to create a more focused and easily describable group. Lizabeth Cohen writes that this "was a much more interactive process, with potential consumers exerting decisive influences on the marketing field, helping to convince

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[75] Keith Negus, "Images, Identities, and Audiences: Marketing and Artist Development," in *Producing Pop: Culture and Conflict in the Popular Music Industry*, 70.
[76] Kim Simpson "Introduction: American Pie – Slicing up Radio Consumers in the Early '70s," in *Early '70s Radio: The American Format Revolution*, 9, 14; David Brackett, "Crossover Dreams: From *Urban Cowboy* to the King of Pop" in *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 283.

marketers that groups with increasingly independent identities offered new opportunities for cultivation as segments."[77] Negus's views support this, noting that "lived cultural experiences" encourage the division of the public, which "are reinforced by the way in which the recording industry actively divides the audience in order to construct identifiable markets."[78] Further, Joseph Turow writes that in radio, this resulted in fine-tuning radio formats so that the music and DJ personalities drew in the desired audience while purposely repelling those outside of it. This attracted an easier to define segment for advertisers to target.[79]

It also meant that the record industry had to consider how to effectively disseminate content on both radio and television, which both made money by creating audiences to sell to advertisers, not by selling music. For an artist like Bolton, with potential mainstream appeal, this could mean creating fine-tuned mixes for different formats (or "versioning"),[80] as well as adopting a strategy for the spread of singles from the format with the best stylistic/audience fit to those that are similar, or even beginning airplay in an area of the country most likely to provide positive reception and allowing popularity to spread.[81] These are strategies for countering what Gabriel Rossman

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[77] Lizabeth Cohen, "Culture: Segmenting the Mass," in *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York Alfred A. Knoph, 2003), 308.
[78] Keith Negus, "Images, Identities, and Audiences: Marketing and Artist Development," in *Producing Pop: Culture and Conflict in the Popular Music Industry*, 69.
[79] Joseph Turow, "Signaling Divisions," in *Breaking up America: Advertisers and the Rise of the New Media World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 102.
[80] Joseph Turow, "Signaling Divisions," in *Breaking up America: Advertisers and the Rise of the New Media World*, 108; Keith Negus, "The Decline of the Single Record," in *Producing Pop: Culture and Conflict in the Popular Music Industry* (London: Edward Arnold, 1992), 104.
[81] Keith Negus, "Promotional War Games: Pop Radio in Britain and North America," in *Producing Pop: Culture and Conflict in the Popular Music Industry* (London: Edward

describes as "the problem that [a] song was highly focused on the generic conventions of its initial format and by definition will not match additional formats as well."[82] Of course, this is one reason labels remix a single to create a broader listener base, and also the reason, Rossman writes, that songs that cross over tend to spread "through a few formats for which it is a close genre fit."

For Bolton, this process of segmentation often meant his most reliable radio play and chart success were with Hot 100 and Adult Contemporary, with very limited success on Mainstream Rock. For example, throughout the course of his career, Bolton has placed thirty-two songs on the Adult Contemporary chart. Nineteen charted on Top 40, many with long-lasting presence, but only four songs charted on Mainstream Rock.[83] Bolton's varied success with Mainstream Top 40, Hot 100, and other pop charts demonstrates that both these formats and their sometimes overlap, while the music and audience for rock has increasingly targeted white males under 35 since the 1970s, and such listeners are less likely to hear music most prominently played on Adult Contemporary stations targeted toward women.[84]

Arnold, 1992), 104; Gabriel Rossman, "But Which Chart Do You Climb?" in *Climbing the Charts: What Radio Airplay Tells Us About the Diffusion of Innovation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 77.

[82] Gabriel Rossman, "But Which Chart Do You Climb?" in *Climbing the Charts: What Radio Airplay Tells Us About the Diffusion of Innovation*, 77-79.

[83] "Michael Bolton Chart History," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*.

[84] Eric Weisbard, "The Wrath of the Buzzard: WMMS and Rock," in *Top 40 Democracy: The Rival Mainstreams of American Music*, 206.

In short, Bolton's mainstream success was the result of establishing credibility by drawing upon styles in which he felt comfortable composing and performing, promoting the right singles on the right stations (for the right audience), and creating visuals that clearly communicated the kind of aesthetic that made sense from this artist. This last component was essential for the success of this transition in an era dominated (as the introduction states) to an unprecedented extent by public image. This was not a revelation for Bolton, since his image had visually signaled his generic commitments throughout his career, indicating through hairstyles, clothing, and video conventions what to expect aurally. Keith Negus writes that "different genres of music have become associated with and signify different images, which in turn connote particular attitudes, values and beliefs. At the same time the visual images denote particular sounds."[85] The labeled images below demonstrate the generally corresponding relationship Negus describes between the aesthetic of Bolton's image and that of the musical periods described in this chapter, including rock, heavy metal, soul, melodic rock, and ballads. All are album or single covers that highlight the first image offered to those purchasing recorded music.

The album covers in figure 2.3 demonstrate Bolton's changing images throughout his career. Analyzing these visuals with knowledge about his stylistic development elucidates the connection between public image and music. The first image, from 1975, focuses on Bolton's face and upper body, thus focusing on the artist's long, unruly hair and soulful facial expression. Bolton's right shoulder is raised, suggesting that he is holding a guitar. This all suggests that he is playing guitar with his eyes closed, and

[85] Keith Negus, "Images, Identities and Audiences," in *Producing Pop: Culture and Conflict in the Popular Music Industry*, 66.

possibly that he aligns in some meaningful way with hippie culture (possibly even with an anti-commercial stance). The next two images, from 1983 and 1985, show him wearing leather with hair that has been deliberately styled, a combination that suggests identification to some degree with hair metal, a more accessible adaptation of heavy metal. The lack of musical instruments in the image and a focus only on Bolton (not on a band, a sexualized woman, or a more abstract object) suggest a focus on a solo artist. With its close-up on Bolton's upper body and face, the image from 1985 in particular seems to convey both a rock-orientation stylistically and a singer-songwriter practice. In both cases, these images provide a clear individual persona for listeners to identify with. The image from 1987 is similar to that from 1985 in that is focuses on Bolton's direct gaze and his upper body. However, Bolton is wearing a more formal button-down white shirt that lack a connection with rock's typical visuals. He also seems to stand in front of audience seats in an auditorium, a performing venue not common for rock performances. This visual, for Bolton's cover of "(Sittin' On) The Dock of the Bay," suggests a serious aesthetic intent, like that of a contemporary blues performer who plays more in theatres than in clubs. Such connotations are appropriate for a white singer covering a soul song written and originally performed by an African American. The last image, from 1993, offers yet another transformation, starting with Bolton's blonde hair. While seated with his left arm on his left knee, he gazes seductively at the camera, his shirt partially unbuttoned. This conveys Bolton's role as both a somewhat sexualized artist and an approachable male figure. Suggestions of a rock orientation via clothing, or with a more "serious" genre such the blues (via clothing and setting) are absent, and Bolton's image aligns with that of pop.

Figure 2.3: Michael Bolton Album Cover/Press Images, 1975-1993[86]

1975 *1983* *1985*

1987 *1993*

Like hair and clothing in publicity shots, the character in videos changed as well, including how the act of music making was conveyed. His earlier videos placed more emphasis on projecting the appearance of a group performance that highlighted related musical elements such as guitar solos. In "Fool's Game" from 1983, Bolton plays guitar

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[86] Discogs, "Michael Bolotin *Everyday of My Life* Cover," discogs.com, https://www.discogs.com/Michael-Bolotin-Every-Day-Of-My-Life/master/975795 [accessed April 30, 2018]; Discogs, "Michael Bolton *Everybody's Crazy* Album Cover," discogs.com. https://www.discogs.com/Michael-Bolton-Everybodys Crazy/release /1550094 [accessed April 30, 2018]; Discogs, "Michael Bolton *Michael Bolton* Album Cover," discogs.com. https://www.discogs.com/Michael-Bolton-Michael-Bolton/release /2377507 [accessed April 30, 2018]; Discogs, "Michael Bolton '(Sittin' On) The Dock of the Bay' 7 inch Single Cover." discogs.com. https://www.discogs.com/Michael-Bolton-Sittin-On-The-Dock-Of-The-Bay/release/1429252 [accessed April 30, 2018]; Discogs, "Michael Bolton *The One Thing* Album Cover," discogs.com. https://www.discogs.com/ Michael-Bolton-The-One-Thing/master/120745 [accessed April 30, 2018].

throughout the video as he and his band members mimic live performance on a stage.[87] As shown in Figure 2.4, Bolton wears tight black leather pants, and his button-down shirt is partially unbuttoned, while his band members (Figure 2.5) wear tight cap-sleeve t-shirts.

Figure 2.4: Michael Bolton "Fool's Game," 1983

Figure 2.5: Band Members, "Fool's Game," 1983

At various points, the viewer is treated to Bolton walking through steam as he walks backstage and sings by himself (Figure 2.6 below). The performance setting portrays

[87] Martin, Kahan, dir., "Fool's Game," music video, performed by Michael Bolton et. al., 1983, https://imvdb.com/n/michael-bolton [accessed June 18, 2018]. Video accessed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NukzQZM-1Qk. All discussion of this video and screenshots reference this source.

Bolton as a victim of seductive, dangerous-looking women (Figure 2.7 below) who threaten not only his emotional stability but also his physical well-being. This illustrates the previously described element of rock and metal culture – women as a threat – as these women seem to intrude on the male-centered rock performance.

Figure 2.6: Michael Bolton, "Fool's Game," 1983

Figure 2.7: Dangerous Women, "Fool's Game," 1983

In 1985, two years later, the Wayne Isham-directed and produced video for "Everybody's Crazy" featured more dramatically stylized clothing, with coordinating blazers signaling the harder sound of the song.[88] Like his videos for Mötley Crüe and Bon

[88] Wayne Isham, dir., "Everybody's Crazy," music video, performed by Michael Bolton et. al (Sony BMG Music Entertainment, 1985), https://www.vevo.com/watch/michael-

Jovi,[89] Isham's setting reflects the generic conventions of the song. Bolton mostly performs as a vocal soloist, but he still appears as part of the band throughout, and even plays a guitar solo (Figure 2.8 below).

Figure 2.8: Michael Bolton Guitar Solo, "Everybody's Crazy," 1985

Setting the video mostly on a stage reinforces rock's live performance and group-based culture, while additional elements such as the exaggerated physical movement of the performers add to the drama of the fabricated performance that were common among pop-metal videos of the period (Figure 2.9 below).

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bolton/everybodys-crazy/USSM20301255 [accessed April 25, 2018). All discussion of this video and screenshots reference this source.

[89] Craig Marks and Rob Tennanbaum, *I Want My MTV: The Uncensored Story of the Music Video Revolution* (London: Dutton, 2011), 583.

Figure 2.9: Michael Bolton and Band, “Everybody’s Crazy,” 1985

The collage of chaotic images playing on video screens in the back of the stage (examples in Figure 2.10 below) reinforce the message that “Everybody’s Crazy.” They also recall heated tops such as (left to right) nuclear weapons, the Vietnam War, and religious practices. In a sense, the song and video (perhaps inadvertently) communicate the irony of describing young people trying to cope with “craziness” within a genre noted for promoting immoderate values and behaviors through highly stylized musical conventions.

Figure 2.10: Chaotic Images, “Everybody’s Crazy,” 1985

Marking a change of approach, the video for Michael Bolton's four-format breakthrough, "(Sittin' On) the Dock of the Bay" from 1987's *The Hunger*, features Bolton singing the song in the location Otis Redding wrote it near Sausalito, California.[90] While the video shows Bolton singing the song as a band accompanies him (Figure 2.11 below), we also see female background singers dancing as a fire burns in a trash can (Figure 2.12) and individuals in separate locations (at least one of whom is a musician) lost in introspective thought (Figure 2.13 below).

Figure 2.11: Michael Bolton and Band, "(Sittin' On) the Dock of the Bay," 1987

Figure 2.12 Singers Dancing, "(Sittin' On) the Dock of the Bay," 1987

[90] Michael Bolton, *The Soul of it All: My Music, My Life*, 184.

Figure 2.13: Anonymous Characters, "(Sittin' On) the Dock of the Bay," 1987

These images contribute to the emotional weight of the song, while the incorporation of both men and women, engaged thoughtfully as either performers or as characters reflecting the sentiment of the lyrics, allows this presentation to avoid the male-centered performance aesthetic of Bolton's previous videos. In addition, most of the performers in the video are dressed in clothing that blends into the background of the video. Bolton, for instance, wears long coat over a nondescript shirt and pants (see Figure 2.14 below).

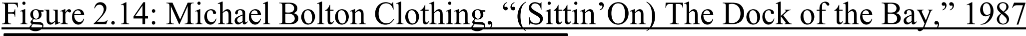

Figure 2.14: Michael Bolton Clothing, "(Sittin'On) The Dock of the Bay," 1987

In addition, many shots of him singing are above the waist and have him looking away from the camera, as though singing to himself.[91] Bolton is the star of the video, but one also gets a sense that the music and visuals were carefully combined to communicate the message of Redding's song. In part, this is a result of the setting, but the fact that the performers we see in the video relate to what we hear in the recording makes the "performance" seem more authentic and a natural part of the surrounding environment.

Later videos also create a world in which the aesthetic and lyrical message of the song are taken seriously, but some require a more obvious suspension of disbelief common in music videos. John Corbett describes this phenomenon as the "filmic disavowal tactic," writing that "verisimilitude is not the basis for value in the image/sound replenishment in music video" because these videos supply a visual component in "a medium long known to be merely auditory."[92] A music video might reflect norms of music performance, gender, race, class, and other factors as they relate to the song, but this is not accomplished through a direct relationship. As an example, Corbett cites viewers accepting lip synching as a substitute for singing. In some cases, videos feature a musician playing an instrument that is clearly absent from the recording, or far too few musicians to reflect the complexity of the aural environment. Of course, this does rule out a video contributing to the interpretation of a song, but this affect is

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[91] Michael Utterback, dir., "(Sittin' On) the Dock of the Bay," music video, performed by Michael Bolton, et. al (Sony BMG Music Entertainment, 1987) https://www.vevo.com /watch/michael-bolton/(sittin-on)-the-dock-of-the-bay/USSM20100589 [accessed April 25, 2018]. All discussion of this video and screenshots references this source.

[92] John Corbett, "Free, Single, and Disengaged: Listening Pleasure and the Popular Music Object" *October* 54 (1990): 87.

often achieved by methods other than a seemingly direct representation of musical performance.

The videos for “How am I Supposed to Live Without You” and “How Can We Be Lovers,” the second and third singles from 1989’s *Soul Provider*[93] demonstrate this tenet that “the seen and heard need not necessarily coincide in supposed unity.”[94] The former video features segments with a forlorn Bolton singing by himself interspersed with scenes of the singer and his former lover interacting, all of which are set in the home that they shared (Figure 2.15 below).[95]

Figure 2.15: Bolton and Woman, “How Am I Supposed to Live Without You,” 1989

The more muted color profile of shots with Bolton and this woman (above right) indicate that these recall their past interactions, while the warmer colors seen when he sings alone place those parts of the video in his present (above left). In such segments, Bolton often addresses the camera, and thus the viewer, as though he is communicating in

[93] Michael Bolton, *The Soul of it All: My Music, My Life*, 211.
[94] John Corbett, “Free, Single, and Disengaged: Listening Pleasure and the Popular Music Object,” 87.
[95] Greg Gold, dir., “How am I Supposed to Live Without You,” music video, performed by Michael Bolton (Sony BMG Music Entertainment, 1989), https://www.vevo.com/watch/michael-bolton/how-am-i-supposed-to-live-without-you/USSM20100587 [accessed April 25, 1028]. All discussion of this video and screenshots reference this source.

the first person with his ex, even though he is supposedly alone in the residence. Of all the sounds heard on this single, Bolton's vocal track is the only one that is visually reproduced, and he lip synchs without any sign of amplification. Rather than creating a performing space, this video serves as a visual reinforcement of the personal loss described by the lyrics, in a place defined in the past by a relationship but now by disappointment and solitude.

The domestic setting of the video also marks its space as one that Lisa Lewis has described as one oriented toward female viewers.[96] Lewis notes that because the home has traditionally been an environment deemed more appropriate for girls and women than public places, videos that take place here "attempt to compensate for the devaluation and trivialization of female-cultural experience."[97] Given that this ballad achieved its greatest popularity with the female Adult Contemporary audience, the recreation of this environment here could indicate the intent to appeal more directly to women.

Bolton's appropriation of the home, a supposedly female space, also indicates a role reversal of sorts. In her exploration of male-address and female-address videos, Lewis explores how videos have ostensibly targeted an audience of a particular gender by incorporating visual signs of the naturalized social spaces for men and women – either "the street" for males or the home for females.[98] In female-address videos, in which she sees female artists communicating to a mostly female fan base, Lewis calls visuals and scenes typically associated with male-dominated public spaces "access signs," and those

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[96] Lisa Lewis, *Gender Politics and MTV: Voicing the Difference* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 109.
[97] Ibid., 109
[98] Ibid., 33-37.

that have appropriated signs normally connected with the other gender "discovery signs."[99] In "How am I Supposed to Live Without You," Bolton appropriates the feminine domestic setting, making this a "discovery sign" in this context, while also performing material typically associated with female listeners.

The situation is more complicated in the video for "How Can We Be Lovers." This clip features Bolton performing as a member of a mixed-gender rock group with a female keyboardist and female backup singers.[100] While the setting replicates a performance of the song to some extent, the visually accessible performing elements do not entirely reflect those on the recording. Also, the video is set in an obviously artificial environment, marked by a pristine bright-white background. Scenes of the performance, shot in color, are interspersed with black and white shots of Bolton's lover by herself and with passages showing Bolton interacting with her (see images below). Except for shots of Bolton and his lover lying in bed, the entire video clearly takes place in these two imaginary realms – one in color and one in black and white – unified by the white background. This approach allows director Jim Shea to more closely associate public and private spaces, and to connect the relationship-based focus of the lyrics with to the mainstream rock aesthetic of the recording.

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[99] Ibid., 109.

[100] Jim Shea, dir., "How Can We Be Lovers," music video, performed by Michael Bolton, et. al (Sony BMG Music Entertainment, 1989), https://www.vevo.com/watch/michael-bolton/how-can-we-be-lovers/USSM20100588 [accessed April 25, 2018]. All discussion of this video and screenshots reference this source.

Figure 2.16: “How Can We Be Lovers Images”

The performing conventions portrayed in the video also reinforce this connection between pop and rock, making it clear that the boundaries between the two are murky and conditional. For example, the song’s romantic subject matter and the wardrobe of Bolton and his backup singers reflects pop conventions – he sings about love, and these performers are dressed somewhat formally. On the other hand, the clothing and exaggerated physical movements and facial expressions of the lead guitarist and drummer pair with the somewhat virtuosic guitar solo and Bolton’s rough vocals, recalling both rock’s working-class associations and its musical practices. Because of this mixed gender performing ensemble, the mixture between pop and rock, and between the public and private, this video also clearly aims for a large general audience with broad musical tastes. The fact that the featured performers tend to fulfill traditional gender expectations, with a male guitarist and drummer and female vocalists and keyboard player, also suggests that video was meant to avoid offending mainstream sensibilities. In addition, Bolton’s female love interest never directly takes part in performing the song; rather, she is seen failing to play the piano, an instrument historically connected to middle-class women. She dramatically shoves the sheet music off the stand, while Bolton appears more in control when he plays. Within this mixed-address video, male gender roles

dominate both the music-making and the rational component of the romantic relationship. After all, it is Bolton who gets to sing that the two lovers can "work it out."

On a somewhat different topic, it bears mentioning the possible association between these two videos, and subsequent connection between the songs. The same actress plays Bolton's love interest in both, and the subject matter of the songs (as portrayed in the videos) seems interrelated. In "How Can We Be Lovers," the relationship shows signs of serious trouble, and in "How am I Supposed to Live Without You," tensions lead to Bolton's lover leaving him for someone else. The lyrics of "How am I Supposed to Live Without You" indicate that the romantic connection was a potential one:

<u>Michael Bolton, "How Am I Supposed to Live Without You," Verse two</u>

> I'm too proud for cryin', didn't come here to break down
> It's just a dream of mine is coming to an end
> And how can I blame you when I built my world around
> The hope that one day we'd be so much more than friends?

The video reshapes the narrative to create a different scenario, with the woman leaving Bolton alone, the implication being that she abandoned their relationship to be with someone else.

While this video reinterprets the meaning of the song, the clip for "Said I Loved You…But I Lied" vividly reinforces the message conveyed. Director Rebecca Blake creates obvious visual connections between the landscape, the timbral quality of the music, the key changes, and the lyrical references to nature.[101] Not only is Bolton dressed

[101] Rebecca Blake, dir., "Said I Loved You…But I Lied," music video, performed by Michael Bolton Et. al (Sony BMG Music Entertainment, 1993), https://www.vevo.com/watch/michael-bolton/said-i-loved-you-but-ilied/USSM20100829. [accessed April 25, 2018]. All discussion of this video and screenshots reference this source.

in tones that mirror his surroundings in this mountainous desert landscape, the images of fire, horses, and eagles that are strategically interspersed between shots of Bolton and his love interest fade into, or even mirror, one another. Bolton sings some lyrics wearing denim that contrasts with his tanned skin to match the earth and sky of the desert landscape. Some portions show him singing in a darkened cave wearing black leather that complements the shadows. Other scenes have him caressing his lover, who is shown in most shots with her eyes closed as though fully immersed in the sensations of affective touch. In other shots, she rides a horse bareback, in slow motion. She behaves as though part of the environment, distinguished at some points by her passivity, and at others by her physical connection to the land and one of its creatures (the horse).

Bolton's active connection to the environment is demonstrated in other ways. At one point, Bolton stands atop a mesa with his arms outstretched (Figure 2.17, left), and the next shot is that of a flying eagle, with Bolton's outstretched arms leading to the eagle's broad wingspan. As demonstrated in Figure 2.17 below, his image remains in the background as the eagle flies.

Figure 2.17: "Said I Loved You…But I Lied" Video Screenshots

In a subtler use of the technique, Bolton's image and shadow are quickly superimposed on the sky as in Figure 2.18, just as many images linger as one shot moves to the next.

Figure 2.18: "Said I Loved You…But I Lied" Video Screenshot

These visual cues convey both the general message of the lyrics and the modal and key changes – as his feelings transcend the limits of love, Bolton and his lover connect more deeply with nature, and with one another. The B-flat major choruses sound all the more triumphant when the eagle mirrors Bolton's outstretched arms, and Bolton's dark clothing in a cave filled with shadows emphasizes the "darker" quality associated with the minor mode. More significantly, the modulation to F-major is followed by a shot of Bolton holding his lover that changes from black and white to color.

While Rebecca Blake's treatment effectively connected musical and visual elements in this video, some of the elements, such as the one just described, may have overreached. In any case, such a melodramatic, affected setting certainly fueled some negative commentary about the amplified emotional content in Bolton's music. In addition, the absence of any performing instrumentalists, and Bolton lip synching the

song to the camera in a remote desert, creates a sense of artificiality. This is ironic considering that the song describes romantic feelings that connect to natural forces.

Because of the incongruity between visual and aural representation in music videos, some degree of artificiality always finds its way into the viewing experience – even mimicked live performances use the studio recording, and live footage is often excerpted from a performance. However, these videos still convey a sense of realness, of the performers communicating directly and sincerely to an audience, that more abstract interpretations often do not. "Live" videos hide the technological mediation of the video better, so that the viewer feels closer to the music and to a seemingly unmediated performance. Without the longstanding separation of music from the visual that Corbett describes, album covers and music videos would not fulfill as crucial a role, and would likely need to take a more clearly defined form.[102] As it is, Michael Bolton can perform "How Can We Be Lovers" from a fake stage, or "Steel Bars" from a compilation of live and fake-live clips, or "Said I Loved You…But I Lied" atop a desert mesa. A video does not fulfill its purpose as simple visual documentation of live performance. Rather, it works alongside other visual (and audio) media to market the music and its practitioners. As Corbett writes, music video is "a hybrid of radio and a record jacket."[103]

By fulfilling the visual component not available on the record or the radio, visual media convey many extra-musical associations. They allow the audience to determine genre associations, musical skill and commitment, as well the public persona that viewers and listeners engage with. Comparing the images of Michael Bolton in various stages of

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[102] John Corbett, "Free, Single, and Disengaged: Listening Pleasure and the Popular Music Object," 83-86.
[103] Ibid., 88.

his career and those of his videos, one gets a sense of how the audience was expected to perceive him. Just like the album covers above, the image in Figure 2.19 below suggests changes in both Bolton's musical approach and image, as well as changes in the popular music context starting in the mid-1990s.

Figure 2.19: Michael Bolton *Timeless: The Classics, Vol. 2*, 1997 Album Cover[104]

By the time he cut his hair (coinciding with a musical shift) in the late 1990s, Bolton's popularity had declined. Just as music alone could not bring him mainstream success, several factors contributed to the change in reception. These include the role of overall shifts in the popular music field, Bolton's various side-projects outside the realm of melodic rock and pop, and the role of journalistic criticism. The next section will discuss this process as it took place within the broader American social and political climate of this period.

[104] Discogs, "Michael Bolton *Timeless: The Classics Vol. 2* Album Cover," discogs.com. https://www.discogs.com/Michael-Bolton-Timeless-The-Classics-Vol-2/release/1535770 [accessed April 30, 2018].

Genre and Criticism

As noted previously, Bolton's rise to fame resulted from a shift in music and marketing. However, these changes would have meant less if they had not coincided with the public's interest in the kind of artist Bolton ostensibly became by the late 1980s. Al Teller's suggestions, then, included both what people wanted to hear from Bolton and what they wanted to hear in general. Bolton's choices in the mid-1990s, then, failed to meet his fans', and the general public's, expectations.

In part, the decrease in popularity can be explained as an example of what David Bracket describes as "the temporal, experiential, functional, and fleeting quality of genres."[105] These attributes come from the fact that genres cannot be defined through "direct, ono-to-one relationship[s]," but are instead constantly reshaped through changing relationships between musicians, consumers, and the industry. This results in the constant shifting between the acceptance of some styles of music, and public images, and the declining significance of others. Sometimes, these changing styles create different expectations for existing genres. Brackett notes that this can result in "a relabeling of the 'same' genre."[106] An artist whose style remains consistent in a changing environment may be relabeled, either to a different genre, or to an outdated iteration of the same genre.

For Michael Bolton, his mainstream position eroded as hip-hop, R&B vocalists, alternative rock, and other styles altered the landscape in the 1990s. Some listeners chose this music over his, while others joined the mass audience because they were drawn in by these different options. This influenced both radio playlists and sales. Considering the

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[105] David Brackett, "Introduction: They Never Even Knew," in *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Musi*c, 3.
[106] Ibid., 13.

shifting content of his albums, Bolton also may have alienated some fans who grew uncertain about what to expect from him. Releasing albums comprised mostly of covers – for example, *Timeless: The Classics* in 1992 and *This is the Time: The Christmas Album* in 1996 – interspersed with albums offering more original material – *The One Thing* in 1993 and *All That Matters* in 1997 – departed from behavior that had probably aided his success. Mostly original material, composed from a contemporary perspective, certainly generated a portion of his appeal, and at the very least avoided comparisons that come with making covers. It is also possible that the demographic he appealed to after his stylistic changed had aged into and then out of prominence as a consumer group, accounting for his rise and fall. Even though he clearly attempted to adapt his approach to reflect the smoother aesthetic popular at the time, while remaining familiar to his previous audience, this window of mass popularity had closed. Age may have also been a factor, since pop singers tend to enjoy a shorter shelf life than some rock artists.

When *All That Matters* was released in 1997, *Billboard* released a piece describing the production and style of the album in general, and the first single, "The Best of Love." Author Melinda Newman includes statements made by Bolton, and they describe his attempts to adjust to the musical climate while maintaining legitimate connections to his longstanding musical influences. To create this "fresh new Bolton" that he says reflects "part of where I am in my life," he worked with songwriters and producers that could help reshape his music to sound more current. Of these collaborations, he notes that "this album has a little more contemporary groove, which is my conscious attempt and my good fortune to have surrounded myself with people who are very in tune with what feels good today and what radio is playing today without

trying to make me something I'm not." These excerpts clearly indicate both internal and external motivations for making some degree of stylistic change. Like the shift in image and music to become more pop-friendly, Bolton was aware both of his own taste and that of his audience and tried to bring them together within the late 1990s mainstream.

Discussing his label Columbia's and radio's concerns, Newman details how attaining more mainstream radio play has become more difficult for Bolton and similar artists later in the 1990s, writing that "while [he] is very much a core artist at AC radio, like many adult male pop artists, he has found that space on top 40 radio has been tougher to guarantee."[107] Newman also quotes the senior VP of marketing for Columbia, Tom Corson, expressing a similar sentiment. Because radio programmers also go on record in this article discussing Bolton's bad reception over the years, perhaps the musical environment largely brought about this struggle for mainstream radio play (and thus also the struggle of single and album sales).[108] After all, Top 40 played his music earlier in the decade, and critical commentary on his contributions was negative then, too.

This sort of criticism is easy to find in the pages of *Rolling Stone*, a publication in which his name has been used more as an obvious substitute for "bad music" than as part of a discussion of style. Discussing the popularity of alternative rock acts, Michael Azerrad writes that "…perhaps rock fans are beginning to tire of canned, passionless music that sounds more like niche marketing than self-expression."[109] Azerrod cites Gary Gersh of Geffen Records as supporting Azerrod's assertion that alternative rock is more

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[107] Melinda Newman. "Bolton Shows What 'Matters,'" *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video,and Home Entertainment*, October 18, 1997, 14.
[108] Ibid., 20
[109] Michael Azerrad, "New Bands Strike Gold with Majors," *Rolling Stone*, August 20, 1992, 15.

authentic as musical expression and more connected to listeners' life experiences. Both credit the move away from previous selections to audiences coming to this realization, with Gersh stating, "Maybe they're sick of being force-fed Genesis and Michael Bolton and all of this nonsense."[110]

Bolton has offered some comments on his poor critical reception. In a dramatic expression of frustration, he described critics as "chimpanzees who throw paint on Rembrandts and Van Goghs" – a statement *Los Angeles Times* writer Patrick Goldstein writes was made upon finding out that "music writers backstage booed when he won a Grammy for Best Male Pop Vocal"[111] (in 1992 for his cover of "When a Man Loves a Woman"). Bolton described his position in a more measured tone during his 1995 interview with Charlie Rose, in which he suggested that the field of American music criticism lacked qualified personnel. Stating that some rock critics had been hired "by an editor that doesn't know anything about music," he concludes that such a person "shouldn't be writing about music of mine."[112] This mirrors the difficulty Clive Davis faced when attempting to get fair coverage for his artists. In a 1990 letter to Davis, the head *New York Times* pop music critic at the time, Robert Hilburn, responds to Davis's criticism by telling Davis that he was working to expand coverage for year-end top 10 lists and in general.

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[110] Ibid., 15.
[111] Patrick Goldstein, "92 Year in Review: Year of the Bare – And Other Fun Atrocities," *Los Angeles Times*, December 27, 1992.
[112] Michael Bolton, interview by Charlie Rose, *Charlie Rose*, December 12, 1995.

Citing his lack of personal interest in pop, he notes that he has chosen other writers who like the music to cover it because he knows that some readers will appreciate this content.[113]

Such neglect of pop artists by music critics relates to the earlier mention of alternative rock providing relief from "nonsense." And the perception of authentic versus artificial music described draws upon some longstanding practices within the music business. The previously described self-division of the public, and its subsequent reinforcement by the industry, clearly relates to the separation of "authentic" and "inauthentic music." As Negus writes, this happens over time, as "each emerging genre posits its own conventions of authenticity, which at the same time exposes previous conventions…"[114] Deena Weinstein writes that rock 'n' roll was defined against the music of the previous generation, but that rock and rock journalism defined themselves as part of the counterculture, and also through the "art-authenticity-commerce binary."[115] Lisa Lewis suggests that this ideology was "borrowed inappropriately from high-art culture," with the result that pop "was maligned as the creation of the commercial music industry…Pop artists were denied the status of artists because of their association with extreme popularity and commercial success."[116] As noted in the introduction, this criticism implied the disposition of audiences, too, the logic being that only dupes liked

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[113] Correspondence from Robert Hilburn to Clive Davis, November 12, 1990, ARC-0009, Box 1, Folder 1, Document 5, Rock and Hall of Fame Library and Archives, Cleveland, OH.
[114] Keith Negus, "Images, Identities, and Audiences: Marketing and Artist Development," in *Producing Pop: Culture and Conflict in the Popular Music Industry*, 77.
[115] Deena Weinstein, "Art Versus Commerce: Deconstructing a (Useful) Romantic Illusion," in *Stars Don't Stand Still in the Sky: Music and Myth*, ed. Karen Kelly and Evelyn McDonnell (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 59-60.
[116] Lisa Lewis, *Gender Politics and MTV: Voicing the Difference*, 29.

what had been defined by critics as artificial. Only recently has substantive (and positive) writing on pop become more common in popular music criticism. Perhaps most notably, artists such as Taylor Swift, Beyoncé, and Sam Smith have received mention as talented performers and songwriters, when in the past the coverage may have been more superficial and less favorable. Factors such as an increase in female critics, greater respect for female artists, and even some fans of earlier pop groups becoming music critics have contributed to this change.

Weinstein suggests that, as time has gone on, this "myth" is "less believable than it ever was," but is still supported "because too many people gain too many different things – money, identity, prestige, or a common critical standard – from it to give it up."[117] The failings of "authentic" rock, and other categories such as rap and indie, to remove themselves from the machinations of the industry have yet to be exposed to the same extent as pop. While Negus cites exposure of this artificiality to define the pop/rock binary, pretenses are also revealed as contextual factors change. For instance, when alternative rock groups signed major-label deals, sold millions of records, and enjoyed widespread radio play, they no longer seemed like an "alternative" to the mainstream. The musical and critical environment also facilitated Bolton's decreased popularity when these more "real" alternative rock groups first came along, and it explains, in part, the criticism he faced during the height of his pop stardom, since pop had long been subject to negative commentary.

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[117] Deena Weinstein, "Art Versus Commerce: Deconstructing a (Useful) Romantic Illusion," 68.

In addition, the association of pop with women, whose taste and lifestyle choices have been subject to ridicule, followed his work from 1987 on, and only served to highlight his place in the pop domain. As quoted previously, journalist Sheryl Garratt writes that "on the whole, the word 'fans,' when applied to women is derogatory. It is always assumed that they are attracted to a person for the 'wrong' reason, that they are uncritical or stupid."[118] Allison McCracken notes that a review of John Mayer in a 2003 issue of *Entertainment Weekly* "describes Mayer's female-only appeal" as "'firmly in the sensitive-singer-songwriter-whom-chicks-dig division" and cites "repeated references to the top teen idol Justin Bieber as a 'girl'" as an example of "misogynist and effemiphobic perspectives."[119]

Alternately, Holly Kruse writes that, while "most male critics are not blatantly sexist in their prose," an overwhelmingly male focus leads to "generalizing, patronizing, [and] objectifying terminology."[120] Even from Kruse's more forgiving perspective, the masculine point of view that has dominated music journalism has still influenced the way female fans and artists have been described. She writes that female popular music fans have often been portrayed in a negative light as people who irrationally devote themselves to their favorite artists.[121]

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[118] Ibid., 409.
[119] Allison McCracken, "Conclusion," in *Real Men Don't Sing: Crooning in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 319.
[120] Holly Kruse, "Abandoning the Absolute: Transcendence and Gender in Popular Music Discourse," in *Pop Music and the Press*, ed. Steve Jones (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 136.
[121] Ibid., 135.

McCracken's writing supports this, noting that descriptions of young female Justin Bieber fans as suffering from "Bieber Fever" "are indicative of a larger cultural discourse of patronizing, trivializing, sometimes hostile rhetoric consistently directed at this particular audience like no other in the mainstream media."[122]

Although this last comment relates to teenage females, commentary on adult women maintains this tone to a significant extent. An example of this appears in *The New Rolling Stone Album Guide*. In this collection of broad artist reviews, J.D. Constantine provides a relatively measured description of Bolton's oeuvre but writes that he released certain styles of music instead of those that the author prefers because "what his public preferred was…soppy emotionalism."[123] This suggests an audience that judges music with what Constantine views as poor taste, a perspective that can also indicate a lack of aesthetic sophistication. Related to this negative portrayal of Bolton's assumed audience, writing about VH1 in *Rolling Stone* has also been dismissive of this demographic. Regarding the upcoming launch of VH1 in 1985, author Erik Hedegaard describes the channel as "music video for housewives" in the title. Even though this interview of Bob Pittman (then-executive vice president of MTV Networks) allows him to acknowledge the "housewife" viewer in a positive manner, and to describe a diverse potential audience, the featured picture of Pittman (shown in Figure 2.20 below) is an unflattering one that clearly connects to the negative connotations of the article's dismissive title.

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[122] Allison McCracken, "Conclusion," in *Real Men Don't Sing: Crooning in American Culture*, 319.
[123] J.D. Constantine, "Michael Bolton," in *The New Rolling Stone Album Guide*, ed. Nathan Brackett and Christian Hoard (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 90-91.

Apparently, it takes a dopey-looking fellow such as this to hold such views about media targeted to adult women.[124]

Figure 2.20: Image of Bob Pittman, *Rolling Stone*, 1985

From the line of reasoning that Weinstein and Lewis describe comes the criticism of pop as apolitical culture created to provide mindless pleasure, which contrasts with the apparent import of rock and rap as agents that articulate activist viewpoints (making such music aesthetically superior through its association with a larger purpose and apparent separation from commerce).

[124] Erik Hedegaard, "MTV's VH1: Music Video for Housewives," *Rolling Stone*, January 17, 1985. https://www.rollingstone.com/tv/features/mtvs-vh-1-music-video-for-housewives-19850117 [accessed June 14, 2018].

Much maligned by such authenticity myths, Michael Bolton has made his political affiliations clear on numerous occasions: when he participated in the 1992 Rock the Vote campaign, [125] traveled with artists as part of the late 1980s Glasnost effort,[126] added vocal tracks to and participated in the music video for the Persian Gulf War-supporting "Voices that Care,"[127] and performed for Bill Clinton's 1992 inauguration.[128]

Pop culture of the 1980s and 1990s was replete with such instances of musicians, actors and other cultural influencers expressing political opinions through avenues that focused on resolving various crises. Perhaps the most widely accepted were those that highlighted the seriousness of a given situation and focused on suggested solutions rather than casting a critical eye, especially when the military was concerned. The documentary short for "Voices that Care" serves as an excellent example of this, since it showed Meryl Streep, Will Smith, and others supporting soldiers while avoiding criticism of the mission, the idea being that any critique would negatively affect soldiers risking their lives, and reflect badly on the American people. In "Voices that Care," protecting American solidarity is the objective. Given the number of celebrities involved as soloists, songwriters, or as choir support, this apolitical-political stance seems to have been the acceptable one for celebrities at the time.[129]

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[125] Kim Neely, "Group Gets Youth Vote on Bandwagon," *Rolling Stone*, August 20, 1992, 17; Melinda Newman, "Rock the Vote in High Gear With TV, Retail, Tour Drives," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, 14.
[126] Michael Bolton, *The Soul of it All: My Music, My Life*, 151.
[127] David Foster, Linda Thompson, and Peter Cetera. "Voices that Care." Giant. 1991. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ol6vr5_CY1o [accessed April 28, 2018].
[128] Michael Bolton, *The Soul of it All: My Music, My Life*.
[129] David Jackson, "Voices that Care," directed by David Jackson and James Yukich. February 28, 1991, documentary short, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch ?v=KJ1S_UNaWps [accessed April 28, 2018].

Bolton's involvement in this project highlights his involvement in supporting mainstream political views. Even if his affiliations were at times relatively progressive (such as his support of Bill Clinton), they sometimes downgraded the significance of the cause, rather than bolster Bolton's image. When Clinton, labeled the "first and rock & roll -generation president," by *Rolling Stone* and other sources,[130] selected Bolton to perform at his inauguration, one response was "…after all the proclamation that rock [&] roll had arrived at the White House, skeptics wondered how Michael Bolton and Kenny G got on the guest list."[131] That conclusions made about his music transferred to this realm invites an exploration of the political positions, or lack of them, possibly conveyed by both Bolton's statements and by his music.

Bolton's own stance on his music hints at limited progressivism and a flexible acceptance of how his listeners use his songs in their lives. In the quotations cited in the introduction, he seemed to support women for seeking out what they need in music, and very critical of emotionally unavailable men. Of course, he still assumes that what his female listeners need is a man, and that is why they listen to his music. In a more general sense, his statement in the Charlie Rose interview (quoted above), makes it clear that he derived satisfaction from making music that his audience drew significant meaning from.

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[130] Henry Schipper, "Clinton and Brown Sound Off," *Rolling Stone*, May 14, 1992, 17.
[131] Chris Mundy, "A Truly Democratic Party," *Rolling Stone*, March 4, 1993, 21.

While his intentions seemed admirable, his female fan base was not valued as a group making credible choices, with one radio programmer going so far as to note that other programmers had categorized him as a "womanizer."[132] The assumption was clearly that his appeal to women was through cynical manipulation, rather than honest expression.

Musically, the content that his audience appreciated could be described as emotionally vulnerable lyrics conveyed through distinctive vocals, with well-executed instrumental backing and solos. Songs like "How Can we be Lovers," and "Steel Bars" (which Bolton co-wrote with Bob Dylan) offered critiques about the realities of romantic relationships, while "Time, Love, and Tenderness" and "Ain't Got Nothing if You Ain't Got Love" make general statements about perseverance and interpersonal relationships. In terms of songwriting, Bolton's devotion to his craft rarely fails his audience, even if critics believe otherwise. They may criticize his pop orientation, his female fans, or his collaboration with other professional songwriters, but examination of his music suggests that this negative attention has been based more on deviance from standards of rock authenticity than on standards of musical composition and performance. With clear attention to lyrical and musical detail, each element sounds necessary within the overall aesthetic environment. For instance, the modal orientation and rock instrumentation in "How Can We Be Lovers" first effectively convey the seriousness described by the lyrics, and later express the rush that comes when the Bolton believes the problems are no longer insurmountable. The integration of lyrical and musical elements in "Said I Loved You…But I Lied" communicate the overwhelming experience of falling deeply in love.

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[132] Melinda Newman, "Bolton Shows what 'Matters,'" *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, 20.

Bolton's music has also faced scrutiny for a lack of obvious political import. However, many of these songs convey a sense of vague optimism fostered by the contemporary political and economic environment that communicated the importance of both personal and institutional responsibility. To some extent, this also reflects the sentiment of "Voices that Care," with the choral elements in many of his songs adding to a feeling of vague collectivity. The general message was that people need one another, so citizens need to hold themselves accountable for their behavior to support the United States.

This framework of generalized progressiveness was communicated by an emotionally vulnerable, yet physically masculine, heterosexual male. This traditional approach is even more obvious when Bolton treats more established romantic themes. "How am I Supposed to Live Without You," for instance, has Bolton asking a female friend how to go on without the prospect of their romantic involvement as though she shares some responsibility for his heartbreak. Although his disappointment is understandable, perhaps their lack of romantic involvement leaves him responsible for answering the question detailed in the chorus (and title). He does question his reliance on her in the second verse (discussed above), but even if he doesn't "blame" her, he emphasizes his loss, rather than her dream of love coming true. Furthermore, the focus in the chorus – the most recognizable part of the song – is on repeatedly asking what *he* is supposed to do. This portion of the song seemed to shape the video, since it ignores the platonic nature of the relationship, instead showing the two characters as a couple. Because of the variation in possible interpretations, some viewers may have assumed this reading even without engaging much with the video.

Because of the multivocality of interpretation, both men and women could have strongly identified with Bolton's character, by placing themselves in that situation of loss, and likely focusing on the chorus's lyrical content. Perhaps these women identify with Bolton's persona because he conveys what they would like to have expressed in a relationship, from both themselves *and* their partner. Of course, such views can be attributed to the imaginary nature of identification with music, since people can fit music to meet their needs, and even those who have never experienced such circumstances could react with sympathy. This recalls Barbara O'Dair's commentary by explaining, in part, how men frequently elicit such widespread connections, even among women. She notes that women often identify with the music made by men, even that which clearly communicates a masculine point of view, but men rarely do so when listening to music made by women. American men are perceived as representing America, while female citizens represent only each other.[133] This explains the appeal of Bolton's music to women who may, on some level, place themselves in the role he plays in his music and videos, even when the women in the video appear passive, irrational, or unfaithful.

Based on this variability of interpretation, an artist's intentions and audience reaction may not validate the assumptions of rock-oriented criticism of music and marketing. This puts accusations of Bolton's "womanizing," which labels his apparent pandering to an uncritical female audience, on shaky ground, since Bolton's appreciation of his fans could be sincere, and his audience could interpret his music and videos in many ways. Besides, to describe Bolton as a womanizer for appealing to a mostly female

[133] Barbara O'Dair, "Across the Great Divide: Rock Critics, Rock Women," *Stars Don't Stand Still in the Sky: Music and Myth*, 248.

demographic when rock is full of songs and public images that promote actual womanizing is an odd use of the term. Such comments seem designed less as accurate descriptions of an artist's intentions and impact than as statements intended to denigrate the taste of some listeners while elevating the choices of others.

Conclusion

Returning to the subject of genre, Simon Frith writes that it "is not determined by the form or style of a text itself but by the audience's perception of its style and meaning." However, he notes that consumers do not entirely define genre and popularity; rather, music and musicians, marketing, and other factors combine to continually reshape a "web of genre expectation."[134] It is within this "web" that genres acquire meaning, and in which that meaning changes or fades. An artist whose music and image resonated with millions can become an element of nostalgic or condescending recollections of past favorites. These comments on genre could be reframed as a discussion about taste – how all these factors shape who likes what and why.

In this vein, we return to the implicit question from the introduction: "Why do women like this?" Women (and, it should be noted, the mainstream audience in general) responded positively to this music, through sales and radio listenership, because it effectively communicates, through coordinated music and lyrics, powerful messages about significant life experiences, both those that test our perseverance and those that reward it. These songs and Bolton's image also conveyed a combination of conservative

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[134] Simon Frith, "Genre Rules," in *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 94.

and progressive viewpoints that coincided with contemporary mainstream political views. This made his music seem at once relevant and modern yet inoffensive.

Bolton's performance as a mainstream pop/rock icon who fervently commits to every note he writes and sings may inspire criticism from some, but his fans clearly find his commitment appealing. Whether lamenting lost love, celebrating newfound depths of emotional connection, or reaffirming the importance of interpersonal connections, Michael Bolton's aesthetic investment has drawn an audience that finds their own interpretation of authenticity within mainstream popular music. In doing so with this diversity of lyrical and musical content, he also added to the variety of material offered with the title "Adult Contemporary."

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CHAPTER THREE:
NOSTALGIA, APPROPRIATION, AND THE NEW RIGHT
IN EARLY 1990S POP

Introduction

You've got no one to blame for your unhappiness
You got yourself into your own mess
– "Hold On," Wilson Phillips

How can a person like me care
for you?
– "The Sign," Ace of Base

She's a hunter, you're the fox
The gentle voice that talks to you
Won't talk forever [1]
– "All That She Wants," Ace of Base

The lyrics above, from the songs "Release Me" and "Hold On" by Wilson Phillips and "The Sign" and "All That She Wants" by Ace of Base (respectively), were released by very different-sounding groups. However, all of these tracks articulate somewhat judgmental, even self-centered, approaches to handling interpersonal relationships – tactics that readily offer unsympathetic conclusions to often complicated situations. Despite these traits, or perhaps in part because of them, both Wilson Phillips and Ace of Base achieved massive commercial success with these songs' release. In fact, for Americans tuning into the radio or the television in the early to mid-1990s, it was difficult to escape this music, as it was disseminated to a mass audience on a range of radio formats, on MTV and VH1, as well as on award shows. By negotiating an

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[1] Chynna Phillips, Glenn Ballard, and Carnie Wilson, "Hold On," 1990, track one on *Wilson Phillips*, SBK, compact disc; Chynna Phillips, Wendy Wilson, and Carnie Wilson, "Release Me," 1990, track two on *Wilson Phillips*, SBK, compact disc; Joker and Buddha, "The Sign," 1993, track four on *The Sign*, Arista, compact disc; Joker and Buddha, "All That She Wants," 1993, track one on *The Sign*, Arista, compact disc.

American audience increasingly segmented by media and advertising strategies, and by the generally divisive politics of the period, these groups achieved popularity with both the "MTV generation" and an older adult demographic. Additionally, as this chapter explores, repetition likely played an important role in these songs' popularity: if one did not appreciate what these artists offered at first, heavy airplay could have converted a dissenter to a fan.[2]

Nonetheless, the work of Wilson Phillips and Ace of Base has drawn little scholarly attention, even though both groups' marketing and music deftly combined ideological elements from both the developing feminist movement and the continued influence of the New Right. This chapter begins to correct this oversight by demonstrating that Wilson Phillips's first two singles, "Hold On" and "Release Me," as well as two singles released by Ace of Base, "All That She Wants" and "The Sign," utilize a complicated approach to pleasing a conflicted American public by lyrically conveying both prevalent conservative ideals and suggestions of vulnerability, and by delivering these messages through compelling musical settings. On the one hand, the songs convey proclamations about putting oneself first, placing responsibility on the shoulders of those struggling, and reinforcing restrictive feminine morality. On the other, these messages also support a sense of personal toughness and adherence to more traditional ideals, both qualities that surely inspired many appreciative listeners who viewed these principles as significant gains of the Reagan era.

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[2] Jonathan Seabrook, "'Roar,'" in *The Song Machine: Inside the Hit Factory* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015), 303.

This content found an appreciative audience despite the influence of feminism's third wave in many cultural forms. In the field of popular music, the Riot Grrrl movement and the popularity of female singer-songwriters signaled the desire for, and recognition of, expressions of female experiences conceived and performed by women. The success of female punk groups like Bikini Kill and soloists such as Tori Amos highlighted the demand for a more comprehensive, and progressive, view of women's experiences and challenges, which were conveyed by women who clearly composed and performed as talented professionals. The work of Lori Burns, Mélisse Lafrance, Sara Cohen, Marion Leonard, Ron Moy and others have analyzed composition, authorship, marketing, and reception for such artists.[3]

The work of these scholars demonstrates that this area is far from neglected, even if the opportunity for further research remains. Pop-oriented groups whose songwriting role is less recognized, such as Wilson Phillips and Ace of Base, suggest another avenue for study. These two groups in particular achieved widespread popularity, acquiring a mainstream pop and Adult Contemporary audience, and their musical and political import deserves further study.

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[3] Lori Burns and Mélisse Lafrance, "'Close Readings' of Popular Song: Intersections Among Sociocultural, Musical, and Lyrical Meanings ," in *Disruptive Divas: Feminism, Identity and Popular Music* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 31-62; Lori Burns, "Vocal Authority and Listener Engagement: Musical and Narrative Expressive Strategies in the Songs of Female Pop-Rock Artists, 1993-95," in *Sounding Out Pop: Analytical Essays in Popular Music*, ed. Mark Spicer and John Covach (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 154-192; Sara Cohen,"Popular Music, Gender, and Sexuality," in *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 226-242; Marion Leonard,"Introduction," in *Gender in the Music Industry: Rock, Discourse, and Girl Power* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 1-22; Ron Moy, "Gender and Degrees of Popular Music Authorship," in *Authorship Roles in Popular Music: Issues and Debates* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 22-43.

This chapter will discuss how these two groups in particular suggest the varied lyrical and musical approaches used to convey conservative messages to a broad audience, highlighting both the mixture of material that can cross over to AC and the underlying acceptance of these social and political ideas in the early to mid-1990s.

As discussed in the previous chapter, progressive gains contrasted with the continued influence of the New Right. Even as women gained a greater voice in the workplace, they still struggled for equal pay and respect. Some fought assumptions that inspired detrimental welfare reform and public debate about poverty in general, and single mothers, sexual harassment, and domestic abuse more specifically. Though the 1980s has been highlighted as the decade of individual focus and greed, this zeitgeist seemed in many cases to survive through the 1990s as both institutions and individuals advanced the importance of self-reliance and self-centeredness. As Colin Harrison describes the period, resistance to the so-called cult of the victim, color-blindness, and feminism, and other policies and positions "were all manifestations of this work of remembrance and forgetting,"[4] particularly in terms of the progressive influence of the 1960s and 1970s counterculture.

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[4] Colin Harrison, "Introduction: The Intellectual Context," in *American Culture in the 1990s*, 13.

To properly consider the relevant subject areas, this chapter will discuss each one separately to some extent, while considering how the material produced by and for these groups fits within the broader context of the early 1990s, and more specifically within debates over authorship in popular music and the effects of various media formats. In this way, these elements receive more focused treatment that allows effective placement within the overall context.

First, “The Industry in the 1990s” discusses marketing and radio strategies in a broader sense. Second, “Lyrics, Interpretation, and Promotion in the 1990s” explores some potential messages these song lyrics conveyed within the political context, as well as more specific promotional strategies. Then, "Production, Musical Analysis, and the Authorship/Authenticity Debate” explores production and composition details and issues of authorship and authenticity in the pop realm. Next, “Music Video and Audience Competency” analyzes the music videos for these four songs to suggest the role of this form of media in interpretation. This section also suggests how various elements of this musical and visual material drew in different demographic groups based on their musical knowledge. Last, the conclusion discusses how aesthetic meaning can shift based on the material, the cultural context, and the media used.

The Industry in the 1990s

Both Wilson Phillips and Ace of Base attained popularity in a period described by music journalist Steven Knopper as the "post-CD boom."[5] In this period after the commercial introduction of the compact disc, CDs, from both back-catalogue reissues and new releases, sold in unprecedented numbers. From 1984-2000, artists as diverse as Barbara Streisand to Mötley Crüe signed multi-million-dollar contracts, and labels spent extravagantly to record and market performers and their releases. Much of the time, some of this money came out of an artist or group's royalties. Such is the case with Wilson Phillips, who benefitted from competition among labels to sign them. Label SBK (associated with EMI) won the group over by offering a $500,000 advance and eventually spent $5.65 million dollars to record and market their first album.[6]

Because of the amount of money required to successfully sign, record, and market an act, many record labels favored established artists (much like they had in the 1970s). As a new, untested group, Wilson Phillips no doubt landed their contract in part because of their familial connections. As the daughters of John and Michelle Phillips of the Mamas and the Papas, and Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys (respectively),[7] Chynna Phillips and Carnie and Wendy Wilson were often marketed with some connection to their parents. These associations were often highlighted in a way that suggested a degree of authenticity by lineage. In 1990, for example, *Rolling Stone* announced the group's

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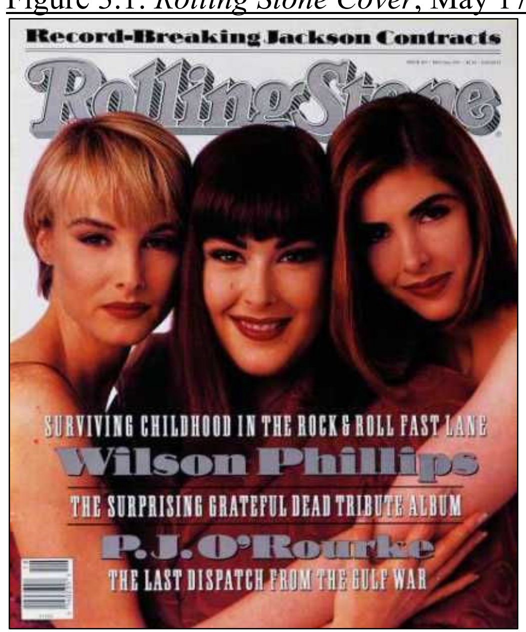
[5] Steve Knopper, "How Big Spenders Got Rich in the Post-CD Boom," in *Appetite for Self-Destruction: The Spectacular Crash of the Record Industry in the Digital Age* (New York: Free Press, 2009), 40.
[6] Ibid., 44-46.
[7] Steve Knopper, "How Big Spenders Got Rich in the Post-CD Boom," *Appetite for Self-Destruction: The Spectacular Crash of the Record Industry in the Digital Age*, 45.

arrival with an article titled "Wilson Phillips's California Dream,"[8] referencing both a popular Mamas and the Papas song and Chynna Phillips's parents. The next year, in the wake of the success of Wilson Phillips's eponymous first album, *Rolling Stone* featured the three singers on the magazine's cover (shown in Figure 3.1 below), accompanied by the title "Wilson Phillips: Surviving Childhood in the Rock & Roll Fast Lane." The title of the accompanying article, "California Girls," (by Christopher Connelly and Andrew Eccles) obviously recalls the title of a Beach Boys song, and the article itself describes the trio's "rock & roll childhood."[9]

Figure 3.1: *Rolling Stone Cover*, May 17, 1990[10]



[8] David Wild, "Wilson Phillips's California Dream," *Rolling Stone*, May 17, 1990.
[9] Christopher Connelly and Andrew Eckles, "California Girls," *Rolling Stone*, May 2, 1991.
[10] Rolling Stone, "Surviving Childhood in the Rock & Roll Fast Lane: Wilson Phillips," *Rolling Stone*, May 2, 1001, https://archive.rollingstone.com/#/2/829/C1/S [accessed July 25, 2018].

Regardless of the media's willingness to hype this heritage, the trio liked to appear reluctant to exploit these connections. In a 1990 radio interview, Chynna suggested – off-air – avoiding so much focus on their parents, a reaction to DJ Bob Case suggesting their "obvious" musical influence.[11] However, the rest of their marketing strategy, even the interview quoted in the previous paragraph, features the trio discussing their lifelong connections to not only their parents but also to other entertainment industry figures – and naming the group "Wilson Phillips" advertised their lineage to anyone who would recognize the significance of those names. *Rolling Stone* writer David Wild even describes them as "the princesses of West Coast rock royalty, the second coming of the California Dream."[12] Wild also quotes their lawyer and manager describing them as "real thoroughbreds"[13] and details a scenario for the group in which familial connections generated immediate and intense interest from the record and radio industries. Steve Knopper writes that "not long after the women formed a band, major labels bid for the right to sign them."[14]

Additionally, listening to their music, it is not difficult to assume that Wilson Phillips and their producer Glen Ballard intended to recall a rebirth of 1960s pop in the 1990s. By utilizing close vocal harmonies, prominent synthesizers, and relationship-oriented lyrics, this album creates a synthesis of past and contemporary musical styles and lyrical content that appealed to both a younger pop audience and to older AC

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[11] David Wild, "Wilson Phillips's California Dream," *Rolling Stone*.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Steve Knopper, "How Big Spenders Got Rich in the Post-CD Boom," *Appetite for Self-Destruction: The Spectacular Crash of the Record Industry in the Digital Age*, 45.
[14] David Wild, "Wilson Phillips's California Dream," *Rolling Stone*; Knopper, "How Big Spenders Got Rich in the Post-CD Boom," *Appetite for Self-Destruction: The Spectacular Crash of the Record Industry in the Digital Age*, 45.

listeners. Connelly and Eckles notes that many "cynics" made similar observations, describing the group as "the Hot Mamas with Papas, comely second-generation singers who've glided to mainstream success on a smooth surface of good looks and inoffensive harmonies, as well as on the public's gossipy curiosity about their more flamboyant fathers."[15] However, by stating their reluctance to cash in on their connections, the group suggests that they want to be recognized on their own merits – even when everything from music to marketing suggests otherwise.

Though these connections to the '60s encouraged broad acceptance with the 1990s music industry and audience, they did so in a period of intense oppositional politics known as the "culture wars." Though the actual issues were complicated, two basic sides argued over them: conservatives and progressives. The former believed that the United States had lost a once-unified culture due to the changes of the 1960s, while progressives continued to embrace multiculturism via identity politics. As scholar Andrew Hartman writes, supporters of the New Right worked to "repair" the damage by disparaging feminism and rolling back Great Society programs (among other methods), and progressives tried to preserve 1960s accomplishments and perhaps advance the agenda despite the influence of the neoconservatives.[16]

While Swedish group Ace of Base lacked the countercultural and industry connections of Wilson Phillips, they did earn the support of Arista executive and legendary record industry figure Clive Davis. Although they achieved success throughout much of Europe earlier in the 1990s, numerous U.S. labels turned the group down under

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[15] Christopher Connelly and Andrew Eckles, "California Girls," *Rolling Stone*.
[16] Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars*, 2.

the assumption that the material from their album *Happy Nation* would be unmarketable to American audiences. As music writer John Seabrook describes it, a period dominated by grunge, R&B vocalists, and rap "was not a propitious time to break a foreign synth-pop band in the United States."[17] When Davis heard the group, though, he immediately pursued them and worked to add potential singles to their first U.S. release.[18]

This effort was documented in a letter written by Davis in 1993, before the release of *The Sign* (basically *Happy Nation* with the added tracks). While producing different performances and edits, the band sent this material to Davis, who provided direction and encouragement. To this end, he commended the group's "understanding and flexibility regarding the US market"[19] and noted the "responsibility to treat seriously and responsibly to communicate what this special market is all about." Seabrook writes that Davis suggested recording a cover of "'Don't Turn Around,'" written by Diane Warren and Albert Hammond, as a potential outside hit, and adding a song that band member Jonas Berggren had recently written called "The Sign" to ensure that the album included more radio-friendly songs. These two songs would become two of the highly successful singles released from this album.[20] As Davis notes in his autobiography, "you need several hits to sell a pop album," explaining that "it's the depth of singles that makes the difference and sends sales through the roof."[21] He concludes that *The Sign* may have been moderately successful relying on the strength of "All That She Wants," but adding those

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[17] John Seabrook, "'The Sign,'" in *The Song Machine: Inside the Hit Factory*, 41.
[18] Ibid., 42-43.
[19] Correspondence from Clive Davis," October 25, 1993, Clive Davis Letters, ARC-0009, Box 1, Folder 1, Document 019, p 1.
[20] John Seabrook, "'The Sign,'" in *The Song Machine: Inside the Hit Factory*, 43.
[21] Clive Davis, "Sarah McLachlan, Ace of Base, and the Freewheeling Nineties," in *Clive Davis: The Songbook of My Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012), 419.

other potential singles allowed further releases to advertise the album on radio and television and increase sales. This strategy led to *The Sign* eventually selling ten million certified units, according to the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA).[22]

The Sign offers an even mix of reggae-influenced and electronic dance music-based tracks, but the songs released as singles in the U.S. were those offering the former style. This should come as no surprise, considering that more stylistically aggressive dance music was a rarity on 1990s radio. Some Ace of Base singles (including "All That She Wants") did perform well on dance charts, which suggests what American radio programmers provided for a dance-friendly audience.[23] In addition, as Larry Flick writes in a 1996 *Billboard* article, even the New York dance station WKRU avoided newer dance tracks, instead favoring "music made during the bygone days of polyester."[24] Material this old would not be included on the chart of current hits, so what we see on these tabulations is a collection of the newer songs in relation to one another, not in terms of overall radio play. Mid-tempo material, oriented around reggae timbres and rhythmic material and catchy vocal hooks, were favored over club-friendly dance tracks by radio, the American public, and, thus, Davis's Arista records.

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[22] Davis, "Sarah McLachlan, Ace of Base, and the Freewheeling Nineties,"420; Recording Industry Association of America, "Gold and Platinum: Ace of Base," https://www.riaa.com/gold platinum/?tab_active=top_tallies&ttt=TAA#search_section, [accessed July 23, 2018].

[23] "Hot Dance Music," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, October 30, 1993. This is one example of many of "All That She Wants" appearing on this chart.

[24] Larry Flick, "The 'Beat' of New York No Victory for Dance Community," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, February 24, 1996.

The fact that this song went on to reach the number two spot in *Billboard*'s Adult Contemporary chart highlights the mainstream orientation of such dance stations, while also suggesting the generic variety played on AC stations.[25]

As these songs were released, each one achieved widespread success, with most showing crossover from Hot 100 to Adult Contemporary on the *Billboard* charts and a great deal of appeal in other categories. "All That She Wants," the first single, even started its airplay journey on modern rock stations and moved through multiple formats.[26] The next three singles, "The Sign," "Don't Turn Around," and "Living in Danger" all achieved a great deal of success, with "The Sign" becoming the album's most successful release. Seabrook notes that this track "spent six weeks at number one [on the Hot 100] and was the top-selling single of the year."[27] Such results prove the success of Davis's strategy, as does Figure 3.2 below. This visual provides a compelling demonstration of this song's chart performance.[28] "The Sign" placed on the Hot 100 from January 1st of 1994 until October 8th of that year, and on Mainstream Top 40 from January 8th to July 9th.

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[25] "Ace of Base Chart History," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, https://www.billboard.com/music/ace-of-base/chart-history/adult-contemporary [accessed July 25, 2018].
[26] J.R. Reynolds, "Ace of Base a Good 'Sign' for Arista," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, February 12, 1994. Billboard, "Modern Rock Tracks," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, September 18, 1993. This chart also lists UB40's "Zooropa," suggesting a reggae trend.
[27] John Seabrook, "'The Sign,'" in *The Song Machine: Inside the Hit Factory*, 43-45.
[28] This figure presents performance for the charts on which this song was the most successful.

In fact, this song remained at number one on this chart from the week of February 12th to the week of March 14th – fourteen weeks.[29] From February 26th to July 9th, this song placed on all four of these charts.

Figure 3.2: Ace of Base, "The Sign" Chart Performance[30]

	Jan'94 Feb'94 March'94 April'94 May'94 June'94 July'94 Aug'94 Sept'94 Oct'94
Hot 100	1/1 | 68/100 3/12 | 1/100 10/8 | 50/100
Mainstream Top 40	1/8 | 38/40 2/12 | 1/40 7/9 | 20/40
Rhythmic Songs	1/29 | 35/40 4/9 | 4/40 7/23 | 30/40
Adult Contemporary	2/26 | 31/40 6/8 | 2/40 9/17 | 19/40

The popularity of Ace of Base may also be due to the group offering an alternative to the grunge that dominated American popular music at the time and even competed with rap and R&B for placement on the Rhythmic Songs chart.[31] This generated appeal to those resisting these genres, while also creating opportunities for airplay on more pop friendly charts, including Adult Contemporary (on which this song peaked at #2).[32]

Crossover clearly indicates the broader reach of a song, since it moves from a more youth-oriented audience to an older (and more female-oriented) group. It also keeps

[29] "Pop Songs, Week of May 14, 1994," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, https://www.billboard.com/charts/pop-songs/1994-05-14 [accessed November 25, 2019].
[30] "Ace of Base, 'The Sign' Chart History." *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*. https://www.billboard.com/charts/search?artist=ace+base&title=sign&label=&chart_name=&chart_date= [accessed November 25, 2019].

[31] "Rhythmic Songs, The Week of February 5, 1994," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, https://www.billboard.com/charts/rhythmic-40/1994-02-05 [accessed November 26, 2019].
[32] "Ace of Base Chart History," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment* [accessed January 29, 2019].

those songs playing longer, and this combination increases the potential for a single (and album) to sell, while also adding to licensing fees paid to songwriters. The 1990s was a particularly fruitful time for newer songs to cross over, as many of Joel Whitburn's lists in his monograph *Top Adult Contemporary: 1961-2001* indicate. Among the top twenty artists in the 1990s, all could be considered high achieving in the mainstream as well. Céline Dion, Mariah Carey, Elton John, Michael Bolton, and Rod Stewart make the top five, all of which had singles in rotation on more top-40 oriented formats (and rock stations as well in some cases).[33] *MTV News* writer Corey Moss writes that "AC peaked in the mid'90s," but when pop radio began playing material less suitable for AC the commonalities between the two format types diminished.[34] As David Brackett writes, "previously unexplored syntheses of genres can construct, or respond to, new (and very large) audiences."[35] Radio playlists demonstrate this fusion by combining songs with varied genre associations, but specific songs combine elements that can be identified with particular genres. This can reduce their appeal by incorporating certain features. For both Wilson Phillips and Ace of Base, a combination of generic features increased their audience, as their singles were a good fit for both pop and AC formats. In terms of AC success, the former group is number sixteen on Whitburn's "Top 20 Artists" list for AC in the 1990s, since both "Hold On" and "Release Me" reached number one on

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[33] Joel Whitburn, "Top 20 Artists: 1961-2001," in *Top Adult Contemporary: 1961-2001*, 322.
[34] Corey Moss, "Never a 'Bad Day': Adult-Contemporary Radio, Where Pop Hits Live Strong," *MTV News*, October 31, 2006, http://www.mtv.com/news/1544498/never-a-bad-day-adult-contemporary-radio-where-pop-hits-live-strong/ [accessed January 30, 2019].
[35] David Brackett, "Crossover Dreams: From *Urban Cowboy* to the King of Pop," in *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 302.

Billboard's Adult Contemporary chart.[36] Ace of Base placed several songs on this chart in the 1990s, with "The Sign" the most successful (reaching number two).[37]

Lyrics, Interpretation, and Promotion in the 1990s

As Seabrook, *Rolling Stone* reporter Rob Sheffield, and others have noted, Ace of Base's Swedish origin produced some of its notable idiosyncrasies, with oddly-worded lyrics perhaps the most notable quirks.[38] "All That She Wants" will serve as an example of these characteristics, as it provides a few obvious examples of awkward vocabulary that identified the group as foreign. At times, however, these lyrics inspired interpretations that were reflective more of 1990s American conservatism than the intentions of the group.

Seabrook points out that "the first verse sounds vague as if it has been translated from another language," singling out the phrase "catching tan"[39] for special attention (see Table 3.1 below).

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[36] Joel Whitburn, "Top 20 Artists: 1961-2001," in *Top Adult Contemporary: 1961-2001*, 322, 347.
[37] Joel Whitburn, "Artist Section," in *Top Adult Contemporary: 1961-2001*, 16; "Ace of Base Chart History" [accessed January 30, 2019].
[38] John Seabrook, "'The Sign," in *The Song Machine: Inside the Hit Factory*, 40; Rob Sheffield, "50 Best Song of the Nineties: From Britney spears and Ace of Base to Beck and Nirvana," *Rolling Stone* August 8, 2016, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/50-best-songs-of-the-nineties-252530/ace-of-base-the-sign-1994-247823/ [accessed July 23, 2018].
[39] John Seabrook, "'The Sign,'" in *The Song Machine: Inside the Hit Factory*, 40.

Table 3.1: Ace of Base, "All That She Wants," 1993[40]

Section	Lyrics
Introduction :00 – :29	She leads a lonely life She leads a lonely life
Verse 1 :30 – :51	When she woke up late in the morning light And the day had just begun She opened up her eyes and thought Oh, what a morning It's not a day for work It's a day for catching tan Just lying on the beach and having fun She's going to get you
Chorus 1 :52 – 1:11	All that she wants is another baby She's gone tomorrow, boy All that she wants is another baby All that she wants is another baby She's gone tomorrow, boy All that she wants is another baby
Post-chorus/Transition 1:12 – 1:33	All that she wants All that she wants
Verse 2 1:34 – 1:55	So if you are in sight and the day is right She's the hunter, you're the fox The gentle voice that talks to you won't talk forever It is a night for passion But the morning means goodbye Beware of what is flashing in her eyes She's going to get you
Chorus 2 1:56 – 2:15	All that she wants is another baby She's gone tomorrow, boy All that she wants is another baby All that she wants is another baby She's gone tomorrow, boy All that she wants is another baby — is another baby, yeah —
Interlude 2:16 – 2:35	Instrumental interlude

[40] Joker and Buddha, "All That She Wants," track one on *The Sign*, Arista, 1993, compact disc. All discussion of this song references this recording and album liner notes.

Table 3.1: Ace of Base, "All That She Wants," 1993

Chorus 3 2:36 – 3:33	All that she wants is another baby — is another baby She's gone tomorrow. boy All that she wants is another baby — is another baby, yeah — All that she wants is another baby — is another baby She's gone tomorrow, boy All that she wants is another baby — is another baby, yeah — All that she wants All that she wants

Neil Strauss pointed out in his 1994 *New York Times* review that many listeners interpreted this song as describing a woman looking to get pregnant, not a one night stand that leaves her lover hurt or (the intended meaning) a boyfriend.[41] In fact, a popular interpretation of this song, that its lyrics detail and warn about the practices of a "welfare queen" who uses men to get pregnant and then receive more public assistance, was even supported in the 2004 edition of *The New Rolling Stone Album Guide*. In his review of the group's contributions, Keith Harris writes that this song is a "welfare-state cautionary tale."[42] From a modern-day perspective, some interpretations seem more plausible than others. A perspective that inspires the "welfare queen" reading ignores the fact that this figure in American public life was typically black and urban or "white trash," and the lyrics do not describe such a person. Additionally, those who have watched the music video (discussed in-depth later) have seen a sophisticated, beautiful woman living in relative wealth.

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[41] Neil Strauss, "Pop Briefs: Ace of Base *The Sign*," *New York Times Late Edition*, April 17, 1994; Seabrook, "'The Sign," 40.
[42] Keith Harris, "Ace of Base," in *The New Rolling Stone Album Guide*, ed. Nathan Brackett and Christian Hoard (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 5.

That this misconception was common anyway is not as surprising considering the political climate of the time. As noted in the introduction, welfare reform had become a significant political, social, and economic issue in the United States by the 1990s, with the roots of the debate over its cost and effectiveness reaching back at least to the 1960s, when President Lyndon Johnson instituted his Great Society programs. Ronald Reagan's use of the "welfare queen" trope in his 1976 and 1980 campaign speeches also play into the misinterpretation of the song.[43] The contention among some Americans was that these government programs encourage aberrant behavior and discourage the disadvantaged from committing to the effort required for success.[44] Denials that historically disadvantaged groups needed or benefitted from governmental and social support was partially rooted in the idea that personal responsibility was the solution to discrimination, income inequality, and other problems. Colin Harrison writes that the "argument about the excessive amount of capital to be made out of reference to personal suffering . . . disabled political protest by representing it as individual complaint."[45] The fear that individuals used apparent disadvantages to avoid punishment for inappropriate, or even unlawful, behavior also promoted the rejection of various institutional programs. Though often portrayed as black and urban, the "welfare queen" also served as a broader symbol of someone who took advantage of the system by fraudulently requesting and receiving public assistance.

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[43] Gillian Brockwell, "She Was Stereotyped as 'The Welfare Queen.' The Truth was More Disturbing, a New Book Says," *The Washington Post*, May 21, 2910, https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2019/05/21/she-was-stereotyped-welfare-queen-truth-was-more-disturbing-new-book-says/ [accessed October 15, 2019].
[44] Colin Harrison, "Introduction: The Intellectual Context," in *American Culture in the 1990s*, 12-13.
[45] Ibid., 19.

Another likely interpretation of "All that She Wants," also seems to negatively portray the song's central character. Interpreting "baby" as "boyfriend"[46] in the context of this song could suggest that a conniving woman prefers a short-term relationship. The lyrics ominously warn the listener that "she's going to get you," describing the interaction with the line "she's a hunter you're the fox," and concluding that "the gentle voice that talks to you won't talk forever." Composed by men (group members Joker and Buddha) but sung by a woman (Linn), this interpretation of the song suggests that a predatory woman uses her charms to get what she wants, regardless of the personal cost to the men she encounters. Fearing a promiscuous woman seems directly related to the backlash against feminism that began in earnest in the 1980s and continued to some extent through the 1990s. It also reveals a clear double standard, since promiscuous, emotionally unavailable, "love 'em and leave 'em" men have often been portrayed as heroes in popular culture. Of course, these lyrics could encourage varied responses, but the two suggested seem the most likely, and are directly related to significant American issues in the 1990s: welfare reform and feminism.

Compared to "All that She Wants," the contemporary reception of Wilson Phillips's 1990 hit "Hold On" seems bland by comparison. This song reflects an intersection of references to both postfeminist and neoliberal ideologies and vocal and accompanimental elements that situated the group as both modern and historically oriented. Many listeners have considered the vague life guidance in this song uplifting, but an in-depth, contextually informed interpretation suggests that the lyrics articulate alignment with anti-victim discourse, which casts doubt on victims' quality of character

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[46] John Seabrook, "'The Sign,'" in *The Song Machine: Inside the Hit Factory*, 34-36.

and their claims, in the end suggesting private causes and solutions for what are often public problems. Those interpreting the song's lyrics as supportive may have favored this approach, finding it more constructive than offers of assistance. For those on the other side of the issue, the song's arrangement may have softened the message enough to encourage a more upbeat reading.

From the first perspective, this song offers welcome assertions of personal responsibility. Wendy Wilson validates this interpretation, writing in a 2015 interview that this song "was about liberty and empowerment. Being strong as a female and turning a negative into positivity. Anyone could relate, really."[47] Encouraging an individual to take responsibility for circumstances they have created can certainly prove helpful, especially with a reminder that the maker of these mistakes may be capable of rectifying them. However, the message conveyed by the lyrics, reflects a common myopic focus on personal responsibility. Feminist scholar Rory Dicker writes that this became a cornerstone of postfeminist philosophy. She states that the "so-called 'postfeminist generation'" felt that issues of inequality should be handled individually.[48] Susan J. Douglas describes this as "self-improvement, self-help, private solutions to public problems"[49] and notes that this approach "erases the need for continued feminist politics" and encourages a "solitary, narcissistic process, not a mass, cooperative one"[50]. "Hold

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[47] Kelsey McKinney, "Throwback Thursday: Talking to Wilson Phillips About How 'Hold On' Went to Number One 25 Years Ago," *Splinter*, Jun 4, 2015, https://splinter news.com/throwback-thursday-talking-to-wilson-phillips-about-ho-1793848147 [accessed August 3, 2018].

[48] Rory Dicker, *A History of U.S. Feminisms*, 108.

[49] Susan J. Douglas, *The Rise of Enlightened Sexism* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2010), 149.

[50] Ibid., 150.

On" appealed to both men and women, but Wendy's statement suggests the group's focus was on women's issues via the postfeminist approach, and thus a somewhat conservative orientation. The song's message resonated with 1990s audiences and facilitated "Hold On" reaching number one on both the Hot 100 and Adult Contemporary charts. This single also sold enough copies to achieve "Gold" certification by the RIAA.[51]

Table 3.2: Wilson Phillips, "Hold On," 1990[52]
*Content in parentheses not present on single version

Verse 1 :15 – :46	I know this pain Why do lock yourself up in these chains? No one can change your life except for you Don't ever let anyone step all over you Just open your heart and your mind Is it really fair to feel this way inside?
Chorus 1 :47 – 1:16	Someday somebody's gonna make you want to Turn around and say goodbye Until then baby are you going to let them Hold you down and make you cry Don't you know? Don't you know things can change Things'll go your way If you hold on for one more day Can you hold on for one more day Things'll go your way Hold on for one more day

[51] "Wilson Phillips Chart History," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, https://www.billboard.com/music/wilson-phillips/chart-history [accessed July 24, 2018]; Recording Industry Association of America, "Gold and Platinum: Wilson Phillips," https://www.riaa.com/gold-platinum/?tab_active=default-award&se=wilson+phillips#search_section [accessed July 24, 2018].
[52] Chynna Phillips, Glenn Ballard, and Carnie Wilson, "Hold On," track one on *Wilson Phillips*, SBK, 1990, compact disc. All discussion of this song references this recording and album liner notes.

Table 3.2: Wilson Phillips, “Hold On,” 1990, Continued

Verse 2 1:17 – 1:25	You could sustain Or are you comfortable with the pain? You've got no one to blame for your unhappiness You got yourself into your own mess Lettin' your worries pass you by Don't you think it's worth your time To change your mind?
Chorus 2 1:26 – 1:57	Someday somebody's gonna make you want to Turn around and say goodbye Until then baby are you going to let them Hold you down and make you cry Don't you know? Don't you know things can change Things'll go your way If you hold on for one more day Can you hold on for one more day Things'll go your way Hold on for one more day
Bridge 1:58 – 2:27	I know that there is pain But you hold on for one more day and Break free the chains Yeah I know that there is pain But you hold on for one more day and you Break free, break from the chains
Chorus 3/Breakdown 2:28 – 2:44	Someday somebody's gonna make you want to Turn around and say goodbye Until then baby are you going to let them Hold you down and make you cry Don't you know? Don't you know things can change Things'll go your way If you hold on for one more day yeah If you hold on

Table 3.2: Wilson Phillips, "Hold On," 1990, Continued

Outro 3:13 – 3:40 (4:27)	Don't you know things can change Things'll go your way If you hold on for one more day Can you hold on Can you hold on Mmm…If you hold on baby (Hold on for one more day, 'cause It's gonna go your way Don't you know things can change Things'll go your way If you hold on for one more day, yeah Can't you change it this time Make up your mind Hold on, hold on Baby hold on…turn around, just turn around baby Hold on for one more day, 'cause It's gonna go your way…)

Examining the lyrics (see Table 3.2 above), lines conveying both empathy and tough love supports the conclusions described above. For instance, lines like "I know this pain" (in the first verse) and "Don't you think it's worth your time / To change your mind?" convey personal relatability and individual potential – as though having experienced a similar situation, the speaker understands these difficulties and believes in the addressee's power to improve conditions. Locking oneself in "chains" makes it clear that these struggles and limitations were not imposed from outside. Mention of locking oneself in "chains" in verse one relates the assumption that outside forces did not contribute to the situation. Later in verse one, the line "Don't ever let anyone step all over you" suggests that others have taken advantage of this person because he or she has been too passive. It may be that blame is at least shared with a more powerful person or institution, but whether restraining oneself or being walked over, the struggling individual bears responsibility for these problems and their solutions.

Lines like these also suggest opposition to a claim of victim status, since the focus on personal failings and solutions overrides the contextual considerations the addressee might face.

Many of these lyrical examples highlight the shared influence of individualism between postfeminist and anti-victim ideologies. Both of these ideologies place the responsibility for problem resolution on victims, thus discouraging collective action. As stated previously, scholar Colin Harrison writes that in the 1990s this critique of victim status avoided exploration of economic or social issues, since it "disabled political protest by representing it as an individual complaint"[53] Political science scholar Alyson M. Cole describes this ideology as a "radical neoliberal inversion of the 'personal is political,'" in which "political demands are belittled by casting them as matters of personal attitudes or feelings, as individual defects or faults, thereby delegitimizing collective, political solutions."[54]

Thus, this approach centers culpability on victims. As Cole writes, the term "victim" was used by many writers in the 1990s to alter the meaning of the term: "Individuals and groups who claim to have been victimized are portrayed as impotent, manipulative, self-indulgent, helpless, hopeless dependents," with a "tendency to blame others (often society as a whole) for their plight."[55] Under these terms, victims cause their own problems, but blame others, and often exploit the situation to acquire resources

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[53] Colin Harrison, "Introduction: The Intellectual Context," in *American Culture in the 1990s*, 19.
[54] Alyson M. Cole, "Embittered Subjects: The New Politics of Blaming the Victim," *Eurozine*, 2011, https://www.eurozine.com/embittered-subjects/ [Accessed 21 June 2019], 40-41.
[55] Ibid., 29

(likely in the form of welfare or affirmative action). They may engage in purportedly unnecessary and socially disruptive collective action as well – hence the significance of anti-victim discourse in the culture wars.[56] "Hold On" hints at alignment with some elements of this perspective; for example, "Or are you comfortable with the pain?" in verse two suggests this point of view by implying that the addressee enjoys victimhood, and ignoring the context to justify directing attention to the victim as the willing cause of their own pain.

In fact, the passionate disseminators of anti-victim discourse often focused on the idea of victim status as desirable to some. Charles J. Sykes writes in his 1992 book *A Nation of Victims: The Decay of the American Character*, that "portraying oneself as a victim has become an attractive pastime."[57] At many points in his book, Sykes cites the most egregious examples of victimization claims to portray individuals and groups as either incapable of accepting responsibility or manipulative to the point of generating crises to benefit from the consequent political or legal repercussions.[58] In a chapter called "The Sexual Nightmare," he utilizes this approach to define feminist issues by work produced by the movement's most radical representatives.[59] From this perspective, many of the problems women in the 1990s faced were in fact exacerbated by feminists, and what Douglas describes as "persistent structural inequalities"[60] are too insignificant to have inspired resistance to the status quo.

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[56] Colin Harrison, "Introduction: The Intellectual Context." In *American Culture in the 1990s*, 19

[57] Charles K. Sykes, *A Nation of Victims: The Decay of the American Character* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), xiii.

[58] Ibid., 3-6

[59] Ibid., 175-196.

[60] Susan J. Douglas, *The Rise of Enlightened Sexism*, 150.

To this effect, the choruses combine rejection of feminist principles with assumptions of victim responsibility, most notably with the lines “Until then baby are you going to let them/Hold you down and make you cry.” The suggestion that one might “let” this happen suggests that the victim is in a sense a willing participant and ultimately responsible for their mistreatment by someone capable of literally or figuratively “holding them down.” The victim is supposedly meant to be motivated to change, as though that will resolve these issues. On the other hand, the chorus later suggests that holding on for “one more day” will solve these problems, thus contradicting the calls to action. According to this statement, with patience (and likely some privilege) “things will go your way” if you wait long enough.

Both “Hold On” and “All That She Wants” had the potential to recall, in particular, two prejudices and misunderstandings common when these songs were released: that of the disdainful woman having babies to receive a bigger welfare check, and that of the person suffering because of their own poor choices. Perhaps for some listeners, these textual interpretations generated some of the appeal of these songs. However, these songs also appear to treat the situations of women with a degree of ambivalence. “Hold On” offers vaguely defined support while placing blame on the protagonist, and “All That She Wants” articulates a somewhat musically upbeat but lyrically critical perspective on a potentially promiscuous woman without suggesting that men should be held to the same standard. Perhaps in this socially conservative period these strategies were meant to address these issues in ways that allowed for multiple interpretations.

Aside from consonance with conservative contemporary politics, another possibility for these songs' success is that they were played and discussed so much. Seabrook sites a 2011 study that concluded that "familiarity with a song reflexively causes emotional engagement; it doesn't matter what you think of the song."[61] Songs in heavy and widespread radio and video rotation create acceptance through repetition. As previously noted, "All That She Wants" experienced success as a single in part because the song played on various radio formats (and, later, video). As Rick Bisceglia, then-senior VP of promotion for Ace of Base's label Arista describes it, the succession moved from modern rock "to top 40/mainstream, then to top 40/rhythm-crossover…After that we got play from MTV and VH-1. Then the song was picked up by Adult Contemporary stations."[62] Since AC stations tend to mix some newer songs with already-proven hits that fit within the stylistic range of the station's sub-format (hot AC, etc.),[63] AC play can demonstrate both a song's suitability for the format and its ubiquity.

Achieving this kind of airplay often requires coordination of various efforts. As described in Chapter One, before the massive radio consolidation that occurred after the passage of the Telecommunication Act of 1996, more station owners throughout the country meant that promotional strategies anticipated local and regional response to a record as well as the resources required to encourage multiple station programmers to play a song enough to create demand. Keith Negus summarizes the process as follows: "First, artists, or specific recordings, are defined in terms of a particular radio format.

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[61] John Seabrook, "'Roar,'" in *The Song Machine: Inside the Hit Factory*, 303.
[62] J.R. Reynolds, "Ace of Base a Good 'Sign' for Arista," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*.
[63] William A. Richter, "Radio Comes of Age," in *Radio: A Complete Guide to the Industry* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 63.

Relevant stations are then targeted, with the aim of 'crossing over' from one format to another and eventually gaining airplay on CHR and across the various formats."[64]

As noted in the previous chapter, Gabriel Rossman writes that moving from one format to another creates longevity for a track, allowing it to move to a different format once that demographic's listeners have heard enough repetitions.[65] It also means that early 1990s industry personnel were constantly trying to move songs to new formats to increase longevity and breadth of coverage.[66] This required the services of independent radio promoters, who used millions in record industry money to influence radio programmers to play songs. Even though the United States government and press has punished some for pay-for-play at various points, with the notorious payola scandal of the 1960s standing out, the practice remained common. Because of this, without paying individuals with contacts and influence in the radio industry to reach out to radio programmers, a song was unlikely to get radio play. This made indie promoters indispensable, and the money they received from record labels among these companies' largest expenses. In part, the huge profits for promoters were a result of the financial health of the music business in the 1990s. Promotor Bill Scull claimed that the labels were "full of cash. They were at their peak" and that "the labels just thought they had to

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[64] Keith Negus, *Producing Pop: Culture and Conflict in the Popular Music Industry* (London: Edward Arnold, 1992), 104.
[65] Gabriel Rossman, "But Which Chart Do You Climb?" in *Climbing the Charts: What Radio Airplay Tells Us About the Diffusion of Innovation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 104.
[66] Keith Negus, *Producing Pop: Culture and Conflict in the Popular Music Industry*, 104

keep up with the Joneses. If the next-door neighbor had indie promotion, and they didn't, they would have gotten screwed."[67]

Negus notes that, in addition to hiring independent radio promoters, getting a record played also often involved the group themselves performing live and sitting for interviews at radio stations throughout the country. This was certainly the case with Wilson Phillips upon the release of *Wilson Phillips*. A portion of David Wild's "California Dream" article in *Rolling Stone* describes such a process – group members travel the country to discuss the album, and to some extent their personal backgrounds, at various radio stations. They also attend promotional events, including the Gavin Seminar, a radio convention at which various artists and industry personnel work to advertise themselves, by meeting and making impressions on the right people.[68]

For "Hold On," this effort clearly paid off. The March 17, 1990 issue of *Billboard* notes that it was the "third-most-added record of the week, with 70 adds fueling a strong debut at No. 74" on the Hot 100.[69] This momentum led to this song eventually reaching number one. For Ace of Base, the popularity of "All That She Wants," and sales of the group's album, led to the second single "The Sign" achieving even greater popularity.[70] Bisceglia of Arista notes that "the inroads established at radio by the first single paved

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[67] Steve Knopper, "How Big Spenders Got Rich in the Post-CD Boom," in *Appetite for Self-Destruction: The Spectacular Crash of the Record Industry in the Digital Age*, 66-73.
[68] David Wild, "Wilson Phillips's California Dream," *Rolling Stone*.
[69] Michael Ellis, "Hot 100 Singles Spotlight," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, March 17, 1990.
[70] J.R. Reynolds, "Ace of Base a Good 'Sign' for Arista."

the way for airplay of 'The Sign,'" concluding that "all formats began playing the record at the same time, and reactions to 'The Sign' were strong."[71]

In addition to making personal appearances, Negus notes that the process can include creating different mixes of the same song to appeal to different radio formats, or even different regions of the country.[72] Anticipating the release of Ace of Base's second album, Clive Davis writes about the need for the single "Beautiful Life" to have "killer remixes at the start so we can offer hipper versions that provide edge, especially rhythm crossover cutting edge, and major underground club appeal as well." He noted that all the mixes "serve a separate purpose," allowing the same song to achieve success on different radio formats and in different venues.[73] This level of planning and promotion helped to separate these groups and their music from the rest of the field, resulting in both cultural eight and massive sales.

As already noted, Ace of Base's second single "The Sign" achieved widespread and long-lasting popularity. Wilson Phillips's second single "Release Me" was also widely played, eventually earning a Gold RIAA certification.[74] An advertisement in the June 23, 1990 issue of *Billboard*, displayed in Figure 3.3 below, highlights the method of associating a newly released single with one previously released, as well as with the associated album.[75] While these songs were released almost four years apart, they both

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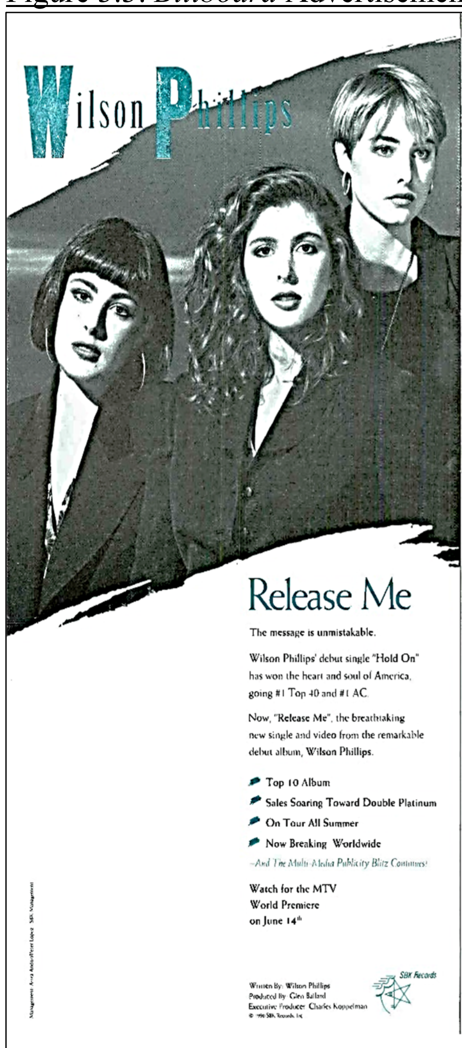
[71] Ibid.
[72] Keith Negus, *Producing Pop: Culture and Conflict in the Popular Music Industry*, 104.
[73] Clive Davis, "Fax from Clive Davis to Gary Barlow," August 6, 1998, Clive Davis Letters, ARC-0009, Box 1, Folder 1, Document 014, p 2-3.
[74] RIAA, "Gold and Platinum: Wilson Phillips," https://www.riaa.com/gold-platinum/?tab_active=default-award&se=wilson+phillips#search_section [accessed July 24, 2018].
[75] "Wilson Phillips Advertisement," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, July 23, 1990, 75.

achieved widespread popularity in the early 1990s, in part through conveying the common theme of moving on from a relationship in a somewhat insensitive manner.

Figure 3.3: *Billboard* Advertisement, June 23, 1990



Wilson Phillips's second single "Release Me" likely found an eager audience in part because of some similarity to "Hold On." Lyrically, this includes a version of victim blaming, but one that conveys a speaker-focused perspective. Essentially, the song describes a struggle to end a relationship.Verse one indicates that ending the relationship is far from ideal but necessary: "I don't wanna give up, but baby / It's time I had two feet

on the ground." (See Table 3.3 below for a formal outline of the album version.) Verse two fleshes out more details of the situation: the addressee's troubles have wounded the speaker, who feels conflicted nonetheless: "Ohhh, if you'd have come down from your high / Would we've been all right?" Wondering what could have been suggests a lack of closure, even with the blame placed on someone else. Verse three adopts an assertive tone like that of the choruses, declaring a firm end to the relationship from a decisive forward-oriented perspective: "I'm not going back to you anymore/Finally my weakened heart is healing though very slow." This statement demonstrates how a focus on one's individual needs can inspire selfishness and a lack of empathy, since the addressee's problems are only understood in terms of how they affect the speaker.

Table 3.3: Wilson Phillips, "Release Me," Album Version, 1990[76]

Section	Lyrics
Introduction 1a :00 – :14	I know that it's time for a change Mmm but when that change comes Will it still feel the same?
Introduction 1b :15 – :28	Add keys and synth to vocals ← Single/video begins here
Verse 1 :29 – :47	How many times have I tried To turn this love around? I don't wanna give up but, baby It's time I had two feet on the ground
Refrain 1 :48 – :58	Can you release me? Can you release me?
Verse 2 :59 – 1:17	Now that you're gone I can't help myself from wondering Ohh, if you'd have come down from your high Would we've been all right?
Refrain 2 1:18 – 1:28	Release me Can you release me?

[76] Chynna Phillips, Wendy Wilson, and Carnie Wilson, "Release Me" track two on *Wilson Phillips*, SBK, 1990, compact disc. All discussion of this song references this recording and album liner notes.

Table 3.3: Wilson Phillips, "Release Me," 1990, Continued

Chorus 1 1:29 – 2:07	Come on, baby, come on, baby You knew it was time to just let go 'Cause we wanna be free But somehow it's just not that easy Come on, darlin', hear me, darlin' 'Cause you're a waste of time for me I'm trying to make you see That baby, you've just got to release me
Refrain 3 2:08 – 2:17	Release me Release me
Verse 3 2:18 – 2:39	I'm not going back to you anymore Finally my weakened heart is healing Though very slow So stop coming around my door 'Cause you're not gonna find what you're looking for
Chorus 2 2:40 – 3:19	Ohh, come on, baby, come on, baby You knew it was time to just let go 'Cause we wanna be free Somehow it's just not that easy Oh, oh, oh, baby Come on darlin', now, hear me darlin' 'Cause you're a waste of time for me I'm trying to make you see That baby, you've just got to release me
Bridge 3:20 – 3:31	Now tell me What is this power you've got on me? What is this power? Ohh
Chorus 3 3:32 – 4:10	Come on, baby, come on, baby You knew it was time to just let go 'Cause we wanna be free But somehow it's just not that easy Oh, oh, oh, oh, baby Come on darlin', now, hear me darlin' 'Cause you're a waste of time for me I'm trying to make you see That baby, you've just got to release me ← Single/video ends here
Refrain 4 4:11 – 4:30	Can you release me? Can you release me?
Outro 4:31 – 4:41 [Fade-Out 4:42 – 4:56]	Release me, release me Release me, will you release me? Ahh, release me Release me, will you release me?...

The tone of the refrains contrasts most dramatically with the that of the choruses and the third verse, gently asking "can you release me," or shortening the line to "release me." These lyrics place the responsibility for action on the addressee, who has seemingly victimized the speaker with poor decision-making and is responsible for the severing of ties. However, if this song is hypothetically considered a thematic companion to "Hold On," maybe the speaker should accept that the resolution is entirely her responsibility. According to that song's lyrics, one becomes a victim by letting it happen. Alternatively, one could view "Release Me'" as a counterpart to "Hold On" that demonstrates the complexity of struggle and pain: "Hold One" argues for the power of individual action, while "Release Me" (this phrase in particular) suggests that power for change sometimes involves more than the choices of one person.

As if to highlight the two-way nature of romantic entanglements, the phrase "release me" also completes each of the choruses, which is significant since the single edit (the version used in the music video) ends with this phrase in the climactic last chorus. It also points to the long-recognized strategy of performing the song title both frequently and toward the ending, to help listeners remember what to buy. While this method is not novel to this song, its execution here is somewhat unusual, since the first chorus arrives a minute and thirteen seconds in. The refrains are what repeat the song's title and create space between verses before this point. In the album version (outlined in Table 3.3 above), this material comprises the outro and fade-out sections, which together add over a minute to the song and emphasize a lack of resolution.

"The Sign" by Ace of Base also reflects on ending a relationship, but does so after a longer period of time that has allowed the narrator to reflect on the situation. Ostensibly, all attachment has eroded, and the narrator expresses satisfaction with the outcome. Verse one (see Table 3.4 below) highlights this lightness of mood, starting with the lines "Ah, I got a new life / You would hardly recognize me / I'm so glad." The clarity of this sentiment ends with the next line: "How could a person like me care for you?" The entire song seems hypothetically directed at the former lover, suggesting that the protagonist is trying to fulfill a need for closure by making condescending remarks toward their former other half. A true "sign" of moving on is no longer feeling absorbed by the need to declare independence and superiority. The singer claims to have dragged herself "up to the light," and wonders where the former lover belongs. Presumably one must struggle without assistance on this venture, and the ex may not belong in the "light." This seems like cold and petty reasoning for someone who is "happy now" that the relationship is over.

Table 3.4: Ace of Base, "The Sign," 1993[77]

Introduction 1a :00 – :09 Introduction 1b :10 – :31	Drum machine, etc. Synth, bass, keys [Whoa, oh, yeah]
Verse 1 :32 – :51	Ah, I got a new life You would hardly recognize me I'm so glad How could a person like me care for you? (Ah) Why do I bother When you're not the one for me Ooh, is enough, enough

[77] Joker and Buddha, "The Sign," track four on *The Sign*, Arista, 1993, compact disc. All discussion of this song references this recording and album liner notes.

Table 3.4: Ace of Base, "The Sign," 1993, Continued

Chorus 1 :52 – 1:13	I saw the sign and it opened up my eyes I saw the sign Life is demanding without understanding I saw the sign and it opened up my eyes I saw the sign No one's gonna drag you up to get into the light where you belong But where do you belong?
Re-intro 1 1:14 – 1:23	Intro. 1b material
Verse 2 1:24 – 1:43	Ah, Under the pale moon For so many years I've wondered who you are How could a person like you bring me joy? Under the pale moon Where I see a lot of stars Ooh is enough, enough?
Chorus 2 1:44 – 2:05	I saw the sign and it opened up my eyes I saw the sign Life is demanding without understanding I saw the sign and it opened up my eyes I saw the sign No one's gonna drag you up to get into the light where you belong... But where do you belong?
Re-intro 2:06 – 2:25	Intro 1b material with simple synth flourishes and steel drum elements
Bridge 2:26 – 2:35	Oh, oh-oh
Chorus 3 2:36 – 2:45	I saw the sign and it opened up my mind And I am happy now living without you I've left you, oh-oh-oh I saw the sign and it opened up my eyes I saw the sign No one's gonna drag you up to get into the light where you belong
Outro 2:46 – 3:11	I saw the sign - I saw the sign I saw the sign I saw the sign - I saw the sign I saw the sign - I saw the sign I saw the sign! And it opened up my eyes I saw the sign!

This interpretation of the song suggests a bittersweet perspective of one who has not quite resolved the issues wrought by the relationship. John Seabrook writes that such "an air of melancholy" in songs that seem cheerful is "a uniquely Swedish quality."[78] The material allows for a more complicated reaction to a difficult situation – understanding oneself with and without a significant other – within the context of a pop song. Perhaps this partially explains why "The Sign" acquired so much popularity, spending six weeks on at No.1 on the Billboard Hot 100,[79] and has appeared on numerous 1990s flashback lists. For example, the song is discussed in *Billboard*'s 1999 article "Totally '90s Diary of a Decade" and appears as number forty-two of *Rolling Stone*'s "50 Best Songs of the Nineties" list from 2016.[80]

Production, Musical Analysis, and the Authorship/Authenticity Debate

Of course, more than lyrics and clever marketing must account for any song's appeal. Musical factors such as form, timbre, and harmony also influence how a song suggests a range of meanings, and these elements are often crafted through complex production processes. Each of the songs described above creates a purposeful and distinct aural environment with the potential to add to lyrical interpretation. Performers and songwriters contribute a great deal, but in many cases producers have been so significant

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[78] John Seabrook,"'The Sign,'" *The Song Machine: Inside the Hit Factory*, 37.
[79] Ibid., 45.
[80] Geoff Mayfield, "Totally '90s: Diary of a Decade," December 25, 1991;Rob Sheffield, "50 Best Song of the Nineties: From Britney spears and Ace of Base to Beck and Nirvana," *Rolling Stone*, August 8, 2016, *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*.https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/50-best-songs-of-the-nineties-252530/ace-of-base-the-sign-1994-247823/ [accessed July 23, 2018].

that some songs may never have achieved the same level of success had they not been arranged so skillfully.

A great deal of criticism of pop has been inspired by this environment of collaboration – a typical complaint poses a question such as "how does it take that many people to write a three-minute song?" In large part this attitude reflects the importance placed on performers themselves writing their own music, since this engenders a sense of direct expression and makes it easier to assume that the performers have truly lived and felt what their music depicts. As noted in Chapter Two, pop has often been considered "the creation of the commercial music industry,"[81] rendering this genre's contributions less valid than forms such as rock (which are generally just as commercialized but not marketed as such). Allan Moore writes that this broader association with the music business, labeled as "mediation," often relates to "the distance between [music's] (mental) origin and its (physical) manifestation."[82] He notes that though this argument has often been used in discussion of folk music, rock criticism has appropriated it, at times demonstrating that the use of acoustic instruments helps to nullify signs of mediation for listeners.[83]

To some extent, this relates to criticism of electronic instruments, programmed beats, auto-tune, and other technology that highlights not only less traditional musicality but also the likely contributions of multiple individuals. Will Straw notes the strong inclination to identify music with its performers (more specifically singers), with the result that "the difference between singing and songwriting has come to feel like an

[81] Lisa A. Lewis, *Gender Politics and MTV: Voicing the Difference*, 29.
[82] Allan Moore, "Authenticity as Authentication," *Popular Music* 21 (2002): 213.
[83] Ibid., 213.

uncomfortable difference, the sign of a potential incompleteness in artistic expression."[84] Evidence of mediation can highlight that difference. If it appears as though the performers did not compose their music – because of instrumentation, genre associations, or something else – this "uncomfortable difference" can signal a lower aesthetic value. As Straw notes, "the problem of authorship in popular music has normally been reduced to one of the relationships between songwriter and song."[85]

As discussed elsewhere in this dissertation, Moore explains this relationship within three categories of authenticity: first person, second person and third person. First person, also labeled "authenticity of expression. . . arises when an originator (composer, performer) succeeds in conveying the impression that his/her utterance is one of integrity, that it represents an attempt to communicate in an unmediated form with an audience."[86] Second person authenticity, "or authenticity of experience" serves to validate "the listener's experience of life."[87] Third person authenticity – "authenticity of execution" – involves "a performer. . . accurately representing the ideas of another."[88] All of these forms of communication convey a "truth," whether that of the performer, the listener, or an expressive culture, and they center around a single performer or group of performers. This reflects suspicions of the machinations of the industry as well as a broader trend in Western culture which has valued what Keith Negus describes as "the Romantic notion

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[84] Will Straw, "Authorship," in *Key Terms*: *in Popular Music and Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 201-202.
[85] Ibid., 201.
[86] Moore, "Authenticity as Authentication," 214.
[87] Ibid., 220.
[88] Ibid., 218.

of the great individual"[89] for quite some time. Musicians such as Bob Dylan are often portrayed as sole authors of their work, making their accomplishments seem direct and pure despite their dissemination through mass media. Contrastingly, Wilson Phillips and Ace of Base repeatedly cited the extent, and worth, of their participation in the music-making process because of the well-known role of co-writers and producers.

In addition, the genre of pop, to which both groups have contributed, has rarely been described as meeting the criteria described above. The knowledge (or assumption) that this music is not a direct expression of the performers inspires some to conclude that the material and how the audience responds to it have little worth as artistic expression and personal experience. Supposedly, such works are spawned by a team of savvy, cynical professionals and performed by willing shills of the business who lack the ability to create "their own" music.

Clearly, though, communication – what popular music aspires to accomplish – is rarely that simple, especially in mass media. Regardless of how it was composed and produced, song can elicit a range of responses, with some more common than others. As an example, "Hold On," discussed previously, has been interpreted by many as an unquestionably positive song, one meant to lift people up, but considering the lyrics from another perspective yields another potential intention (and response). In addition, any song that reaches millions of listeners tends to do so because of marketing, which complicates the authorship issue further due to the influence of these media and their authors in shaping reception. These points downgrade the relevance, and very possibility,

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[89] Keith Negus, "Authorship and the Popular Song." *Music & Letters* 92 (November 2011): 612.

of "authentic" material and performances, since part of "where the music is" resides in these many stages of the creative process, and in the minds of listeners. The dismissal of professional songwriters and producers in particular negates the significant contributions of talented individuals, who on many occasions have invested their personal experiences into their work.

The assumption that such pop groups did not create, or could not have created, a significant portion of the music performed, and the criticism of multiple roles in popular music production, loom large for these songs. For Wilson Phillips, marketing could have contributed to this perception. Considering dismissively superficial criticism of the group, Connelly and Eccles write that "there is a lingering sense that the SBK campaign may have overdone it a bit and allowed the group's sleek, telegenic image to drown out its genuine chops."[90] Attractive female artists have often fought the conclusion that their physical appearance was their primary contribution to their success, but the evaluation of both groups involved more than this.

Identified as participating in the pop genre, it was easy for some to assume that the members of Wilson Phillips and Ace of Base played a minimal role in their music's composition. However, the liner notes in *Wilson Phillips* indicate that Chynna, Carnie, and Wendy wrote or co-wrote six out of the ten songs on the album. Glen Ballard, who also produced all tracks on the album, shares co-writing credits on five of these songs. "Release Me" is credited solely to Wilson Phillips. As for *The Sign*, the liner notes clearly indicate that members of Ace of Base wrote most of their songs. The image in Figure 3.4 below clarifies that Albert Hammond and Dianne Warren wrote "Don't Turn

[90] Christopher Connelly and Andrew Eckles, "California Girls," *Rolling Stone*.

Around," but otherwise the original material for the songs came from Joker (Jonas Berggren) and Buddha (Ulf Ekberg). In his autobiography, Clive Davis confirms this, writing that "all the songs on the group's *Happy Nation* album were written by the two guys in the group, Jonas Berggren and Ulf Ekberg."[91]

Figure 3.4: *The Sign* liner note credits[92]

All music by
Joker/Buddha and lyrics by
Joker. Rap lyrics by
Buddha except 2) music
and lyrics by Albert
Hammond/Diane Warren, 4)
music and lyrics by Joker.

Given this information, the question then shifts from identifying who originally wrote the song, to determining who is responsible for the significant elements of the completed song released to the public. Ace of Base had sought to work with successful Swedish producer Denniz PoP (Dag Krister Volle) for quite some time before he finally agreed to work with the group. This resulted in the release of well-crafted, catchy versions of songs that Ace of Base had recorded. Seabrook notes that the demo for "All That She Wants," then called "Mr. Ace," sounds like an unfinished work. Even though the track suggested some commercial potential, some of the beats sound less than professional, and the haunting whistling tune that starts the later version of "All That She

[91] Davis, "Sarah McLachlan, Ace of Base, and the Freewheeling Nineties," 419.
[92] Discogs, "Ace of Base: The Sign Images," discogs.com, https://www.discogs.com/Ace-Of-Base-The-Sign/release/12384842 [accessed July 25, 2018].

Wants" actually appears most prominently toward the end of the demo.[93] Though this version only includes one verse (what became verse one of two), it incorporates two break-down sections, the first running from 1:26 to 1:31 and the second from 2:16 to 2:36, which incorporate elements of the six-note riffs played by the distorted bass heard throughout most of the song. These bass elements are much more prominent in the demo than in the version produced with Denniz PoP. In the latter version, a cleaner-sounding bass plays similar, but less elaborate, figures. A tenor saxophone-like synthesizer (perhaps inspired by the original bass part) plays a five-note syncopated figure at key points in the song, including the end of the instrumental introduction (:09), the end of the first verse (:51), after the first half of the chorus (1:01), and so forth. This material separates some sections of the song and constitutes a memorable timbral and rhythmic feature. Denniz PoP's adjustments in the accompaniment created enough room in the track for the individual elements to make an impression without overpowering the vocals or making the aural space sound overly busy. The break-down sections in "Mr. Ace" do not appear in "All That She Wants," a decision that simplified the form and potentially made the song more radio-friendly.

Jonas and Ulf's vocal presence on the later version of the track is minimal, with the listener only subtly hearing whispered male voices in the post-chorus/transition sections that repeat "all that you want."' In the demo, they perform extensive rap lyrics that come across as partially incoherent – and impossible to transcribe in their entirety – because of the strong Swedish accent they are performed with. Linn's vocals sound more

[93] Seabrook, "'The Sign,'" 36; Joker and Buddha, "Mr. Ace, 1991 Demo," 2014, track thirteen on *The Sign* (Remastered), Arista, https://mp3co.biz/song/6522855/Ace_of_Base_Mr_Ace_Demo_1991_Bonus_Track/page/3/ [accessed July 30, 2018].

playful in the demo, but the later version still includes the pronunciation of “work” as the two-syllable “wo-ah,” sung with a short first syllable and descending figure. In place of interpretive elements in the demo such as the melodically interesting chromatic descent on “day for catching tan” in the repeat of verse 1 (1:59), the listener benefits from subtle reverb and double tracking throughout the song.

These alterations, and likely the key change as well, reinforce the vocals and allowed Linn to sing in a more comfortable range. Some of the odd chord progressions in the demo verses were replaced when Denniz PoP changed the mode from major to minor, a choice which also allows the choruses to stand out with their somber minor mode orientation. Lastly, the addition of a second chorus creates variety in the song’s form (imperative after the elimination of the rap verses) and strongly reinforces the conclusion that the woman the song describes is a predator. The rap lyrics in the demo departed from this message by featuring the bragging of “Mr. Ace,” but if the audience of “All That She Wants” feels any uncertainty about the character of the song’s subject, no doubt remains after Linn sings “She’s a hunter you’re the fox / The gentle voice that talks to you / won’t talk forever.”[94]

Denniz PoP also produced other songs on *The Sign*, including the title track and “Don’t Turn Around.” The significance of his role is clear in both instances. Seabrook notes that “The Sign” started with a very simple arrangement, which was developed into a sonically complex, yet clear-sounding instrumental with perfectly processed vocals. The song’s repeated use of ascending vocals lines in the verses, and syncopated and dotted rhythms throughout, adds to the jaunty quality of the performance, which the key

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[94] John Seabrook, “‘The Sign,’” *The Song Machine: Inside the Hit Factory*, 39.

change at the bridge dramatically reinforces.[95] Comparing the effect of listening to the song to that of simply analyzing lyrics, the effect is quite different, clarifying the importance of musical elements in shaping a song's interpretation.

In this regard, "Don't Turn Around" serves as a notable example of this phenomenon. Originally written for Tina Turner in 1986, and later released with greater success by British group Aswad, Hammond and Warren's song found much greater success with Ace of Base's cover.[96] Aswad's take on the song incorporates some of reggae's stylistic elements, and it sounds downright cheerful, while Turner's recording is a rock ballad with powerhouse vocals.[97] Ace of Base's version incorporates haunting sounds of whistling wind at the beginning of the song. An unconvincing "I will survive without you" is then heard before the ominous flute-like synthesizer (which is reminiscent of that in Aswad's version). The end of the bridge includes rapping by Buddha, whose vocal timbre and lyrics highlight the darker interpretation of this song.

Rap Lyrics, "Don't Turn Around"[98]
As he walks away he feels the pain getting strong
People in your life they don't know what's going on
Too proud to turn around
He's gone

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[95] Seabrook, 45.
[96] Al Shipley, "20 Biggest Songs of the Summer: the 1990s," *Rolling Stone*, July 23, 2014, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/20-biggest-songs-of-the-summer-the-1990s-13619/16-ace-of-base-dont-turn-around-216241/ [accessed August 21, 2018]; Clive Davis, *The Songbook of my Life*, 419.
[97] Albert Hammond and Diane Warren, "Don't Turn Around," track two on *Distant Thunder*, Mango Records, 1988, compact disc; Albert Hammond and Diane Warren, "Don't Turn Around," B-side for "Typical Male," Capitol, 1986, tape; Albert Hammond and Diane Warren, "Don't Turn Around," track two on *The Sign* by Ace of Base. 1993. Compact Disc.
[98] Albert Hammond and Diane Warren, "Don't Turn Around," 1993, track two on *The Sign*, Arista, compact disc; Also note that Aswad likely added the lyrics rapped by Buddha.

These varied performances of "Don't Turn Around" demonstrate the aesthetically valuable role of artists and producers in interpreting a song composed by an outside writer. While the rapping in "Mr. Ace" is difficult to understand, that in "Don't Turn Around" is more clearly articulated. Adding the comparison of "Mr. Ace" to "All That She Wants" further demonstrates the cultivation of this material by Denniz PoP to appeal to a broader, English-speaking audience. The collaboration between producer and artists resulted in something more aesthetically and commercially valuable than either could accomplish alone.

Behind-the-scenes production information on Wilson Phillips is scarce, but it still bears noting some known elements of the process and how it resulted in interpretive possibilities beyond those offered by lyrics alone. SBK, the group's record label, paid $500,000 to hire producer Glen Ballard to work with the group on their first album.[99] This large payment secured a producer already known for his work on Michael Jackson's *Bad* and *Thriller* (and later known for Alanis Morissette's *Jagged Little Pill*).[100] As previously noted, outside songwriters wrote four of the album's ten songs; members of Wilson Phillips and Glen Ballard share credit for the rest, with the exception of "Release Me," for which the group claims sole authorship. The presence of a producer like Ballard, known for composing as well as performing a technical role in the studio, begs the question of how much of the material he wrote.

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[99] Steve Knopper, "How Big Spenders Got Rich in the Post-CD Boom ,"*Appetite for Self-Destruction: The Spectacular Crash of the Record Industry in the Digital Age*, 45.
[100] John Seabrook, "Katy Perry: Altar Call," in *The Song Machine: Inside the Hit Factory*,
253-254.

Some evidence regarding the previously discussed second single from *Wilson Phillips*, "Release Me," survives in a 1989 video featuring Chynna, Carnie, and Wendy singing this song with a sparse synthesized keyboard accompaniment. Initially, the trio performs before a microphone in what looks like a studio. Later, Ballard conducts them as they sing *a cappella*.[101] A later video documenting the songwriting process for Wilson Phillips's second album *Shadows and Light* shows the group improvising lyrics and vocal harmonies while Ballard guides their work and accompanies them on piano.[102] Extrapolating from these videos, it seems as though Ballard composed much of the instrumental content, while the group aurally composed their vocals and likely wrote many of their lyrics.

A 2015 email interview with Wendy and Carnie Wilson confirms this, at least for "Hold On." Wendy writes that "Chynna had the inspiration for "Hold On" and wrote the majority of it," while Carnie recalls that

> Glen Ballard wrote a real catchy, pop, melodic music track for us. Chynna took home the cassette tape…wrote 90% of the song. Came back the next day, we tweaked a little, and it was done!"[103]

The song begins with high hat cymbal and conga-like drums, then soft synthesizers that fade in, followed by chordal electronic keyboards and bird-like sounds

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[101] Wilson Phillips, "Wilson Phillips Demo for 'Release Me,'" 1989, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nEcp2homWUA&index=24&list=PLYogP0ce7s6FkqKsD-G4FBqKJVICd1qch [accessed August 3, 2018].

[102] Wilson Phillips. "Wilson Phillips Working on 'Goodbye, Carmen,' (from *Shadows and Light*)," ca. 1991, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i1jln0r7zoo&index=25&list=PLYogP0ce7s6FkqKsD-G4FBqKJVICd1qch [accessed August 3, 2018].

[103] Kelsey McKineey, "Throwback Thursday: Talking to Wilson Phillips About How 'Hold On' Went to Number One 25 Years Ago," *Splinter*.

(played on electric guitar). This section ends with descending eighth notes on the synthesizer. Overall, "Hold On" starts off sounding like a happy song.

The production also allows the group's vocals more potential to recall the work of past pop groups. Chynna's double-tracked solo vocals alternate with the group's collective singing, which may remind some listeners of groups such as those led by the parents of Wilson Phillips's members. The double-tracking, frequent harmonization, vocal fills, and use of echo eliminate true solo vocals, a feature that counters the strongly individualistic message that the lyrics convey by emphasizing vocal collectivity. Chynna's vocal timbre, with its light, even girlish, quality also helps to musically suggest a clarity and righteousness of intention.

Additional vocal performing choices reinforce the song's positive aural character. For instance, the ascent just before a quick descent in the fourth line of the first verse creates a playful and inoffensive interpretation of this previously-discussed line: "Don't ever let anyone step all *over* you," with the first syllable of "over" emphasized before a descent to the second syllable and the next word. The same tactic is used in the second verse on the fourth line: "You got yourself into your *own* mess," with "own" emphasized before the descent to "mess." In both cases, the saccharine musical delivery alters what the words might communicate on their own.

In the chorus and second verse, the use of energetic syncopated synthesizers and electric and acoustic guitar figures create a texturally full and upbeat background to tough-love lyrics. Some of the text painting reinforces the aural imprint of the song. For instance, the ascent just before a quick descent on the fourth line of the first verse creates a playful and inoffensive interpretation of a line that conveys something even a troubled

person might already know: “Don’t ever let anyone step all *over* you,” with “over” emphasized before the descent in pitch to “you.” The same tactic is used in the second verse on the fourth line – “You got yourself into your *own* mess,” with “own” emphasized before the descent to “mess.” Differently performed, this line could convey a lack of compassion, but as we hear it, the saccharine musical delivery disguises what the words seem to communicate.

Concerning the choruses, the vocal rhythm creates a sense of forward momentum with the faster pacing of the first several lines, and the accompaniment’s faster rhythms and more fleshed-out texture reinforce this effect. Starting with the words “hold on” in line eight, elements of the accompaniment change to respond to the more anthemic melody. As Table 3.5 below illustrates, the choruses play a particularly significant role, since these sections comprise a large proportion of the song. Until the end of the second chorus, “Hold On” follows what is basically a contrasting-verse-chorus form, but starting with chorus two, the chorus, and variations of it, are repeated until the end of the single edit version at 3:42 (or 4:25 for the album version, which continues with even more chorus material and a fade-out). This exaggerated repetition has likely influenced interpretations, since listeners hear this energetic setting in over half the song (including chorus one). Listeners could derive the overall meaning from the upbeat chorus.

Table 3.5: Wilson Phillips, "Hold On," 1990: Basic Formal Outline[104]
*Chorus material in **bold print**

:00 – :14	Intro
:15 – :46	Verse 1
:47 – 1:16	**Chorus 1**
1:17 – 1:25	Guitar Solo
1:26 – 1:57	Verse 2
1:58 – 2:27	**Chorus 2**
2:28 – 2:44	**Bridge**
2:45 – 3:12	**Chorus 3 / Breakdown**
3:13 – 4:27 (3:40)	**Outro**

Until the end of the second chorus at 1:57, the song utilizes contrasting-verse-chorus form, but after this point, the chorus, and variations of it, are repeated until the end of the song at 4:27 (or 3:40 for the single). Considering these proportions, the variety in the vocal delivery and accompaniment is essential for creating the impression that something fresh is happening. Beginning with the bridge, the vocal style and accompaniment recall the first verse and introduction, while the lyrics combine material from the first verse with that of the chorus. This section has the effect of resetting the song so the chorus, now accompanied by strident percussion and performed with a fuller vocal texture, sounds like somewhat new material, while satisfying the audience with familiar lyrics and vocal melodies. Considering that the chorus comprises so much of the song and the insistently upbeat character of the recording, it seems natural that listeners would recall this material most consistently (in particular the latter portion predominantly featuring the phrase "hold on") when considering the message of this song. Some may suggest that such a strategy suggests a lack of invention, but Glen Ballard's (and Wilson Phillips's) reuse of chorus and introductory material in the latter half of the song likely

[104] Music and lyrics for "Hold On" by Chynna Phillips, Glenn Ballard, and Carnie Wilson.

reinforced attachment to the song, since this combination of repetition and variety made the lyrics and melody easier to recognize while developing the accompaniment with new rhythms, timbres, and textures.

Like “Hold On,” in “Release Me” one section plays an important role in the song’s formal development and encourages a particular lyrical interpretation. Rather than the chorus as with the former song, in the latter refrains fulfill this role. The song begins with the members of Wilson Phillips singing the lyrics below acapella:

> I know that it's time for a change
> Mmm but when that change comes
> Will it still feel the same?

This helps to frame much of the song in terms of ambivalence about ending a romantic relationship, a theme that continues in the somewhat subdued first and second verse and is highlighted by refrain material (see Table 3.6 below). Harmonically, by alternating between two chords, (F and G, the subdominant and dominant in the key of C-Major) and ending with a deceptive cadence (on an F chord), these sections suggest both stasis and tension. Rather than a command, the recording suggests that “release me” is a suggestion or a request that undermines any certainty suggested at other points in the song. This informs the tone of the album version song significantly, since the group sings “release me” repeatedly, beginning immediately after the last chorus.

Table 3.6: “Release Me” Formal Outline, Album Version

:00 – :28	Introduction
:29 – :47	Verse 1
:48 – :58	Refrain 1
:59 – 1:17	Verse 2
1:18 – 1:28	Refrain 2
1:29 – 2:07	Chorus 1
2:08 – 2:17	Refrain 3
2:18 – 2:39	Verse 3
2:40 – 3:19	Chorus 2
3:20 – 3:31	Bridge
3:32 – 4:10	Chorus 3
4:11 – 4:41	**Outro: “release me”**
4:42 – 4:56	**Fade-Out, “release me”**

These sections also provide a change in texture, whether they add instruments like refrains one and two, or provide a more subdued contrast to the surrounding material. In refrain one, cymbal, synthesizer, and drum set add to the sparse instrumentation of the previous verse and generate momentum into the more energetic second verse. Refrain two adds electric guitar figures and keyboard flourishes that provide a transition to chorus one. Refrain three provides a transition to verse three, and the last refrain provides a sort of bookend to the song by reinforcing the unresolved state of the lyrical and musical situation.

Between refrain three and this point, however, verse three, chorus two, the bridge, and third chorus create a consistent build-up of texture, rhythmic complexity, and volume. The last chorus functions as the song’s climax, with a thicker and more timbrally complex instrumental accompaniment that supports dramatic vocal volume and emotional expression. In all, we hear bass guitar, acoustic and electric guitar, drum set, synthesized French horn (deep in the mix), and synthesized strings. The heightened state of this elevated chorus results in part from the preceding bridge. This section introduces

new vocal melodic material, vocal call-and-response (the only solo vocals in the song), the first synthesized string figures, and a key change that progresses from C-Major through G to arrive in D-Major at the beginning of the chorus. The emotional urgency builds somewhat consistently until this point, with the refrain and outro afterword conveying a rapid reduction in musical energy and resolve as conveyed by the lyrics.

In addition to the transition from verse three to chorus three, and the more strident verse three and bridge lyrics discussed previously, the song's increasing intensity includes changes in the formal pattern. Table 3.6 above illustrates that after the introduction and before the first chorus, verses alternate with refrains. Starting with chorus 1, the pattern changes, as this new section moves to a refrain and to verse three. This refrain is half the length of the previous two and contains only one line: "release me." Then, instead of another refrain after verse three, chorus two directly follows, and the song continues with the bridge and last chorus. This is, of course, followed by the outro and fade-out in the album version, but in both cases the musical setting encourages varied interpretations of the song's message. Whether assertive (in the single version) or ambivalent (in the album version), the lack of concern for the romantic partner, and the speaker's heightened focus on the self, come instead to sound (respectively) like a declaration of freedom or an acknowledgement of attachment.

<u>Music Video and Audience Competency</u>

The previous discussion describes some of the ways in which compositional and production factors influence the interpretation of the lyrics for this song by lending a softer approach to sometimes strident vocabulary. In a similar vein, the promotional

video for "Hold On," directed by Julien Temple, tends to reinforce this effect.[105] As the introduction begins, flyover shots of pristine, snow-covered mountain tops fade into one another. This pairs well with the song's introduction, the bird sounds in particular. During each of the verses, shots of scenery intertwine with sequences featuring the singers performing mostly as individuals in isolated locations. During the first verse, the three women perform in the mountains, and the group wears more rugged, neutral-colored clothing to match the setting – denim, long sleeves, a coat, or a long skirt, all in blues, whites, and browns. This contrasts with the first chorus, which shows Wilson Phillips sitting together on a beach, sitting in the sand wearing all black and singing. At times, we see an isolated headshot of a single group member, but the emphasis on the complete group is greater here than during the verses. The second chorus utilizes both settings more evenly, which prepares the viewer for the greater diversity of setting and faster pace of visual and musical change that begins with the "breakdown" at 2:45. In this section, we first see the group members singing and striding confidently along a sidewalk by the beach, in step with the music's tempo. As the song progresses, the scenery shifts quickly between the sidewalk, the beach, and the mountain, reflecting the greater musical variety. Perhaps both the song and the video were crafted with this activity toward the end to maintain audience attention to the end.

In addition to emphasizing the song's structure, the video also reinforces an emphatic message through dramatic physical gestures. As demonstrated in Figure 3.5 below, Chynna uses her body and facial expressions to especially dramatic effect, moving

[105] Julien Temple, dir., "Hold On," music video, performed by Wilson Phillips, 1990. All discussion of this video and screenshots reference this source.

her entire upper body to the beat, bending one arm with her fist clenched, stretching her arms out wide, shaking her head (and tossing her short hair), and conveying a sense of urgency through pained facial expressions.

Figure 3.5: Chynna Phillips in “Hold On” Music Video

Carnie and Wendy (Figure 3.6 below) contribute a more cerebral presence, often sitting still and wearing satisfied facial expressions. They convey a sense of enjoyment with performing the song, while Chynna engages with the camera as though communicating to a struggling individual (Figure 3.5 above).

Figure 3.6: Carnie and Wendy Wilson in "Hold On" Music Video

Added less than a month after the release of this song as a single, the video first appears in Billboard's "The Clip List" in the March 3, 1990 issue (coincidentally, the same date as Michael Bolton's video for "How Can We Be Lovers").[106] Considering that RIAA lists February 28, 1990 as the single release date, one can assume, given the previous discussion on market saturation, that the release date for the video was delayed slightly to provide the opportunity to build strong radio play and sales to potentially bolster reception of the video – which would in turn encourage greater radio play and sales. The video remained listed on "Active" status for several weeks, reaching "Heavy" rotation on April 28, 1990.[107] "Active" is one of many designations for play frequency that MTV added in 1984. In a letter from then-VP of MTV's Programming Les Garland to Seymour Stein (the co-founder of Sire Records), Garland lists and explains the rationale for these categories. He writes that "the standard 'heavy/medium/light' categories – traditionally used by radio – don't really reflect the exposure for your video

[106] "The Clip List," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, March 10, 1990.
[107] "The Clip List," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, April 14, 1990 and April 28, 1990. Please note that *Billboard* did not publish a "Clip List" in the April 21, 1990 issue.

product on MTV. And as video continues to affect dramatic changes in our industry, we feel we should provide an accurate representation of what's happening on MTV."[108]

The categories used at this point are listed here:[109]

Power	Active	Breakout	Adds

Garland argues that this strategy improves transparency by better informing "industry decision makers," but it seems as though it functions in a similar manner to increasing the number of popularity charts. That is, if a video did not receive enough airplay to earn a spot on a top fifty list (which *Billboard* eventually used), it might appear under the "Breakout" category. If not for this category, the video would not have made a list at all, just as a song might perform adequately on *Billboard*'s R&B chart but not appear at all on the Hot 100. Celebrating an appearance on such a list ignores the fact that the material has not achieved enough popularity to appear on a chart with more competition.

These visual and musical elements, communicated through a very popular music video, help to convey an energetic, positive interpretation for the lyrics that seem to lack sympathy for the individual they address. Setting the video mostly in pristine natural settings and utilizing prominent group vocal harmonies may recall the idealistic musings on nature utilized by some artists active in the 1960s and 1970s.

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[108] Les Garland, "Letter to Seymour Stein," 1984, Sire Records Collection, ARC-0002, Box 10, Folder 8, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives, Cleveland OH.
[109] Ibid.

The more serious and confessional lyrics recall singer-songwriters of the period. "Hold On" (and "Release Me") could have been the "You've got a friend" of the early '90s – vulnerable, but with a selfish undertone.

As previously suggested, the fact that some listeners connected Wilson Phillips's music to that of their parents (or at least their parents' generation) could also be a consequence of the group and the press acknowledging their familial connections. The fact that David Wild's 1990 *Rolling Stone* piece, quoted earlier ("Wilson Phillips's California Dream"), repeatedly mentions the group's ties to successful 1960s groups highlights how significant this factor likely was in generating their popularity. The group discusses their lineage at length, but all three members insist that they had no intentions of using it to get ahead. Considering that the industry veteran (Richard Perry) who recorded their first demos and paid for them to record more material was a friend of Chynna's mother Michelle Phillips, a certain amount of privilege certainly improved their exposure to crucial resources and personnel. Wild notes that they went over to Perry's house and sang for him, and he immediately signed them for their demo work.[110]

These casual connections to important people seem to be viewed as irrelevant by the group. They are quoted in Wild's article suggesting that they consider these factors less relevant than their "hard work," which they claim is mostly responsible for their success.[111] In a 2013 interview, Carnie acknowledges that the group members can credit their parents' reputations and connections for getting signed in the first place, but that a strong demo tape was also crucial to gain SBK label head Charles Koppelman's

[110] David Wild, "Wilson Phillips's California Dream," *Rolling Stone*.
[111] Ibid.

acceptance.[112] It seems typical that those benefiting the most from privilege recognize it the least, assuming that their hard work made the difference, and if others engaged in their lives with the same intensity they would reap similar benefits. If Wilson Phillips views their accomplishments from this perspective, it seems natural that their music would reflect this. "Hold On," which suggests that one is generally able to solve tough problems by deciding to do so, was inspired by a realm in which individuals possess the financial and personal resources to make this point of view realistic.

Musical content could also factor into this connection of the group's music with that of the previous generation. Carnie acknowledges the influence of her parents' generation on Wilson Phillips's music, stating in that 2013 interview that "the underlying voice of Wilson Phillips is that other generation."[113] For those able to grasp these musical similarities and recognize the significance of the Mamas and the Papas the Beach Boys, both musical and blood relations could have factored into interpretation and popularity. According to Gino Stefani's levels of musical competency, such recognition would have required a recognition of works in a general social sense, as well as in terms of cultural practices, and musical styles as they relate to historical periods.[114] For many younger listeners, it seems unlikely that the competence existed to make similar connections, since familiarity with different styles and works would result in different reactions. These

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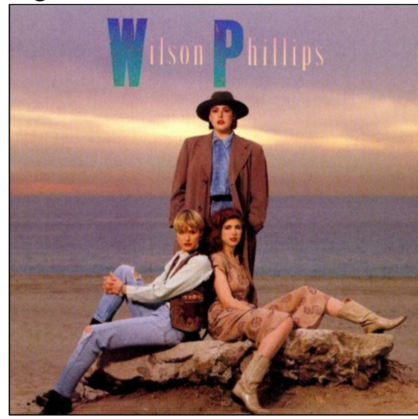
[112] Sean Pajot, "Carnie Wilson on Food Shows, Wilson Phillips, and Fat Jokes: 'I'm So Sick of That Shit,'" *New Miami Times*, February 27, 2013, https://www.miaminewtimes.com/music/carnie-wilson-on-food-shows-wilson-phillips-and-fat-jokes-im-so-sick-of-that-shit-6453536 [accessed August 4, 2018].
[113] Ibid.
[114] Gino Stefani, "A Theory of Musical Competence," *Semiotica* 66: 1-3 (1987): 7-22, cited in Brackett, "Introduction," in *Interpreting Popular Music* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2000), 12-13.

listeners could have recognized other cues in the music that identified these songs as belonging with contemporary works instead. It may have occurred to the label to exploit potential references to older music to capture an older demographic as well, and since VH1 and MTV played the clip so much, the message may have been received by that audience as well as less historically aware listeners. Connelly and Eccles confirm this, writing that "while its audience is largely young and female, the record also clearly appeals to an older audience, raised on singer-songwriters."[115]

The music video certainly presents elements with the potential to exploit this connection, featuring the singers in natural settings, dressed primarily in low-key blues and browns, while they sing in harmony (or double-tracked solos) about life's significant issues. Listeners less aware of these associations could have appreciated them anyway, but the modern instrumentation and easy-to-follow form, along with the inclusion of more modern clothing and assertive behavior in the video, could have been more likely (or at least intended) to draw in the younger audience. The album artwork (shown in Figure 3.7) exemplifies this, with flesh tones and nature emphasized on the front and a modern image suggested on the back.

[115] Christopher Connelly and Andrew Eccles, "California Girls," *Rolling Stone*.

Figure 3.7: "Hold On" Album Images[116]



Like the video for "Hold On," the clip for "Release Me" was released at a point that allowed it to benefit from the band's existing success without saturating the market. The advertisement on page nineteen of this chapter notes a June 14 premier date. This is verified in the June 16, 1990 installment of *Billboard*'s "The Clip List." This issue is also the last to include the video for "Hold On." During this week, this video continued playing on "Active" status while "Release Me" played as a new video. After that, "Hold On" was not played enough on MTV or (VH1) to appear on "The Clip List."[117]

Although also directed by Julien Temple, the clip for "Release Me" enjoyed more airplay than that for "Hold On." While MTV played both videos on "Active" rotation for several weeks, "Release Me" entered "Heavy" rotation on the weeks of August 11, 1990 and August 18, 1990.[118] This video also played a great deal on VH1. After the video's initial airplay on this station the week of June 30, "Release Me" appeared under "Hitmakers" from August 4 through September 15, entering VH1's "Heavy" rotation on

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[116] Discogs, "Wilson Phillips: *Wilson Phillips* Images," discogs.com, https://www.discogs.com/Wilson-Phillips-Wilson-Phillips/master/90000 [accessed July 25, 2018].
[117] "The Clip List," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, June 16, 1990.
[118] "The Clip List," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, August 11, 1990 and August 18, 1990.

September 22nd and playing enough to remain there until October 13. The drop-off for "Release Me" may have coincided with the addition of the group's next video (for "Impulsive") on October 6.[119]

While timing plays an important role in generating this degree of widespread success, and the record industry could certainly influence playlists (just as they have for radio), the content also matters. Though working with the same group in roughly the same time period as he directed "Hold On," Temple's approach varied from that used previously. This allowed him to create an alternative image for this song and for Wilson Phillips. Where before the material and group reached out the viewer, offering the collectivity of nature and exuberant reassurances of confident young women, this later video establishes an urban setting and creates a darker, more reflective, tone for a song that lacks the upbeat tone conveyed earlier.[120]

Contrasting with the soothing natural colors of the previous video, this clip is shot entirely in black in white. Set in an expensive home overlooking Los Angeles, most scenes convey a sense of emotional distress and personal isolation. Seeing the group in this exclusive setting, we also get a sense of hipness and privilege. They may have performed a supposedly universal message in an accessible location before, but the implications change in this setting. Including the home's scenic overlook in several shots, including the introduction (Figure 3.8, left) and chorus (Figure 3.8, right) reinforces these suggestions. Unlike the video for "Hold On," which hints at connections with a bygone

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[119] "The Clip List," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, all issues from August 4, 1990 through October 13, 1990.
[120] Julien Temple, dir., "Release Me," music video, performed by Wilson Phillips, 1990. All discussion of this video and screenshots reference this source.

era, this setting utilizes more contemporary connections, highlighting Wilson Phillips's youth and wealth in a modern LA home.

Figure 3.8: Wilson Phillips in "Release Me" Music Video

In the image on the left, we see the result of extensive fading. The faded details below the women remain from a shot of a man swimming on a pool on the deck during the day. The women stand on the deck and sing at night, with the remnants of the earlier scene prominently displayed. By utilizing such dramatic overlays, Temple may have been hinting at the haunting effect of the relationship discussed on the song. The images in Figure 3.9 below, from the end of the video (and the song's outro), make this intention clear.

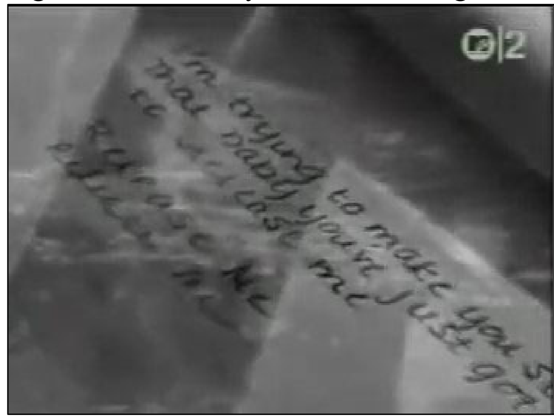
Figure 3.9: Carnie and Wendy Wilson in "Release Me" Music Video

Each member of the group seems to face the same dilemma – a lover who won't let go, and who she cannot let go of. Even though the song is largely sung in rhythmic unison, this visual approach creates opportunities to focus on individuals. We see the first-person address delivered by each of them in the context of performance, as well as in brief scenes like those in Figure 3.10 below that feature them handling the situation during the day, outside of a performance environment.

Figure 3.10: Carnie Wilson and Chynna Phillips in "Release Me" Music Video

Temple places Carnie's serious-looking phone conversation (left) during refrain 1 and Chynna reflecting on her relationship (right) during refrain 2. During refrain 3, Temple goes so far as to show Wendy writing lyrics to the song (Figure 3.11 below).

Figure 3.11: Wendy Wilson Writing in "Release Me" Music Video



This choice pointedly recalls the advertised songwriting role of the group, while also hinting at what inspired the song's composition. If Wilson Phillips wrote the song after experiencing similar situations in their lives, they are singer-songwriters, not pop stars. But rather than explicitly placing them alongside earlier figures, they are hip young women of the '90s utilizing compositional and performative methods familiar to baby boomers. They can draw on established notions of authenticity while reaching out to a younger demographic.

All this only works if both performer and audience agree to some extent on what these symbols mean. That is, effective recording and marketing rely on an understanding of both the artist and the audience. Erving Goffman described this as "impression management," which describes the regulation of "self-image." Goffman "suggested that the roles people play are essentially scripted for various audiences and that as people act out such roles, they view themselves through the lens of their perceived audience."[121] This encourages behavior that yields the desired results.[122] To generate both word of mouth and a public image, radio station visits, carefully placed singles, well-crafted videos, and other visual advertising all marketed the group and the music recorded with master songwriter and producer Glen Ballard. The spotlight was on Chynna, Carnie, and Wendy, framing them as young, beautiful performers (and songwriters) with famous parents. Utilizing connections to countercultural musicians and modern artists in both music and marketing took advantage of the likely range of cultural competence.

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[121] Quoted in Kristin J. Lieb, "Frameworks for Considering Pop Stars," *Gender, Branding, and the Popular Music Industry* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 5
[122] Ibid., 5-6.

Of course, Ace of Base was similarly well-managed. With the assistance of Clive Davis and Denniz PoP, the group was able to craft accessible pop and market it to a broad audience. Simplifying the sound, downplaying the strong Swedish accent in the rap lyrics, and featuring attractive female singers (while the male members often performed in the background) helped shape the music and image into something broadly accessible. Naturally, music videos also participated significantly in this process. Ace of Base released videos for each U.S. single from *The Sign* ("All That She Wants," "The Sign," "Living in Danger," and "Don't Turn Around"),[123] in addition to a video for "Happy Nation." However, this discussion will focus on how the clip for the group's first American single, "All That She Wants," may have encouraged two particular interpretations of the song. Avoiding overt suggestions that the female character seeks to have a child to increase her welfare benefits, the video suggests that either the woman is woman is promiscuous but feels conflicted about it, or she sincerely pursues relationships with men who leave after enjoying intimate relations with her.

In the video, directed by Matt Broadley,[124] the woman first appears in a silky black nightgown and seems sound asleep. A shot of her face and chest appears between blurry shots of both her and Ace of Base members. Next, we see her open her eyes as Linn sings, "she opened up her eyes and thought/oh what a morning." Linn, who sings the bulk of the song without other group members' vocals, performs seated in the woman's apartment with the rest of the group. Joker plays piano, at times replicating the

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[123] Recording Industry Association of America, "Gold and Platinum: Ace of Base;" Fred Brosnan, "Chart Beat," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, October 22, 1994, 113.
[124] IMVDb, "Ace of Base: All That She Wants," IMVDb: The Internet Music Database," https://imvdb.com/video/ace-of-base/all-that-she-wants [accessed August 5, 2018].

rhythm of the bass part (but in the wrong register), while Jenny sits near a window and absent-mindedly plays with a necklace, even when she sings during the chorus (though her vocals are not actually present in this portion of the track). Ulf appears seated in the back of the room, first holding a saxophone, then a clarinet, seemingly referring to the synthesized saxophone figures throughout the song. A mimicked performance such as this creates a different image of a group than a video in which the members simply lip synch and act out the context of the song, as Wilson Phillips does in "Hold On." They appear as "jamming" performers with varied skillsets rather than stereotypical pop artists.

The song describes the woman and then builds an argument to avoid her because of her motives, using different statements to convey this message. The video, however, follows a narrative structure: after we see the performers in the apartment, we see the woman get up in the morning, stare pensively out the window, put on make-up and get dressed, and leave her apartment at night.[125] She then arrives at a bar and talks with a man, seduces him in her apartment, and then wakes up alone the next morning with a pained expression on her face. This sequence of events suggests that the men she sleeps with are predatory, but not necessarily her. At all times except when talking to the man she meets, her facial expression is serious, and on the basis of the shots of her activities in the apartment during the day, she seems lethargic, only motivated to action for the purpose of going out to meet a man. Her appearance and behavior do not seem sinister, especially considering her facial expression upon awakening alone toward the end of the video (Figure 3.12, left). However, Linn's intense facial expressions (Figure 3.12, right),

[125] Matt, Broadley, dir, "All That She Wants," music video, performed by Ace of Base, 1993. All discussion of this video and screenshots reference this source.

the behavior of the rest of the group, the frequent use of blurred shots, and the overall yellow and grainy tone of the video, these images convey a menacing quality that contrasts with the woman's behavior. This ambiguity is also portrayed by a shot early in the video (at :26) of her pushing away a man's hand when he reaches for hers and another later on (at 3:25) of her grasping his hand when he holds it out for her. These two options suggest that men pursue her, and it is up to her to end the relationship or to encourage it to continue. In this context, her loneliness is of her own making, and the men she encounters are not at fault. Considering these visual elements and the song lyrics, this portrayal of this woman's lifestyle might relegate her to the "miserable single woman" category still portrayed in 1990s mass media (not to mention the present day). After all, in the video it is she who wakes up unhappy and alone after initially pushing a man away and later taking a man she just met home with her. Such situations have in some instances been blamed on the diminished importance of traditional female roles (the housewife, for example) and the encouragement of female independence. Thus, the short-term relationships and lack of deep intimacy.

Figure 3.12: An Actress and Malin Berggren in "All That She Wants" Music Video

Perhaps for some listeners the primary appeal of this song was its playful vocal melody with its wide leaps and repetition, reggae appropriation, and appealing instrumental timbres – surely refreshing in the popular music field of the period. The video became quite popular, offering an interpretation that likely influenced viewers who understood the song differently before, and reinforced a negative image of the song's subject for those who felt that way after just listening (and for those who had only heard the song while watching the video). According to *Billboard*'s "Video Monitor," this clip premiered on MTV (and on VH1) the week ending October 17, 1993.[126] By the week ending October 31, the video was ranked number twenty-one in plays.[127] The November 6th issue notes that, although "All That She Wants" had reached the number two spot on the Hot 100 chart, the release of the full album had been delayed to add two additional songs for potential single release. The popularity of this song and its video when the album was not yet available may have created more anticipation for *The Sign*'s release, and for the release of other singles. The video became increasingly popular, reaching number sixteen on the November 7th-dated "Video Monitor" list.[128] The November 27th issue announces the arrival of *The Sign* in addition to anticipated singles with a prominent photo of the group wearing black and white (Figure 3.13 below), surrounded by artwork similar to that used for the album. The use of this imagery not only further introduced the

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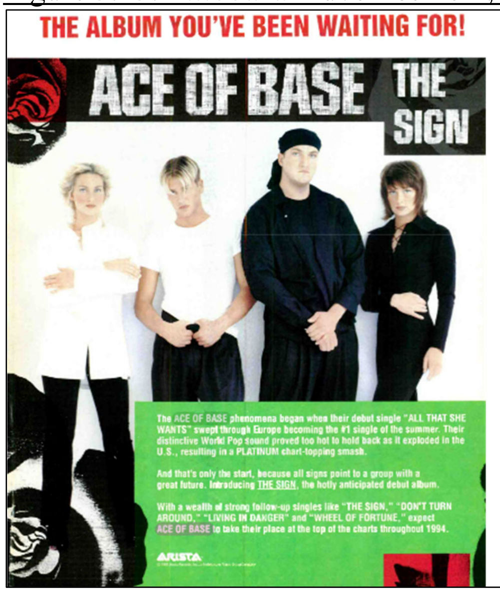
[126] "Video Monitor," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment* October 30, 1993.
[127] "Video Monitor," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment* November 13, 1993.
[128] "Video Monitor," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment* November 6, 1993; Billboard, "Video Monitor," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*," November 7, 1993.

band, appearing serious and stylish, it also hinted at what to look for when purchasing the album and its singles. By this point the video for "All That She Wants" had reached number thirteen on *Billboard*'s list.[129] In addition to achieving widespread chart success, this song became popular as an audio-visual experience, reinforcing its accompanying interpretational suggestions among a large audience.

Figure 3.13: *Billboard* Advertisement, November 1993[130]



Clearly, the reception of this song and video influenced that of the album's next single, "The Sign." According to "Video Monitor," the video premiered on VH1 on the week of January 16, 1994,[131] and on MTV the week of January 22.[132] This video

[129] "Video Monitor," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*," November 7, 1993.
[130] "Ace of Base Advertisement," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*," November 27, 1993.
[131] "Video Monitor," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, January 16, 1994. This week also saw Michael Bolton's "Said I Love You…But I Lied" reach number one on VH1.
[132] "Video Monitor," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, January 22, 1994.

achieved higher rankings on both channels than the clip for “All That She Wants”: number two on VH1 the week of March 12, 1994 and number five on MTV the week of May 8, 1994.[133] It also brought the earlier video back into substantial circulation, as several issues of “Video Monitor” suggest.

In part, this momentum was due to the popularity of “The Sign” on radio. As discussed previously, this song became popular before the anticipated single release date due to heavy airplay of “All That She Wants.” The video also offers an appealing aesthetic, offering quickly changing shots of band members, acrobats moving through the air, brightly colored flowers, and a symbol clearly meant to stand for “the sign.”[134]

Figure 3.14: Ace of Base in “The Sign” Music Video

The video begins with the members of Ace of Base moving from darkness into close formation in front of the camera. Just before the song starts, they each reach a

[133] “Video Monitor,” *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, March 12, 1994; Billboard, “Video Monitor,” *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, May 8, 1994:
[134] Mathias Julin, dir., “The Sign,” music video, performed by Ace of Base, 1993. All discussion of this video and screenshots reference this source.

position with optimal lighting (see Figure 3.14 above). Once the song starts, we see a shifting between shots in bright color and black and white. The change between these palettes creates consistent contrast, but sometimes the pace of change accentuates the difference. The images in Figure 3.15 below, from the introduction, shows a fist that opens in front of a saturated orange background. From left to right, the clear shot, blurry shot, flash, and open hand all appear in the space of one beat. The fist is seen at the end of the measure, beginning on the second eighth note of beat three, and the open hand is shown on the first half of beat four. On the "and" of four, the black and white shot of the group appears again.

Figure 3.15: Quick Sequence in "The Sign" Music Video

This sequence highlights another important method director Mathias Julin utilizes: each shot changes with the rhythm of the song. That is, although the length of shots differs, something new always appears on the beat. This serves to reinforce one of the most prominent elements of the song, while entertaining viewers with often drastically different shots.

Although the song is mostly sung by Linn (with Jenny singing the second verse and elements throughout the song), in the video the entire group participates in varied ways. Julin's approach to featuring all the members adds to the video's dynamic

quality.[135] The image in Figure 3.16 below, for instance, shows Linn singing in black and white, but Joker (in color) gestures in response to her. Also, she appears on a screen, while Joker looks more real, responding to something happening in a distant location.

Figure 3.16: Malin (back) and Jonas Berggren (front) in "The Sign" Music Video

In Figure 3.17 below (left), we see the entire group singing the song (except Linn), even though we hear only Jenny's vocals. On the right, Linn sings the first verse, while the other members dance with abandon.

Figure 3.17: Ace of Base in "The Sign" Music Video

[135] This may distract from a lack of traditional performing roles for Joker and Buddha.

Placing visual emphasis on “the sign,” the song and album title, with the ankh symbol shown in Figure 3.18 below offers an alternative interpretation. Originating in Ancient Egypt, the ankh can represent life, immortality, or life after death. In fact, some describe it as “the key of life.”[136] For the album, the ankh was likely meant to inspire association with the song. In the context of this song and video, this symbol seems to reference finding the key to happiness – recognizing the faults of a lover and embracing the stability and power of a new life that better meets the speaker’s needs. The sign portrayed in the lyrics refers to what the speaker realized about the mans she was with, and the ankh adds another layer of meaning for those familiar with the symbol. The fire suggests both destruction and reincarnation – burning down one’s life and starting a new one in the ashes.

Figure 3.18: Ankh and Flames in “The Sign Music Video

[136] Ancient History Encyclopedia, “The Ankh,” ancient.eu, September 19, 2016, https://www.ancient.eu/Ankh/ [accessed October 22, 2019].

Conclusion

Considering the role of music videos, producers, co-writers, radio, music critics, and the logic of record labels, the role of the members of these two groups in their success is difficult to isolate. This chapter has highlighted some elements which Wilson Phillips and Ace of Base brought to their music, but the factors that led to their signing and popularity, as well as to how their music has been interpreted, are complex. Relevant elements include all those listed above as well as a myriad of listener perspectives. In terms of Wilson Phillips, fondly recalling the music of the 1960s and 1970s may have contributed to the group's success, due to both elements of their music and to their well-advertised familial connections. Perhaps some fans of Ace of Base approved of their appropriation of reggae because it recalled this genre's initial American popularity in the 1970s and the appropriation of relevant stylistic traits in 1980s new wave. Both Wilson Phillips and Ace of Base also incorporated contemporary instrumentation, and, of course, lyrics relevant to that period in much of the western world. The members were young, but incorporating more traditional or minimalist visual elements in the marketing downplayed youth and suggested a degree of seriousness in the public image. This mixture of old and new references made the music and images of these groups seem grounded yet relevant, familiar but still hip. The competency of a large audience resulted from incorporating such elements so that different demographics could identify with them.

In addition to the codes of competency discussed earlier, musical codes factor significantly into the content of these songs and how they communicated within the larger context. David Brackett writes that a "'musical code' offers a way of theorizing the

connections between musical sound and such ‘extra-musical’ factors as media image, biographical details, mood, and historical and social associations.”[137] Some popular music is so tightly situated both musically and extra-musically in a particular context that its appeal lies within that narrow sphere, both in the moment and later for those who remember it. Richard Middleton describes this as “overcoded” music, while that “received within a general sense of ‘understanding’” is “undercoded.”[138] Overcoded music tends not to age well, and to appeal to those with the specific competence to understand the musical language and context of communication.[139]

That these groups connected with large audiences suggests that the way their output (music, image, etc.) was coded allowed different groups of people to see the code as relevant to them. It engaged different elements of competency for different people. This broad appeal suggests undercoding, but perhaps highly coded content can operate at more than one level, suggesting different codes to different people. In this vein, Brackett writes that these codes and how they are understood fluctuate, stating that “in the act of interpretation, the way in which we ‘decode’ a piece may change our sense of the piece we are hearing, necessitating an infinite series of new perspectives in the act of listening.” Some welcomed the resurgence of reggae upon hearing “The Sign,” while to others it sounded completely fresh, and the pretty young faces singing the tune made it even more appealing.

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[137] David Brackett, “Introduction,” in *Interpreting Popular Music*, 9.
[138] Richard Middleton, “‘From Me to You:’ Popular Music as Message,” in *Studying Popular Music* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1990), 173.
[139] David Brackett, “Introduction,” in *Interpreting Popular Music*, 13.

All this was conveyed through different media that shaped every aspect of reception. Of course, MTV significantly influenced the content of music videos, since getting past the censors and into heavy circulation would almost certainly increase sales. Because MTV determined much of what the audience engaged with on their programs, the content of the videos was affected. Communications scholar Jack Banks concluded in 1996 that "MTV strongly embraces a 'narrowcast' format playing only specific kinds of music designed to attract its desired young audience."[140] The video could appeal to others outside this demographic (with clips getting heavy play on VH1 for this reason), but the standards of the Acquisition Committee resulted in "about 80 percent of the videos received never mak[ing] it on the channel."[141]

In a similar manner, as Keith Negus notes, "the formatted radio network decisively demarcates the markets for recorded music in the United States."[142] The coding of Wilson Phillips's and Ace of Base's offerings fit within the respective markets of top 40 or contemporary hits radio, as well as the Adult Contemporary, and even dance formats. This material was also produced and approved by MTV and radio programmers because it would not overly offend the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC). This group campaigned loudly to control the content of popular media to prevent or limit access among the nation's youth to content found morally objectionable by the PMRC's standards. For less well-established artists, the standards were strict because the network

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[140] Jack Banks, "MTV As Gatekeeper and Censor," in *Monopoly Television: MTV's Quest to Control the Music* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), 176.
[141] Ibid., 176.
[142] Keith Negus, "Plugging and Programming: Pop Radio and Record Promotion in Britain and the United States," 62.

knew that playing more risky content might not be worth the risk of criticism.[143] Once selected, the videos and singles of Wilson Phillips and Ace of Base played repeatedly, as magazines, newspapers, and other outlets added to the influx of widely circulated information, all of which encouraged approval through massive circulation and added layers of coding to suggest authenticity and relevance.

This recalls Marshall McLuhan's oft-repeated statement from the 1960s: "'the medium is the message' because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action."[144] The process of composition and recording, inscription as a commoditized object (a compact disc), radio and video play, contributions of music journalism (and so forth) makes certain demands of this content, shaping what is created and how it is understood. Alban Zak concurs, writing that "music itself has changed as its production and reception processes have become permeated by technology. Like musical notation before it, sound recording has had a profound influence on the way music is made, heard, and thought about."[145] While the medium does not negate the content of music, it sets the rules for what is possible and beneficial (both aesthetically and financially) in creation, dissemination, and reception. The content discussed in this chapter successfully utilized various media to effectively craft and convey musical and lyrical ideas in a manner that softened the social and political

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[143] Craig Marks and Rob Tennanbaum, *I Want My MTV: The Uncensored Story of the Music Video Revolution* (London: Dutton, 2011), 316-317.
[144] Marshall McLuhan, "The Medium is the Message," in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 9.
[145] Albin Zak, "Writing Records," in *The Poetics of Rock* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 2.

messages to make them seem appropriately compassionate within a socially conservative context.

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CHAPTER FOUR:
BOYS KNOW GIRLS – DISAFFECTED YOUNG MEN, TROUBLED INDEPENDENT WOMEN, AND THE TUNES THAT APPEASED THEM ALL

Introduction

For many Americans, Michael Bolton served, for better or worse, as a model of an emotionally vulnerable yet masculine male in the late 1980s and early 1990s. His romantically themed lyrics and expressive vocals balanced with a virile masculine image marked by his bared chest and fit physique. In the mid-1990s, after the height of Bolton's fame, a different type of sensitive, rock-oriented male musician proliferated in the American popular music field: that of the troubled young man. Often emotionally unsettled and physically disheveled, male talent such as Matchbox Twenty and Vertical Horizon conveyed the complexity of youthful masculinity in this period. Incorporating suggestions of victimization, confusion, and insecurity into the lyrics of successful singles helped to situate this material within a challenging economic and social landscape.

Though comprised of male performers operating generically within rock, such groups and artists achieved widespread popularity, which included a large female listenership. The mutable interpretation of their material allowed many women to identify with it as they connected their experiences and feelings to those suggested in the music. Effective marketing also facilitated this success, since such groups and individual artists also acquired a large audience through deliberate portrayals of their musical and public relatability as both pop-friendly alternative rockers and troubled members of

Generation X, and consolidation in radio allowed greater format redundancy (similar playlists on multiple formats), and likely influenced the genre culture of the period.

While the more rock-oriented music discussed in this chapter deviates from this dissertation's focus on mainstream pop, exploration of these artists' work presents opportunities to discuss how such material achieved success in what may seem like a distant market. In particular, analysis of this material necessitates a more explicit discussion of crossover, format redundancy, youthful masculinity, and the musical taste of American women. In the last years of the twentieth century, radio consolidation, the coming of age of a generation, and the varied reactions to feminism played themselves out in the content of these songs and in how they were produced and marketed.

Slackers and Angry White Men in the Postindustrial 1990s

Facing a new millennium generated a great deal of speculation among young American men, some of it inspired by social and economic changes. As sociologist Michael Kimmel writes, at this point "the structural foundations of traditional manhood – economic independence, geographic mobility, domestic dominance – had all been eroding."[1] Economic changes, some induced by economic globalization of, and the greater participation of women in, the workforce, combined with changing interpersonal relations, encouraged doubt and frustration among those men who felt that earning enough to support a family, and holding a position of dominance within the social structure, constituted important facets of "traditional manhood." Kimmel notes that

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[1] Michael Kimmel, "Wimps, Whiners, and Weekend Warriors," in *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 216.

downward mobility, as well as the inclusion of women in "men's social clubs" led some men to feel threatened.[2]

Andrew Hartman writes about these men as well, describing the documentation of a perceived "war against men."[3] This "war" took the shape of feminists and minorities encouraging institutional and social changes that these concerned men found threatening. Feminism itself was deemed "emasculating," and granting privileges to others seemed to threaten the benefits enjoyed by men. Rather than focusing on the economic changes that brought about a loss of control for many Americans, these "angry white men" (and some media outlets reporting on them) cast blame on those who sought to escape their marginalization. Such a viewpoint concludes that a significant consequence of these activities was the victimization of men.[4]

Scholar Kyle Kusz writes that these arguments, and accompanying images in popular culture, "are best understood as instruments and effects of a white male backlash politics that seeks to disavow and deny the privileged position of white masculinity in order to re-secure its central, privileged, and normative position within a historical conjuncture of social, cultural, and economic changes that has threatened it."[5] Focusing more explicitly on the figure of the "slacker," Kusz describes a phenomenon by which a group of young white men (very rarely women), characterized by a lack of educational and personal achievements, represented a "lost generation" that was dysfunctional and

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[2] Ibid., 216-217.
[3] Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars*, 149.
[4] Michael Kimmel, "Wimps, Whiners, and Weekend Warriors," in *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 217.
[5] Kyle William Kusz, "Reality Bites?: The Cultural Politics of Generation X and Youthful White Masculinities in Sport and Popular Culture in 1990s America." PhD diss. (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2003), iii.

downwardly mobile because of its own failings. The new right focused on these young men in part because they seemed to prove the negative effects of more progressive changes wrought by identity politics. In addition, the negative portrayal of the slacker allowed the blame for their economic struggles to shift in some assessments from the changing economy to a lack of will on the part of young men. Kusz describes this practice as "an imaginary solution to the economic anxieties and tensions…being felt by many (mostly older) members of the white, middle classes who could not comprehend the younger generation's" difficulty in securing the same level of gainful employment as they had.[6]

In some media representations, the "angry white male" and the "slacker" found common ground in the sense that both were utilized to articulate the frustration and confusion encountered by men attempting to adjust to 1990s economic and social conditions. More conservative forces mobilized these figures and their perceived struggles to create an identity politics that would benefit white men by portraying them as victims.[7] Musically, this reactionary activity encouraged the development and popularity of troubled white male artists. Through aesthetic and marketing choices, these men critiqued real economic and social problems as experienced by these artists, but often in an inflated manner that benefited those critical of changing gender roles and in denial of the contribution of economic changes to the woes of American youth.

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[6] Ibid., 118.
[7] Ibid., 122-123.

Of course, these two stereotypes – the "angry white male" and the "slacker" – hardly describe the complexity of material offered within the popular music field, let alone the shades of experience faced by young men (and women) in real life. To highlight how artists conveyed varied perspectives on the challenges facing young men and women in the 1990s, the following discussion is framed to highlight in turn how these musicians express anger, gender-based condescension, and confusion over social and economic changes. Explaining how their contributions fit within the general mainstream, rock, and Adult Contemporary radio environments illuminates not only radio and record industry practices, but also the means through which these artists shared personally inspired messages with a large audience through means adaptable to the contemporary popular music field. That is, these young men may have felt anger and uncertainty in their own circumstances, but that a broader demographic recognized their own experiences in what these groups offered is not surprising given the tough circumstances many Americans faced. Coordination between aural and visual media also encouraged this identification with songs that, to varying degrees, appear to convey potentially offensive messages about young women – a prominent segment of the audience that seemed willing to accept or ignore these implications.

Radio Formats in the Post-Regulation World

To frame the discussion of individual songs, this section will provide a brief summary of changes to radio resulting from the 1996 Telecommunications Act. This topic is discussed more thoroughly in Chapter One, but considering that the music

discussed in this chapter reached radio after the passage of the law, a refresher will add depth to the overall context.

In short, the telecom act inspired massive changes in ownership, noticeable within weeks after the passage of the law. This resulted in far fewer companies owning many more stations.[8] Both format and program diversity suffered from this consolidation. Analyzing the consequences of deregulation, activist Jenny Toomey writes that "radio companies regularly operate two or more stations with the same format. . . in the same local market."[9] Additionally, programmed content between differently labeled formats has overlapped a great deal, so even two differently formats can share a great deal of programming – for example, Contemporary Hits Radio (CHR, also known as Top 40), Adult Top 40, and Hot Adult Contemporary can sound like the same format.[10] Instead of increasing musical diversity to allow each station to compete for a different segment of the audience (as was the proposed result of the law), many of these stations, regardless of format, played overlapping content. Toomey writes that research by the Freedom of Music Coalition "found 561 instances of format redundancy nationwide – a parent company operating two or more stations in the same market, with the same format" even though "format variety…actually increased."[11]

This format overlap may have encouraged airplay of some songs on many different stations and formats. However, crossover between formats did not emerge

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[8] Christopher H. Sterling and Michael C. Keith, "Clouds in the Air (Since 1995)," in *Sounds of Change: A History of FM Broadcasting in America*, 180.
[9] Jenny Toomey, "Empire of the Air," *The Nation*.
[10] Gabriel Rossman, "But Which Chart Do You Climb?:" in *Climbing the Charts: What Radio Airplay Tells Us About the Diffusion of Innovation*, 74.
[11] Jenny Toomey, "Empire of the Air," *The Nation*.

because of this act – after all, Michael Bolton, Ace of Base, and Wilson Phillips all achieved success on a considerable number of *Billboard* charts, which is a marker for radio airplay. This occurred with a lesser degree of radio deregulation and thus a more diversified ownership and programming environment. Many factors beyond deregulation, including musical style, the musical context, and marketing have played a role in widespread airplay. As a result, the effect of the 1996 Telecommunications Act on crossover is difficult to quantify. The influence of format redundancy will stand as a suggestion in the background in this chapter. Chart positions should be considered within this context – likely impacted by station ownership (and thus programming) changes, but to an indefinite extent.

Anger, Relationships, and Postindustrial Grit

The disgruntled young people portrayed in the music and videos for "Push" and "Everything You Want" by the members of (respectively) Matchbox Twenty and Vertical Horizon offer, among other things, lyrical depictions of resentful young lovers. These two songs reinforce their darker messages by incorporating various musical elements drawn from the alternative rock subgenre, including distorted electric guitars and strategically processed vocals. Rather than dominating the aesthetic environment, these lyrical and musical features add an edge to romantic subject matter, acoustic instrumentation, and thinner textures, all common genre markers for pop.

As a result of this synthesis, these rock-oriented groups succeeded with a large audience, including that tracked by *Billboard*'s Adult Top 40 chart. For example, Matchbox Twenty's "Push" reached number one on the Alternative Songs chart, as well

as the number three position on *Billboard*'s Mainstream Top 40 chart and number six on Adult Top 40.[12] Vertical Horizon's "Everything You Want" performed well on several charts, including the Hot 100 (number 1), Triple A (number 2), Mainstream Top 40 (number 2), Adult Top 40 (number 1), and Alternative Songs (number 5).[13] Lyrical and musical elements, discussed below, helped both songs draw in such a broad demographic.

In "Push," for instance, the song starts with more resonant chordal electric guitar (see Table. 4.1). This timbre continues through the verses, in which the guitar plays more rhythmically sparse chordal figures that allow the vocals greater aural space. The drum set elements, first heard on the pick-up to the first verse, continue in the background until the first pre-chorus. At this point, the accompanimental material adopts a more raw-sounding timbre and forceful rhythm with distorted electric guitar and the sixteenth-eighth pattern in the bass, both of which recall the influence of hard rock. In the chorus, these guitar figures become more rhythmically active, eventually forming a rhythmic unison that becomes most dramatic in the latter half of the choruses (first at 1:08, then at 2:28 and 3:14). At several points, the bass contributes significantly to the overall feel of the song. In the verses, for instance, the bass plays the same basic rhythms as the other guitars, but in the pre-choruses this instrument's rhythm is more active. Combined with a static melody, these rhythmic elements add to the tension in these sections of the song.

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[12] "Matchbox Twenty Chart History," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, https://www.billboard.com/music/matchbox-twenty/chart-history [accessed January 17, 2019].

[13] "Vertical Horizon Chart History," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, https://www.billboard.com/music/vertical-horizon/chart-history [accessed January 18, 2019].

Table 4.1: Matchbox Twenty, "Push," 1996[14]

Section	Lyrics / Description	Key
Introduction 0 – :09	Bass and chordal electric guitar	F#M
Verse 1 :10 – :33	She said I don't know if I've ever been good enough I'm a little bit rusty, and I think my head is caving in and I don't know if I've ever been really loved by a hand that's touched me, well I feel like something's gonna give and I'm a little bit angry, well	
Pre-chorus 1 :34 – :56	This ain't over, no not here, not while I still need you around You don't owe me, we might change Yeah we just might feel good	BM
Chorus 1 :57 – 1:19	I wanna push you around, I will, I will **[well, I will]**[15] I wanna push you down, I will, I will I wanna take you for granted, I wanna take you for granted I will	F#M
Transition/ Introduction 2 1:20 – 1:30	Melodic electric guitar with band accompaniment	
Verse 2 1:31 – 1:53	She said I don't know why you ever would lie to me like I'm a little untrusting when I think that the truth is gonna hurt ya And I don't know why you couldn't just stay with me You couldn't stand to be near me when my face don't seem to want to shine 'cuz it's a little bit dirty, well	
Pre-chorus 2 1:54 – 2:16	Don't just stand there, say nice things to me 'Cause I've been cheated I've been wronged, and you don't know me, well I can't change I won't do anything at all	BM
Chorus 2 2:17 – 2:39	I wanna push you around, I will, I will I wanna push you down, I will, I will I wanna take you for granted, I wanna take you for granted I will	F#M
Bridge 2:40 – 3:02	Oh but don't bowl me over Just wait a minute well it kinda fell apart, things get so crazy, crazy Don't rush this baby, don't rush this baby	D#m
Chorus 3/ Outro 3:03 – 3:58	I wanna push you around, I will, I will I wanna push you down, I will, I will I wanna take you for granted, I wanna take you for granted I will	F#M

[14] Rob Thomas and Matt Serletic. "Push," track four on *Yourself or Someone Like You*, Atlantic, 1996, compact disc. Discussion of music and lyrics references this recording and album liner notes.

[15] Album liner notes indicate that the first two lines of each chorus end with "I will, I will," but the recording suggests that Rob Thomas sang "well, I will" each time.

Such changes in instrumentation and rhythm help to define the song's form. The degree of timbral and textural variety offered by the introduction, verses, pre-choruses, choruses, and transitions allows the different musical settings to create variety between these sections, and among iterations of each section, and to enhance the nuances conveyed by the lyrics. Displayed in Table 4.1, the differing harmonic settings also mark different sections of the song and enhance the message that the lyrics and vocals convey. Overall, the song functions in F-sharp major. The verses, choruses, and transition are all clearly in this key. The pre-choruses center on B-major, which functions as a static sub-dominant of F-sharp major.

These harmonic choices move the accompaniment itself forward, but they also heighten the message of the lyrics. For instance, in the F-sharp major verses, the woman reflects on how she has been mistreated and her resulting feelings of inadequacy,[16] while the B-major-centered pre-choruses are clearly directed at the other person in this one-way conversation. The same device is used in the bridge, which predictably modulates briefly to D-sharp minor. (This sounds distant despite sharing much with its relative major F-sharp.) Combined with the exposure of the vocals when the accompaniment briefly drops out as Rob Thomas sings "crazy," the vocal ascent on the last line of this section, and the overall thick instrumental texture, this key and modal change provides a period of contrast between two choruses and marks the climax of the song. Bridges typically serve this function, but for "Push" this section of the song lyrically suggests that the subject is

[16] This song was meant to reflect the perspective of a woman. This will be discussed more thoroughly later in the chapter.

aware that things have gone awry, and that it was not her intention to "push" the relationship to such a state.

To the song's credit, in the lyrics a man describes the perspective of a hurt and potentially abusive woman engaged in a dysfunctional relationship, thus highlighting how damaged and vulnerable she feels. This quoted text most likely identifies her pain as inspiring her actions, rather than blaming it on her lover. To some, though, it seemed as though the text served to justify abuse by explaining what inspired it and why she feels entitled to damage her lover to appease herself. Sung by a man with baritone vocal range, this song generated a great deal of controversy because many interpreted the lyrics as misogynistic and supportive of violence against women.[17] Such a misunderstanding seems natural considering that the only indication that a woman could be the threatening party, rather than a man, is quickly sung as a pick-up ("She said") that begins the two verses. Performing the song as an interpretation of a woman's perspective was an unusual choice, one that many in the audience missed. In part, this confusion may come from the lyrics, some of which may not quote or paraphrase the woman. For example, the pre-choruses and choruses could be interpreted as the man's reaction to what the woman has said, so that she expresses vulnerability and pain in the versus and he responds with threats and attempts to control her (or someone else's) behavior in the rest of the song.

Additionally, violence against women is an unfortunately common social issue and subject in the media, so the assumption that a man is threatening a woman is more likely than a reversal of those roles. In terms of media coverage, Susan Faludi cites

[17] Elysa Gardner, "Matchbox 20 On Top with 'Push,'" *Entertainment Weekly*. September 5, 1997, https://ew.com/article/1997/09/05/matchbox-20-top-push/ [accessed September 30, 2018].

numerous headlines and marketing strategies announcing "American manhood under siege" and the connection between this and abusive behavior.[18] Public figures described the crisis in varying ways, citing men victimized by social changes, the dysfunctional behavior of youth, and a pushback that included stereotypically masculine commercials for cologne and razors.[19] Such trends highlight significant issues faced by men, although some of the responses to them have required what Michael Kimmel describes as "a set of empirical inversions that made the rational mind reel."[20] This included the idea that men were meant to dominate society, as well as the position among "men's rights" advocates that women had achieved equality and were using their position to "discriminate against men."[21]

Ultimately, this last point fed into what Kusz describes as the "appropriation of language and imagery associated with 'working class and underclass white cultures'"[22] by alternative rock and its various offshoots. For many listeners, "Push" fed into this, since it was easy to imagine Rob Thomas as the subject of the song. The lyrics could easily suggest that he felt damaged and entitled to assert his rightful male dominance in retaliation. This interpretation follows the trend Kusz describes of "songs by white male

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[18] Susan Faludi, "The Son, The Moon, and the Stars: The Promise of Postwar Manhood," *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999), 6.
[19] Susan Faludi, "The Son, The Moon, and the Stars: The Promise of Postwar Manhood," in *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*, 6-7; See also from this text "Girls Have all the Power: What's Troubling Troubled Boys," 102-152.
[20] Michael Kimmel, "Wimps, Whiners, and Weekend Warriors," in *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 218.
[21] Ibid., 218.
[22] Kyle William Kusz, "Reality Bites?: The Cultural Politics of Generation X and Youthful White Masculinities in Sport and Popular Culture in 1990s America," 231-232.

bands expressing sentiments of being victimized and ill-treated."[23] The video encourages this interpretation, since Thomas appears as a troubled young man who lashes out.

This isn't to say that some men were not victimized by certain conditions, or that they most commonly handled this struggle in ways that hurt others. Faludi discusses the plight of men attending domestic violence groups, observing that the general goal seemed to be learning to control one's behavior in a world in which real control was in short supply. She writes that the common assumptions about this loss of control relate to the changing roles of women: either they "are properly challenging male dominance," or "women have gone far beyond their demands for equal treatment and now are trying to take power and control away from men."[24] This springs from what she describes as "a peculiarly modern American perception that to be a man means to be at the controls and at all times to feel yourself in control."[25]

Thomas claims that the group's management encouraged speculation about the lyrics, writing that "at the time, our management cooked up this whole idea of this controversy that women were freaking out about the lyrics because it [sic] was sexist."[26] The result was, according to *Entertainment Weekly* writer Elysa Gardner, recognition that the lyrics were "perceived as misogynistic by some folks."[27] She suggests that "when Matchbox 20's Rob Thomas sat down to write 'Push'. . . the singer forgot his sensitivity

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[23] Ibid., 232.
[24] Susan Faludi, "The Son, The Moon, and the Stars: The Promise of Postwar Manhood," in *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*, 9.
[25] Ibid., 9.
[26] Rob Thomas, "'Push' Commentary," genius.com, https://genius.com/Matchbox-twenty-push-lyrics [accessed September 27, 2018].
[27] Elysa Gardner, "Matchbox 20 On Top with 'Push,'" *Entertainment Weekly*.

training." [28] Here, Gardner ridicules both the expectation to consider how mass mediated content might impact others and Thomas's apparent lack of political correctness. She does allow him to explain that the song was written about many people in his life who have emotionally damaged him, including an ex-girlfriend who demanded a share of the song's royalties.[29]

Reflecting on the song several years after its release, he writes that he felt positive about the musical qualities of the song and thought that, especially considering other material released in the period, "Push" would seem mild by comparison: "This was the '90s," he writes. "Tool had 'Prison Sex' out. This was calm compared to a lot of stuff that was out there."[30] Regarding the controversial lyrics, Thomas writes that the general inspiration "was this emotional manipulation people do when they're in the wrong relationship."[31] He also suggests that his troubled relationship with his mother partly inspired the song, indicating that the song could refer to a platonic relationship, such as that between a parent and child.[32]

The fact that some found it overly angry or sexist certainly added to the public awareness of "Push," but the song likely found a large, appreciative audience in part because it conveyed a degree of subtlety both lyrically and musically. Beyond the controversy, textual and musical elements communicated the perspective of someone who attempts to establish control and build self-worth through emotional manipulation

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[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Rob Thomas, "'Push' Commentary," genius.com.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Rob Thomas, "'Push' Commentary," genius.com; Elysa Gardner, "Matchbox 20 On Top with 'Push," *Entertainment Weekly*.

and physical violence. By approaching the subject from this point of view, Thomas provides insight into the potential motivations of a distressed person by highlighting both their vulnerability and their problematic efforts at conquering it.[33]

Reception of the song was also influenced by aural genre associations. While the verses offered a softer timbre and thinner texture (to accompany reflective lyrics), the pre-choruses and choruses, as well as the bridge, recall the harder textures of alternative rock, especially for 1990s listeners. Keith Negus, citing Simon Frith, writes that genre associations are part of a process "whereby ongoing cultural production is not so much about sudden bursts of innovation but the continual production of familiarity and newness."[34] In this case, the song combined more comfortable mainstream musical associations with those of hard rock. This configuration allowed some listeners to home in on the confessional pop elements, while others focused on the rock orientation. The degree of calculation on the part of the band and its producers is debatable, since Thomas simply seemed to think he was writing a meaningful song and detailed production information is unavailable.

Figure 4.1 below demonstrates the changing dissemination (and audience) for "Push" as the song first registered enough airplay to chart, until the peak on each chart. The graph does not include chart performance after the peak date, and each chart contains a different number of songs (so the position means something different depending on

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[33] Rob Thomas and Matt Serletic, "Push," 1996, track four on *Yourself or Someone Like You*, Atlantic, compact disc. All discussion of this song references this recording and album liner notes.
[34] Keith Negus, "Cultural Production and the Corporation: Musical Genres and the Strategic Management of Creativity in the US Recording Industry," *Media, Culture & Society* 20 (1998), 362.

how many songs are included). However, this image facilitates the visualization of how this song's chart performance demonstrates the spread of listenership from one target audience to another. Clearly, "Push" was promoted first for rock radio. After that, airplay spread to other formats, always with some overlap to ensure continued presence, but with enough restraint to avoid overplaying the track.

Figure 4.1: "Push" Chart Performance[35]

March April May June July August September October

Mainstream Rock 3/17 | #39 6/7 | #4

Alternative Songs 5/3 | #36 7/26 | #1

Triple A 5/31 | #17 8/16 | #2

Adult Top 40 7/12 | #36 10/18 | #6

Mainstream Top 40 7/19 | #40 10/11 | #3

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[35] "Matchbox Twenty Chart History," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, https://www.billboard.com/music/matchbox-twenty/chart-history [accessed February 13, 2019]; "Mainstream Rock Tracks," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, March 15, 1997, https://www.billboard.com/charts/hot-mainstream-rock-tracks/1997-03-15 [accessed February 13, 2019]; "Alternative Songs," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, May 3, 1997, https://www.billboard.com/charts/alternative-songs/1997-05-03 [accessed February 13, 2019]; "Triple A," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, May 31, 1997, https://www.billboard.com/charts/triple-a/1997-05-31 [accessed February 13, 2019]; "Adult Pop Songs," *The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, July 12, 1997, https://www.billboard.com/charts/adult-pop-songs/1997-07-12 [accessed February 13, 2019].

As with other artists (including those discussed in this dissertation), Matchbox Twenty's record label Atlantic clearly pushed airplay of this song on relevant formats to encourage circulation to those who would (literally) buy into this pop/alt-rock group. The label also likely released different versions of the song to ensure that the style would fit that of as many formats as possible. The spread of this song on radio was the result of what Frith describes as a "collusive" process whereby the record industry, critics, deejays, and various audiences continually reevaluate artists' place within the overall musical and social context.[36]

Another song that also enjoyed crossover success by utilizing this process is "Everything You Want" by Vertical Horizon. Released in 1999, this track less ambiguously communicates the perspective of the sort of disgruntled young male described by Faludi, Kimmel, Kusz, and others. Rather than anger, though, Matt Scannell's lyrics ultimately describe a man's confusion over his love interest's lack of appreciation for what he feels he has to offer her. This sentiment recalls Kusz's observations that young generation x men are not typically angry, but rather confused over a lack of social acceptance or economic opportunity.[37] Scannell's verses describe a confused individual, but without any clear indication of the gender of this person. These sections also neglect to mention anything about a romantic relationship, instead focusing on building the character that the text is hypothetically directed toward. Statements such as "You never could get it / Unless you were fed it / And now you're here and you don't

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[36] Simon Frith, "Genre Rules," in *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 75-76, 88.
[37] Kyle William Kusz, "Reality Bites?: The Cultural Politics of Generation X and Youthful White Masculinities in Sport and Popular Culture in 1990s America,"152.

know why"[38] and the mention of "places where you used to learn" in the first verse describe an unreflective individual who "used to" be receptive to personal growth.

After the first chorus that describes the rejection of another man (using "he" as a pronoun) who should fulfill wants, needs, and represents what the individual aspires to, the second verse is difficult to interpret without connections to a romantic relationship. "You're waiting for someone to put you together," for instance, suggests that a man might be expected to perform this function for the song's addressee, who is presumably a woman. The next lines indicate that this woman is ultimately looking to be pushed away, to find conflict while simultaneously hoping for the definition of her psyche.

These observations, we learn in the last chorus, come from the perspective of the man referred to in the third person in earlier choruses. At this point, he is portrayed by the singer. He has apparently learned enough about this woman that he can confidently make observations about her innermost problems and desires, but he still feels mystified by her rejection. Surely this stems from placing responsibility for her lack of interest squarely on the woman's shortcomings: when the singer's lover rejects him despite his perception that he offers all she could ever want or need, he describes her faults. The rejection becomes a symptom of her lack of awareness or desire for conflict, not of any lack on his part.

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[38] Matthew Scannell, "Everything You Want," track three on *Everything You Want*, RCA, 1999, compact disc. All discussion of this song references this recording and album liner notes.

As discussed previously, this song performed well on several charts.[39] In addition to a man describing his trouble with a seemingly confused young woman (gender roles that a listener could reverse), the arrangement of this song (the basics of which are illustrated in Table 4.2 below) contributed to its widespread success. The use of highly distorted eighth-note guitar figures in isolation during the first nine seconds of the song creates a distinctive beginning, to which acoustic guitar, beginning at :10, creates a more accessible impression while orienting the song in E-flat minor. A sudden break before verse 1 begins at :21 adds another unpredictable element to the composition, as does the separation of verse 1 (but not the other verses) into two parts. Instead of silence between part one and part two of this verse, we hear the first drum set elements in the form of a quarter note on beat four that initiates the thicker texture starting at :41. Double-tracked vocals and subtle vocal harmonies join the distorted guitar, electric guitar, and drum set, plus a more rhythmically active bass. When chorus 1 begins in 1:01, the song's texture has been developed by a two-part introduction and verse. Overall, the use of novel and varied timbres and the build-up of texture tell a musical story that proceeds compellingly through aural variation and escalation.

These tactics are further demonstrated when another layer of distorted electric guitar joins the arrangement in Chorus 1, playing more sustained notes, and adding a hard-rock inspired timbre. This contrasts with the more strained electric guitar and vocal sounds heard previously, while adding a less rhythmically active layer. Scannell's vocals, supported with more obvious harmonization, center on D-flat, which creates a higher

[39] "Vertical Horizon Chart History," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, https://www.billboard.com/music/vertical-horizon/chart-history [accessed January 18, 2019].

range and reinforces the key area of G-flat major. The vocal melody in the bridge clearly supports this harmonic orientation, as the primary pitches sung by Scannell outline a G-flat^7 harmony. In both cases, these melodic and harmonic changes, along with thicker texture and the emphasis on compressed and saturated timbres, imbue these sections with heightened tension and create a sense of variety in a song that features repetitive vocal melodies.

Table 4.2: Vertical Horizon, "Everything You Want," 1999

Section	Content	Key
Introduction, Part 1 0 – :09 Introduction, Part 2 :10 – :20	*Distorted eighth-note guitar figures*[40] *Acoustic guitar enters*	Eb Minor
Verse 1, Part 1 :21 – :40 Verse 1, Part 2 :41 – 1:00	Somewhere there's speaking It's already coming in Oh and it's rising at the back of your mind You never could get it Unless you were fed it Now you're here and you don't know why But under skinned knees and the skid marks Past the places where you used to learn You howl and listen Listen and wait for the Echoes of angels who won't return	
Chorus 1 1:01 – 1:21	He's everything you want He's everything you need He's everything inside of you That you wish you could be He says all the right things At exactly the right time But he means nothing to you And you don't know why	Gb Major
Transition 1:22 – 1:31	Accompaniment from verses with subdued melodic guitar line	Eb Minor

[40] While the instrumentation of this figure is uncertain, only vocals, guitars, drums, and percussion are listed in the album liner notes. Considering this, the instrument playing these eighth notes is likely a guitar with a distorted timbre and abbreviated note endings (using either manual or digital methods).

Table 4.2, Vertical Horizon, "Everything You Want," 1999, Continued

Verse 2 1:32 – 1:51	You're waiting for someone To put you together You're waiting for someone to push you away There's always another wound to discover There's always something more you wish he'd say	
Chorus 2 1:52 – 2:12	He's everything you want He's everything you need He's everything inside of you That you wish you could be He says all the right things At exactly the right time But he means nothing to you And you don't know why	Gb Major
Bridge 2:13 – 2:36	But you'll just sit tight And watch it unwind It's only what you're asking for And you'll be just fine With all of your time It's only what you're waiting for	Eb Minor
Verse 3 2:37 – 2:56	Out of the island Into the highway Past the places where you might have turned You never did notice But you still hide away The anger of angels who won't return	Eb Minor
Chorus 3 2:57 – 3:16	He's everything you want He's everything you need He's everything inside of you That you wish you could be He says all the right things At exactly the right time But he means nothing to you And you don't know why	Gb Major
Chorus 4 3:17 – 4:17	I am everything you want I am everything you need I am everything inside of you That you wish you could be I say all the right things At exactly the right time But I mean nothing to you and I don't know why And I don't know why Why I don't know	Gb Major – higher vocal range but no modulation

The videos for these songs highlight the confused and sometimes angry persona more dramatically than the songs. Both videos feature a drab overall color profile for at least part of the video. This could recall the influence of some alternative rock videos that used this effect to help portray a sense of unsettledness and dysfunctionality, such as Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit." Director Nigel Dick's concept for "Push" centers the video in a flatly lit, blue-grey tinged environment.[41] The band, dressed in dark-colored clothing, performs in an alley between two run-down warehouse-like buildings that suggest elements of postindustrial blight. In many scenes (like that illustrated in the screenshot below), lead singer Rob Thomas stands among drably dressed men waiting in line, all of whom face away from the camera so that Thomas, with his leather jacket (partly unzipped to reveal his chest) and highly expressive face, stands out. These settings and behaviors help to set him apart from those who seem to have a different agenda and perspective on their conditions.

Figure 4.2: Rob Thomas in "Push" Music Video

[41] Nigel Dick, dir. "Push," music video, performed by Matchbox Twenty, 1997. All discussion of this video and screenshots references this source.

Such foundations create a visual connection to the harder elements of the accompaniment, such as the distorted guitars in the pre-choruses and choruses – the sound is dark, and so are the images. This helps to demonstrate, as Carol Vernallis writes, how "in music videos, images can work with music by adopting the phenomenological qualities of sound," which includes "mimic[ing] timbral qualities."[42] Making these adjustments is necessary, Vernallis theorizes, because "people seem to process sound differently from image."[43] Images "can be owned, procured, processed," while sound is more ephemeral, "more akin to a verb or adjectival form than to a noun form."[44]

Figure 4.3: Matchbox Twenty in "Push" Music Video

The overall focus on Thomas's performance, even when the rest of the group is in view (as in Figure 4.3 above), allows Dick to tell the emotional story of the lyrics through both Thomas's distinct facial and bodily movements and certain set pieces that symbolize elements of the text. The overall impression one gets from this performance is of a trapped person (below in Figure 4.4, the left image literally demonstrates this) who feels

[42] Carol Vernallis, *Experiencing Music Video: Aesthetics and Cultural Context*, 177.
[43] Ibid., 175.
[44] Ibid., 176.

invisible and screams for attention (see the image below on the right). In the absence of traditional glamour, we see a glamourous suffering.

Figure 4.4: Rob Thomas in crisis in "Push" Music Video

At times, Thomas's behavior seems to threaten the viewer. The right image above suggests this (captured from the point in the bridge when he sings "crazy"). When he reaches for the camera, or, as seen below, tries to pull away when his right wrist is cuffed and connected to a chain, his emotional stability becomes increasingly questionable.

Figure 4.5: Rob Thomas Struggles in "Push" Music Video

Such visuals add a physical element to a medium which Vernallis suggests is "primarily external to us"[45] A listener can hear the angst in Thomas's voice and feel the sound as a real physical force; this visceral sense passes to a viewer who can connect the aural and visual fields when Thomas yanks at a chain while people casually walk by, or when he menacingly sings to the viewer vis-à-vis the camera as he expresses his anguish to the audience. The physical realities of sound influence the perception of the visual as "the yoking together of two concepts from different semantic realms creates a new meaning."[46]

This interpretation positions Rob Thomas, or the character he portrays here, as both a victim and a bully. The fact that he is imprisoned in a wooden box, chained to a brick wall, ignored when he sings among the public, or left alone while others walk away (starting at 3:51) inspires little sympathy because he never appears as a balanced, sensitive individual. Either the world made him crazy, or he is insane, and others have used various strategies to contain his behavior. Regardless, these disturbing images and actions suggest a rather extreme interpretation of the song, one that certainly supplied additional material for those seeking to discredit "Push" for its seemingly misogynistic lyrics. Nigel Dick's video offers a powerful presentation of emotional distress through the settings and a compelling performance by the group (particularly Rob Thomas).

The power of these visuals seems to override what Thomas described as the intended message of the song, making it difficult to interpret the music without imagining Thomas's antics. Dick's work here is aesthetically powerful, but the coding of the video

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[45] Ibid., 176.
[46] Ibid., 184.

overwhelms some components of the music.[47] Sheila Whiteley's work on music video supports such a conclusion. She writes that "pop videos impose a visual interpretation of the song, that the preferred meaning is largely weighted in favor of the image."[48] Assuming this dominance of the visual over the musical, assumptions that "Push" described the deplorable actions of a damaged young man were encouraged by this video.

The clip does maintain allegiance with rock orientation of the song, as does the video for "Everything You Want." Directed by Clark Eddy,[49] this video reflects the more pop-friendly accompaniment in the verses. Both videos provide visuals to "advertise their home genres," as Vernallis writes (in this case, rock is dominant), while offering material that could "withstand multiple viewings and appeal to a wide range of viewing audiences."[50] The videos are not so edgy as to discourage a less rock-friendly audience. To this end, Eddy's video more successfully incorporates visual elements that both, as Lisa Lewis describes, "[elevate] white-male musicianship and [create] an idealized vision of white-male spectatorship"[51] while incorporating settings that provide female viewers comfortable access to both the streets and a diner booth – in one case, an "access sign" that appropriates a typically male-dominated space, and in the other a "discovery sign" that represents a place women have typically felt welcome.[52]

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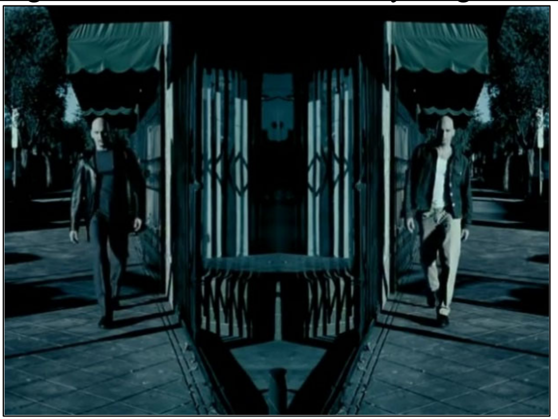
[47] Ibid., 191. Vernallis discusses how the medium with the "sharpest contours" dominates interpretation. In this case, the video wins out, altering the song's meaning.
[48] Sheila Whiteley, "Seduced by the Sign: An Analysis of the Textual Links Between Sound and Image in Pop Videos," in *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*, ed. Sheila Whiteley, (London: Routledge, 1997), 259.
[49] Clark Eddy, dir., "Everything You Want," music video, performed by Vertical Horizon, 2000. All discussion of this video and screenshots references this source.
[50] Carol Vernallis, *Experiencing Music Video: Aesthetics and Cultural Context*, 191.
[51] Lisa Lewis, *Gender Politics and MTV: Voicing the Difference*, 32.
[52] Ibid., 109, 120.

By following the song's form, the video underlines timbral and textural changes to emphasize both the range of rock-influenced elements in the accompaniment and the changes in lyrical strategy between the verses and the other sections of the song. Every verse focuses on either street or restaurant scenes (Figure 4.6 below).

Figure 4.6: Scenes from "Everything You Want" Music Video



Other sections primarily feature the band, with frontman Matt Scannell generally in the foreground, singing and playing guitar in a cube (below) with three sides of bright-white lights facing the viewer.

Figure 4.7: Vertical Horizon Performs in "Everything You Want" Music Video

The image on the left in Figure 4.6 displays an important device used in the video, that of the split screen. This alludes to the more philosophical elements in the text,

highlighted by lyrics like that in verse three: *Out of the island / Into the highway / Past the places where you might have turned*. The split often shows Scannell, dressed in contrasting outfits, making choices, some of them different and leading to different outcomes. Clearly, the image above suggests that the man on the left is perhaps more successful because he is dressed in higher-end clothes, while the man on the right is wearing working class-associated attire. Presumably, the better-dressed fellow made better choices. In one instance, he stops to pet a dog. In another, he turns to looks into a peephole, which leads to the band playing chorus 3 in the light box.

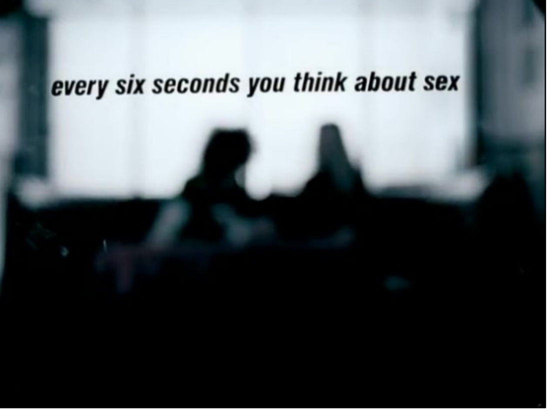
This sequence demonstrates how these different settings demarcate formal sections while sometimes serving as a gratuitous advertisement for the song, album, and band. When Scannell's sharply dressed character looks into the hole, we see a stylized "vh" inside (for Vertical Horizon), which opens up to the bass drum and then the group playing (both images below). The band's attire ties into the hard rock associations in these sections, with Scannell's tight screen-printed long-sleeve t-shirt and leather pants standing out. Compared to the rest of the video, the colors contrast more dramatically, suggesting different realms for the lip-synched performance and the other scenes.

Figure 4.8: Vertical Horizon Advertising in "Everything You Want" Music Video

Not long before that, in the third verse, the light box turns pinkish-red in the last few seconds, and the screen transitions to a shot of "everything you want" (the title of both the song and album it appears on) printed on a park bench. Like the images of people walking, taking cabs, and riding bikes, this focuses on people physically moving about their environment, the consequence of previous choices and inspiration for future ones.

As the shot zooms out, the viewer sees Scannell singing to a bored-looking young woman maintaining her fingernails. He turns toward her with an arm over the top of the bench, which closes the physical and affective distance between the two. This stance seems slightly offensive, but less obvious a violation of personal space than the scene acted out with the couple pictured in Figure 4.9 below. Just before these two young people calmly look at each other, the young man tries to kiss the woman, but she moves her head away (below). Before this, the word "no" flashes on the screen, and after it we see "every six seconds you think about sex." Combined with shots of other couples, a pattern becomes clear: the woman either yells at a man or turns him down. These messages are sympathetic to the men while suggesting that men struggle with the demands and limitations women place on them.

Figure 4.9: Couples Interact in "Everything You Want" Music Video



The use of words that flash on the screen serve to highlight both extra-musical messages, such as the one above, and specific lyrics in the song. For instance, "more" appears before we hear the lyrics "there's always something more you wish he'd say." Some text seems more philosophical, such as "every action has an equal and opposite reaction," which appears during the bridge. This effect seems to relate to the use of the split screen, which implies both different choices and creates an abstract aesthetic quality that director Eddy carries through the clip. At times, he emphasizes the contrasting qualities of the settings, such as using the quarter note that separates verse one from the chorus to have a strangely dressed man cycle between the two Scannells (below) before breaking to the light cube (where there is one Scannell).

Figure 4.10: Visual Effects in "Everything You Want" Music Video

This is the first time the viewer experiences a dramatic synchronization between audio and visual realms. The rhythm of the video adopts that of the song, emphasizing the quarter note break on beat four, then switches to a different setting for the next section. At other points, the emotional state matches that of the song in a more general sense, such as the muted color pallet and generally slower physical movement of the

verses and the abundance of color contrast and movement. In these sections, characters appear absorbed in their environment, unaware of their role in a music video.

By avoiding the more dramatic language and aggressive setting of "Push," Vertical Horizon's song avoided controversy. It did attract widespread appeal, demonstrated in part by further examination of *Billboard* charts. In addition to reaching number two on Triple A and Mainstream Pop and number five on Alternative Songs, the song also earned the number two slot on Radio Songs (which only covers reported radio play and does not add sales data) and number one on the Hot 100 – possible at this point because songs not released for sale as singles were included in the tabulations after December 5, 1998. This song was the first of 2000 to "[reach] pole position with its first chart entry."[53]

The fact that "Everything You Want" reached the number one spot on the Adult Top 40 chart indicates that, in addition to appealing to potentially younger listeners that also supported harder rock groups, an older demographic also found the song appealing. This older audience, though not specifically Adult Contemporary, tends to skew female as well, indicating that women found the song appealing. *Billboard* writer Melinda Newman notes that Adult Top 40 is an "adult-female-friendly format" that "has found a place for rock acts" like Vertical Horizon (and Matchbox Twenty).[54] Newman quotes

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[53] Fred Bronson, "Vertical Horizon gets 'Everything' it Wants," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, July 15, 2000, 114; Gary Trust, "In 1998, 'Iris,' 'Torn,' & Other Radio Smashes Hit the Hot 100 at Last After a Key Rule Change," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment,* May 30, 2018, [accessed October 11, 2018]. https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/chart-beat/8458527/hot-100-rule-change-1998-airplay-singles.
[54] Melinda Newman, "It's a Good Time to be Modern Pop: Mixing Bits of Rock into Top 40 Radio," *Billboard*, September 23, 2000, 5, 23.

program directors stating that they will include rock to a point, but that anything too extreme will push away pop-friendly listeners. She also writes that Vertical Horizon, Matchbox Twenty, and similar groups, the music of which she labels "modern pop," might appeal so strongly to a large audience because they offer a mixture of pop and rock with thoughtful lyrics that can be interpreted in a variety of ways. About "Everything You Want," Scannell says that he anticipated multiple responses when writing the song, and that "'It's important to give the listener the freedom to say, 'This is what I believe.''"[55] (The article suggests that the song is "about a guy's unrequited love for a girl." [56])

To some, these two songs represent the angry men of America, but their reception suggests that the situation was more complicated. The lyrics and their settings convey feelings linked to troubled men, but women also clearly identified with this material. We see and hear confusion, loss of control, and an inability to satisfactorily resolve issues. As the social and economic means of proving adulthood had been compromised, the issue of control, or the loss of it, came to inform songs like these. As a coping mechanism or more abstract attraction, a mixed-gender audience gravitated to such messages.

Such material seems on the surface to insult or threaten women to varying degrees, but perhaps greater insult came from condescending tunes like the two discussed in the next section. The songs and clips for "Push" and "Everything You Want" feature men expressing somewhat conflicted feelings about relationships, but "Absolutely (Story of a Girl)" by Nine Days and "Lullaby" by Shawn Mullins offer a more mainstream pop-

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[55] Newman, "It's a Good Time to be Modern Pop: Mixing Bits of Rock into Top 40 Radio," *Billboard*, 22.
[56] Ibid., 22.

friendly musical orientation with lyrics describing troubled young women and the stable men with seemingly omniscient understanding of their issues.

Troubled "Girls" in a Postfeminist World

"Absolutely (Story of a Girl)," released by the group Nine Days in 2000, appealed to a wide range of listeners that included those reflected on *Billboard*'s Adult Top 40 chart. This song reached the number two position here, number six on the Hot 100, and number one on Mainstream Top 40. Appealing as well to a more rock-friendly audience, this song reached number ten on both the Alternative Songs and Triple A charts.[57]

At around 96 beats per minute, this tempo is much faster than the tempi of the other songs discussed thus far in this chapter.[58] A typical rock band arrangement, with the addition of organ, complements the narrow-range vocals performed with a boyish timbre. These qualities suggest a pop-rock orientation, a description given greater weight by the melodically oriented organ and guitar solos and the untrained and unsophisticated timbre and uneven rhythmic distribution with which vocalist John Hampson delivers the lyrics. The image below displays the first line of the song (also the first line of the chorus), in which "This is the story of a girl," begins on the pick-up to beat three of the first measure, and utilizes a dotted eighth note to elongate "is" before finishing "story of a girl" with sixteenth notes on beats one and two.

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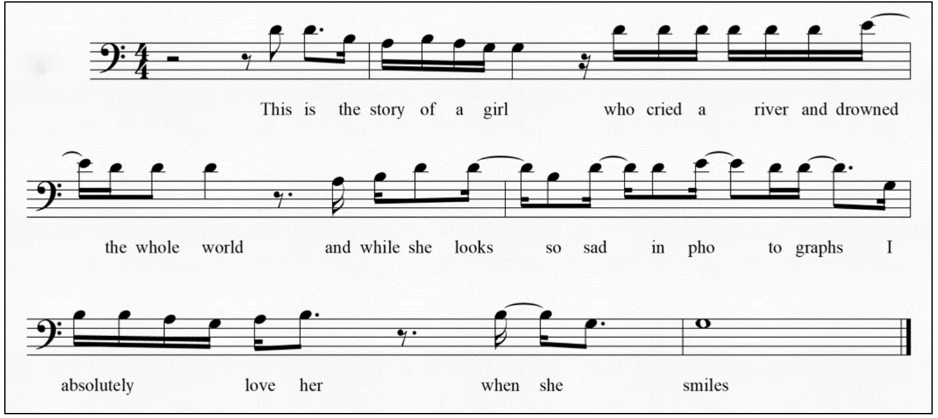
[57] "Nine Days Chart History," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, https://www.billboard.com/music/nine-days/chart-history [accessed January 19, 2019].
[58] Brian Desveaux and John Hampson, "Absolutely (Story of a Girl)," track two on *The Madding Crowd*, 550 Music/Sony, 2000, compact disc. All discussion of this song references this recording and album liner notes.

Figure 4.11: Introduction/Chorus 1, Nine Days, "Absolutely (Story of a Girl)"



This creates a cheerful rhythmic tension, which is reinforced as each line until the last is delivered melodically (and backed harmonically) like an unfinished phrase (in G-major). These features also effectively communicate what is essentially a long sentence over several measures. This quality, as well as the faster pace of the song, make it more difficult to reflect on the lyrics, especially those of the verses. The song overall obviously describes a frustrated and awkward young woman, but the verses center on her floundering relationship. She "wakes up with hope" but "only [finds] tears," while "waiting" for things to improve. Hampson admits that he "can be so insincere / making her promises never for real," but when he sings "Now how many lovers would stay / Just to put up with this shit day after day" in the second verse, it isn't clear who is putting up with what because the pre-choruses and choruses criticize the "girl" to such an extent that it seems like he feels that he is tolerating her behavior, rather than vise-versa. Each pre-chorus describes an immature female whose looks leave something to be desired and talks too much, while the choruses recall the flood of tears in, among other works, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, before concluding that "when she smiles" he "absolutely love[s] her."

Though the song's overall sense of musical levity and memorable chorus likely helped this song stand out, the song's unremarkable form and harmonic orientation added to the accessibility of this single. Starting the song with the chorus (that happens to include most of the title in the first line), suggests the name of the song right away. Ending this section with a satisfying conclusive cadence and descending melodic line allows one to focus on the word "smiles" and to feel as though the song delivers a positive message. By the second verse, a fragile relationship has been thoroughly described, but without a real sense of handwringing on the part of the young man despite lines like "How did we wind up this way / watching our mouths for the words that we say."

Table 4.3: Nine Days "Absolutely (Story of a Girl)," 2000

Chorus 1 :00 – :15	This is the story of a girl Who cried a river and drowned the whole world and while she looks so sad in photographs I absolutely love her When she smiles
Verse 1 :16 – :35	How many days in a year She woke up with hope but she only found tears and I can be so insincere making her promises never for real As long as she stands there waiting Wearing the holes in the soles of her shoes How many days disappear When you look in the mirror so how do you choose
Pre-Chorus 1 :36 – :44	Your clothes never wear as well the next day And your hair never falls in quite the same way You never seem to run out of things to say
Chorus 1 :45 – :59	This is the story of a girl Who cried a river and drowned the whole world And while she looks so sad in photographs I absolutely love her When she smiles

Table 4.3: Nine Days “Absolutely (Story of a Girl),” 2000, Continued

Verse 2 1:00 – 1:19	Now how many lovers would stay Just to put up with this shit day after day How did we wind up this way watching our mouths for the words that we say As long as we stand here waiting Wearing the clothes of the souls that we choose How do we get there today When we're walking too far for the price of our shoes
Pre-Chorus 2 1:20 – 1:28	Your clothes never wear as well the next day And your hair never falls in quite the same way You never seem to run out of things to say
Chorus 3 1:29 – 1:38	This is the story of a girl Who cried a river and drowned the whole world And while she looks so sad and lonely there I absolutely love her When she smiles
Bridge 1:39 – 1:48	
Solo 1:49 – 2:07	
Pre-Chorus 3 2:08 – 2:17	Your clothes never wear as well the next day And your hair never falls in quite the same way You never seem to run out of things to say
Chorus 4 2:18 – 2:27	This is the story of a girl Who cried a river and drowned the whole world And while she looks so sad in photographs I absolutely love her When she smiles
Chorus 5 (Revised) 2:28 – 2:48	This is the story of a girl Her pretty face she hid from the world And while she looks so sad and lonely there I absolutely love her This is the story of a girl Who cried a river and drowned the whole world And while she looks so sad in photographs I absolutely love her When she smiles
Outro 2:49 – 3:03	When she smiles

Songwriter Hampson described the song as one he one he wrote in "ten minutes" about his girlfriend at the time, thinking "'she totally drives me crazy, but I absolutely love her when she's happy, when she's smiling.'"[59] While this recollection suggests a careless but not malicious attitude, the lyrics' flippant treatment of the situation, and the lighthearted setting of this text, begs the question of why women would be drawn to such a song. Perhaps the timbrally unsophisticated, rhythmically playful vocals and pop-punk accompaniment create such a strong impression of a lighthearted tune about a quirky girl that further reflection was discouraged. Norma Coates suggests a more widespread trend, writing that rock "is at times more oppressive to women than the mainstream culture that it opposes itself to," but "women, young and sometimes older, seek affective empowerment from it"[60] anyway. Selective listening to ignore offensive elements, identifying with the powerful male figure, or finding power in objects of the male gaze (such as highly sexualized women), provide avenues from which women develop a taste for culture that, upon closer reflection, can reinscribe notions of women as childlike, emotionally immature, or existing for male enjoyment.

These issues linger when analyzing the video for this song. Directed by Liz Frielander,[61] this clip features the group performing in the same apartment building in

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[59] David Basham, "Nine Days Tells Tory Behind the 'Story of a Girl,'" *MTV* June 12, 2000, http://www.mtv.com/news/1432642/nine-days-tells-story-behind-the-story-of-a-girl/ [accessed October 15, 2018].
[60] Norma Coates, "It's a Man's, Man's, Man's World: Television and the Masculinization of Rock Discourse and Culture," PhD diss. (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2002), 9
[61] David Basham, "Semisonic, Video Director have 'Chemistry," mtv.com, December 4, 2000, http://www.mtv.com/news/1375031/semisonic-video-director-have-chemistry/ [accessed October 15, 2018].

which this "girl" lives.[62] As demonstrated in the images below, the band performs the song "live," wearing sloppy jeans, t-shirts, and sneakers, while dancers (presumably in another room) energetically respond to the music. The video follows a plot as the song plays, in which the young woman takes a bath that overflows, causing electrical problems, a fire, the spread of smoke throughout the building, and the activation of the sprinkler system. Ultimately these events cause a city-wide blackout at the end of the video.

Figure 4.12: Nine Days, et. al Perform in "Absolutely (Story of a Girl)" Music Video

The woman (left, Figure 4.13 below) clearly sees that the water is spilling out of her bathtub and likely moving through the building, but her indifference prevents her from turning off the faucet. She relaxes in her overflowing bath and then puts on her clothes (without turning off the water) as though nothing is awry. The smoke and water don't stop the dancers, either, a feature clearly meant to create an appealing visual spectacle: attractive young people (particularly women in revealing clothing) dancing in

[62] Liz Frielander, dir., "Absolutely (Story of a Girl," music video, performed by Nine Days, 2000. All discussion of this video and screenshots references this source.

the sprinklers. They are so carefree that they can enjoy themselves in a flooding and burning building.

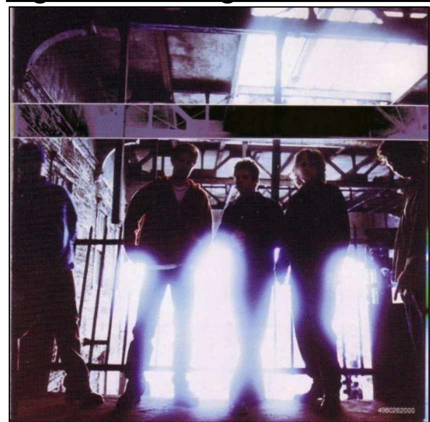
Figure 4.13: “Girl,” et. al Perform in “Absolutely (Story of a Girl)” Music Video

In addition to the plot, this video is shaped by Frielander’s use of color and movement. The predominant red and brown color saturation like that in Figure 4.13 (right), as well as the dramatic images of flowing water, the group performing and people dancing, the smoke and fire, and of the shots of the band keep the eye focused on the exotic and dynamic visuals. Shots of the band are particularly effective, because they recall the energy of live performance, making the visuals feel more realistic and allowing the viewer to empathize with the group. These shots also change quickly enough to be somewhat disorienting – one cannot remain fixated on any member because the focus on each one is brief, and these shots themselves are broken up with segments featuring dancing and following the actions of the “girl.”

While creating about three minutes of entertainment, and an appealing interpretation of this song – irreverent young people having fun, resulting in a dramatic power outage – the video also reinforces Nine Days’s image as an innocuous rock band. Their clothing and energetic performance fit in with similar groups of this period, and

watching them perform, even though it isn't real, creates a sense of authenticity for a band with "inauthentic" pop inclinations. The record jacket (Figure 4.14 below) for the album that includes this song, *The Madding Crowd*, also clearly appropriates typical 1990s/early 2000s rock associations of urban decay and (seemingly) lackadaisical sartorial choices to generate a more rock-associated image.

Figure 4.14: Images from *The Madding Crowd* Record Jacket[63]



While the video for "Everything You Want" followed the song's form rather closely, the clip for "Absolutely (Story of a Girl)" follows the overall tone and messages of the song more generally. Overall, the video follows increases in the song's overall intensity and uses the dancers to highlight the youthful sound of the material (though they do not emphasize the lyrics). Although the band inspires dancing, the "girl" is the character whose actions set other important elements in motion, and we see the consequences of her lackadaisical sensibility in the flooding, fire, dancing in sprinklers, and so forth. Her appearance and behavior in the video portray a very specific

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[63] Discogs, "Nine Days: *The Madding Crowd* Images," discogs.com, https://www.discogs.com/Nine-Days-The-Madding-Crowd/master/361720 [accessed January 20, 2019]; the album's title refers to *Far from the Madding Crowd* by Thomas Hardy, as the song lyrics recall the tangled relationships described in Hardy's book.

interpretation of how the lyrics describe her. She is physically attractive and appears relaxed, but her lack of concern for the damage she causes suggests the character flaws described in the song. Significantly, the last three words of the song, "when she smiles," coincide with the woman smiling while looking directly at the camera, even though at this point in the video the apartment building has caught on fire and flooded, causing a car accident and subsequent traffic. Ultimately, the viewer seems encouraged to question her judgement and perhaps her intelligence, but, like the song, the clip stops short of substantive criticism.

In some respects, this song and its promotional video avoid the more extreme sexism present elsewhere in the popular music field. Several scholars have concluded that music videos in particular tend to objectify women, with female roles in male-oriented videos dominated by sexualized portrayals and traditionally female occupations.[64] Melissa A. Click and Michael W. Kramer write that "female characters in male artists' videos were more likely condescending or traditional portrayals than female characters in female artists' videos, who were more likely portrayed as fully equal to men."[65] In his article "Revisiting Sex-role Stereotyping in MTV Videos," Steven A. Seidman writes that a survey of music videos revealed that male and female roles were more shaped by traditional expectations than occurred in reality. In terms of portrayals of the workplace, he writes that as it was "still more gender stereotyped than really existed in some

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[64] Melissa A. Click and Michael W. Kramer, "Reflections on a Century of Living: Gendered Differences in Mainstream Popular Songs," *Popular Communication* 5 (2007): 245.
[65] Ibid., 245.

respects."[66] The most obvious female-dominated roles are those of a domestic worker, teacher, or prostitute, but Nine Days's song and Frielander's clip demonstrate more subtle rendering of apparently common female characteristics. In the song, this includes describing an adult woman as a "girl" and further questioning her maturity through descriptions of her moodiness and her ineffective coping mechanisms. Her melancholy and chattiness are canceled out by a pleasing facial expression (her smile) – yet the other descriptions of her appearance criticize her looks in ways that only add to the portrayal of a disorganized and generally unappealing woman. Because of the dismissive tone of the lyrics and musical setting, this song still portrays the male singer as more in control, as though he tolerates his girlfriend's aberrant behavior to occasionally see her smile. The video shows a young woman bathing and allowing her apartment to flood, and other women dance in lightweight clothing, but at no point do these elements become overtly sexualized.

Click and Kramer note that popular music and music videos commonly associate women with passivity and immaturity, while men tend to make active, informed choices.[67] Nine Days provides an example of these trends in an upbeat, pop-punk context, but Shawn Mullins's 1998 hit "Lullaby" (and the video) offers an updated folk-oriented take on this perspective.[68] Though the hip-hop influences and varied textures and timbres

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[66] Steven Seidman, "Revising Sex Role Stereotyping in MTV Videos," *International Journal of Instructional Media* 26 (1999): 15.
[67] Melissa A. Click and Michael W. Kramer, "Reflections on a Century of Living: Gendered Differences in Mainstream Popular Songs," 253-254.
[68] "Folk oriented" in this case refers to an emphasis on acoustic guitar and lyrics that reflect personal experience to some extent. Although Mullins does not operate as a true folk musician, his musical style and lyrics reference those identified with folk.

of this song create an interesting musical arrangement, the lyrics seem to criticize a woman's behavior from a condescending, patriarchal subject position.

Like "Absolutely (Story of a Girl)," real-life events inspired this song's lyrics. Mullins was approached by a woman in the audience (named Jodi) after a sparsely attended show in a bar on Fairfax Avenue in Los Angeles. After she told him about growing up in L.A., Mullins wrote the song about her star-studded upbringing, taking some liberties with the specifics of her life story – as Natalie Nichols writes in the *LA Times*, "Shawn Mullins is the type of guy who sits quietly at the bar and listens to other people's stories, then goes home and writes his own versions."[69] He added some names and avoided others, and he also portrayed her as a troubled young woman, even though he later described her as "a pretty upbeat person."[70] In an interview with *Billboard*, Mullins stated that the melody to "Lullaby" came to him "a few days later, while driving between Los Angeles and Phoenix."[71] Another interview has him stating that he had to pull over "because the melody made [him] shake."[72]

Though the lyrics likely reflect a great deal of what Jodi recalled, telling the story as though these events produced a haunted adult suggests an entirely different meaning to partying with "Sonny and Cher" than a description of a well-balanced woman recalling an interesting life. In trying to write an appealing song, Mullins turned to the trope of the

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[69] Natalie Nichols, "Inspired Storytelling Imbues Mullins's Songs," *Los Angeles Times*, April 14, 1999, 6.
[70] Anonymous, "'Lullaby;' Shawn Mullins | 1998," *Los Angeles Times*, March 9, 2008, F-2.
[71] Carrie Bell, "The Modern Age," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, video, and Home Entertainment*, October 3, 1998, 87.
[72] Richard Harrington, "Awakening Success with a 'Lullaby;" For Shawn Mullins, Hit Song Soothes All," *Washington Post*, January 17, 1999, G01.

"troubled young woman," and his attempt to comfort her can be interpreted as trivializing her situation from an all-knowing male perspective.

Perhaps the most easily recognized example of this appears in the chorus, in which Mullins literally sings a lullaby to this adult woman (see Table 4.4).[73] In the second verse, she "can't let go and she can't relax," until, of course, she "hangs her head to cry." The product of an upbringing with shallow interpersonal relationships, she still lives with her mom (see verse 3). And she's "so pretty / But she`d be a whole lot prettier / if she smiled once in a while." Apparently, being pretty should improve her psychological state, and her beauty would be appreciated more if she made sure others saw her as content. Like the chorus, the next lines of verse 3 convey a sense of compassion for this woman – Mullins appreciates her struggles. However, by describing her smile as "like a frown," he emphasizes her physical appearance, reinforcing a commonly held expectation that women should suppress negative emotions in a public setting. He also makes it clear that, even if the woman's friends are telling her to smile more (not Mullins), he agrees that being able to sense her internal struggles is unwelcome. Discouraging this woman from expressing pain in public limits the sense of Mullins's sympathy for her plight.

Table 4.4: Shawn Mullins, "Lullaby," 1998

Introduction 1 :00 – :09	*Scratching, drum machine, drum set*
Introduction 2 :10 – :22	*Add acoustic guitar, bass*

[73] Shawn Mullins and Jay Drummonds, "Lullaby," track two on *Soul's Core*, Columbia, 1998, compact disc. All discussion of this song references this recording and album liner notes.

Table 4.4: Shawn Mullins, “Lullaby,” 1998, Continued

<table>
<tr><td>Verse 1
:23 – :44

Transition
:45 – :51</td><td>She grew up with
the children of the stars in the Hollywood Hills and the boulevard

Her parents threw big parties
Everyone was there
They hung out with folks like Dennis Hopper, and Bob Seger, and Sonny and Cher

Add chordal piano, increased volume in ensemble</td></tr>
<tr><td>Verse 2
:52 – 1:15</td><td>She feels safe now
in the [this][74] bar on Fairfax
And from the stage I can tell that she can`t let go and she can`t relax
And just before
She hangs her head to cry
I sing to her a lullaby, I sing</td></tr>
<tr><td>Chorus 1
1:16 – 1:39

Re-intro
1:40 – 1:47</td><td>[I sing] Everything’s gonna be all right
Rockabye, rockabye
[Everything’s gonna be all right
Rockabye, rockabye
Rockabye][75]

Similar to Introduction 2</td></tr>
<tr><td>Verse 3
1:40 – 2:08

Transition
2:09 – 2:20</td><td>She still lives with her mom
outside the city
Down that street about a half a mile
And all her friends tell her
she`s so pretty<br>But she`d be a whole lot prettier
if she smiled once in a while

‘Cause even her smile looks like a frown
She`s seen her share of devils
in this angel town</td></tr>
</table>

[74] The liner notes indicate that the word here is “the,” but in the recording Mullins sings “this.”

[75] For each chorus, the liner notes include only the first two lines of lyrics performed in the recording.

Table 4.4: Shawn Mullins, "Lullaby," 1998, Continued

Chorus 2 2:21 – 2:45	Everything's gonna be all right Rockabye, rockabye **[Everything's gonna be all right** **Rockabye, rockabye** **Rockabye]**
Solo 2:46 – 3:09 Re-intro 3:10 – 3:21	*Melodic electric guitar solo, accompanied by full band and Mullins's improvised vocals* *Similar to Introduction 2*
Verse 4 3:10 – 3:44	I told her I ain`t so sure about this place It`s hard to play a gig in this town and keep a straight face Seems like everybody`s got a plan It`s kind of like Nashville with a tan
Chorus 3a 3:45 – 4:09 Chorus 3b 4:10 – 4:32	But everything's gonna be all right Rockabye, rockabye Everything`s gonna be all right Rockabye, rockabye[76]  **[Everything`s gonna be all right** **Rockabye, rockabye** **Everything's gonna be all right** **Rockabye, rockabye**
Outro 4:33 – 5:31	**Everything 's gonna be all right** **Rockabye, rockabye** **Everything's gonna be all right** **Rockabye, rockabye** **Rockabye** **Bye-bye, bye-bye]**[77]

To be clear, it seems doubtful that Mullins intended to write anything but a comforting song. His story about "Lullaby's" composition suggests that he combined Jodi's story with his creative instincts. Rather than consciously writing patriarchal lyrics, the song likely seemed to Mullins as an appealing approach to telling the story. Surely,

[76] In the music video, Chorus 3a proceeds directly to the outro.
[77] None of this text is included in the liner notes.

some patriarchal expressions are unintentional, but they can still achieve the same result. Steven A. Seidman notes that some research has shown that music videos have had a measurable impact on the attitudes of teenagers, such as a desire for thinness among young women.[78] Jennifer M. Hurley confirms this, writing that "the desire on the part of young people to have an identity and sense of belonging guarantees the success of a popular cultural form which sets trends in fads and fashions, and can even promote identification with particular subcultures."[79] I do not claim a straightforward relationship between the content of media and the behavior of audiences, but denying any relationship ignores the role of culture as our way of explaining our values to ourselves and to others, whether as a consumer or creator. As Stuart Hall writes, "it is only through the way in which we represent and imagine ourselves that we come to know how we are constituted and who we are."[80]

Of course, the meanings described here have resonated with some listeners' interpretations, while others have undoubtedly perceived the song differently. What media ultimately communicates to the individual can certainly vary. In this case, some have found "Lullaby" offensive, while others have found it comforting. Reaffirming the existence of the polysemic text, Keith Negus describes "complex narrative meanings that are emergent in and articulated to many single pop songs, due to their embedding in a

[78] Steven Seidman, "Revising Sex Role Stereotyping in MTV Videos," 12.
[79] Jennifer M. Hurley, "Music Video and the Construction of Gendered Subjectivity (Or How Being a Music Video Junkie Turned Me into a Feminist)," *Popular Music* 13 (1994): 332.
[80] Stuart Hall, "What is this 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" in *Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996), 473.

broader social and cultural context."[81] Since the text is not interpreted the same way every time, it's only fair to emphasize that because these songs found appreciative listeners, the majority did not observe overly sexist or harmful language – or they did but were not offended by it.

Perhaps interpreting these songs in a more negative light is easier to do from a present-day perspective, removed from the buzz generated by contemporary widespread success.

To many critics, the song provided comfort and interesting musical features. In a 1999 article for the *New York Times*, Ann Powers describes "Lullaby" as "a gift, a country-flavored, rap-influenced modern rock song with an infectiousness that songwriters aim for but rarely capture."[82] Nichols compares Mullins to Tom Petty, noting the former artist's "eye for detail."[83] Another author (for the *LA Times*) describes the song as "dreamy."[84] And *Billboard*'s Melinda Newman writes that "Lullaby" is "a hypnotic, half-spoken number that recalls Springsteen or David & David."[85]

In addition to receiving critical praise, the song clearly appealed to many listeners, reaching number 7 on the Hot 100 chart, number 9 on Alternative Songs, and number 1 on Triple A, Mainstream Top 40, Adult Top 40, and Radio Songs. This indicates both the intense exposure this song received as well as the breadth of its popularity. The album including this song, *Soul's Core*, also performed well, reaching number 54 on both the

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[81] Keith Negus, "Narrative, Interpretation, and the Popular Song," *Musical Quarterly* 95 (2012): 370.
[82] Ann Powers, "Nurturing an 'Overnight' Success, 9 Years in the Making," *New York Times Late Edition*, March 3, 1999, 1.
[83] Natalie Nichols, "Inspired Storytelling Imbues Mullins's Songs," *Los Angeles Times*.
[84] Anonymous, "'Lullaby;' Shawn Mullins | 1998," *Los Angeles Times*.
[85] Melinda Newman, "Post-Breakup Toad Set Could be in Wings; Shawn Mullins's 'Fast' Rise to the Majors," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, August 8, 1998, 14.

Billboard 200 and Top Album Sales charts,[86] and achieving RIAA's Platinum Certification.[87]

The use of acoustic guitar and piano during much of the verses, the addition of distorted electric guitar in the choruses, and the use of record scratching (in the introduction) and the drum machine combined with live drum set elements (throughout) creates an instrumental palette that allows for flexible genre associations. None of these elements sounds like a contrived attempt to inspire these connections. For instance, the scratching that begins the song sounds somewhat lazy, almost as though one is playing the song on a record that is momentarily adjusted to begin at the correct point. This vintage listening context connects with the drum machine because of its earthy timbre and rhythmically relaxed performance. Mullins's acoustic guitar, beginning at :10, is competent, but the production allows for some imperfection to remain in the sound, and the simple licks he plays sound approachable and somewhat improvised – a scrappy blue-eyed soul for the new millennium.[88]

This approach fits well with the vocal performance in the verses, which features a predominantly gravelly, spoken-word recitation. Mullins's hint of a southern accent during these sections connects with a more rural, folk-like style without signaling clearer genre associations with country that might deter some listeners. Regardless of one's

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[86] "Shawn Mullins Chart History," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, https://www.billboard.com/music/shawn-mullins [accessed January 8, 2019].
[87] Recording Industry Association of America, "Gold and Platinum: Shawn Mullins," https://www.riaa.com/gold-platinum/?tab_active=default-award&se=shawn+mullins #search_section [accessed January 8, 2019].
[88] This portion of the introduction is cut from the music video mix, which moves from a brief introduction with scratching, drum machine, and drum set to the first verse.

conclusions about the song's male-female dynamic, Mullins's approach to setting "Lullaby," particularly the chorus, utilizes novel elements within a mainstream-friendly aural environment. "Talking" in the verses also conveys the context of the song, in which Mullins performs in "this bar on Fairfax."

Eventually the song builds from this more relaxed setting to the sonorous chorus, scored more fully in terms of instrumental texture and timbre, as well as vocal timbre and volume. Before this, between the first and second verses, the song introduces a hint of what follows in the chorus, including prominent chordal piano, distorted electric guitar, and increased drum set. This pre-chorus-like material (from :45 to :51) repeats at the end of verse 3 (from 2:09 to 2:20), with the electric guitar more prominent in the stereo field. In the first instance, this sudden build-up provides variety between the two verses, setting them apart, and creates the expectation of a chorus at that point. The delay creates tension, even as the presentation of this material prepares the listener for the first chorus.

The second use of this transition is both instrumental and vocal, since Mullins sings the last three lines of verse 3 with increasing volume and urgency. This helps to connect the swagger of the verses with the energetic levity of the anthemic chorus. Mullins's soulful full-voiced and falsetto vocals contribute to the contrasting character of these sections. As the verses describe problems in a more subdued manner, the choruses provide the vague reassurance of resolution with louder and thicker instrumentation, and more exuberant vocals that are reinforced by Mullins's own backing tracks. Sparse vocals and accompaniment portray despair, while a choir of instruments and vocals serve to placate.

Mullins also provides transitions between the first chorus and third verse, and between the rhythmically static electric guitar solo and verse 4. Minimal percussion and acoustic guitar bring the song back to a level matching that of the verses. Reversing the trend set by previous verse to chorus material (which conformed the chorus setting), the last chorus begins with Mullins singing softly in falsetto accompanied by piano, acoustic guitar, and bass playing half notes, while drums maintain greater continuity with the verse. This defies expectations by differing from previous transitions and choruses, but it also makes the last iteration of the chorus (labeled 3b in Table 4.4) sound fresh. Without this, the outro, which reiterates chorus material in a somewhat improvised fashion, might sound overly repetitive. Instead, the end of the song builds musical and emotional momentum until the song winds down at around 5:00.

The promotional video for this song added to the momentum created by widespread and frequent radio play. Powers writes that the video, starring then-well-known actress Dominique Swain, "turned the song into an event."[89] Like Liz Friedlander in Nine Days's video, director Roger Pistole[90] chose to utilize a hyper-pigmented color palette. In this case, lighting is used to make objects and actions in some scenes more sharply defined. In scenes set at a pool with the troubled young woman and two friends (Figure 4.15 below), this allows the viewer to focus on the specifics of the context.

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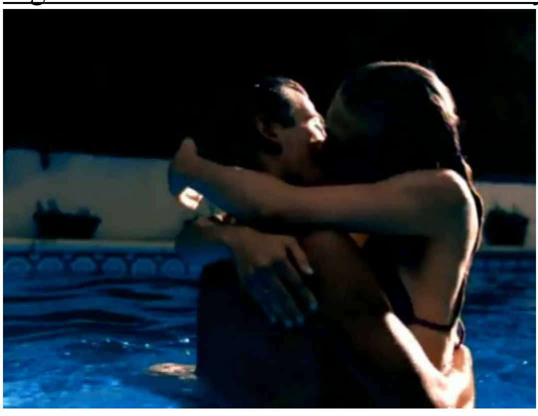
[89] Ann Powers, "Nurturing an 'Overnight' Success, 9 Years in the Making," *New York Times Late Edition*. The fact that Swain had recently appeared in the film "Lolita" may have added additional meaning for viewers who saw this movie.
[90] Roger Pistole, dir., "'Lullaby,'" music video, performed by Shawn Mullins, et. al., 1998. All discussion of this video and screenshots references this source.

Figure 4.15: Young Woman, Pool Setting in “Lullaby” Music Video

The technique changes when the woman becomes more intimate with her male friend. As seen below, the lighting rapidly changes from dark to almost artificially bright.

Figure 4.16: No Flash to Flash in “Lullaby” Music Video



When she’s left alone after the man leaves with her female friend, we see her experiencing the sting of rejection close up and somewhat unfocused, but once again in natural light. The flashing light reflects an overwhelming state of arousal, while the more natural lighting is more centered in reality – she flirts with the young man, then feels the lonely sting of rejection.

Vernallis writes that, to help join the perceptions of sight and sound, “the music video image, like sound, foreground the experience of movement and of passing time. It

attempts to pull us in with an address to the body, with a flooding of the senses."[91] In the scene described above, the viewer may feel a sense of ease in the beginning, a disorienting rush in the middle, and overwhelming disappointment in the end, as the young woman plunges underwater and cries, metaphorically drowning in her sorrow.

Much of the video takes place in the club in which Mullins and his band performs. Here, color saturation and lighting effects make it difficult to focus on the quickly changing images. In one sense, they blend together more than the pool shots because of overall darker lighting, but some shots, like the one below, contain a great deal of contrast between dark and light. This tends to obscure a portion of the image.

Figure 4.17: Shawn Mullins In Shadow in "Lullaby" Music Video

Other portions of this setting recall the flashing lights used for part of the pool scene, which has the effect of challenging the eye to focus in a rapidly changing environment. In each of the images in Figure 4.18 below, the lighting and color remains consistent for at most two frames.

[91] Vernallis, *Experiencing Music Video: Aesthetics and Cultural Context*, 177.

Figure 4.18: Color Changes in "Lullaby" Music Video

The image of Mullins on stage (Figure 4.17) and the sequence illustrated in Figure 4.18 makes apparent the video's focus on red and green. These two colors clash even more dramatically in the context of the dramatic shadows and dramatically changing light levels. In the club, this reinforces some of the other effects utilized to tell the song's story: shots of many unhappy, isolated people and the young woman becoming blurry as she consumes alcoholic beverages.

These individuals seem disconnected and fit the description of the young woman in the song in terms of lifestyle and emotional awareness. They look bored and lonely in a room full of people, alcohol, and music, but others look engaged in the performance. Many of the club-goers are young like the woman Mullins connects with, and perhaps one can extrapolate that they follow the same directionless lifestyle. This all has the effect of making the song about the relationship between Mullins and this one person,

and a message for all lost souls. Since some fans of “Lullaby” surely identified with the song in this more general sense, setting the video to briefly feature several individuals in addition to the primary subject seems an effective strategy.

It is interesting that, given the song’s general use of contrast between formal sections, the narrative we see and the varied color and lighting in the video do not coordinate with what we hear. Although showing Mullins performing alone with acoustic guitar during part of the verses connects with the record, his stage performance is as animated during these sections as it is in the choruses. He moves to the song’s tempo, but not always in a way that reflects how he would likely perform that material. The latter sections are punctuated by segments with Mullins playing alone, well-lit with a camera directly in front of him (see below). He smiles as he sings that all the woman’s (and possibly other audience members’) problems will be resolved somehow.

Figure 4.19: Shawn Mullins Performs in “Lullaby” Music Video

The video ending reflects the inconclusive character of the song: Mullins has not offered any specific solutions. We hear a melodically and harmonically ambiguous ending and see sad faces as Mullins’s image fades out.

Aside from the pool scene described above, the video likely does little to encourage sympathy with either the young woman or the other lost-looking people in the video for anyone outside that demographic. These people are young but bored, privileged enough to spend evenings buying drinks in a bar. The young woman drives a nice car and presumably spends her time trying to entertain herself. Like "Absolutely (Story of a Girl)," the song and video offer a central female character who seems unable to organize her thoughts and actions to behave as a confident adult. We also see two primary female characters who live a life of leisure, while the men perform music that describes their predicament for them. The bands reinforce their musical abilities, while the women, at best, are beautiful (especially when they smile). Yet again, we have an expression of what Click and Kramer describe as "gendered notions of women as more passive and submissive and men as active and as decision makers." [92] Men grow up, but women remain "girls."[93]

This imbalance finds representation in the videos for "Absolutely (Story of a Girl)" and "Lullaby." Like the songs, the characters and situations depicted here clearly demonstrate a male perspective. Other videos discussed in this chapter, such as those for "Meet Virginia," and "3 AM," do not portray women with so little to offer aside from their looks and a man's interest in their problems. As a result, we get a better sense of a complex inner life for these characters, and their choices are easier to understand and respect. Simon Frith writes that "making music isn't a way of expressing ideas; it's a way

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[92] Melissa A. Click and Michael W. Kramer, "Reflections on a Century of Living: Gendered Differences in Mainstream Popular Songs," 253.
[93] Ibid., 251.

of living them."[94] Through creation and reception, we realize what our values are. The ideas presented in the videos here suggest that, in general, men and women in the western world, in the media and real life, face dissimilar and unequal expectations.

Considering this recalls Lisa Lewis's discussion of the preferred address in music videos. Lewis writes that "producers interpret audience research according to their own conceptions of what appeals to certain audience types, relying on 'knowledge' about the targeted constituents that is taken for granted by society. These ideological assumptions become a gauge used to manufacture a signification practice."[95] The pop-rock associations and youth-oriented setting of Nine Days's song and video, the generic musical mixture in "Lullaby" and moody theme in this song's promotional clip all indicate an appeal to the mainstream, with broad potential for the age range. Because of "Lullaby's" folk or soft-rock elements, and Mullins's age (he was 30 when the song was released), the demographic was likely to skew older. However, based on the chart data discussed above, both songs appealed to women, since such categories track female-dominated audiences. It seems as though women were expected to respond positively to this material, since both songs feature relationship-based and female-centered lyrics, and (young) women feature prominently in both videos. Since both female characters demonstrate limited agency, the appeal to this audience becomes more complicated.

Perhaps some women identified with the female subject of the songs and videos, both as women and as people appreciative of the male attention. They could identify in a more homological sense, or simply feel sympathetic, though this doesn't necessarily need

[94] Frith, "Music and Identity," *Taking Popular Music Seriously* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2007), 296.
[95] Lisa A. Lewis, *Gender Politics and MTV: Voicing the Difference*, 27.

to be the case. As Norma Coates writes, "the audience for . . . rock, has throughout its history, included almost as many females as males, even though the form is, at times, fiercely masculine and demeaning to women."[96] These statements about rock specifically can to some extent represent popular music more broadly. Thus, female fans could have identified with the man addressing the women, or they could have held beliefs in common with the ideologies expressed in this material. Lewis writes that, because of the connection between power and knowledge creation, "producers can become unwitting collaborators in the reproduction of social relations of inequality and can create ideologically biased television discourses."[97] This assertion applies to producers of music as well. Coates's statement that "power and discourse are conjoined in a multitude of ways, making power easier to reproduce and harder to identify"[98] suggests how producers and audiences both play roles in the reinforcement of sexist ideologies through seemingly innocuous popular culture.

Here we find the portrayal of women needing a man to bring order to their lives, a trend Faludi writes about in *Backlash* as stereotyped lonely young women harmed by liberation. We also see the notion that women are meant to present a pleasing image to the public, hence the statement that these women are more attractive when they smile. To some young men, these points of view validated a particular form of self-confidence that builds upon the perceived weaknesses of women. This is the realization in music and promotional video of a character type present in many films that critic Nathan Rabin has

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[96] Norma Coates, "It's a Man's, Man's, Man's World: Television and the Masculinization of Rock Discourse and Culture," 9.
[97] Lisa A. Lewis, *Gender Politics and MTV: Voicing the Difference*, 28.
[98] Norma Coates, "It's a Man's, Man's, Man's World: Television and the Masculinization of Rock Discourse and Culture," 12.

described as the “manic pixie dream girl.”[99] He writes that this figure is “fundamentally sexist…since it makes women seem less like autonomous, independent entities than appealing props to help mopey, sad white men self-actualize.” However, these representations were readily accepted by many women, demonstrating the naturalized way in which ideas about women’s limitations and their usefulness to men continue to find an audience that may be unaware of the pervasive sexism they support with their time and money.

The next section will also discuss portrayals of women in crisis, but in these two cases the songs and videos convey a sense that the male performers feel compassion for and perhaps identify with the women they sing about. “3 AM,” by Matchbox Twenty, and “Meet Virginia,” by Train, depict complicated women whose struggles are not caused by supposedly “natural” conditions of their gender. Rather, they indicate a sense of ennui and struggle that transcends gender.

<u>The Complicated Love and Self-Loathing of Postindustrial Youth</u>

Matchbox Twenty’s “3 AM” was released to radio as a full-textured, upbeat mainstream rock tune, but Rob Thomas originally wrote a much more subdued song. Though the band delivered a cheerfully set description about a distressed but intriguing woman to the masses, Thomas was originally thinking specifically of his mother’s condition as she endured treatment for cancer several years earlier. In a live performance, he explains this context:

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[99] Nathan Rabin, “The Bataan Death March of Whimsey Case File #1: *Elizabethtown*,” *AV Film*, January 25, 2007. https://film.avclub.com/the-bataan-death-march-of-whimsy-case-file-1-elizabet-1798210595 [accessed February 12, 2019].

> It was written about a time when I was like 12 or 13. I didn't write it when I was 12 or 13, but it was about that time… when my mother had cancer. And she's okay now, but it was a weird period to…be having to take care of yourself and take care of your mom, and you're saying, "mom sleeps all the time, why does mom sleep all the time," and you don't get it. And that was the song that came out of it. [100]

Thomas performs the song solo, accompanying himself on piano. In addition, the tempo is much slower – around 74 beats per minute here compared to 108 in the version released on their first album *Yourself or Someone Like You* from 1996. It would come as no surprise if very few people engaged with the song from such a solemn perspective. Thomas acknowledges this, stating that

> "nobody ever picked up on it, which like I say is just as good, 'cause I think it would lose something universal about a song that makes it kind of special to everybody because you're supposed to be able to take it into your own and use it for whatever you want."[101]

The fact that he values the variability of interpretation suggests that he may not have had qualms about rearranging the song to fit in better with contemporary radio hits. Thomas said that the tempo continued to increase after he originally composed the song as a piano ballad, but that "to want to compete with the times, we created it into a song that sounded like what was happening."[102]

This desire to fit with the musical context comes with both the need for the music industry to make the business as predictable as possible and radio programmers' understandable tendency to select material that will provide novelty without pushing away their carefully crafted audience. Keith Negus writes that "industry produces culture

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[100] Transcribed by author from Rob Thomas, "3am Acoustic," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BUVWzvFYk0k [accessed January 10, 2019].
[101] Ibid.
[102] Rob Thomas, "'3 AM Commentary," genius.com, https://genius.com/Matchbox-twenty-3-am-lyrics [accessed January 10, 2019].

and culture produces an industry,"[103] a statement which ultimately highlights the complex relationship between the industry and society. Because of the financial risk inherent in producing and marketing records and artists, the industry attempts to minimize unpredictability. As Negus writes, the industry's "strategic calculation is built on a desire for stability, predictability, and containment."[104] That sometimes results in a difficult relationship between the industry and musical development, but, as with the rearrangement of "3 AM," business decisions can follow existing musical styles. Since the trend in the mid-to late 1990s was upbeat pop-rock, Matchbox Twenty was encouraged to create as many potential singles within these stylistic parameters as possible.

This demand for consistency comes additionally from radio, an industry in which novelty also is welcomed within limits. For record companies, this allows for a certain degree of predictability in sales, but for radio, it makes songs easier to fit within a playlist that has been finely honed to capture the desired audience. The previous comments make it seem as though the goals of these two sectors of the economy frequently align, a conclusion that music scholar John Wallace White supports to some extent. He writes, "record companies and radio stations share a symbiotic relationship. Record companies generate sales through free exposure of their records on radio stations, and the stations that play hits score good ratings, thus ensuring their ability to sell more advertising."[105]

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[103] Keith Negus, "Cultural Production and the Corporation: Musical Genres and the Strategic Management of Creativity in the US Recording Industry," 359.
[104] Ibid., 367.
[105] John Wallace White, "Radio Formats and the Transformation of Musical Style: Codes and Cultural Values in the Remaking of Tunes," *College Music Symposium* 37 (1997): 1.

However, the balance between these two agents implied by the word "symbiotic" may be somewhat inaccurate.

To this end, media scholar J. Mark Percival writes that, not only is "the symbiosis argument an over-simplification of a complex set of relationships," but "music radio hold[s] the dominant position in the relationship between itself and the record industry," resulting in "important consequences for record industry A&R practices…and the production of popular music recordings (the actual sounds on the records)."[106] Even White describes a situation in which Dolly Parton's 1984 remake of the song "Downtown" produces the kind of predictability that will prevent radio listeners from "changing the dial."[107] This and the assertion that "format categorization" guides the record industry in a practice in which "tunes are crafted in the production process to fit into these predetermined formats"[108] suggests unacknowledged agreement with Percival's overall argument: the record industry shapes musical content and artist image to get airplay.

One further point on this topic: any doubt about radio's domination should be eliminated by the long-running use of radio promotion by the record industry. Well-publicized payola scandals have arisen from time to time since the early 1960s (though the term was used much earlier), but Steve Knopper notes that this practice continued

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[106] J. Mark Percival, "Music Radio and the Record Industry: Songs, Sounds, and Power," *Popular Music and Society* 34 (2011): 455.
[107] John Wallace White, "Radio Formats and the Transformation of Musical Style: Codes and Cultural Values in the Remaking of Tunes," 6, 11.
[108] Ibid., 2.

through the 1990s.[109] He writes that independent promoters, paid by the industry to encourage radio play by gifting concert tickets, merchandise, and money to radio personnel, "would take as much as $300 million in 'legal payola' every year from record labels by the late 1990s. They'd turn around and give program directors money and record labels access to the program directors."[110] In a more equal relationship, such expenditures would not be necessary.

In part because of labels' financial difficulties, but also because of radio conglomeration after the passage of the 1996 Telecommunications Act, "the indie promo men finally went away" by the early 2000s. Similar practices, but from "radio people at major labels," continued until New York Attorney General Elliot Spitzer successfully prosecuted these individuals in 2005.[111]

Not only did the industry pay for play, but they also had to take steps during production to ensure that radio singles conformed to what was currently playing. For Matchbox Twenty, that meant setting "3 AM" as a fast-paced rock-based track, complete with catchy guitar licks, that suggests an overall happy impression – quite the contrast to the original acoustic version. A certain degree of novelty, created through both formal devices and Rob Thomas's idiosyncratic lyrics and vocals, allowed this song to stand out enough to appeal to a broad range of listeners, in terms of gender, age and genre. A brief summary of this song's *Billboard* chart performance helps to illustrate this broad appeal. "3 AM" reached number one on Adult Top 40 and Triple A, number two on Mainstream

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[109] Steve Knopper, "1984-1999: How Big Spenders Got Rich in the Post-CD Boom," in *Appetite for Self-Destruction: The Spectacular Crash of the Record Industry in the Digital Age*, 66, 69.
[110] Ibid., 72.
[111] Ibid., 74, 210-212. Of course, this practice has endured in different forms since then.

Top 40 and Mainstream Top Rock Songs, number three on Alternative Rock Songs, and number twenty-five on Adult Contemporary.[112]

Marketing (discussed later) contributed to this success, but the song also offered something accessible to a wide variety of listeners. This starts with a compelling introduction: “3 AM” begins with four measures of call and response between a syncopated acoustic guitar riff and a brief three-note response from electric guitar. After the first response in measure two, acoustic guitar returns with the same material, but this , electric guitar plays a descending syncopated figure. This leads to the second part of the introduction, in which acoustic, electric, and bass guitars repeat the previous material without a break for four measures (see Table 4.5 below for a formal outline). Like introduction 1, this section also ends with an exposed bass guitar riff (Figure 4.20 below) that links this portion of the introduction to the song’s next formal section, the first verse, and is used as a transition in all three verses.

Figure 4.20: Exposed Bass Guitar Riff, “3 AM,” 1996

Material from the first seventeen seconds of the song repeats throughout the verses, which use the same syncopated figure, guitar riffs, and the space of the first four measures to create an easily recognizable complement to Thomas’s distinctive vocals. Though the vocals and accompaniment in the choruses are more melodically and rhythmically simple to allow them to function as a recognizable hook, the instrumental

[112] “Matchbox Twenty Chart History,” https://www.billboard.com/music/ma tchbox-twenty/chart-history.

material in the verses provides repetition to balance the more irregular vocals that reflect the distressed state of mind the lyrics convey.

Here and in the choruses, we also hear the continued use of call and response, whether the electric guitar responds to the familiar syncopated figure, or the entire band provides a fill between the vocals. This maintains rhythmic and melodic interest, while also allowing the pre-choruses to stand out. In these sections, we hear Thomas's vocals subtly doubled as the band plays slower syncopated material. The volume and texture here are reduced at first, but gradually build toward the full-textured choruses. Vocal texture and timbre changes here as well, reflecting to a limited extent the content of the lyrics. Rather than subtly off-setting two vocal tracks, Thomas's harmonization is clearly differentiated from the primary vocal. This reinforcement includes only the quoted material, and it only punctuates the end of the first three lines (see Table 4.5). This mimics the call and response heard elsewhere in the song, but instead of providing a reply to the beginning of a line, the additional vocal bolsters the end of the statement by joining in.

In addition to the contrast provided by the pre-choruses, the re-intro and verse three (from 2:11 to 3:02) function as a bridge. Musically similar to introduction 1, this serves as a more contrasting reset than re-intro 1, which utilizes introduction 2 material and leads directly to verse 2. Though this song lacks an instrumental solo, this longer break, featuring a sparse instrumental texture, allows Thomas's vocals in verse 3 to stand out and creates a greater sense of seriousness at this point in this song. It also provides the commonly utilized buffer between one iteration of the chorus and a chorus-heavy ending

to the song. This allows subtle changes to chorus vocals, including call and response after the first line and harmonization on the last two words, to sound especially climatic.

Table 4.5: Matchbox Twenty, "3 AM," 1996[113]

Introduction 1 :00 – :08	Call and response between acoustic and electric guitar
Introduction 2 :09 – :17	Full band plays syncopated figure
Verse 1 :18 – :43	She said, "It's cold outside" and she hands me a raincoat She's always worried about things like that She said, "It's all gonna end and it might as well be my fault"
Pre-Chorus 1 :44 – :52	And she only sleeps when it`s raining And she screams, and her voice is straining
Chorus 1 :53 – 1:11	And she says, "Baby, it's three AM, I must be lonely" When she says, "Baby, well, I can't help but be scared of it all sometimes says the rain's gonna wash away, I believe it"
Re-intro 1:12 – 1:19	Material from introduction 2
Verse 2 1:20 – 1:46	She's got a little bit of something, God it's better than nothing And in her color portrait world she believes that she's got it all She swears that the moon don't hang quite as high as it used to
Pre-Chorus 2 1:47 – 1:54	And she only sleeps when it's raining And she screams and her voice is straining
Chorus 2 1:55 – 2:11	And she says, "Baby, it's three AM, I must be lonely" When she says, "Baby, well, I can't help but be scared of it all sometimes says the rain's gonna wash away, I believe it"
Re-intro/Bridge 2:11 – 2:32	Sparse instrumentation, harmonically and melodically static. Utilizes syncopated and five-note riffs like introduction 1. (Continues in verse 3)
Verse 3 2:33 – 3:02	She believes that life is made up of all that you're used to And the clock on the wall has been stuck at three for days, and days She thinks that happiness is a mat that sits on her doorway But outside it's stopped raining

[113] Rob Thomas (lyrics), John Leslie Goff, John Joseph Stanley, Rob Thomas, Brian Yale (music), "3 AM," track three on *Yourself or Someone Like You*, Atlantic, 1996, compact disc.

Table 4.5: Matchbox Twenty, “3 AM,” 1996, Continued

Chorus 3 3:03 – 3:21	And she says, "Baby, it's three AM, I must be lonely" When she says, "Baby, well, I can't help but be scared of it all sometimes and the rain's gonna wash away, I believe this.”
Outro 3:22 – 3:45	Well, it's three AM, I must be lonely Well, heaven she says, "Baby, well, I can't help But be scared of it all sometimes"

The context the song describes is animated through the use of irregular vocal rhythms, unpredictable verse structure, and descriptive lyrics. Only the two lines in pre-choruses rhyme and share the same number of syllables; otherwise, the overall chorus structure is irregular, and each verse freely adapts to the varying linguistic content. The melodic contour remains generally consistent from one verse to the next, but the rhythm varies depending on the number of syllables in the lyrics, which does not establish any pattern within a single verse. All three feature three lines (assuming the last line of verse 3 is more transitional to chorus 3), but otherwise the lyrics vacillate between Thomas describing a woman’s character, quoting her, and describing his own feelings. Casual listening may suggest that the woman is the song’s subject, but closer analysis suggests that the relationship is central.

In verse 1, for instance, Thomas describes being handed a raincoat and the reflection inspired by this action: “She’s always worried about things like that.” In verse 2, Thomas reflects darkly on the woman’s resources (a “little bit of something, God it’s better than nothing”) but then suggests that her perception is skewed in the second line: “And in her color portrait world she believes that she’s got it all.” Verse 3 offers a potential explanation for her viewpoint: “life is made of up all that you’re used to” suggests an individual’s narrowly circumscribed experience, but also might indicate that

comfort and happiness come from adjusting to existing circumstances and focusing on symbols of groundedness, such as the "mat that sits on her doorway" described in line three. In line four, Thomas offers criticism with the observation that "outside it's stopped raining." Rain functions as a predictable symbol of cleansing and relief in "3 AM." In the choruses, the woman says, "the rain's gonna wash away," meaning that she maintains faith for the resolution of her problems. When Thomas observes the rain stopping, this faith, for him at least, becomes more uncertain. Notably, the organ, which is also present in both pre-choruses, the first re-intro, and chorus 3, becomes more prominent as verse 3 continues.[114] As a potential symbol of (religious) faith, the greater presence of organ at the point at which the "rain" stops could help to highlight the centrality of faith (or hope) in "3 AM." She believes that circumstances will improve, but Thomas is overwhelmed by both her problems and her reaction to them. Despite this disparity, the lyrics avoid a condescending approach, instead framing the situation with compassionate concern.

The video for this song, directed by Gavin Bowden,[115] maintains some continuity with the previously released clip for "Push" by emphasizing Rob Thomas's intense outward demeanor. Throughout, we see the camera moving over still shots of Thomas looking intently at the camera, like the one below.

[114] Given that producer Matt Serletic is credited with playing keyboard parts on this record, he likely composed and played this (electronic) organ part.
[115]Gavin Bowden, dir., "3 AM," music video, performed by Matchbox Twenty, 1997.

Figure 4.21: Rob Thomas's Intense Facial Expression in "3 AM" Music Video

While lip synching, he provides a clear visual sense of his emotional investment with facial expressions and bodily movements. Because most shots of the band feature them standing or walking nonchalantly, Thomas's performance seems quite disjunct from what other group members are doing. The images below are shots that occur in sequence (with some frames taken out to preserve space). Please note that the series used in the video (and presented in abridged form below) does not include the drummer, so this presentation of the band's composition is incomplete.

Figure 4.22: Matchbox Twenty Band Shots in "3 AM" Music Video

Brian Yale, Bass *Adam Gaynor, Rhythm Guitar* *Rob Thomas, Vocals* *Kyle Cook, Lead Guitar*

A primary goal of the video seems to be to highlight Rob Thomas while reminding viewers as an afterthought that he performs as a singer in a band. Another goal, or at least affect, of the video is crafting group members' personalities and the band's overall tone relative to the popular music field. Since much of the footage of

Thomas consists of rather mundane experiences, such as sitting on the sidewalk and walking on the street, and the band members' demeanor remains detached until the group performs together during the last chorus and outro, the overall image is that of youth with nothing better to do – grunge-inspired youth of the late 1990s who look like they think deep thoughts as women shop in grocery stores (Figure 4.23 left) or look both haunted and shocked as someone pulls up in a car (Figure 4.23 right).

Figure 4.23: Rob Thomas in "3 AM" Music Video Setting

Thomas appears as an agitated character, but the others seem oddly detached considering that most of the sounds in the song were made by them. Thomas and the band represent two versions of the stereotyped gen-x male, either overflowing with emotion or completely lacking it – a characterization emphasized further by the fact that until chorus 3 the only person seen performing the song in any capacity is the lead singer. In this climactic scene, we see the band perform in another part of the transit station. A great deal of camera motion helps to emphasize the jumping, head-banging, and musical performance of the band. Since this portion of the video is shot outdoors, with an outside wall on one side and a roof over a courtyard, we can see rain pouring beyond the edge of the shelter (see below).

Figure 4.24: Matchbox Twenty Performs in “3 AM” Music Video

The rain is one of the clearest references to the song lyrics, with the other being a subtle focus on individual subjects. A man walking on the street behind Thomas during the first chorus, two women in the grocery store and the man and woman in the car that stops for Thomas (the male driver asks him for a cigarette) receive lingering attention. We see enough detail of the first man and the driver to gauge their general demeanor, and that the latter character has been injured. The women’s faces (and one woman’s shoes), seen below, also suggest any number of interior thought processes and external struggles.

Figure 4.25: Character Shots in “3 AM” Music Video

Store Customer *Customer’s Shoes* *Store Clerk* *Car Passenger*

The lyrics describe two people struggling to maintain faith in life and in one another, a day-to-day affair disguised by the ordinary shape it often takes. The video portrays the drama in a way that the record couldn’t – another example of Marshall McLuhan’s assertion that forms of media shape their content.

Bowden's approach helps to develop the viewer's understanding of band members' public personae and presents some interesting characters, but the result is a more abstract correlation with the song and with the act of music-making. The story played out is more gender neutral, and the primary expressive individual is the lead singer, with the band functioning more as actors than as musicians. This approach makes the band seem moody and artistic but accessible, potentially appealing to as broad a demographic as the song.

Contrasting with this less straightforward correlation, the song and video for Train's 1999 hit "Meet Virginia" connect more clearly, though with enough emphasis on the quirky young woman the song describes that some of the subtler suggestions in the song become easier to miss. This reflects the general assumption among critics. One *Billboard* writer notes that the song features a "compelling lyric about an impoverished girl with big dreams of getting out,"[116] while another describes "Meet Virginia" as "an ode to a free-spirited woman."[117] The majority of Monahan's own descriptions focus on the woman as a mixture of different women he has met over the years.[118] Like other tracks discussed in this chapter, this song resonated with a wide range of listeners, achieving crossover between pop, alternative, rock, and adult formats. *Billboard* charts show the song reaching #20 on the Hot 100 and #10 on Mainstream Top 40, #11 on

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[116] Chuck Taylor, ed., "Reviews & Previews," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, July 31, 1999, 21.
[117]Carla Hay, "Aware/Columbia's Train Makes Steady Progress," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, October 30, 1999, 77.
[118] Chuck, Taylor, "Columbia's Train Scheduled to Speed Thru Stations' Playlists with 'Virginia,'" *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, September 11, 1999, 37; Carrie Bell, "The Modern Age," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, July 24, 1999, 30.

Triple A and #25 on Alternative Songs, and achieving the best position (#2) on Adult Top 40. Not only did the song resonate with young women and men, but adults (weighted towards women) also identified with Train's musical and lyrical content, and likely with the more performance-oriented visual aesthetic offered in the video as well.[119]

Analyzing the song in closer detail, one may get the sense that the female subject of the song and the man singing it are both struggling with their own unusual choices, as well as the weight of familial expectations. The song prominently describes a female gen-x member with an unusual physical appearance, as described in verse 1a (see Table 4.6 below): "She doesn't own a dress / Her hair is always a mess…" In verse 3a, we learn that her background is also atypical: "Daddy wrestles alligators / Mama works on carburetors / Her brother is a fine mediator / For the president." She makes unconventional choices, such as wearing "high heels when she exercises" and drinking "coffee at midnight / When the moment is not right." In the first person, singer (and songwriter) Patrick Monahan also describes himself (presumably), as a pack-a-day smoker, who hates "to be alone" and joins the woman in criticizing President Bill Clinton (since her brother works for him). United by their quirks and sense of outsider status, they appreciate one another's beauty despite, and because of, these features that might turn others away.

[119] "Train Chart History," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, https://www.billboard.com/music/train/chart-history [accessed January 19, 2019].

Table 4.6: Train, "Meet Virginia," 1999[120]

Section	Lyrics
Verse 1a :00 – :10 Verse 1b :11 – 20	She doesn't own a dress Her hair is always a mess If you catch her stealin' she won't confess She's beautiful Smokes a pack a day No wait, that's me, but anyway She doesn't care a thing about that, hey She thinks I'm beautiful
Refrain 1 :21 – :31	Meet Virginia
Verse 2 :32 – :41	She never compromises Loves babies and surprises Wears high heels when she exercises Ain't that beautiful
Refrain 2 :42 – :47	Meet Virginia
Chorus 1 **:48 – 1:08**	Well she wants to be the Queen Then she thinks about her scene Pulls her hair back as she screams "I don't really wanna be the Queen"
Verse 3a 1:09 – 1:19 Verse 3b 1:20 – 1:30	Daddy wrestles alligators Mama works on carburetors Her brother is a fine mediator For the President And here she is again on the phone Just like me hates to be alone We just like to sit at home And rip on the President
Refrain 3 1:31 – 1:35	Meet Virginia [Return to verse 1b Mmm accompaniment]
Chorus 2 **1:36 – 1:56**	Well she wants to live her life Then she thinks about her life Pulls her hair back as she screams "I don't really wanna live this life"
Instrumental Solo 1:57 – 2:19	No mama [Guitar Solo] No mama No mama No mama

[120] Train, "Meet Virginia," track one on *Train*, Sony, 1998, compact disc.

Table 4.6: Train, "Meet Virginia," 1999, Continued

Re-intro 2:20 – 2:28	Return of material from refrains 1 and 2, with more elaborate bass
Verse 4 2:29 – 2:50	She only drinks coffee at midnight When the moment is not right Her timing is quite… unusual You see her confidence is tragic But her intuition magic And the shape of her body? Unusual
Refrain 4 2:51 – 3:003:32	Meet Virginia I can't wait to Meet Virginia Yeah e yeah, hey hey hey
Chorus 3 **3:01 – 3:32**	Well she wants to be the queen And she thinks about her scene Well she wants to live her life Then she thinks about her life Pulls her hair back as she screams "I don't really wanna be the queen"
Outro 3:33 – 3:59	I, I don't really wanna be the queen I, I don't really wanna be the queen I, I don't really wanna live this

Until refrain 4, it seems as though Monahan is portraying a current relationship: specific comments on physique, personality and interactions seem to indicate that both have found someone with whom they can share struggles and feel compassion and understanding. However, refrain 4 adds two lines that call this context into question: to "Meet Virginia," he adds "I can't wait to / Meet Virginia." At this point, it seems as though the woman lives in his imagination as an idealized figure, and that the comments about not wanting to "live this life" reflect to some extent Monahan's own lack of acceptance of the roles forced upon him, or the consequences of his choices.

Although citing "a number of different female personalities that were attractive and bizarre to me" as inspiration for the female character in the song, he also acknowledges that the song is also "about being unusual and wanting to be grandiose,

like being a rock star or an actress, but in the end, knowing that you'd be more satisfied being who you are."[121] He also includes himself as inspiration for the song: "in the end, a lot of these things do have to do with me."[122]

Intentions and interpretation aside, the song is clearly set with a basic contrasting verse-chorus form, in which refrains separate somewhat varied choruses from the preceding verses. Verses 1 and 3 are subdivided by temporal space and by changing instrumentation. In the beginning, this separation allows the first part of verse 1 to function as an introduction (since the song lacks one), while the second portion adds bass drum. This leads to a fuller drum set presence in refrain 1, which also adds a layer of stepwise three quarter-note figures played by guitar on beats one through three. This material is used in verses and refrains throughout the song, creating a sense of familiarity within variety as the band performs these carefully articulated musical elements.

Each chorus repeats musical material, but the lyrics change to reflect the changing information state of the audience, and the emotional expression of the vocals follows. These adjustments may reveal the most about Monahan's place in the context he describes. In particular, as he sings "I don't really wanna be the queen" in chorus 3, and ends the song with "I, I don't really wanna live this [life],"[123] the song's perspective seems to change from third to first person as the vocals convey a deeper sense of vulnerability.

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[121] Chuck, Taylor, "Columbia's Train Scheduled to Speed Thru Stations' Playlists with 'Virginia,'" *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment.*
[122] Ibid.
[123] This word properly completes the sentence, as it does in Chorus 2.

The promotional video for this song offers two settings: one in which the young woman, played by Rebecca Gayheart,[124] applies for a waitressing job (which serves in place of the original introduction for the song), works happily until she encounters a few difficult customers, cheers up upon meeting Monahan (playing a role as a customer), and then either quits the job or submits to it as part of her new reality.[125] In this context, we see the woman's physical beauty through glimpses of her putting on her uniform and through customers' reactions to her. Though the female waitress who hires her dislikes her immediately, the male cook and most of the male customers are drawn to her looks and disposition. For most of the video, she conveys a cheerful and self-confident demeanor (see below), as well as defiance towards unwanted advances when she smacks a man who behaves inappropriately.

Figure 4.26: "Virginia" Character in "Meet Virginia" Music Video

Toward the end of the video, she sits at the counter, clearly contemplating her situation. When she removes her name tag (which she chose from a bin – her name is probably not Virginia) and other elements of her uniform, we see that both these external

[124] Carrie Bell, "The Modern Age," July 24, 1999, *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment* 30.
[125] "Meet Virginia," music video, performed by Train, 1999. All discussion of this video and screenshots references this source.

elements and her overall demeanor, including the forced smile she first wears immediately before beginning her first shift, are superficial. She has been playing a role, and internally acknowledges its unsuitability to her desires, even if it is the case that she continues working at this establishment. She has compromised her integrity to perform her waitressing duties by performing an act. Though the song states that "she never compromises," this could be in indication that everyone, even the free-spirited, must eventually adapt pragmatically to reality.

The other setting features the band enthusiastically performing the song. Arranged in close quarters, this "performance" creates a sense of authenticity, since the viewer can see each band member seemingly playing the song live. The group also appears content, enjoying both the quieter and more dramatic moments of the song. Though we see several shots of individual band members playing (particularly the lead guitarist), Monahan's performance is more frequently highlighted. Shots of the band utilize darker lighting, with a warmer cast than the brighter lighting but cooler color profile of the restaurant scenes. This further differentiates the restaurant, where events occur, from the performance, which reflects on those events.

Figure 4.27: Train Performs in "Meet Virginia" Music Video

These two songs achieve something directly that the other four could only attain by a greater interpretive stretch: a crossover friendly rock-based song about a troubled woman that avoids a patronizing representation. Rob Thomas and Patrick Monahan, as the primary male characters in “3 AM” and “Meet Virginia,” seem to question their own choices and beliefs, and in different ways portray the women in their lives with a degree of respect lacking in “Everything You Want,” “Absolutely (Story of a Girl),” and “Lullaby.” “Push” presents a more complicated picture, describing potential abuse from a woman, but sung by a man, and full of twisted reasons for hurting another to appease oneself.

Conclusion

These songs have been interpreted in a variety of ways, and appealed to a variety of demographic groups, but the situations they describe with varying degrees of specificity – complicated personal relationships, changing gender roles, and a challenging economic climate – affected more than just the troubled men discussed in the chapter. The fact that men represented these issues in songs such as those discussed here highlights these groups’ perspectives, but it has not limited others from identifying with their music.

This chapter has offered various suggestions for how these audience segments fit these songs and videos into their innumerable worldviews, but musical materials and marketing shape the content that the individual encounters. Only so many interpretations are possible, and some are more likely. One might describe Matchbox Twenty, Vertical Horizon, Nine Days, Shawn Mullins, and Train as successfully adopting select musical

and visual components of alternative or punk rock. Whether by combining a fast tempo with the lyrics of a love song (in the case of Nine Days), or by playing a folksy pop song in a dive bar (the video for "Lullaby"), such elements convey a mutability of genre and target audience. In this way, those drawn to rock, pop, or some mixture of the two find their musical desires met, while the visual conveys a contemporary edge with comfortable middle-class values.

At times, the music was deliberately shaped to appeal to a particular audience. As previously discussed, "3 AM" was reinterpreted as an up-tempo rock song. Train made similar adjustments: "Meet Virginia" was remixed to appeal more readily to Top 40 radio.[126] Gabriel Rossman describes this tactic as one meant to allow a song "to meet the crossover format's genre conventions."[127] Though some formats will likely be a better initial fit for a given song, some will allow for additional airplay and dissemination of the song to a larger audience, particularly with an effective remix.[128]

The record industry also debates the order and timing of single release, to make sure the song will be accepted to station playlists (due to playlist compatibility), and to shape the artist image and album reception. This process is suggested in papers describing the early career of recording artist Seal at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. "Crazy" was the first single released from his eponymous debut album, but one letter describes a debate that ensued about which song to release next. Seal and label personnel

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[126] Chuck Taylor, "Columbia's Train Scheduled to Speed Thru Stations' Playlists with 'Virginia,'" *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*.
[127] Gabriel Rossman, "But Which Chart Do You Climb?" in *Climbing the Charts: What Radio Airplay Tells Us About the Diffusion of Innovation*, 77.
[128] Ibid., 77.

eventually agreed on releasing "Killer" once "Crazy" was played out if "The Beginning" followed. When plays of the first single declined, the second single was meant to continue airplay and sales momentum, as well as continuing to shape the message and image of the album and artist.[129] Then-senior director of marketing for Columbia Records made similar statements about Train in 1999. The first single from *Train*, "Free," appealed to rock stations and engaged a predominantly male audience. "Meet Virginia" attracted more female fans and brought airplay on a greater variety of formats. "I Am," was the next single from the album, which was "serviced to rock and alternative stations." He states that "the plan is that 'Meet Virginia' will take us through the end of the year, and sometime around then we'll release 'I Am' to pop radio."[130] Given the variety of material on this album, releasing songs that cross over while allowing songs to receive their maximum airplay period kept the band in the public's attention without overexposing the available material. It also encouraged listeners to purchase the album to acquire easy access to multiple appealing songs.

In addition to radio play, the release of singles on compilations can broaden the reach of a track. In 2000, *Billboard*'s Chuck Taylor wrote that these collections "have changed the way that the industry markets product." He notes that in July of that year "*Now 4* debuted at No. 1 on the Billboard 200, displacing Eminem." Combining singles that often represent disparate styles introduces listeners to music that they may have avoided otherwise.

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[129] Martin Kirkup, "Letter to Seal (Henry Samuel)," 1991, Sire Records Collection, ARC-0002, Box: 15, Folder: 3, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives, Cleveland OH.
[130] Carla Hay, "Aware/Columbia's Train Makes Steady Progress," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, 77.

Live performances can also expand perception of a band's material beyond that of radio singles, and to demonstrate their capabilities as live performers. As Melinda Newman wrote in a 2000 *Billboard* article, "in today's singles-driven climate, for many of these artists, playing live allows them to prove that they are far more than just what the fans hear on radio."[131] John Hampson of Nine Days concurs, stating his appreciation for the success of "Absolutely (Story of a Girl)," but noting that "because of our live show, people are starting to realize that we're more than just that song."[132] Train also played a lengthy tour to promote their album,[133] including playing for CNBC's "Power Lunch" program to appeal more directly to this white collar audience.[134]

Given remixing, single release strategies, visual marketing (including videos), and extensive live performances, the strictures of genre seem like quaint musings rather than grounded critiques in the overall functioning of the music industry. After all, the diverse audiences that these groups engaged have often been associated with corresponding genres – in the 1990s, it was young women with pop, young men with alternative rock (and rap), older adults with more mellow pop and rock. The strategies discussed above were intended to expand the audience for a given song and artist as much as possible, a goal possibly made easier by the rampant format redundancy discussed earlier in this chapter. If a song fits on Top 40, Triple A, and Hot AC because of careful production,

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[131] Melinda Newman, "Frequent Touring Instrumental in Modern Pop Acts' Quest for Success," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, September 23, 2000, 39.
[132] Ibid.
[133] Carrie Bell, "The Modern Age," July 24, 1999, *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, 30.
[134] Chuck Taylor, "Stock Show Broadens Portfolio: CNBC's 'Power Lunch' Finds New Fans with Live Music," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, August 19, 2000, 6, 108.

remixing, video treatment and airplay, live performance (in person and on television), and format redundancy, it no longer belongs to one group of people, but engages multiple segmented taste publics simultaneously. At this point, one begins to wonder when an artist's reputation is damaged by popularity with an adult-oriented demographic, and when appeal this simply adds to the portfolio of one who seeks to establish a larger following. Perhaps the designation is less aesthetically cumbersome for a male-dominated rock-oriented group that can claim association to this storied heritage and highlight that a portion of their audience is "serious" than for a "womanizer" like Michael Bolton or a diva like Whitney Houston.

Continuing with this line of discussion, the next chapter moves onto another 1990s male musician with both aesthetic credibility and pop appeal: the English singer-songwriter David Gray, whose mixture of pop, rock, and folk and an earthy image made him the latest "next Bob Dylan" while also fitting into adult female-oriented playlists.

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CHAPTER FIVE:
COMFORTABLE COOL – ADULT CONTEMPORARY AND SINGER-SONGWRITER AUTHENTICITY

Introduction

The messages conveyed by the artists discussed in Chapter Three ranged from angry to condescending to thoughtful, and critical reception in the rock press was almost as varied as the content in question. This chapter continues the discussion of male artists in the late 1990s and early 2000s by examining the work and reception of a male singer-songwriter, Englishman David Gray, that garnered approving remarks from the rock press. For various reasons, he was labeled as an "authentic" rock artist whose work on his breakthrough 1998 album *White Ladder* was described by *New York Times* critic Jon Pareles as "resolutely understated."[1] Of the songs on this release, Pareles writes that "some lyrics sketch stories, but most simply pour out his state of mind…"[2] This evaluation might suggest a niche audience for *White Ladder*, but this album performed well with alternative, mainstream, and adult-oriented audiences.

Gray achieved this broad reach because his music and image were identified with rock yet presented both a sensitive masculinity without losing aesthetic credibility. This artist also suggested an aura of cool, but more of a comfortable cool[3] associated with

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[1] Jon Pareles, "In Performance: Rock," *The New York Times* March 28, 2000, https://www.nytimes.com/2000/03/28/,arts/in-performance-rock-495824.html [accessed August 28, 2000].
[2] Ibid.
[3] I recognize that the concept of "cool" predates Thomas Frank's work, as these terms were used to describe different styles of jazz (hot and cool) from at least the 1920s.

what Thomas Frank labels “hip consumerism.”[4] He offered something for fans of rock, folk, and pop, for men looking at typically feminine-coded modes of expression as their own[5] (as well as for women looking for a sensitive men), and for consumers drawn to the mainstream and for those looking to express rebelliousness with their purchasing choices (as Frank portrays this practice).[6] Frank writes that such a figure “has become the paramount cliché of our popular entertainment, the preeminent symbol of the system he is supposed to be subverting.”[7] In this period, David Gray provided what was perhaps the ideal combination of traits to reach both the self-conscious connoisseur and the self-satiating consumer.

The following discussion will explore the complicated issues of authenticity, identity, masculinity, and consumerism in the last years of the 20th century and early years of the 21st by defining these larger subjects and by examining the marketing and music of *White Ladder*. In focusing on this artist, I argue more broadly that certain commercially successful male musicians were able to retain the credibility of the auteur while also conveying emotional vulnerability and lyrical and musical sensitivity that were appealing in the alternative and mainstream/Adult Contemporary markets. Analysis of music journalism, music videos (for Gray’s “Babylon”), album artwork, archival letters, relevant scholarship, and various versions of the song “Babylon” allow for an exploration

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[4] Thomas Frank, “Hip as Official Capitalist Style,” in *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 232.
[5] Ian Biddle, “‘The Singsong of Undead Labor:’ Gender Nostalgia and the Vocal Fantasy of Intimacy in the ‘New’ Male Singer/Songwriter,” in *Oh Boy! Masculinities and Popular Music*, ed. Freya Jarman-Ivens (New York: Routledge, 2007), 125-144.
[6] Thomas Frank, “Hip as Official Capitalist Style,” in *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*, 232.
[7] Ibid., 228

of Gray's authentication as a "cool" rock artist through image-building and compositional practice, as well as musical and lyrical elements.

First, the chapter will discuss the concept of "paying dues" through a period of struggle and consistent touring, and effective music videos and album cover art. Next, the effect of music critics on the public image of David Gray reveals the impact these writers have on the public personae of artists. Following this, Gray's song "Babylon" is analyzed, and Allan Moore's theory of authentication and scholarly works on authorship contribute to insights into how music, journalism, and commonly held ideas about authorship contribute to reception. The next section focuses on how gender affects authentication. Some male artists have successfully adopted elements of previously feminine-coded female musical approaches and public personae in part as a response to changing social and economic conditions. The chapter ends with a conclusion that offers reflections on the material covered in these pages.

Rock Authenticity, Live! Or, Validating Mass Mediation

For any musician, the factors that may lead to a granting of authenticity (by writers, other musicians, or listeners) vary, but paying dues plays an important role in neutralizing the effects that commercial success can have on an artist or group. Philip Auslander cites this as one of two primary factors that can determine rock artists' credibility. He writes that "to be considered an authentic rocker, a musician must have a history as a live performer, as someone who has paid those dues and whose current

visibility is the result of earlier popularity with a local following."[8] He concludes that "only live performance can resolve the tension between rock's romantic ideology and the listener's knowledge that the music is produced in the studio."[9] In this context, the live audience (and those who learn about performances outside the performing context) can more easily associate the music with more traditional music-making, rather than with a complex commercial operation. Having achieved an expansive audience through mass dissemination of recordings, music videos, interviews, and reviews in mass-mediated journalism, earlier work and continued live performances can continue to shape the image of artists as personal, locally oriented, and "real." Through these means, association with the music industry is described as incidental, not foundational.

David Gray's widespread recognition in 2000 benefitted from this type of image-making as well. Numerous articles cited Gray's years of struggle before the success of *White Ladder*, and interviews featuring Gray and record industry personnel cited Gray's rigorous touring schedule and previous commercial failures. On this first theme, numerous mentions of Gray's performing schedule add to his credibility as a capable and accessible musician. Carla Hay's 2000 *Billboard* article on this artist's success mentions his tour several times, and a 2001 article by Ray Waddell notes the longevity of the *White Ladder* tour, noting that "Gray is on his fourth U.S. swing to support *White Ladder*."[10]

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[8] Phillip Auslander, "Tryin' to Make it Real: Live Performance, Simulation, and the Discourse of Authenticity in Rock" in *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 88.
[9] Ibid., 91.
[10] Ray Waddell, "Coming to America: Can British Music Regain Lost Turf?" *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, May 19, 2001, 89.

Waddell quotes Gray as stating "I've been touring behind this record since it came out [internationally] in 1998. I've been touring within an inch of my life."[11]
Auslander's argument that live performance legitimizes a rock act (whose music was likely first encountered through on an album or a radio station) is also supported by a statement David Gray made in 2001: "'When people see me live, that's when the penny drops and they really get it."[12]

On the other hand, the prevailing wisdom runs counter to what Auslander has theorized about rock performance in the age of music video's popularity. Even with the declining popularity of music video by the late 1990s, when Auslander published the work discussed here, he still argues that "music video works to authenticate sound recordings in much the same way [as live performance] – and that authentication is necessary for much the same reason – as when live performance was the main guarantor of authenticity."[13] In this context, live performance validates the video by providing evidence that certain elements of the video (and, by extension, the recording), are reproducible live. For those watching, the video most directly informs opinions on the recording.[14] This means that for David Gray, live performance fits within a tripartite system that authenticates musicians who at some point really produced, recorded, and most likely performed this music. In addition, even if music video became the focus for determining the real from the crass and fake, the mythos of rock authenticity as

[11] Ibid. Addition of text to quote in original.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Phillip Auslander, "Tryin' to Make it Real: Live Performance, Simulation, and the Discourse of Authenticity in Rock," in *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, 104.
[14] Ibid., 105.

reproduced in music journalism, and through the words of the musicians themselves, still centers on "real" live performances as a marker for respectable musicianship.

This model of conveying an artist's validity within the commercial record industry requires coordination and a long-term investment. *Billboard* writer Steven M. Flanders wrote in 1998 that at the time, labels were generally avoiding this strategy, instead focusing more on immediate profit than on building long-term brand recognition. He writes that "selling a record is product marketing; selling an artist is brand marketing."[15] Citing the Canadian rock group Barenaked Ladies as an example, he writes, that the group was "a brand built over time…Barenaked Ladies consumers were cultivated over time, and they like the Barenaked Ladies, not a Barenaked Ladies *song* [sic] or a Barenaked Ladies *album*."[16] Flanders notes that this sort of fan base provides a cushion in the event that the next song or album does not appease a larger audience: the artist or band will still have the support of their more long-term fans.[17]

This required the group to not only produce records and perform in long tours, but also to work with managers, since personnel can use their contacts in the record industry to gain more and better exposure. At times, getting appropriate label support was difficult, as illustrated in letters in the Sire Records Collection at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Illustrate. One letter in particular demonstrates this. Faxed from manager Nigel Best to personnel at Sire Records/Warner Brothers on April 14, 1993, this letter indicates that promotion had been lacking and poorly coordinated. Best describes his

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[15] Steven M. Flanders, "Focus on Selling Your Artists, Not Records," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, August 29, 1998, 8, 38.
[16] Ibid., 38. Emphasis in original.
[17] Ibid.

dissatisfaction with “the way Barenaked Ladies has been handled over the past couple of months, especially in light of, yet again, radio, press, and promotion.”[18] He notes a “total lack of enthusiasm placed behind the track ‘Be My Yoko Ono’ that has resulted in a grand waste of time, effort, and money on behalf of the band” and points out interviews of other bands in *Rolling Stone* and “the trades,” where mention of the group was absent.[19] In spite of a focus on the fan base this group had built over the years that seemingly made them more legitimate, this group, and its representatives, were keen to reach a larger audience through radio and major publications that highlighted both their music and the band as a brand.

As a less well-established artist, David Gray’s following was smaller than that for the Barenaked Ladies. His obscurity required the Dave Matthews-founded label ATO (and later RCA as well), to engage rigorously with media outlets to an extent BNL’s manager had found lacking in that group’s promotional strategy. In an interview with Charlie Rose from November 30, 2000, Gray explains that he felt comfortable signing with ATO because he had known Dave Matthews professionally, and because he was tired of hearing the usual promises from record companies who ended up not promoting him. ATO planned a “grassroots” promotional campaign, which Gray approved of.[20] Before this, he had been dropped by Virgin, and left EMI before his contract expired to

[18] Nigel Best, “Letter to S. Stein, L. Woronker, M. Ostin, H. Klein,” April 14, 1993, ARC-0002, Box 1, Folder 27-28, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives, Cleveland OH.
[19] Ibid.
[20] David Gray, *Charlie Rose*, interviewed by Charlie Rose, November 30, 2000, https://charlierose.com/videos/9473 (accessed April 4, 2019).

avoid being dropped again.[21] He released his fourth album *White Ladder* on his own label, IHT Records. Initially the record was released only in Ireland, where Gray had a more substantial following,[22] but ATO offered an opportunity to build on this reception to reach the lucrative United States market.

To this end, the label worked to craft his image through interviews, some of which have already been mentioned, and in music videos. In particular, the video produced for the US release of "Babylon" (Gray's first US single and biggest success) works to craft a mysterious yet sensitive image for this previous unknown. He comes across as emotionally expressive, but this typically feminine-coded trait is framed by the perception of his intellectual reflectiveness, his role as a songwriter, and a degree of distance from the recording industry.[23] However, another video, released in the UK in January 2000 and directed by Kieran Evans,[24] interprets the song differently and suggests a rather different image for Gray, one that his new US label clearly found unsuitable for the American market. However, Gray still comes across as an example of the mythologized romantic folk artist.

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[21] Wes Orshoski, "Astralwerks Satisfies Demand with David Gray Reissues," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, June 16, 2001, 10.

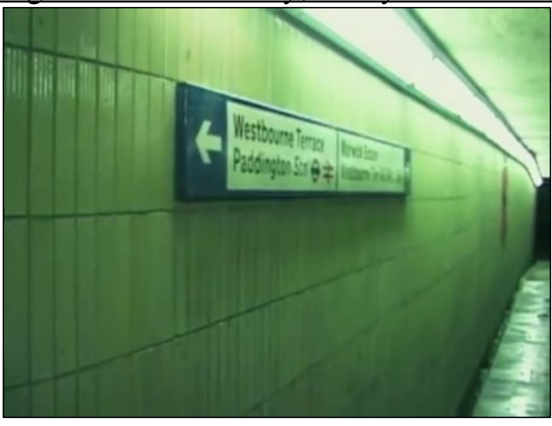
[22] Jackie McCarthy, "Review: Albums – David Gray: 'Life in Slow Motion,'" *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, Sep. 17, 2005. (accessed April 24, 2019). Gray formed this label with his manager Rob Holden. See Jason Fine, "A Brighter Shade of Gray," *Rolling Stone*, May 10, 2001, 52.

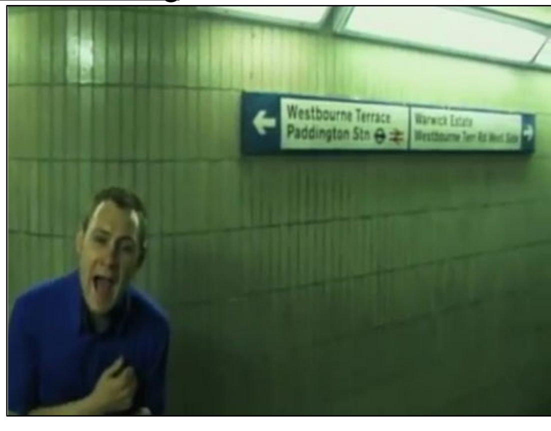
[23] Feminine-coded traits are modes of behavior that reinforce a socially accepted construction of femininity. Expressions of vulnerability in music include displays of vulnerability and lyrical depictions of romantic relationships.

[24]Evan Keiran, dir. "Babylon, Version 1 (2000)," music video, performed by David Gray, et. al., 2000. All discussion of this video and screenshots reference this source; IMVb. "Babylon, Version 1 (2000)," imvdb.com, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8125078/?ref =nm_flmg_dr_13 (accessed April 16, 2019).

To start with, this first video for “Babylon” is set in London, a choice clearly intended to appeal to a UK-based (or more broadly European) audience. A sunset over the city and a sign in the London Underground (below, left) directing patrons to Paddington Station establishes this during the longer introduction of this version of the song (labeled Radio Mix One)[25]. Gray performs in front of this sign later in the video (below, center), and maps of London for sale from a street vendor (below, right) further clarify the connection to this specific city.

Figure 5.1: David Gray, “Babylon” Video 1, London Setting





[25] David Gray, “‘Babylon’ Promotional Disc,” IHT/East-West Records, 2000, Compact disc.

This version features shots of Gray performing alone interspersed with images of various groups of people, couples, individuals, and the street scene. Though Gray is featured throughout, even singing and relaxing with these essentially nameless characters, much of the video documents ordinary people and activities, including late-night conversations at a bar or club and doing laundry at a laundromat.

Gray, and the song, become firmly situated in this place, with many unidentified people taking up at least as much time and space as visuals of the song's performance. "Babylon" creates a soundtrack to these activities, while the movement of people in this place inspires and suggests frame for interpreting the song. All along, the camera moves from left to right, starting fresh with each shot. This suggests turning pages, the passage of time, and a sense of physical movement in a video that captures a "fly on the wall" perspective of Londoners drinking, dancing, kissing, or using a washing machine.

This more general sense of the scene characterizes the video's connection to the song's lyrics in the second verse, displayed below.

David Gray, "Babylon," Verse Two[26]
Verse Two:
Saturday I'm running wild
And all the lights are changing red to green
Moving through the crowd I'm pushing
Chemicals all rushing through my bloodstream

In a more direct interpretation of the second line of verse 1, blurry lights in red, green, and white appear just after Gray sings the line "All the lights are changing green to red." (Figure 5.2 below)

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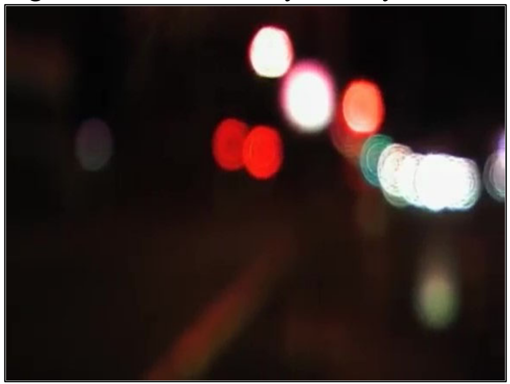
[26] David Gray, "Babylon," track two on *White Ladder*, ATO Records, 2000, compact disc; Lyrics sourced from album liner notes.

Figure 5.2: David Gray, "Babylon," Street Lights



The impact of such direct visual connections to lyrics may be as significant as the music's reenactment in this somewhat abstract approach. David Gray is not the star of the video, the individual whose affectively compelling performance generates motivation for those around him. Much of his performance of the song takes place with no potential audience in an empty apartment, with Gray's lyrics addressing a woman who is absent from the video. The shots in which he sings around others show these people continuing their activities as though the performance is inconsequential compared to dancing or talking. In every performance shot, including those with potential spectators, the audience is either uninterested or unaware of the music.

Gray's demeanor sometimes reinforces this sense of isolation, as when he sits in a club looking forlorn rather than happily connected to those around him. In the image on the left below, which appears several seconds before the image on the right, Gray is barely visible, highlighting the incidental quality of his presence in social situations. The image on the right clarifies his lack of enthusiasm in a room full of energetic people. This environment also conveys indulgent behavior that helps to visually explain the use of the

word “Babylon” in the song’s title and choruses since Babylon is symbolic of a site of excess.

Figure 5.3: David Gray, “Babylon” Video 1, Gray in Bar

In another series of shots, shown in Figure 5.4 below, Gray stares intensely at the camera, his gaze suggesting “creepy stranger” more than “affable singer-songwriter.” These shots, and a few others without Gray’s eye contact (but the same setting), are interspersed throughout the video. Given the likelihood of a more limited budget for this clip, the use of this sequence and others suggests an economical use of footage that also creates continuity in a somewhat disjunct visual context.

Figure 5.4: David Gray, “Babylon” Video 1, Gray Shot Sequence

This treatment reinforces the artistic quality of this interpretation, with Gray playing the role of the moody artist, and the center of the visual and aural action taking place in London's public places. The gap between the performing elements on the musical track and those seen in the video is resolved in a sense by the "performance" of the many people going about their lives. Instead of seeing a musician playing a synthesizer, for instance, we see a street full of people. This also allows the music becomes a part of public life, instead of the sole focus of the clip.

Media scholar Carol Vernallis emphasizes the significance of images in music videos with her assertion that "to share ground with or showcase features of a song, images must often relinquish qualities associated with objects and adopt those of sounds."[27] This allows for the completion of the performance in this video with the activities of the characters in the video. For instance, the song describes relationship-related experiences that take place over a weekend, as the lyrics provided in Table 5.1 demonstrate. To pair with this idea, the video starts with a sunset, ends with a sunrise, and provides several images of people enjoying weekend activities to accommodate the general theme of "a weekend in the life." In addition, the song's lyrics place Gray as more of an observer, and the shots of Gray shown in Figure 5.3 place him as disjunct from everything else. He sits still as others party around him, and any interaction between Gray and his lover is missing from the visuals, which reflects the lyrics' description of her physical absence until Sunday.

[27] Carol Vernallis, *Experiencing Music Video: Aesthetics and Cultural Context*, 177.

Because of these features, the viewer could imagine Gray as both reflective and serious and half-heartedly engaged with others – with the exception of his pleas to an absent lover. These associations have the potential to lessen the association of Gray and his music with pop, since we mostly see him as a singer-songwriter with an acoustic guitar. The visuals distract from the fact that Gray was operating as a recording artist who utilized a range of electronic instruments, production technology, and other musicians (who helped to compose the track) to achieve the sound being marketed by this clip.

To some extent, the video comes to dominate the song, and the setting dominates the character building for David Gray. He operates in a scene that would continue without much change without him. The focus on the visual setting recalls Simon Frith's statement that "television is not sound-centered but picture-driven, organized around an aesthetic of immediacy."[28] Constant movement, novel images, and obvious continuity must maintain "viewers' fickle attention."[29] Frith notes that, in a music video (and a commercial), "music is used to aestheticize the reality we see…, to ground what we see, to tie a moment to a familiar song…, [and] as an ironic commentary on what is seen, to distance viewers from the action and make them feel more knowing."[30] The first video for "Babylon" enhances the song's portrayal of ordinary activities taking place on a weekend – they seem more commonplace with a soundtrack. These activities also add to the meaning for the song, since the music serves as a soundtrack to meaningless interactions and missed opportunities. Viewing the events in the video as the shots of

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[28] Simon Frith, "Music and Television," *Popular Music* 1 (2002): 280.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid., 282.

various people pass by the screen allows the viewer to evaluate familiar experiences from the outside while compiling them into an overall sense of "London on any weekend."

This version, with its collage of images and partial performance, suggests a representation of reality, of unscripted choices that average people contend with every day. These relatable depictions pair with this rendition of a musical work in the place of a substantial visual representation of a musical performance. However, marketing this artist and his music to the United States required a different approach, and a second music video was released in October of 2000 for the American market.[31] On this topic, communications scholar Jack Banks writes that "labels act as a selective 'gatekeeping' force in the production of videos by deciding which of their artists will be featured in music clips and which songs from the artists' albums will have accompanying videos."[32] Music videos can be seen as commercials designed to sell music, but they also sell the artists based on principles they depict: what they stand for musically, personally, and in relation to the industry's commercialism. Given Gray's obscure status, the video for "Babylon," the first single from *White Ladder* and the first view many Americans had of this artist, played an important image-making role. Label ATO (and RCA as well later on) knew that a new video was necessary to create a more appropriate public persona. As Banks writes, "a primary function of videos is to introduce a label's new talent to the public. Music videos are not necessarily expected to boost sales of new act immediately,

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[31] IMDb, "David Gray: Babylon, Version 2 (2000)," imdb.com, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8125088/ (accessed April 16, 2019); Carla Hay, "Hit Single Helps David Gray Raise 'White Ladder on ATO," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, November 18, 2000.
[32] Jack Banks, "The Record Companies' Role in Video Music Production and Distribution," in *Monopoly Television: MTV's Quest to Control the Music*, 137.

but rather are used as part of a long-term promotional strategy designed to familiarize consumers with emerging artists."[33]

To "familiarize consumers" with David Gray, the second video offers a more direct, US-friendly interpretation of the lyrics and a presentation of Gray as a joyful figure, as it avoids reference to London and demonstrably highlights live performance.[34] Frith describes liveness as "aesthetically crucial" for television and for rock, noting that "both media use recording devices to give their audiences as sense of something happening here and now."[35] In this case, the "here" becomes San Francisco, indicated by director Mike Figgis with obvious references like those in Figure 5.5 below.

Figure 5.5: David Gray, "Babylon" Video 2, San Francisco Setting

[33] Ibid., 139.
[34] Mike Figgis, dir. "Babylon Version 2," music video, performed by David Gray, et. al., 2000. All discussion of this video and screenshots reference this source.
[35] Simon Frith, "Music and Television," 284.

However, instead of allowing the location to dominate, Figgis uses it to encourage the association of "Babylon" and David Gray with an American city important in rock's history – like the first video, the mix of the song (Radio Mix One) omits verse three, which specifically mentions London. This formal approach creates a clear-cut contrasting verse-chorus structure, brings the first pre-chorus and chorus closer to the beginning of the song, and, by eliminating the third verse, allows for this video's focus on San Francisco. A more in-depth discussion of the different versions of "Babylon" will follow later in the chapter, but it bears noting that the U.S. album version includes the third verse.[36]

Table 5.1: David Gray, "Babylon"[37]

Album version:	Version 2:
Introduction	Introduction
Verse 1	Verse 1
Verse 2	
Pre-Chorus 1	**Pre-Chorus 1**
Chorus 1	**Chorus 1**
Re-Intro	
Verse 3	Verse 2
Pre-Chorus 2	**Pre-Chorus 2**
Chorus 2	**Chorus 2**
Re-Intro	
Outro	Outro

[36] This version of the song is included at the end of the U.S. album.
[37] Evan Keiran, dir. "Babylon, Version 1 (2000)," music video, performed by David Gray, et. al., 2000; Mike Figgis, dir. "Babylon Version 2," music video, performed by David Gray, et. al., 2000.

The streets and buildings do not generate as much of the visual action as they do in Keiran's version one, but rather provide a background for arguments and conversations between Gray and a woman identified early on as his lover (likely played by Samantha Mathis). We see more obvious visual references that pair with the second line of verse 1 ("All the lights are change green to red") as well as the second line of verse 2 ("All the lights are changing red to green."). This more accessible version also features multiple shots of this woman throughout the video, starting with the introduction. This way, both the song and video highlight the romantic relationship described in the lyrics, which appealed to a more pop-oriented audience, while the city provided ambiance and familiarity. For those familiar with the "Jack Kerouac Street" reference in the picture on the far right (above), romantic notions of another kind likely came to mind: those "authentic," "real artist," associations encouraged by effective references to the Beats and the subsequent 1960s counterculture that emerged in San Francisco.

San Francisco provides the "here" that Frith refers to, and the "now," suggesting a sense of immediacy, is the use of live performance shots. The latter also reinforces Gray's aesthetic validity (especially in light of the Kerouac reference) by serving the "authenticating function" that Auslander describes: "the function of live performance under this new arrangement is to authenticate the *video* by showing that the same images and events that occur in the video can be produced onstage."[38] In place of a live performance that the viewer can compare the video and recording to, Figgis provides "authentic footage" of a live performance within a video that at other times shows a

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[38] Phillip Auslander, "Tryin' to Make it Real: Live Performance, Simulation, and the Discourse of Authenticity in Rock," 105. Emphasis in original.

music video being filmed "live." The video transitions to what looks like fan footage (Figure 5.6) of a concert.

Figure 5.6: David Gray, "Babylon" Video 2, Live Footage

We see him playing acoustic guitar, presumably with a backing band, as the audience sings along with their arms raised. Simultaneously, the sound shifts from that of the US-released studio record to an approximation of a live one: visually and aurally, the viewer experiences a "real" live performance to verify Gray's legitimacy, complete with compromised sound quality and a cheering audience. Interestingly, the sound from the live footage that begins Pre-Chorus 2 remains as the visual shifts to the supposedly live filming of Gray and his drummer in a studio (Figure 5.7). Given that this track features less prominent synthesizers, the absence of performing elements other than acoustic guitar, drums, and Gray's vocals is less disjunct that what the first video offers – Gray performing with and without his guitar, despite the lush synthesizers backing the vocals and acoustic instruments.

Figure 5.7: David Gray, “Babylon” Video 2, Studio Setting

This suggests a connection between a realistic live setting and the industrialized means of the music industry, but in a way that minimizes the effect of the latter elements. Adding to this are the TV screens placed behind the two performers in the studio. The shots often show Gray joyfully performing while looking back at drummer Craig McClune, as the TVs show camera footage focused in on Gray’s face. These screens display video within a live performance that’s a video being filmed within a video. Altogether, this footage and that of the concert suggest connection both to live performance that engages an audience, and to the media essential for mass dissemination.

In both contexts, Gray’s character is unchanged: he performs joyfully without any trappings that could suggest that what the viewer sees might not reflect his true feelings. He is an artist who is serious about his music but not above wanting to share it with his audience, whose enthusiastic response becomes a part of the music-making. The all-knowing viewer perspective that Frith describes allows one to distinguish between the live and studio performances, and between these scenes and those with Gray and an actress playing a romantic partner, but not to the extent that the authenticating function of the live performances are compromised by filming a video or highlighting a romantic

relationship. The subject matter of the lyrics is mediated by the authentication of the video (and the press), making this selection appealing to self-consciously discerning consumers who may otherwise reject a song about a romantic relationship. This expression of masculinity, which incorporates features like romance and vulnerability along with suggestions of intellectual sophistication and aesthetic credibility, reflects what scholar Ian Biddle describes as "find[ing] was of demonstrating the avowed 'masculinity' of the public space without thereby falling foul to accusations of being 'demonstrative' or 'flamboyant.'"[39] He appropriates feminine-coded modes of expression, including explicit display itself, without calling attention to the process. In this way, he exerts his "ownership of public discourse."[40]

The mostly invisible nature of these methods allowed Gray and "Babylon" to also draw in the larger demographic that might be more concerned with the pleasure a song brings than its cachet. Examining the *Billboard* charts for this song[41] reveals that "Babylon" reached number 57 on the Hot 100, number 36 on Mainstream Top 40, number 26 on Adult Contemporary, and number 8 on Adult Top 40, demonstrating a respectable presence on more alternative-oriented formats, and for those targeting a more mainstream, and in some cases, older and more female-dominated, audience.

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[39] Ian Biddle, "'The Singsong of Undead Labor:' Gender Nostalgia and the Vocal Fantasy of Intimacy in the 'New' Male Singer/Songwriter," in *Oh Boy! Masculinities and Popular Music*, 140.
[40] Ibid.
[41] "David Gray Chart History," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, https://www.billboard.com/music/david-gray/chart-history [accessed April 3, 2019].

“Babylon” reached its peak on the AC chart among artists such as Faith Hill, Savage Garden, The Backstreet Boys, and Marc Anthony, all of whom seldom find praise of their music in the pages of *Rolling Stone*.[42]

That this track reached number 1 on Triple A and number 25 on Alternative Songs demonstrates significant crossover. Both of these charts tend to track more rock or indie-identified songs, and Triple A (Adult Album Alternative) for the week of September 9, 2000 (the week Gray reached number 1 after 13 weeks on the chart), reflects this.[43] Phish, Barenaked Ladies, Counting Crows, the Red Hot Chili Peppers, and Joan Osborne also charted that week. All of these artists have been associated generically with rock to some degree, all include prominent guitar and (ostensibly) self-composed lyrics and music, and most are dominated by men. In fact, out of 40 spots on this chart, only seven were occupied by women on this particular week. Compare this to the selections on the Adult Contemporary chart, which tends to include a more even spread of female artists, and a gender bias is obvious.

Though the two “Babylon” videos suggest connections with the song they interpret, a long list of disjunctions between musical and visual elements are still apparent. Considering that a video can focus on interpreting select musical and lyrical elements in the recording and shape the identity of the performer in a number of ways, it seems only natural that viewers would accept changing or mismatched frames of

[42] “Adult Contemporary, The Week of March 24, 2001,” *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, https://www.billboard.com/charts/adult-contemporary/2001-03-24 (accessed April 3, 2019).
[43] “Triple A, The Week of September 9, 2000,” *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, https://www.billboard.com/charts/triple-a/2000-09-09 (accessed April 3, 2019).

presentation without much conscious consideration. Recalling John Corbett's comments (cited in Chapter One), this "filmic disavowal tactic" allows for the condition that "verisimilitude is not the basis for value in image/sound replenishment in music video, that the viewer need not 'believe' that the singer is actually singing."[44] The viewer unconsciously accepts that what is seen need not account for all that is heard and that progressions from different locations and different performing modes spliced together seamlessly are appropriate within a video's reality. Whether the clip reflects more traditional performance conventions, as with Mike Figgis's "Babylon" video, the more complete this realm is to the viewer, the more effectively a video can communicate something appealing and memorable.

This contrasts with Frith's and Auslander's conclusions about the role of music video but addresses important topics that both scholars ignore. If music video includes an element of live performance, as Frith writes, the viewer obviously knows that nothing he or she watches is actually live (even David Gray's "live" vocals sound enhanced by his studio recording). And if the video is meant to validate the credibility of recorded music, the viewer must contend with the fact that, regardless of the content in a music video (even one that includes supposedly live material), the final product was manipulated in a studio as well. Corbett's analysis may exclude some of Frith's and Auslander's historically-oriented material that documents rock's continued work to validate itself as commercially produced art, but it recognizes the adjustments in perception necessary for a viewer to accept a video as a representation of the music and artist(s) it depicts.

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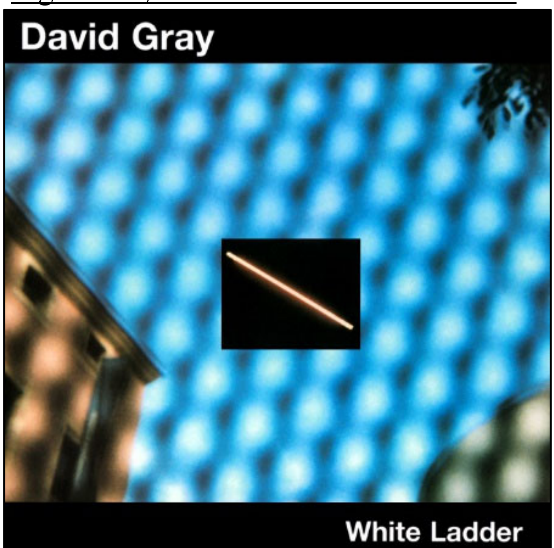
[44] John Corbett, "Free, Single, and Disengaged: Listening Pleasure and the Popular Music Object," 87.

Corbett's statement (also recalling the discussion in Chapter One) that music video is "a hybrid of radio and a record jacket"[45] does recall Frith's commentary on the affinity between radio and music video. Frith writes that "MTV duly aped Top 40 radio formats,[46] with playlists, veejays, 'hot' releases, 'breaking' singles, etc."[47] The formatting and presentation mimics that of radio, while the images offer a more thorough and complex visualization than that provided by the visual materials included with an album or single. That isn't to argue that the latter materials do not fulfill an important role. The covers for *White Ladder* and *Stunt* provide examples for this.

The image chosen to represent Gray's album, seen in Figure 5.8 below, suggests the artistic persona that the videos later reinforced.

Figure 5.8, *White Ladder* Album Cover



[45] Ibid., 88.
[46] I would argue that initially MTV "aped" the AOR format.
[47] Simon Frith, "Music and Television," 279.

Some elements on the cover, such as buildings and a blurry window screen, are identifiable. The white diagonal line, placed in a black rectangle in the center of the image, is a bit mysterious. Even though it resembles the "white ladder" (the oral sedative Xanax, the rectangular shape and indentations of which vaguely resemble a ladder) that is likely referred to in the title track, any connection to those lyrics probably occurred to relatively few listeners since this song was not released as a single and the reference to Xanax as "white ladder" is not universal. The significance of this image lies more in its lack of clarity – the cover's abstract quality conveys a vagueness that sometimes inspires confused appreciation. Art we cannot understand must be profound.

Simon Frith writes that videos "are conceived for a purpose – to create an audience for their stars." He continues: "they are almost always designed to reassert their authenticity, the *rootedness* of performance."[48] Figgis's video in particular excels in this manner by portraying select features of the lyrics and musical texture in a context connected to live performance. This works because, as Corbett argues, the "filmic disavowal tactic" allows viewers to accept the inconsistency of what they see and hear while accepting on another level that these elements belong together.[49]

An album cover performs a different, and arguably more abstract function: suggesting what the artist or group is all about, in a fixed form. The influence of this media form can be powerful. As Theodore Gracyk writes, the "sense of reality inherent in a photograph creates a particularly overwhelming aura of authenticity, inviting us to

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[48] Simon Frith, "Afterword: Making Sense of Video: Pop into the Nineties," in *Music for Pleasure*: *Essays in the Sociology of Pop* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 206.
[49] John Corbett, "Free, Single, and Disengaged: Listening Pleasure and the Popular Music Object," *October* 54 (Autumn 1990): 87.

formulate and retain dubious assumptions. The pictures we have of rock musicians are highly selective and distorting."[50] As an example, he cites the general avoidance of the studio setting, and a focus on vocals and guitar.[51] The first example denies the industrialized origin of the music, and the second draws attention to live performance, a seemingly unmediated form of dissemination. In many cases, marketing creates the type of artist that can be sold with the music, and this includes both video and still shots like album covers. Gracyk writes that "television reinforces such pictures and compounds the message" with live performance, even when the performers lip synch, since "the process of generating the medium which presents them is itself invisible to us."[52]

A successful picture, drawing, or video will immerse the receiver in its content and make it easy to ignore the medium, regardless of the influence of technology or technique. This does not negate the importance of channels of production and dissemination in determining content. Rather, it highlights the possibility that in some cases a media form can be used in a way that makes it seem naturalized, or unpremeditated. For David Gray, images hint at the comfortably mainstream but thoughtfully considered, and they do so in a way that seems to reflect the real artist, not the fruits of carefully executed marketing campaign. Of course, creating an authenticated commercially successful rock artist involves more than music video, pictures, and record packaging.

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[50] Theodore Gracyk, "Record Consciousness," in *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 75.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid. Though CD covers are relatively small in size, the image is generally large enough for consumers to extract the detail necessary to glean meaning. This media form may have lost its influence in this age of digital, web-based music (and single, not album, dominance), but this material was significant when *White Ladder* was released.

The next section will discuss how the discourse of triumph after struggle, associations with previously authenticated artists, songwriting credibility, and other factors supported perceptions of David Gray as a "real" artist.

Real Grit and Real Music. Or, Journalism Authenticates the Rock Star

Aside from the visual media discussed previously, David Gray's credibility was established via the press to a degree only hinted at thus far. Publications such as *Rolling Stone* and *Billboard* and televised interviews authenticated this artist through discussion of live performance (discussed in the previous section), long-term struggle, and aesthetic worth. These means protected Gray from the taint of corporate influence, so that even after selling millions of records (and being clear about wanting to sell records), his work appeared unaffected by commercial concerns. They also protected him from association with female-associated pop artists, grouping him instead with masculine rock idols.

A general emphasis on Gray's long struggle to break the US market recalls Auslander's comments on earning success: an artist like this "has paid those dues."[53] This idea also connects to the vein of anti-commercial sentiment that has long informed determinations of rock authenticity. Despite relatively minimal commercial success, the musician continues to operate, which implies that money and fame are not necessary, and that, when recognition is gained, previous experiences can provide a shield from the cynical music business.

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[53] Phillip Auslander, "Tryin' to Make it Real: Live Performance, Simulation, and the Discourse of Authenticity in Rock," in *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, 88.

Additionally, when artists perform for little financial reward, they avoid associations with record industry manipulation of song composition and performance practices. Simon Frith writes that the process of the industry controlling so much of the formation and creation process is "from both the musicians' and audience's point of view essentially *irrational*." In the scheme Frith describes, demand is created only through marketing, and the "performance/audience relationships exist only as they are mediated."[54] Writing in 1988, he argues that this system has replaced the "old" system, in which musicians work their way up from local to international success.

Alternatively, Jacques Attali concludes that our current phase of music's social, economic, and political role, which he labels as "repetition," essentially began with the use of recording and playback devices to record and replay music. He argues that this system is one in which the creation of demand supersedes production of goods. Frith seems to agree with this but places some groups outside this process. Some artists surely gain experience and fans through more local (no mass-mediated) means. But Frith's discussion of the "old" system seems to ignore the fact that, regardless of the path to success and the valid investments of musicians and audiences, all popular music comes to establish mediated relationships because of how the music is produced, advertised, and disseminated. Also, manufactured groups predate rock 'n roll, particularly in country and western.[55] In any case, Frith (and many others) have described the difficulty of achieving even a moderate level of stardom, let alone maintaining it. The phrase in the essay cited

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[54] Simon Frith, "Picking Up the Pieces," in *Facing the Music: A Pantheon Guide to Popular Culture*, ed. Simon Frith. (New York: Pantheon, 1988), 113.
[55] Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 87-129.

here is that “the ruling ideology is a Horatio Alger-type account of success being *earned* by hard work, determination, and skills *honed* in practice. The superstars’ position at the top of the pyramid is justified because they have *paid their dues* on their way up to it.”[56]

The skepticism in this description is absent from a great deal of popular press, which is often guided by short-sighted observations and nostalgic assumptions about “the way it used to be, compared to all the one-hit wonders “these days.” However, many stars have come and gone quickly throughout American popular music’s past, some of whom were catapulted to fame based solely on their looks.[57] If Frith is correct, and mediation does create fame more than ever, *Rolling Stone* is a part of a certain degree (or new type) of dysfunctionality in the record industry because such publications are a component of the mass mediation that generates large-scale audience interest and approval. However, mass production and mass mediation are unavoidably, and not recently, linked: one produces goods, one inspires demand for those goods. References to the “old” way can reflect real changes, but they also suggest a degree of nostalgia on the part of the author.

Even those earning their success the “old” way, paying dues before international success, may not leverage this image into more than a few singles or albums that achieve large-scale success. David Gray’s *White Ladder* was a platinum record according to RIAA, but his next album, *A New Day at Midnight* from 2003, only earned a gold

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[56] Ibid., 111-112. Emphases in original.
[57] David Brackett’s “Introduction” from *Interpreting Popular Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pages 4 and 6 describes the example of Gary Lewis and the Playboys as a band that didn’t play on the record and a singer whose vocals had to be reinforced by another singers (and who got the job because he was a child of a celebrity).

certification. After that, individual tracks achieved moderate success,[58] but none of Gray's albums reached the same level of sales.[59] In any case, ATO, the label that originally released the album in the U.S., and RCA, the label that assisted later on with marketing and promotion, utilized Gray's previous failure to reach a large audience to promote him a troubled troubadour.[60]

Carla Hay's previously cited November 2000 article on Gray helps to establish this image by quoting industry representatives' praises of Gray's work. She quotes Chris Tetzeli of ATO Records (which released *White Ladder* in the US) stating that the album's first single "'Babylon' strikes a chord because the music is so honest;" and Wayne Isaak, a VH1 executive at the time, states that "We were inspired by the sound of the music. . . We were all so moved by his performance and how he connected with people. Sometimes you have to stand up for music whether or not it's going to be the next mainstream hit."[61] Statements like these suggest an absence of commercial motivation, or at least a greater interest in aesthetic value, among individuals responsible for making music profitable.

In a 2001 interview with *Rolling Stone*'s Karen Bliss, Dave Matthews discusses David Gray and *White Ladder* in a similar manner, while Bliss reinforces the anti-commercial message. In the third paragraph, Bliss begins with a reference to "the artistic

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[58] "David Gray Chart History," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, https://www.billboard.com/music/david-gray/chart-history/adult-pop-songs (accessed April 10, 2019).
[59] Recording Industry Association of America, "Gold and Platinum: David Gray," https://www.riaa.com/gold-platinum/?tab_active=default-award&se=david+gray#search_section (accessed April 9, 2019).
[60] Carla Hay, "Hit Single Helps David Gray Raise 'White Ladder' On ATO," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, November 18, 2000.
[61] Ibid.

quality Gray has set with the million-album sales being a happy byproduct." Matthews' thoughts finish the paragraph: "After [*White Ladder*] was recorded and David was dropped [by EMI], it seemed like a criminal act. We had to prove ourselves to him."[62] Discussing the inclusion of label RCA to marketing and promotion, Matthews says, "maybe if our focus was entirely selfish, we wouldn't have done that but because our focus is on David, it was good for both of us," says Matthews. "Their long arms have been nothing but an enormous help to making the whole thing work, and then at the core of it is this phenomenal record…"[63]

Such dialogue helps to disguise commercial motivations. As an artist himself, who had already toured with Gray, Matthews may have felt more of a connection to both the needs of musicians and Gray's specific situation. Dave Matthews Band was also in the midst of a stylistic change, with the more radio-friendly album *Everyday* released a few months before this interview.[64] However, Matthews continues by explaining how not only Gray but ATO benefitted by earning more capital (both economic and social) to use on later releases.

Even an artist-focused label must focus on financial issues, but both independent and major labels try to frame their activities as something other than business oriented. Isaak and other industry figures may have indeed liked the music, but the industry does

[62] Karen Bliss, "Dave Matthews Talks Label: After Breaking David Gray, Matthews Discusses the Future of his Label," *Rolling Stone*, March 23, 2001, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/dave-matthews-talks-label-238134/ (accessed April 10, 2019). Insertion in original.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Recording Industry Association of America, "Gold and Platinum: David Gray," (accessed April 29, 2019). The songs on this album are much shorter than those usually included on this band's releases, which increased the likelihood of radio play.

not invest time and money promoting singles to multiple radio formats, making expensive videos and ensuring that they get sufficient airplay, and organizing Gray's live performances without assuming such investments would redeem more than someone's conscience. *White Ladder* had already proven its appeal in Ireland and the UK when ATO released it, and Gray had demonstrated his ability and willingness to actively promote the record through interviews and live performances. In fact, by the end of the *White Ladder* tour, Gray had spent three years supporting this album.[65]

Without money and connections, large-scale promotion and significant sales would be difficult to realize, especially in a large country like the United States. Documenting a conference focused on promoting British acts in the U.S., a 2000 *Billboard* article by Paul Sexton quotes several industry representatives' observations on this subject. Among those referenced is Oedipus, then-VP of programming for WBCN-FM Boston, who states that "'[Artists] have to understand the territory – that the U.S. is so vast, they have to try to break it city by city.'"[66] Gray certainly understood this approach with his many visits to the U.S., including the long tour for *White Ladder*. The article also discusses how breaking an artist can take many years and cites how Gray's manager Rob Holden worked for several years to build his career.[67] Holden even co-founded the label IHT that *White Ladder* was initially released on.[68]

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[65] Ray Waddell, "Coming to America: Can British Music Regain Lost Turf?" *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, May 19, 2001 (accessed April 24, 2019).
[66] Paul Sexton, "Industry Debates Breaking British Acts in the U.S.," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*. November 25, 2000, 102.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Jason Fine, "A Brighter Shade of Gray."

This combination of industry and artist roles, with an ostensible emphasis on supporting worthy musicians and their work, is also reflected in some of Gray's comments. For Hay's article, he states that "'ATO has a steely glint in their eye. [*White Ladder*] was the first record they put out and the only record they had to focus on, and it meant so much to them.'" He also asserts that "'RCA has come on board at the right time. They've done a really good job of getting the album more exposure, more radio and video play. We're getting blanket coverage for the first time ever."[69]

Gray collaborated in the authentication process by helping to create the public persona that positioned him musically and visually as an earnest singer-songwriter, not a pop artist, and biographically as someone who had struggled for years to earn the kind of success that he found with *White Ladder*. He found that many of his fans approved of the "genuine" quality of-his music, that fans saw him as a "'heart on my sleeve' kind of songwriter."[70] He continues, saying "'I've become more understated and more confident in my writing. I used to be more wordy, and I've moved away from that."[71] During his *Charlie Rose* interview, Rose asks Gray for his influences, and Gray answers with "'[Bob] Dylan. Anyone who sort of writes and sings on the acoustic guitar has probably been influenced by him. Van Morrison later on."[72] This exchange seems innocuous enough unless one considers that a musician clearly identified as a songwriter is likely to

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[69] Carla Hay, "Hit Single Helps David Gray Raise 'White Ladder' on ATO," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*. Insertion in original.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid.
[72] David Gray, interview by Charlie Rose, *Charlie Rose*, November 30, 2000, https://charlierose.com/videos/9473 (accessed April 4, 2019).

be asked for their influences or other sources of inspiration. By asking this question, Rose addresses Gray as a composer, and this reinforces a degree of credibility.

Gray's demeanor is perfectly awkward – he avoids eye contact and answers several questions uncomfortably, thus suggesting that Gray is reluctant to embrace a conversation centered on him and his music. Though his behavior was likely not premeditated, his apparent discomfort in this setting suggests an endearing uneasiness with fame as well – this wasn't about David Gray becoming an effectively marketed commercial artist, it was about David Gray earning recognition and a connection with a larger audience. Situations such as these helped to add depth to Gray's public persona. His praise of admired songwriters and his own self-identification as a pensive artist encouraged validation of his artistic contributions.

The comparisons others made to canonized artists facilitated this image-building as well. In Rose's introduction to his interview with Gray, he states "'He has already attracted several famous admirers. Joan Baez has said he's the greatest lyricist since Bob Dylan."[73] The first paragraph of Hay's article also signals the significance of such references in the marketing of *White Ladder* (and Gray as an artist): She writes that the album "is being hailed as one of the most un-trendy hits of the year. David Gray's latest album, 'White Ladder' [sic] (ATO/RCA records), has built a steadily increasing audience for Gray, whose personal songwriting is in the tradition of Bob Dylan and Van Morrison."[74]

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[73] Ibid.
[74] Carla Hay, "Hit Single Helps David Gray Raise 'White Ladder' on ATO," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, Nov. 18, 2000.

By framing the album in this way, Hay portrays it (and its first single, "Babylon") as enjoyable for those who might reject more overtly commercial material and to those who value connections to artists with a strong contemporary connection to rock authenticity by describing the album as an "un-trendy hit." Statements like these suggest that, like Bob Dylan and Van Morrison, David Gray's commercial success in no way diminishes his aesthetic contributions.

These methods used in support of *White Ladder* functioned, as Albin Zak writes, to allow Gray's music to "[make space] for itself in the collective consciousness of cultural discourse and the witness that it bears to all that went into its making."[75] Journalists, industry representatives, radio personnel, and the musicians themselves oriented these contributions ideologically and aesthetically by highlighting live performance, describing financial considerations as mitigated by artistic motivations, associating the new music with authenticated material, and avoiding strict genre categorization. The primary focus for Gray's image was highlighting his image as an "artist," a strategy that allowed for the broad dissemination of the music to younger, hipper listeners, those oriented toward contemporary pop, and those Van Morrison fans looking for something familiar yet novel.

Through exposure to this literal and figurative image construction, the audience connected what was heard and seen via mass media with an identity for Gray's music and his validity. These extra-musical means were essential for helping the audience assign meaning and value to this music, and this artist, when presented with numerous options.

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[75] Albin Zak, "Writing Records," in *The Poetics of Rock: Cutting Tracks, Making Records* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2001), 20.

The next section will further explore how the press and other factors influenced favorable interpretations of David Gray, in terms of both public image and music. Close analysis of "Babylon," combined with reflections on statements like those above, and the incorporation of Allan Moore's theories on authentication and other scholars' work on authorship, will elaborate on how this artist (and those like him) achieved both aesthetic credibility and mainstream-friendly status.

The Music Itself. Or, "Real Music" in the Mainstream

Watching music videos like those for "Babylon" on MTV and VH1 and reading about David Gray in *Rolling Stone* and other publications helped to shape the audience's perception of what Gray and his music represented, even if the sound suggested otherwise. (After all, his marketing as another Bob Dylan suggests a connection to folk but "Babylon" lacks substantive evidence of this influence.) These articles, as well as those in *Billboard* and other magazines, influenced radio programmers to add these singles, and those that followed, to their playlists. *Billboard* charts and the buzz around Gray and his music reached broadly to those engaged more critically with the popular music field, whether members of the record or radio industries or the general public. This likely enabled the success of other singer-songwriters, whether individual artists or bands.

The reintroduction of such male artists into the mainstream (and, sometimes simultaneously, the fringes of American popular music) also helped to sustain the discussion of what constitutes meaningful music and true artistry in the popular music field. A 2001 *Billboard* article by Wes Orshoski titled "Industry Rediscovered Its

Troubadour Traditions" describes the success of several singer-songwriters in the late 1990s and early 2000s, a phenomenon that is traced to the success of Gray's *White Ladder*. To illustrate this point, Orshoski quotes an adult top 40 program director as stating, "'You can't help but compare a lot of this music to him. You say, 'Oh, wow, it sounds a little bit like David Gray, so it's probably gonna work.''"[76]

In addition to crediting Gray's success for that of artists such as Ben Harper, Ryan Adams, and Five For Fighting, the desire for "real" music figures heavily in the article. Orshoski writes, "Some say these tracks are filling a void of songwriting of substance" after a period dominated by teen-oriented pop.[77] Some of the strongest statements in this regard unsurprisingly come from the musicians interviewed. Five For Fighting's Jon Ondrasik suggests that the record and radio industries underestimate the audience, stating, "'I don't think they're just out there for stupid teenage bullshit. I think they've always wanted good stuff – they just needed there to be an opportunity for them to get to it."[78] Jack Johnson states that "'It could be that boy bands are kind of fading and people are wanting to hear songs that actually come from a person."[79] The strong implication is that gatekeeping forces kept this music from a public that was hungry for it, but the surprise success of Gray may have encouraged the marketing of such groups and made it less expensive, since the style of emerging singer-songwriters could be linked to Gray's. The cyclical nature of popular music was likely also a factor, since "real" musicians have

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[76] Wes Orshoski, "Industry Rediscovered Its Troubadour Traditions," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, December 22, 2001, 74.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid., 75.

recovered lost ground from "manufactured" music several times (Grunge and Punk, for example).[80] Of course, Gray and others also owe some of their success to the male singer-songwriters of the 1960s and 1970s, such as Bob Dylan and James Taylor.

The discussion surrounding such resurgences is cyclical – it has been repeated continuously at least since the advent of rock journalism. Allan Moore's article "Authenticity as Authentication" (discussed in Chapter Three as well) explores "ramifications" of various terms used in this discourse, such as "authentic," "real," and "honest." He writes that "authenticity does not inhere in any combination of musical sounds. 'Authenticity' is a matter of interpretation which is made and fought for within a culture and, thus, historicized position."[81] Some dialogue, like that cited above, may assume that some music is inherently more "authentic," but this status is, and has always been, determined primarily by forces outside the music. In popular music, compositional association with the material figures prominently in assessments of quality. This is indicated by the three relationships Moore describes as essential for authentication, quoted here: "that artists speak the truth of their own situation; that they speak the truth of the situation of (absent) others; and that they speak the truth of their own culture, thereby representing (present) others."[82]

Each of these parameters focus on authorship, a factor of popular music production that continues to dominate discussions (or assumptions) on authenticity. As Moore writes, "the social alienation produced under modernity…appears to me the

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[80] Ibid., 74-75.
[81] Alan Moore, "Authenticity as Authentication," 210.
[82] Ibid., 209.

ideological root of such striving for the authentic."[83] Because most of the culture that Americans (and others) now interact with is mass-mediated, image building like that described above supports the idea that the music is aesthetically valuable, and much of this material cites the composition of the music and the relationships between the author(s) and the subject matter treated. In this way, the music can be said to reflect lived experiences, true feelings, native customs, or comprehensively understood customs or events. The performance of masculinity is part of a true performance of both music and public persona.

This attraction to easily sourced (mostly individual) authorship also comes from what Keith Negus describes as the "Romantic notion of the great individual." This underlying concept supports the "valuing of authorship [which] is fundamental to music criticism and musicological explanation."[84] Scholars such as Lisa Lewis (discussed in Chapter One) suggest that the ideal of a single authorial presence crafting the whole of any music intended for broad dissemination, as well as "aesthetic standards of uniqueness and complexity" were "borrowed inappropriately from high art culture."[85] The reality is that even a single-author song needs many other skilled individuals to create a track that stands up to many listeners and repeat listening. However, these Romantically oriented notions remain fundamental in determining which music deserves praise. And the denial of any commercial influence is no longer necessary: Moore writes that "constructions of 'authenticity' are no longer made by denial of commercial processes, but consciously,

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[83] Ibid., 210.
[84] Keith Negus, "Authorship and the Popular Song," *Music & Letters* 92 (November 2011): 612.
[85] Lisa Lewis, *Gender Politics and MTV: Voicing the Difference*, 29.

within them."[86] Label spokespeople can now speak for the true value of music, and artists can express gratitude for their label's access to a larger audience, as long as the relationships described above are maintained, or at least advertised.

Naturally, such compositional expectations lead to what Keith Negus describes as "a valuing of the performer who creates his or her own material…authenticated as a form of direct expression, rather than a performer who provides an interpretation or rendition of a song."[87] Will Straw notes that the influence of the electronic microphone encouraged the development of unique performing personalities, which suggested the uniqueness of a recording and associated the song with the voice that dominates the record. In turn, "the difference between singing and songwriting has come to feel like an uncomfortable difference, the sign of a potential incompleteness in artistic expression."[88] Incorporating Moore's and Negus's arguments, the voice should be that of the creator, and the creator should have a close relationship to the creation.

The album version of Gray's "Babylon" (see Table 5.2 below) suggests this closeness in part through both musical and lyrical suggestions that this composition and its production operated on a relatively small scale. The arrangement throughout most of the song is minimal, with a distinctive acoustic guitar figure appearing throughout. Electronic instruments, piano, bass, and drums fill out the texture at various points, creating timbral variety, mirroring the overall message of the lyrics, and further articulating the form.

[86] Moore, 213.
[87] Keith Negus, "Authorship and the Popular Song," 610.
[88] Will Straw, "Authorship," in *Key Terms in Popular Music and Culture*, ed. Bruce Horner and Thomas Swiss (Malden, MA, 1999), 201-202.

Table 5.2: David Gray, "Babylon," Album Version 1998[89]

Introduction :00 – :16	
Verse 1 :17 – :55	Friday night I'm going nowhere All the lights are changing green to red Turning over TV stations Situations running through my head Well looking back through time You know it's clear that I've been blind I've been a fool To open up my heart To all that jealousy, that bitterness, that ridicule
Verse 2 :56 – 1:29	Saturday I'm running wild And all the lights are changing red to green Moving through the crowd I'm pushing Chemicals all rushing through my bloodstream Only wish that you were here You know I'm seeing it so clear I've been afraid To show you how I really feel Admit to some of those bad mistakes I've made
Pre-Chorus 1 1:30 – 1:46	If you want it Come and get it Crying out loud The love that I was Giving you was Never in doubt
Chorus 1 1:47 – 2:06	Let go your heart Let go your head And feel it now Let go your heart Let go your head And feel it now
Re-Intro/Chorus 1 2:07 – 2:22	Babylon, Babylon, Babylon

[89] David Gray, "Babylon," track two on *White Ladder*, ATO Records, 2000, compact disc.All discussion of this song references this recording and album liner notes.

Table 5.2: David Gray, "Babylon," Album Version 1998, Continued

Verse 3 2:23 – 2:56	Sunday all the lights of London shining Sky is fading red to blue I'm kicking through the Autumn leaves And wondering where it is you might be going to Turning back for home You know I'm feeling so alone I can't believe Climbing on the stair I turn around to see you smiling there In front of me
Pre-Chorus 2 2:57 – 3:14	If you want it Come and get it For crying out loud The love that I was Giving you was Never in doubt
Chorus 2 3:15 – 3:51	Let go your heart Let go your head And feel it now Let go your heart Let go your head And feel it now Let go your heart Let go your head And feel it now Let go your heart Let go your head And feel it now
Re-Intro/Chorus 2 3:52 – 4:14	Babylon, Babylon, Babylon, Babylon, Babylon My, oh my
Outro 4:15 – 4:26	

The song starts with acoustic guitar (basic outline in Figure 5.9 below) and electronic percussive elements. In the second phrase (at :09), chordal drag triplets begin in piano, performed with an echo effect such that the first of each triplet is the loudest and the volume decreases until the next triplet.

Figure 5.9: “Babylon,” Guitar Figure Outline

This arrangement continues in the first verse until 0:34, when Gray sings the fourth line “Looking back through time.” At 0:51, a transitional segment begins, articulated by another echo figure – but this time electronic and reminiscent of an electric guitar. The acoustic guitar figure is absent while the listener attempts to predict what will follow. The backing track for the US and UK “Babylon” videos places chorus 1 after verse 1, and both the US and UK album versions of the song maintain Gray’s original form, in which verse 2 directly follows verse 1. This allows the song to build both musically and lyrically before reaching the first chorus. Verse 2 begins with the addition of more percussive elements, some electronic and some acoustic.

The melodically active bass that began in verse 1 continues until pre-chorus 1. At this point, most of the accompaniment, including increased drum set, emphasizes the slower harmonic rhythm of one chord per measure (versus two previously) by emphasizing beat one in 4/4 time with longer notes, accented playing. Though the bass provides rhythmic activity, the double bass and piano only play only on beat one. The piano allows the sound to dissipate until the next measure (and chord change). These metrical accents are countered by syncopated figures in acoustic guitar.

Chorus 1 maintains this arrangement, except for the addition of synthesized strings placed far back in the stereo field. In these two preceding sections, the vocals overwhelmingly become the liveliest component of the arrangement. Since many listeners focus on the lyrics of the pre-chorus and chorus, this seems a wise choice.

This accompanimental simplification also creates more variety in the arrangement while articulating formal sections.

After the first chorus, the accompaniment returns to introductory material as Gray sings “Babylon” three times. This further exposes the vocals at a point when Gray repeats the song’s title. The setting replicates the elements of verse 2 and chorus 1, only adding more prominent synthesized strings at the end of line six of chorus 2 (rather than line three as in chorus 1), at 3:33. During the second re-intro, as Gray sings “Babylon” six times instead of the three in the first re-intro, the arrangement begins to slowly wind down. For an audience friendly to pop singer-songwriters, familiar elements combined with the novelty of the electronic instruments. For those who normally reject such music as too commercial, the song’s arrangement veered far enough from undesirable pop genre conventions with the use of electronic instruments for “Babylon” to come across as artistically conceived and realized.

The latter was possible because, along with elements of the album’s production and promotion, and its unlikely success, the circumstances of the album’s production were also repeatedly explicated. To start with, some publications noted that *White Ladder* was produced for only $5,000,[90] and that the recording and mixing of much of the material in took place in Gray’s bedroom.[91] In his interview with Charlie Rose, we learn that, with this album, Gray realized that he needed to change his approach to engage a

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[90] Gaby Alter, “David Gray,” *Mix: Professional Audio and Music Production*, September 1, 2001, https://www.mixonline.com/recording/david-gray-375552 (accessed April 17, 2019).
[91] Jason Fine, “A Brighter Shade of Gray,” *Rolling Stone*, May 2, 2001, p. 53; Adam Howorth, “Gray Begins New Chapter with ‘New Day,’” *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, November 2, 2002, 12.

larger audience. As he says, "I'd become a bit claustrophobic with my singer-songwriter lonesome guitar in the bedroom thing. So I got my drummer, Clune [Craig McClune], and we started to work with technology, I suppose."[92] In another interview, Gray states that he "'got involved with Clune in a more sort of writing, collaborative way.'"[93] Clune's musical ideas began to shape Gray's writing, and he "began writing pieces around Clune's rhythm tracks and bass lines, or sounds he found on the Groovebox, rather than the more conventional method of starting with a melody or chords."[94]

This organic use of "computers, samples, beats"[95] significantly shaped the production process. A 2002 interview with *Rolling Stone* illustrates the importance of these electronic elements. Writer Jason Fine describes how another song on the album, "'Please Forgive Me' started as a straightforward piano ballad…but Clune…suggested a drum-and-bass-style beat. The song – and Gray's approach to recording – was transformed."[96] Gray and McClune, along with Iestyn Polson, produced the majority of the record.

When producer Iestyn Polson joined the project, he utilized a similar approach to that of Gray and McClune. In a 2001 profile, Polson states the importance of "retain[ing] a human and organic feel, despite the sequencing of the rhythm tracks.'"[97] The profile

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[92] David Gray, *Charlie Rose*, interviewed by Charlie Rose, November 30, 2000, https://charlierose.com/videos/9473 (accessed April 4, 2019).
[93] Gaby Alter, "David Gray," *Mix: Professional Audio and Music Production*, September 1, 2001, https://www.mixonline.com/recording/david-gray-375552 (accessed April 17, 2019).
[94] Ibid. a groovebox is an instrument that allows a user to create musical sequences with pre-programmed sounds, such as that from a synthesizer; McClune also played bass on the record.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Jason Fine, "A Brighter Shade of Gray," *Rolling Stone*, May 2, 2001, p. 52.
[97] Music180, "Iestyn Polson," music180.com, September 9, 2001, music180.com/pros/

describes the tedious process of creating tracks that would complement the songs as follows: "the samples Polson laid down for Gray to play over were minutely constructed using a program called Recycle, which allowed Polson to quantize grooves from multiple sources, recombine them, and observe how his collaborator's performance responded to various feels."[98] This collaborative process between songwriters and producers blurs the line between the two roles – McClune and Polson's work was significant enough to garner songwriting credits on three songs on the album. This signals a change in attitudes on what Ron Moy describes as the technological influence in the composition and recording processes.[99] Perceptions of sampling and the overall use of electronic instruments have come to allow greater acceptance of obvious electronic intervention in a recording. The popularity and critical acceptance of musical genres such as rap that explicitly utilize technological resources in composition and production have facilitated this change, with the result that producers much more commonly hold equal (or sometimes greater) stature as authors in relation to the recording artist(s).[100]

However, given the importance still granted to the individual author, it comes as little surprise that a singular songwriter or producer sometimes informs descriptions of composition and recording (especially in music criticism), even though others, such as the engineer, may also contribute significantly to a work.[101] A great deal of mass-mediated music is created through a complex, fluid process that many listeners, even

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3203, which is now available via https://web.archive.org/web/20120921031851/http://music180.com/pros/3203 [accessed April 16, 2019].
[98] Ibid.
[99] Ron Moy, *Authorship Roles in Popular Music: Issues and Debates* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 117.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Ron Moy, *Authorship Roles in Popular Music: Issues and Debates*, 91

those who consider themselves connoisseurs, do not understand – and in some cases, assigning credit for individual elements may be difficult given the nature of the process.[102] Case in point: much of the press for this album discusses Gray's role as songwriter, with McClune rarely mentioned and Polson relegated to the role of producer. This reinforces Gray's identity as the "star" and re-inscribes Keith Negus's theory of the Romantic in popular music. In addition, the documents that elaborate on these roles seem targeted to those seeking specific information on production. (In some cases, the information in these pieces, including those cited here, requires some expertise to understand.)

This song analysis would be lacking without some discussion of both David Gray's voice and lyrics. Regarding the former, Gray's raw vocal timbre and sincere performance adds to the more organic-sounding elements in the recording. They also help to further identify "Babylon" with Gray, since the vocals are placed so prominently in the mix and, of course, also communicate the song's first-person lyrics.

The lyrics (provided in Table 5.2 above) suggest an overall positive message by combining reflective statements about lost opportunity with descriptions of carefree behavior. Gray's use of the term "Babylon" references the latter, since Babylon has been frequently referenced as a symbol of excess. Moving from Friday to Sunday, Gray sings about feeling frustrated by his mistakes, coming alive in the city with "chemicals all rushing through [his] bloodstream" yet missing his lover, and then seeing her "smiling there in front of [him]." In the verses, the vivid descriptions of the urban scene that dominates both videos suggest an environment of overindulgence. It is important to note

[102] Ibid.

that Gray is moving through public space without having to call attention to it, as women have sometimes needed to. When Gray sings, "I'm kicking through the Autumn leaves," many listeners could recall a similar experience, and perhaps also consider other relevant elements from personal memory. On the other hand, the pre-chorus and chorus text seems dominated by of clichés: "If you want it / Come and get it," and "Let go your heart / Let go your head," suggest a familiarity that is disjunct with the more inspired material in the verses, even as they encourage a pleasure-seeking approach to love and life.[103]

In all, the lyrics for "Babylon" are reflective yet unassuming, as they seem designed to capture a distinctive yet relatable mood with accessible vocabulary. Though the videos suggest more specific scenarios, the narrative and its details are somewhat ambiguous, an ideal quality for reaching a more diverse audience and for bringing that audience pleasure. As Frith writes, "the best records (the ones that give the most pleasure) are the ones that allow an ambiguity of response, letting us be both subject and object of the singers' needs."[104] The unique, yet highly strophic setting bolsters lyrics of uneven quality, and the vocals convey a sense of investment and spontaneity.

Lori Burns, in her discussion of songwriting and interpretation, describes this quality as the "multivoiced nature of the popular song text."[105] To depart from analyses that assume a songwriter is somewhat directly conveying personal experience, Burns

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[103] The first two lines cited in this sentence may also serve as a Badfinger reference from their 1970 release "Come and Get It."
[104] Simon Frith, *Music for Pleasure*: *Essays in the Sociology of Pop* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 167.
[105] Lori Burns, "Vocal Authority and Listener Engagement: Musical and Narrative Expressive Strategies in the Songs of Female Pop-Rock Artists," in *Sounding Out Pop: Analytical Essays in Popular Music* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 154.

adopts an analytical model that places a “real author” and “real listener” between several layers, including what the author and reader assume about one another, about the characters, places, and other elements in the lyrics, and about the means of recording.[106] This method is especially appropriate for the female artists whose work is analyzed in her chapter, since some have assumed that women write only about (and for) themselves or other women, thus making their work less relevant to a broader audience.

Artists like Gray invite an assumption of a more comprehensive (not just male-oriented) identification. In part, this is because he is male (more about that in the next section), but the press surrounding him created a clear and appealing public image, so that the musical setting and his lyrics allow the listener to envision both Gray as the “implied author” and themselves as experiencing the events in the song by proxy. Knowing that Gray struggled for commercial success as he wrote “Babylon” gives greater credence to his work, and his songwriting credits (and likely his vocal timbre for some listeners) facilitated Van Morrison comparisons and conclusions about how Gray’s authorial role reflects on the music’s quality. This applies to the arrangement, which he did not conceive or execute on his own, and the lyrics.

Objectively, the utility of ambiguity and effective image construction can be demonstrated with the crossover of “Babylon” to multiple radio formats. As demonstrated in Figure 5.10 below, starting in Triple A (Adult Album Alternative), the song eventually moved to other charts (and other audience groups). This supports a statement made by former senior VP of artist development/creative services for RCA

[106] Ibid., 161.

Hugh Surrat: the song dispersed to "modern adult, hot AC, modern rock, and top 40."[107] The figure below is not exactly to scale, but it does approximate chart dates and positions (out of the total number of slots for that chart) at entry, peak, and last week. Providing this information helps to illustrate the success of "Babylon," since on some charts the song demonstrates considerable longevity, but on others it appears in a lower place on the chart, and the overlap between charts is considerable. For instance, in late December of 2000, this song charted on Triple A, Adult Top 40, Hot 100, Alternative Songs, and Mainstream Top 40, but popularity varied among formats such that at no point in this period did the song reach higher than #8 on any chart.

Figure 5.10: "Babylon" Chart Details[108]

	June '00	December '00	April '01
Triple A	6/17 | 20/20	9/9 | 1	4/1 | 18
Adult Top 40	10/14 | 33/40	2/17 | 8	4/7 | 21
Hot 100	12/2 | 73/100	2/10 | 57	3/31 | 97
Alternative Songs	12/2 | 40/40	1/6 | 25	2/24 | 36
Mainstream Top 40	12/23 | 40/40	1/27 | 36	2/10 | 37
Adult Contemporary	3/3 | 28	3/24 | 26	4/7 | 27

[107] Carla Hay, "Hit Single Helps David Gray Raise 'White Ladder' on ATO," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*.
[108] "David Gray Chart History," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, https://www.billboard.com/music/david-gray [accessed April 3, 2019].

Surrat's words are again relevant: "This record goes beyond any formatted restrictions, radio-wise and video-wise. It crosses boundaries."[109] This reflects both previous statements about the song's adaptability, while also broaching the issue of how crossover applies specifically to the logic of radio programming.

On this topic, Gabriel Rossman writes that a song is usually played first on a format that fits the genre best but becomes most successful through airplay on multiple formats. To move a song to a station type that is a less obvious fit, it could be remixed. A promotional disc containing recordings of two mixes of "Babylon" demonstrate that this method was used to expand the listenership and increase longevity of airplay for this song. The first version, labeled "Radio Mix One," is essentially the same as that utilized in both of the music videos, while the second radio mix features a more elaborate introduction that includes distorted background vocals and an iteration of the first line of the pre-chorus.[110] Only the album version of "Babylon" includes verse three.[111] The music's potential for broad musical appeal, combined with remixing, marketing, and the efforts of industry radio promoters, helped this song play on more formats, reaching a larger audience, by playing regularly on more stations for a longer period of time before reaching a saturation point.[112] Figure 5.10 above demonstrates just how long, and how broadly, "Babylon" played with significant frequency on several U.S. radio formats.

The strategies described thus far were used to expand the reach and influence of both the music and the man credited with its creation to get the most out of both while

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[109] Carla Hay, "Hit Single Helps David Gray Raise 'White Ladder' on ATO," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*.
[110] David Gray, "'Babylon' Promotional Disc."
[111] David Gray, "Babylon" track two on *White Ladder*.
[112] Gabriel Rossman, "But Which Chart Do You Climb?" 77-78.

public opinion was favorable. In 2001, while the tour promoting *White Ladder* was still in progress, the Caroline/Astralwerks label released Gray's first two albums, along with a collection of early singles. Though grateful that his earlier work was being rereleased, he still spoke with some skepticism about these rereleases: "I think the record industry just thinks [that] this is it. This is the moment. It's all going to evaporate very quickly."[113] This would not be the first time a label released records to ride what they assumed would be a wave of temporary success by an artist. As with the Beatles, though not to the same degree, new fans of David Gray bought these records in part because of name recognition. According to a record store owner, "I think the people who bought *Sell Sell Sell* this past year bought it without even [hearing it first]. They bought it just because it was David Gray."[114]

Paul Théberge describes the process by which some technologies, such as those used in *White Ladder*, have been "isolated" by singling them out, usually as artificial and associated with low aesthetic worth. Other technologies, such as those used to amplify an electric guitar, process vocals, or project sound in a live performance become "transparent."[115] In much popular music discourse, such details about the latter elements have been left out, while music incorporating electronic instruments is identified by this process – hence the frequent mention of production details for *White Ladder* written as though these elements define the album, and the threat of their incorporation to "real

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[113] Wes Orshoski, "Astralwerks Satisfies Demand with David Gray *Reissues," Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, June 16, 2001, 10-11. Insertion in original.
[114]Ibid., 11. Insertion in original.
[115] Paul Théberge, "Technology," in *Key Terms in Popular Music and Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), 211.

instruments" has been neutralized.[116] This includes all the technology utilized for the band's live performances, and the "live" studio performances – the latter of which resulted in quality sound because the band was not playing in the same room but in "iso booths" that allowed for the separation of select instruments during the "'live-on-the-floor'" recording.[117] Théberge writes that, "while there appears to be some public awareness of the intimate role played by technology in the production and reception of music, it is seldom articulated in any clear or systematic manner."[118] The music criticism published for David Gray and BNL in the late 1990s reflects this – Gray had to explain the production of *White Ladder* several times.[119]

These differing approaches to crafting a public image suggested productive ways to view Gray, which in turn encouraged radio format crossover and album sales of both contemporary and earlier work. Authentication allowed some fans to embrace this artist because he conveyed a genuine relationship to his music, his performances, and his fans, and an ambiguous relationship with the forces that helped generate their popularity. Regardless of these methods and their effects, authenticity remains a controversial topic: some avert conflict and generalizations by avoiding explicit use of the term, while on the other end of the spectrum (in some music criticism, for instance) the word enables un-self-conscious aesthetic judgements that re-inscribe seemingly tired assumptions. Because humans constantly determine who or what belongs and deserves praise in various contexts, determinations of authenticity in popular music are unavoidable. The

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[116] Ibid.
[117] Paul Myers, "Barenaked Ladies: Showing Growth with 'Stunt.'"
[118] Paul Théberge, "Technology," in *Key Terms in Popular Music and Culture*, 211.
[119] Zach Schonfeld, "Barenaked Ladies on 20 Years of *Stunt* and Why They Stopped Recording Songs Naked," *Newsweek Magazine*.

authentication process has led to some artists receiving admiration, while others are ignored or used to facilitate negative comparisons. Great damage can come from not realizing (or acknowledging) why and how these judgements are formed. Unexamined assumptions can lead to some music being labeled as more "real" because it was written after a period of struggle, because the songs seem personally relevant to the artist or perhaps explicitly irreverent, because the technological resources utilized have become transparent to the public and to critics. In some cases, an artist's gender significantly shapes reception by influencing conclusions about an artist's capabilities and the universality of their work. The next section will discuss the significance of gender in how David Gray was marketed and critically evaluated as a valid composer and performer, even as he succeeded among a pop-friendly audience less concerned with the "cool" than the "comfy."

The Gender of Authentication. Or, His Truth is Our Truth.

The previous chapter details how some artists articulated the "angry young man" persona in different ways. Whether outright anger, condescension, or more nuanced musings, the situations described and stories told hinted at the challenge facing some men in the mid-to-late 1990s as they navigated the changing landscape. In different ways, the male artists convey a sense of crisis for men in this period.

Susan Faludi comments on this situation, writing that a larger change in American society, one that subsumed economic changes and the advent of second-wave feminism, took place beginning in the mid-20th century: the shift from a "utilitarian world" to an "ornamental" one. This change produced a "culture that encourages people to play almost

no functional public roles, only decorative or consumer ones."[120] Such a lack of purpose and agency affects everyone to some degree, but for men, Faludi, writes, qualities of usefulness in public life, purpose, and confidence have been replaced by superficial displays of manhood – ornamental culture "has left men with little other territory on which to prove themselves besides vanity."[121]

Economic change has diminished many of the traditional avenues through which men can exercise their role as nurturers and providers for both their families and for their country: the transition from industry to service, and an overall lack of agency in public life weakened social sources of traditional masculine empowerment, which were largely replaced with "market-battered 'individuality.'"[122] In this vision of contemporary America, self-worth is purchased and shown, not earned, felt, and known.

Faludi describes the "nineties man" as "stripped of connections to a wider world and invited to fill the void with consumption and a gym-bred display of his ultra-masculinity."[123] She describes men who cannot let go of outmoded ideals of masculinity and struggle in varying ways as a result – sometimes by cultivating vanity but in other cases by grasping to assert privilege or control through means that inspired the term "toxic masculinity."[124] This vision describes to some extent the reception of songs like "Push," since many assumed the song was about an abusive man, as well as the message of "Everything You Want," which conveys the resentfulness and cynicism of

[120] Susan Faludi, "The Son, the Moon, and the Stars: The Promise of Postwar Manhood," in *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*, 34-35,
[121] Ibid.
[122] Ibid., 38-39.
[123] Ibid.,
[124] Ibid., 8-9, 42.

disenchanted white male youth. This chapter features artists and material that suggests another approach to modern masculinity, one that incorporates signifiers of rock's canonized heroes while incorporating more reflective or playful approaches to live performance, songwriting, and production.

Aside from the frequent references to authenticating factors such as live performance, personal investment, and similarity to proven artists such as Bob Dylan and Van Morrison, these late 90s/early 2000s artists convey vulnerability in ways that suggest an alternative masculinity, one that avoids the denigrated female-focused approach of Michael Bolton and situates them publicly as auteurs, not pop shills. However, music scholar Ian Biddle suggests that this approach functions not as a "radical reconfiguration of gender norms," "the articulation of a mode of expressivity attributable to women," but as a reassertion of an "old and conservative gender ideology."[125] This approach to songwriting and performance, most commonly utilized by white male artists (although there are some interesting exceptions among some black artists), fits into a context similar to what Faludi describes. Men like Gray operate in an environment in which traditional modes of expressing masculinity – through the "Fordist projection of masculinity, which linked collective labor and fraternal working patterns with 'being a man'" – are less economically available and less socially significant. As a result, "men have to work harder to find the cultural materials that adequately represent their gender."[126] Biddle proposes that, for men (white men in this case) to symbolically

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[125] Ian Biddle, "The Singsong of Undead Labor:' Gender Nostalgia and the Vocal Fantasy of Intimacy in the 'New' Male Singer/Songwriter," in *Oh Boy! Masculinities and Popular Music*, 142.
[126] Ibid., 128-129

replace this model of masculinity in popular music, male singer-songwriters work to create superficial imagery while finding new means of domination. They approach singer/songwriter duality, premeditated performing conventions, and the complex recording and promotion process in ways that disguise the division of labor and specialization inherent in the production and performance context when possible. When this is impossible, they legitimize these elements as deliberate artistic choices. Either way, industry affiliations are neutralized.

In part, the goal of this is to "[avoid] the *overt* display of hegemonic masculinity," by emphasizing intimacy and authenticity.[127] This helps to suggest that the music is truthful because it comes into being without excessive mediation, exaggerated expression, or unnecessary flair. This masculinity appears both effortless and seasoned, conveying "important" musical and lyrical messages with the help of naturalized technological means. This process helps to craft a "restaging of traditional masculinity by seeming to be something else."[128]

This "restaging" can be found in the way the press encouraged authentication for Gray – by using vocabulary and comparisons long available for male artists but typically lacking in appraisals of female musicians. Marion Leonard notes that "it is commonplace for journalists to describe the music of female artists by referencing only other female acts,"[129] as though only female artists produce comparable work. Their lyrics have often been interpreted as direct reflections of their own experience, or most meaningful to those

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[127] Bid., 129-133. Emphasis in original.
[128] Ibid., 133-135.
[129] Marion Leonard, "Rock and Masculinity," in *Gender in the Music Industry: Rock, Discourse, and Girl Power*, 36.

with very similar life experiences, rather than suggesting the varied interpretations Lori Burns describes (that seem most valid given the variety of female lived experiences). Leonard confirms that the male-dominated rock canon facilitates comparing men to other male artists, and then including them in the canon.[130]

Gray received his approval via musical associations that have been inseparable from the male gender, while female artists have been, at best, marginalized by notions of an isolated femininity that only other women can appreciate. At worst, their gender trivializes them (and their audience). Thus, we get a "new man" who conveys vulnerability while encouraging the critical approval bestowed upon those who seem to communicate "universal" human perceptions. *Female* singer-songwriters and performers, and men whose music attracts a majority female listenership, describe women's trivial problems for trivial women. *Male* single-songwriters (if their gender is noted at all), speak eloquently for us all with rational vulnerability, thus reinstating the invisibility of the male gender, and reasserting dominance over the public sphere.[131] In short, these men seem to suggest a true alternative masculinity, when they are in fact reasserting their dominance by adapting some feminine-coded modes of musical communication to a male-oriented discourse that is implicitly recognized as such by music critics and many

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[130] Ibid., 29.

[131] Ian Biddle, "The Singsong of Undead Labor:' Gender Nostalgia and the Vocal Fantasy of Intimacy in the 'New' Male Singer/Songwriter," 128-129; Judith Butler describes this in *Gender Trouble*, noting that some scholars, "including [Simone de Beauvoir], would argue that only the feminine gender is marked, that the universal person and the masculine gender are conflated , thereby defining women in terms of their sex and extolling men as the bearers of a body-transcendent universal personhood." Judith Butler, "Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire," in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 13.

fans. Such behavior changes the code of masculinity (the set of practices that allow one to perform this socially-constructed gender) by incorporating compositional and performative mannerisms typically associated with females without inherently demonstrating that these male artists have been emasculated.[132] This argument recalls Susan McClary's writing on the association between constructions of gender and musical conventions. She writes that "the codes marking gender difference in music are informed by the prevalent attitudes of their time. But they also themselves participate in social formation, inasmuch as individuals learn how to be gendered beings through their interactions with cultural discourses such as music."[133] Some male singer-songwriters have adjusted to a different social and economic environment, just as listeners have changed their views of appropriate masculine expressivity upon accepting an updated encoding of masculinity. Biddle's interpretation may be extreme for some male artists, but even if Gray did not consciously engage gender norms in this manner, critics, music industry personnel, and listeners interpreted the manipulation of feminine-coded modes of communication with the result that he describes: yet again, men represent us all, and they are disproportionately entered into the canon.

These are potential means through which male artists can assert their discursive power in the ornamental culture Faludi describes (or "post-Fordist," according to Biddle). Critics exploit this approach, helping to validate these musicians in the press. Critical

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[132] In particular, these male artists adapt expressions of vulnerability and intimacy in ways that avoid dramatic display that has been criticized for a lack of restraint. This strategy can inspire a sense of immediacy that obscures the connection between the artist, conventions of staging and recording, and the role of the music industry.
[133] Susan McClary, "Introduction," in *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, & Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 7-8.

validation has been discussed in this chapter, as well as in Chapter Three (for Wilson Phillips in particular). Chapter One discusses how critics often dismissed or ignored Michael Bolton because his musical code failed to convey sincere masculine vulnerability and loyalty to rock's male orientation – at least to critics steeped in heavy metal's ultra-masculinity. Scholar and music critic Kembrew McLeod discusses this bias in "'★1/2': A Critique of Rock Criticism in North America," writing that the "'ideology of rock criticism'…valorizes serious, masculine 'authentic' rock and dismisses trivial, feminine, 'prefabricated' pop music."[134] Pop serves as the feminine, "inauthentic foil" for "authentic" rock – a necessary strategy for music that has been subject to the same commercial pressures that apparently delegitimize other genres.[135] McLeod describes this as "*how* a culture in danger of assimilation actively attempts to preserve its identity," the result of facing "the contradiction of being inside a mainstream culture that they define themselves against."[136]

All this posturing takes place despite the chart data that indicates that Gray's music was popular among such a broad audience that many fans were not approaching their music consumption as an expression of taste as a morally centered choice between good music and commercial pop. He did not serve as an example of the rebellious yet popular singer-songwriter for everyone. Many listeners surely appreciated the romantically centered lyrics, novel production and performing approaches, and approachable public persona of David Gray. The music helped them feel comfort, joy, or

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[134] Kembrew McLeod, "'★1/2': A Critique of Rock Criticism in North America," *Popular Music* 20 (2001): 47.
[135] Ibid., 49-50; See also conclusion of chapter 1.
[136] Ibid., 51. Emphasis in original.

catharsis, primarily fulfilling these functions rather than shaping their identities through the expression of superior taste. Given the different objectives of these two (somewhat abstract) groups, the fact that they sometimes listen to the same music is surprising. It may be the case that some listeners are so engaged with material targeted toward them that they don't realize its broader reach. Perhaps when segmentation is less isolating, some individuals believe that they like an artist for the "right" reasons, while assuming that other fans lack the competence to cultivate such aesthetic judgement.

In either case, the practice that Frith describes as "creating a knowing community, orchestrating a collusion between selected musicians and an equally select part of the public – select in it superiority to the ordinary, undiscriminating pop consumer"[137] is part of a larger strategy, labeled "hip consumerism" by Thomas Frank. In *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*, Frank describes how the counterculture became commodified, channeling political energy into consumer choice. For contemporary consumers, Frank writes that "the entire 'Generation X' discourse repeated – almost mechanically and without the slightest inkling that it was doing so" the youth marketing campaigns of the sixties.[138] Echoing Faludi's observations about the lack of real agency in public life, and the replacement of measurable public agency with superficial substitutes, Frank writes that "in our consuming lives we are no longer merely affluent, we are *rebels*."[139]

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137 Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 67.
138 Thomas Frank, "Hip as Official Capitalist Style," in *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*, 233.
139 Thomas Frank, "Hip as Official Capitalist Style," 232. Emphasis in original.

The effectiveness of this strategy relies on the importance of individuality in modern life. Timothy Taylor describes individual identity as a recent development, as opposed to national or ethnic associations. The exaggerated focus on the individual pairs with an increasingly segmented marketplace that identifies individual consumption choices as a form of personal expression that allows people to define themselves by their own purchases, and by how their choices differ from those of others.[140] While Lizabeth Cohen notes that "segments existed in society prior to being 'discovered' by marketers,"[141] the use of segmentation exacerbated differences between (and within) these groups.[142] By the time David Gray acquired fame, these marketing practices were firmly entrenched, and so were the identity politics associated with them. Taylor writes that "the consumption of music is part of this project of identity construction," which favors extreme individualism – the idea that no two people are alike, and that these differences, and the expression of them, define the worth of each person.[143]

Taylor also discusses the flexibility of individual identity in the postmodern world, writing that "one consumes goods to make oneself; one even consumes other modes of selfhood to make oneself as a way of demonstrating one's agential selfhood to oneself and others." Cultivating appropriate tastes and demonstrating some degree of mobility in terms of identity suggests a sense of cultural competence, of savvy, and of being able to incorporate relevant influences in one's behavior or explicit taste when the

[140] Timothy D. Taylor, *Music and Capitalism: A History of the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 66-67.
[141] Lizabeth Cohen, "Segmenting the Mass," in *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, 308.
[142] Ibid., 309.
[143] Timothy D. Taylor, "Hip as Official Capitalist Style," 67.

social environment, or personal priorities, change. To demonstrate these qualities is to demonstrate "cool."

Referencing Pierre Bourdieu's "The Forms of Capital," Carl Wilson writes that "[c]ool confers status – symbolic power. It incorporates both cultural capital and social capital, and it's a clear route to economic capital."[144] The individual with cool status can convey cultural understanding, social connections, and perhaps utilize these to improve one's economic status.[145] On cultural capital as it relates to the embodied state in the form of culture and embodied practices, Bourdieu writes that because the social condition of its transmission and acquisition [of cultural capital] are more disguised that those of economic capital, it is predisposed to function as symbolic capital, i.e., to be unrecognized as capital and recognized as legitimate competence…"[146] This type of capital comes from capability to perform functions that are, or are made to seem, rare and valuable. In its objectified state, cultural capital incorporates material objects that possess value. By demonstrating relevant skills and the possession of relevant materials, a consumer can claim a valuable position.[147] That is, they feel, and appear to embody, cool – and cool is a demonstration of cultural capital.[148]

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[144] Carl Wilson, *Let's Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste*, 93.
[145] Ibid., 91.
[146] Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory of Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. J.E. Richardson, trans. Richard Nice (Greenwood Press, 1986), 49.
[147] Ibid., 49-50.
[148] If "cool" is a type of cultural capital, then contrary to Wilson's observation that this quality is symbolic capital, "cool" is not symbolic.

These theories suggest that when a consumer purchases an album that has garnered critical praise, praises that work himself, and makes these conditions known, he has acquired cultural capital because of these choices – choices, in this case, that generate this perception because of the genre of the music, the gender of the performer, the work of music critics, and the significance of these activities to the increasingly important understanding and expression of individual identity.

As much as this argument suggests a society full of unwitting citizens who are manipulated by heartless corporate operatives, it also hints at the complexity of postmodern identity formation. Frith writes that "popular culture describes the process in which class and other group values and conflicts are *mediated* (rather than directly expressed), which is one reason why popular commodities…can be and often are simultaneously "transgressive" (of "respectable" values) and reactionary."[149] This recalls the previous discussion of male singer-songwriters appropriating feminine-coded modes of communication to reassert dominance, as well as the negotiation between so-called gatekeepers (record industry personnel, music critics, musicians) and individual listeners. Addressing this subject, Tia DeNora writes that "at times, actors may engage in this appropriation process with deliberation, knowing how certain music is distributed and is thus inextricable from concerns about social control, from the matter of how a citizenry or a workforce is constituted, and from the issue of how desire may be manufactured."[150]

[149] Simon Frith, "The Sociological Response," in *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*, 35. Emphasis in original.
[150] Tia DeNora, "Music's Social Powers" in *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 162.

This perspective balances the responsibility for music's appeal between gatekeepers and the public, between what Leonard describes as a "commercial imperative" and "aesthetic judgements made by musicians and critics such as biographers, journalists, and historians, who are informed by, often tacitly agreed, notions of value taste, and worth"[151] on one hand, and "a listener [who] is active in making sense of [a] performance and may create a personal understanding of it that is at odds with the musician's original intention"[152] on the other. Individuals may not have much direct influence on which artists are signed by record companies or admitted to the canon,[153] but perhaps conclusions about personal perceptions should be less deterministic than Bourdieu, Faludi, and others suggest.

Kristin J. Lieb writes that "the way in which a brand (or a pop star) is presented to us in all its forms – through songs, videos, magazines, clothes, or fragrances – frames the way in which we see and experience it. But our own experiences and issues also provide a frame for how we make sense of such presentations."[154] This recalls how power of the press, the record industry, gender associations, and radio helped made David Gray cool, while also noting how the quality of multivocality makes some material and artists "cool" for some, and adds to a sense of personal superiority, while for others this music engendered feelings of comfort and fun. It seems that the right audiences found this music through the right channels, and it allowed them to use it in ways that suited them best.

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[151] Marion Leonard, "Rock and Masculinity," in *Gender in the Music Industry: Rock, Discourse, and Girl Power*, 27.
[152] Ibid., 28.
[153] Ibid, 27
[154] Kristin J. Lieb, *Gender, Branding, and the Popular Music Industry*, 24.

Conclusion

It may be the case that the most self-assured connoisseurs are the most unaware of the external manipulation of taste. Assuming their superiority by absorbing critics' opinions and purchasing the right records, they appropriate the music and images that grants them membership in the "knowing community" Frith describes. They do this to prove that they are above the machinations of the industry, unlike their pop-loving counterparts, but in fact their consumption choices, and their defense of them as morally determined, are in part the fruit of the music industry's labor. Perhaps those least ensnared are the irreverent listeners who tune into soft AC stations for the comfort they provide, or listen to David Gray because of the real-time resonance the listening experience provides. Perhaps these suggestions are just as biased as those that create "cool" and "uncool" categories in the first place, and they need to be examined just as carefully. As Sue Wise writes, "we must never take anything on trust, we must ask our own questions, seek out our own knowledge, and always look gift horses, in the form of other people's knowledge, firmly in the mouth."[155]

To paraphrase this chapter's introduction, these musicians' late 1990s releases performed well with alternative, mainstream, and adult-oriented audiences. They were rock, but not too rock, and cool, but more of a comfortable cool – perhaps the ideal combination to reach both the self-conscious connoisseur and the self-satiating consumer. This formulation of a "comfortable cool" category recalls arguments about cultural capital and individuality, about top-down formulations and ornamental culture, about

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[155] Sue Wise, "Sexing Elvis," in *On Record: Rock, Pop, and The Written Word*, ed. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (New York: Routledge, 1990), 397.

expressions of alternative and conservative masculinity, and of public will and complicity in their own manipulation. Perhaps it provides few answers, but the most important subjects for debate, the most prescient questions in private and public life, have no concrete answers, only challenges and transformation.

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CHAPTER SIX:
LOVE IN PUBLIC – GENDER, RACE, AND SENTIMENT IN THE “COLORBLIND” 1990s

Introduction

In an exploration of the music played on Adult Contemporary (AC) radio stations from the late 1980s to the late 1990s, this dissertation has discussed numerous topics, including Michael Bolton’s rock influences and pop image, Wilson Phillips’s nostalgia and messages of individualism, Ace of Base’s mid-1990s American reception, Matchbox Twenty’s ambiguous gender perspectives, and David Gray’s authenticated singer-songwriter image. If anything, the breadth of material covered demonstrates that AC has disseminated a broad range of material, not just that suggested by the stereotyped tastes of the white female Adult Contemporary demographic. The variety of material on AC (including its sub-formats hot AC, lite AC, etc.) calls into question the validity of using “Adult Contemporary” as a sort of genre label that describes music or any particular gender with similar stylistic qualities, contextual associations, and listeners. If songs appearing on Billboard’s Mainstream Rock chart also appear on the one for AC, some assumptions about connections between music and listeners must be false.

However, those often labeled as comprising much of the programming on AC stations (and appealing to the format’s ostensibly female target demographic) deserve inclusion in this project as well. While artists like Michael Bolton and Wilson Phillips fit into this category, the female singers commonly known as “divas” have been described as “adult-contemporary singers.” Coined by music writer William Ruhlmann, this phrase suggests a common musical style for these artists, which he finds lacking in good taste. For Whitney Houston and Mariah Carey in particular, he describes their performing

approach as "wildly oversing[ing], investing with gobs of undifferentiated emotional force lyrics that did not justify all that embellishment."[1] That both women were likely referencing African-American gospel singing in the music he describes seems not to have influenced Ruhlmann's conclusions.

Though the authoritative tone of this subjective statement may disguise (for some) the discomfort with the public expression of intense, typically private, emotions, it inflects many critics' judgements about these singers' contributions. The idea that Houston and Carey's music replicates tasteless clichés for indiscriminate listeners suggests a lack of stylistic sophistication and originality that people with bad taste support with their dollars and their hearts. It also suggests a lack of tolerance for some black musical performing practices, or at least ignorance of them, on the part of detractors. In a critical discourse that often conveys a privileged place for innovation and restraint (except for bluesmen), a seeming lack of these traits can doom even the best-executed and popular material to derision.

This chapter will explore the critical and scholarly discourse on divas through a focus on Houston and Carey by delving into issues of gender, marketing, race, sales and radio airplay, lyrical and musical content, and critical and scholarly reception as they relate to the Adult Contemporary format. Beginning with Houston's second album *Whitney*, released in 1985, and ending with comeback (after a public meltdown) and the emergence of the next generation of divas such as Christina Aguilera in 1999, these analyses suggest how these artists navigated a complicated and highly judgmental

[1] William Ruhlmann, "The 1990s: The Digital Revolution Begins," in *Breaking Records: 100 Years of Hits* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 196-197.

environment that either favored or criticized female artists' sexualization, alternately celebrated and disapproved of commercial success, and often highlighted personal flaws to the detriment of aesthetic assessment. That Houston and Carey achieved their strongest AC airplay earlier in their careers, before developing a more R&B or hip-hop-oriented style, indicates that race also significantly informed reception. In a period in which many Americans believed (or hoped) that gender and racial inequality had been left in the past, the music, marketing, and reception of these virtuosic singers suggests that the reality for women in music – black (or biracial) women in particular – was tainted with discrimination.

Gender Politics and Marketing in the Era of Divas

In one respect, this period at the end of the twentieth century can be labelled an era of divas, since so many virtuosic female vocalists, labelled divas like their operatic counterparts, achieved massive commercial success. Artists like Whitney Houston, Mariah Carey, and Céline Dion built a devoted following, as evidenced by chart placement and massive sales. Also demonstrating the appeal of these musicians, VH1 first aired its *Divas* program in 1998. This program showcased several women singers, and a few men, in a truthfully collaborative, but publicly competitive, taped live show.[2]

In terms of gender politics, the 1980s and 1990s was an era shaped to some extent by postmodern feminism, which ideally rejects universal truths and incorporates multiple perspectives. However, media scholar David Tetzlaff describes some factions of this

[2] IMDb, "Divas Live: An Honors Concert for VH1 Save the Music," imdb.com, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0500101/?ref_=nv_sr_1?ref_=nv_sr_1 [accessed September 3, 2019].

form of feminism as "compromised," functioning through "the displacement of one dominant discourse with another and the enlistment of the subjugated population in question."[3] Writing in the early 1990s, he finds that some feminist women, particularly those engaged in the workforce, tried to mobilize their role as sexual objects on the assumption that doing so might advance their success. The argument behind this practice suggests that capturing the male gaze is empowering because it helps women control men with their sexuality. Thus, they use the practices that have sustained the patriarchy to challenge it. Tetzlaff writes that this practice rests on the assumption that "sexual autonomy is a lost cause anyway and the female body is always already a token for male exchange, so we might as well try to get control of the transaction and attempt to get some cultural and economic independence out of the deal."[4]

This tactic requires women to perform the role of sex objects to achieve their goals. This can have the effect of reproducing the patriarchal expectation that women exist to please men, since this pleasure is often offered through physically attractive display and deferential behavior. Considering that men generally have not had to make such compromises, this approach likely does advance the cause of gender equality in a highly compromised sense. Postmodern feminism seems to sell women on the idea that sexual objectification is empowering to encourage support of the patriarchy through the belief that its repressive expectations can benefit individual women.

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[3] David Tetzlaff, "Metatextual Girl: → Patriarchy → Postmodernism → Power → Money → Madonna," in *The Madonna Connection: Representational Politics, Subcultural Identities, and Cultural Theory* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1993), 247, 255.
[4] Ibid., 254.

Nevertheless, this ideology appealed to women working in a social and political environment that denigrated feminism yet still required women to participate in the workforce (due to lower wages, widespread college education, and increasing divorce rates).[5] This sort of empowered objectification also informed both the representations of divas and their reception. On the one hand, Whitney Houston and Mariah Carey were offered as beautiful, sexualized personae performing the traditional female musical role – that of singer. On the other, in many cases this sexualized image is also aggressive, lyrics and musical performance indicate assertiveness and virtuosity, and both singers both controlled interpretations and production to a significant extent. This suggests more complicated reasoning for and consequences to these choices than previously discussed.

Houston's role is conveyed in letters from Clive Davis, then-head of Arista and her direct contact at the label, in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives. Davis functioned as a manager for Houston, suggesting recording material, critiquing production quality and mixes, and planning promotion, and to ensure commercial success. However, his writing indicates a collaborative process between label and artist. For example, in a letter from Davis to Houston, dated August 31, 1995, Davis suggests recording an R. Kelly song, while acknowledging Houston's reluctance to record material written by him.[6] An earlier letter, from 1987, conveys generous comments about her work ethic, and the quality of her second album. He writes, "I treasure you, your talent and our relationship and can only hope that you find it equally as satisfying and

[5] Ibid., 250.
[6] Correspondence from Clive Davis to Whitney Houston, August 31, 1995, ARC-0009, Box 1, Folder 1, Document 21, Rock and Hall of Fame Library and Archives, Cleveland, OH.

rewarding."[7] Lest this suggest that Davis merely placated a demanding diva, a letter to Houston from 1993 that critiques a cut of the "Run to You" promotional video suggests honest communication between the two. For example, when shots of Kevin Costner (co-star in *The Bodyguard*) had been taken out, and Davis wrote that he believed that the video lacked chemistry. He writes, "Basically, what concerns me is that this video edit was already approaching an ode to Whitney" and "we do run perilously close to overdoing it, and we have to be extremely careful."[8] These letters convey a relationship between two agential figures. Even though Houston did not function as a songwriter, she did control significant elements of her recording and promotion.

Regardless, Houston's marketing predictably capitalized on her good looks with strategically sexualized images. Those in Figure 6.1 below were included in the liner notes of the singer's second album, *Whitney*.

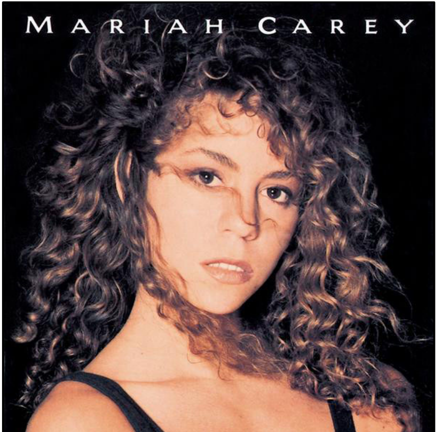
Figure 6.1: Album Images in *Whitney* Album Liner[9]

[7] Correspondence from Clive Davis to Whitney Houston, bcc E. Harvey, J. Houston, P. Marshall, April 21, 1987, ARC-0009, Box 1, Folder 1, Document 3, Rock and Hall of Fame Library and Archives, Cleveland, OH.
[8] Clive Davis Letters, May 28, 1993.Correspondence from Clive Davis to Whitney Houston, May 28, 1993, ARC-0009, Box 1, Folder 1, Document 19, Rock and Hall of Fame Library and Archives, Cleveland, OH.
[9] Discogs, "Whitney Houston: *Whitney* Images," discogs.com, https://www.discogs.com /Whitney-Houston-Whitney/release/523775 [accessed July 15, 2019].

The image on the left, from the front cover, offers a spontaneous-looking shot in which Houston, dressed in a white tank top, smiles at the camera, possibly while dancing. The image on the right, located in the liner notes interior, shows her gazing seductively at the camera. She wears a black satin dress that shows some cleavage and highlights her lean physique. Between these two images, we see the "girl next door" on the left and a refined young woman on the right. Her objectification is in turn playful and sophisticated, but still obvious enough to influence judgements of her public persona. Industry representatives (such as Houston's main point of contact Clive Davis) could have determined that the phenomenal vocal demonstrations on the album required a hint of sexualization to become marketable. In any case, Houston's looks were bound to be scrutinized and connected to her overall image as an artist, since women's bodies, regardless of subjective determinations of attractiveness, are always being judged.

While Houston's image maintained a balance the sexualized and the conservative, Mariah Carey's image evolved from subtly sexual to overt spectacle. Figure 6.2 below provides an example of the former with the front and back cover images from Carey's eponymous first album.

Figure 6.2: *Mariah Carey* Album Liner Images[10]



The image on the left, featured on the album's front cover, shows Carey looking at the camera with a sultry facial expression, mouth partially open, and windswept hair. Her direct gaze and serious appearance suggest an aura of maturity and even danger that contrasts with the more innocent persona portrayed by Houston on her front cover. The back cover shows her wearing a short, tight black dress that shows minimal cleavage. She mimics singing into an old-fashioned microphone, an image likely meant to suggest a connection to her skill as a vocalist. Like the cover of Houston's first album, these images are subtly sexualized (in relative terms). Such visual similarities in terms of marketing may have inspired comparisons between the two artists. They also recall comments made by producer Narada Michael Walden (who worked with both artists) and Tommy Mottola (head of Sony Music), about hopes that Carey would compete commercially with Houston.[11]

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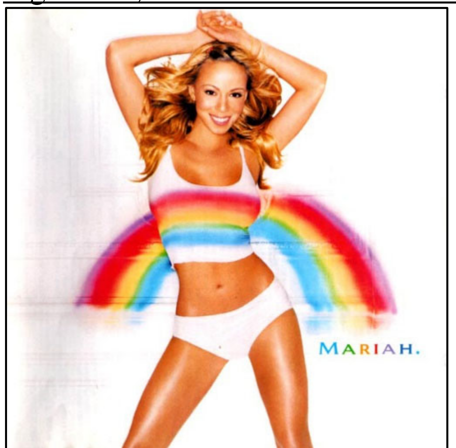
[10] Discogs, "Mariah Carey: *Mariah Carey* Images," discogs.com, https://www.discogs.com/artist/33534-Mariah-Carey [accessed July 15, 2019].

[11] Narada Michael Walden, *Whitney Houston: The Voice, the Music, the Insipration*, with Richard Buskin (San Rafael, CA: Insight Editions, 2012), 99; Tommy Mottola, *Hitmaker: The Man and His Music* with Cal Fussman (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2013), 185.

Carey's image transitioned to an explicitly sexualized one beginning with her 1997 album *Butterfly*. For 1999's *Rainbow*, her last album with Columbia Records, the contrast between these and her 1990 images is dramatic (see Figure 6.3 below).

Figure 6.3, *Rainbow* Album Liner Images[12]



The implications of these and Houston's images are varied, and one's conclusions depend on the horizon of expectations.[13] Portrayals of these women as sexual beings can be seen as positive, either because they mobilized sexuality to entice the public (including other heterosexual women), or because the recognition of women as sexual beings has

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[12] Discogs, "Mariah Carey: *Rainbow* Images," discogs.com https://www.discogs.com/Mariah-Carey-Rainbow/master/78855 [accessed July 15, 2019].

[13] Hans Robert Jauss, "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory," in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*," vol. II, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982, original 1970), 23.

been a goal of some second and third-wave feminists. A negative perspective on this objectification is articulated thoroughly by David Tetzlaff, who writes that controlling men with female sexuality doesn't exert much control at all. He acknowledges that "no meaningful gain comes without compromise, without cost. There is always some sort of trade-off involved" before concluding that "some deals are better than others."[14] From this perspective such public personae produce few beneficial social changes for women, even if sometimes these methods provide benefits for some individuals. Perhaps the ultimate achievement of empowered gender politics is being judged by one's capabilities outside of the physical. To this end, Carey's strategy may call her contributions into question: despite her role as a composer and producer (not to mention her vocal chops) are sometimes overshadowed by commentary on her public persona.

Take as an example commentary written by Mim Udovitch in the 1998 *Rolling Stone* article "Mariah Carey: An Unmarried Woman:" "Although it might seem like a contradiction in terms, Mariah is a responsible pop diva and understands that it is her duty to wear tight, short clothing for public appearances."[15] The reference to "duty" is troubling, but in the context of the article, this comment is complimentary compared to what other critics have written about female artists. Mark Morford's 2003 piece titled "Is Shania Twain Human?" describes Gwen Stefani's dancing during her Super Bowl performance as such: "At one point Gwen swiveled her hips so gorgeously and so deeply

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[14] David Tetzlaff, "Metatextual Girl: → Patriarchy → Postmodernism → Power → Money → Madonna," *The Madonna Connection: Representational Politics, Subcultural Identities, and Cultural Theory*, 253.
[15] Mim Udovitch, "Mariah Carey: An Unmarried Woman," *Rolling Stone* February 5, 1998, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/mariah-carey-an-unmarried-woman-99679/ [accessed July 16, 2019].

that the TV cameras were forced to shoot her only from the waist up."[16] His previous praise for her (and performing partner Sting's) live vocals aside, the focus of the article is on the comparative sex appeal of Stefani and Shania Twain – apparently the measure by which he evaluates performances by female artists. He uses Twain's lack of sexual energy to help prove her disingenuousness as a highly produced and expertly managed pop star who doesn't care about the music she performs.[17] Sexuality is the linchpin to his argument, not the music, a focus replicated, implicitly or explicitly, in many articles on women artists, whether generically oriented as pop or rock.

In other cases, journalists focus on the role of record labels in these artists' success. Clive Davis writes in his autobiography that in his relationship with Houston he was depicted as a "Svengali pulling the strings and Whitney, regardless of her talent, was little more than my puppet."[18] The promotional effort behind Carey's breakthrough also elicited suspicion as Fred Goodman demonstrates in his 1991 *New York Times* article titled "The Marketing Muscle Behind Mariah Carey."[19] He writes, "Ultimately, Ms. Carey's success says as much about the talents of a record company as those of the singer." In another the title and subtitle of another *Rolling Stone* article say it all: "Building the Perfect Diva: Mariah Carey has a hit LP and a Top Ten single, but whose

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[16] Mark Morford, "Is Shania Twain Human?" *SF Gate Morning Fix*, in *The Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader: Histories and Debates*, ed. David Brackett (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 503.
[17] Ibid., 502-504.
[18] Clive Davis, *The Songbook of my Life*, 319.
[19] Fred Goodman, "The Marketing Muscle Behind Mariah Carey," *The New York Times*, April 14, 1991, H28.

'Vision' is it?"[20] These examples convey suspicions about the music industry's role in creating artists from scratch (versus the more trusted long-term route discussed in Chapter Four), but they also clearly question these female artists' agency. The last title hardly befits a willful, talented, skilled woman whose abilities and potential inspired Tommy Mottola and Columbia Records to invest so heavily in her as a "franchise artist."[21] In both this paragraph and the previous one we see examples of what Susan J. Douglas describes "enlightened sexism." She defines this phenomenon as "a response, deliberate or not, to the perceived threat of a new gender regime. It insists that women have made plenty of progress because of feminism – indeed full equality has allegedly been achieved – so now it's okay, even amusing, to resurrect sexist stereotypes of girls and women."[22]

So we have talented, agential women portrayed as sex objects or as unwitting shills of the pop machine. For readers and writers, such representations may have seemed harmless enough because of women's supposed equality. From this perspective, highly sexualized images presented by the stars themselves were harmless, or empowering. As Douglas writes, "enlightened sexism sells the line that it is precisely through women's calculated deployment of their faces, bodies, attire, and sexuality that they gain and enjoy true power."[23]

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[20] Rob Tannenbaum, "Building the Perfect Diva: Mariah Carey has a hit LP and a Top Ten single, but whose 'Vision' is it?" *Rolling Stone* August 23, 1990 [accessed July 16, 2019].
[21] Mim Udovitch, "Mariah Carey: An Unmarried Woman," *Rolling Stone* February 5, 1998, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/mariah-carey-an-unmarried-woman-99679/ [accessed July 16, 2019].
[22] Susan J. Douglas, *The Rise of Enlightened Sexism: How Pop Culture Took Us from Girl Power to Girls Gone Wild*, 9.
[23] Ibid., 9-10.

Douglas and Tetzlaff both argue that these scenarios are misconstrued as having positive potential and effect when they tend to operate as reinforcements of the patriarchy.

Rory Dicker's writing about Riot Grrrl's portrayal of sexuality suggests another interpretation of sexualized public personae. Her statement that these women "display their sexuality openly, almost as a way to counter the stereotype of feminists as asexual and frigid" precedes her description of these displays as "conscious, even parodic."[24] While "parodic" hardly describes Houston or Carey's public image, the idea that representations of female sexuality could be healthy for some artists or for some audience members is an important one. After all, Mim Udovitch's description of Carey as an artist who feels responsible for looking sexy does not clearly come from Carey. In this case, the problem could be with the journalist, while Carey and her fans could respond quite differently. The appeal of Houston and Carey to the mostly white 25-49 women listening to AC stations also suggests that, for some, these artists' sexualization, combined with their musical skill, indicates embodied agency, not exploitation. That is, perhaps Carey's clothing and behavior comes from a more internally defined process of reasoning. For non-white women, seeing an attractive representation of someone who looks more like them could be beneficial. In any case, many of Tommy Mottola's reflections on working with Carey in his autobiography describe her as an individual with strong opinions and little fear about expressing herself. If she was willing to stand up to someone as powerful as him, she probably also dressed herself from a similar perspective.[25]

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[24] Rory Dicker, *A History of U.S. Feminisms*, 123.
[25] Tommy Mottola, *Hitmaker: The Man and His Music* with Cal Fussman (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2013).

The control of any artist working in the music industry is subject to debate, and in a male-controlled realm one must consider how sexist expectations influence which women get signed, how their records are produced, and how objectification affects promotion. But considering these representations in terms of a mostly heterosexual female audience's reception potentially reframes them. They may serve to reinforce harmful ideals of beauty, to inspire girls and women to proudly assert their sexuality, or to demonstrate assertiveness in other forms. In addition, helped by lyrics, voices like Houston's and Carey's (and also Gwen Stefani's and Shania Twain's) convey both vulnerability and boldness that can provide reassurance or encouragement to a listener.

Feminist scholar Chandra Talpade Mohanty describes this as "dynamic oppositional agency."[26] She writes, "it is possible to retain the idea of multiple, fluid structures of domination which intersect to locate women differently at particular historical junctures, while at the same time insisting on the dynamic oppositional agency of individual and collective and their engagement in 'daily life.'"[27] This statement highlights the effects of varied and ever-changing power relationships for different women (white vs. black American, for instance) and suggests that, as a result of these "fluid structures of domination," effective opposition to power must be "dynamic," and therefore not the same for all women. In short, this means that different women face different challenges, and to meet them there are different ways of practicing feminism –

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[26] Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Cartographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism," in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, ed. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 13.

[27] Ibid.

some of which might involve wearing a skimpy outfit and sucking on a lollipop in your album's promotional material.

Mohanty's writing articulates concepts identified with third wave feminism, a phase of the movement that sought to embrace more diverse perspectives than the heterosexual white middle-class American one that dominated earlier periods.[28] Dicker describe the third wave as "concerned with how the interlocking nature of identity helps define the causes that matter to women."[29] The concerns of American white women and African-American women will differ, as will women facing different economic challenges. Divas will also confront different issues, and attempt different solutions, to discrimination than women in different social situations.[30] The "interlocking nature of identity" for Houston and Carey – black (or biracial), women, American, and musician – will be addressed more thoroughly in the section that follows.

Performing Race in a Segregated Market

Before situating this section with a summary of large-scale American racial issues in this period, an important statement is in order: while this chapter separates substantive discussion on gender and race into two sections to allow for thoroughness and clearer organization, for non-white women these factors are inseparable. For Houston as an ostensibly African-American woman, and Carey as an identifiably biracial woman, the

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[28] Ibid., 127.
[29] Rory Dicker, *A History of U.S. Feminisms*, 127.
[30] Mohanty also notes that not all women are feminists. Keeping this in mind, this section suggested different motivations and meanings for such artist images, some of which explicitly reject goals of feminism, or support them by capitulating to patriarchal expectations.

intersection of gender and race undoubtedly informed their stylistic choices, commercial appeal, and critical reception, all of which this chapter will later explore after discussion of the context in which these issues were situated.[31]

An important element of discourse on American race politics in the late twentieth century centered on color-blindness, which Colin Harrison describes as an "approach that neither blacks nor whites [nor other ethnic groups] should be given special treatment, and that entry to schools, jobs or public positions should be awarded without paying any attention to racial background."[32] Although the concept of color-blind approaches to public policy reach back much earlier,[33] the 1990s marked the mainstreaming of this approach, which limited the ability of public policy to address racial inequality, and tended to frame policies meant to benefit minorities as "a form of discrimination against whites."[34] This took place amidst worsening conditions for African-Americans, who suffered disproportionately from factors such as deindustrialization, police violence, and drug abuse (the crack epidemic in particular).[35]

Harrison writes that "most conservatives came to believe that since race did not determine character, individuals should be judged in neutral terms, without regard for color."[36] The responsibility placed on individuals inspired scorn on victims of poverty

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32 Colin Harrison, "Introduction: The Intellectual Context," in *American Culture in the 1990s*, 21.

33 In "The Color Line" from his book *The War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* Andrew Hartman describes conflict arising in the late 1960s from affirmative action policies (105-115).

34 Colin Harrison, "Introduction: The Intellectual Context," in *American Culture in the 1990s*, 21.

35 Ibid., 21.

36 Hartman, *The War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars*, 113.

and its attendant issues (such as violent crime and drug abuse) and encouraged a focus on positive examples of minority achievement. Such figures could demonstrate, or at least reassure, a mainstream (mostly white) demographic that success was possible with hard work and determination. If black Americans suffered it was their fault. As journalist David Sirota writes, "*The Cosby Show*[37] was making the larger case that if African Americans simply worked hard and pretended racism didn't exist, they could 'escape' their race in the eyes of whites and therefore accumulate the wealth and acceptance that the Huxtables had somehow managed to amass."[38] This representation of African Americans certainly functioned as a positive influence for some, but, as Sirota asserts, many others used the show, and the successful family it portrayed, to excuse themselves from considering the plight of minorities, and even to conclude that those who were struggling were to blame, not larger economic or social problems.[39]

It could be said that *The Cosby Show* provided Americans with a black family that conformed to white middle-class values. Phenomenally successful black pop singers like Houston and Carey performed an analogous role in popular music. Their mainstream success suggested that black women had broken gender and racial barriers to success, so with effort others could succeed. That both women achieved AC chart success also suggested to some that their race no longer mattered to this mostly white audience. Also

[37] Though Bill Cosby's legal issues make discussion of his namesake program problematic, this show's influence warrants discussion in this chapter.
[38] David Sirota, "Movin' on Up?" in *Back to Our Future: How the 1980s Explain the World We Live in Now – Our Culture, Our Politics, Our Everything* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2011), 191.
[39] Ibid., 192.

like *The Cosby Show*, these singers faced fallback in the form of claims that they were avoiding overt African-American references to appease whites.[40]

On this topic, Michael Eric Dyson observes that "some artists obscure their racial roots in a natural but lamentable response to a racist environment,"[41] a statement that implicates social issues more than artists' character flaws. As he later writes, "Music cannot be naively expected to triumph over social differences."[42] In a country still coming to terms (to put it mildly) with racial issues, some individuals felt odds with African Americans who felt that black public figures should convey unapologetic expressions of contemporary black culture to properly represent their racial heritage -- perhaps this tactic could force the white audience to acknowledge a more realistic sense of a population so often idealized (as in the case of Cosby's show), ignored, or denigrated.

One of Houston's detractors described her as "whitey" Houston, while *Time* called her "'The Prom Queen of Soul."[43] At the 1989 Soul Train Music Awards, the audience booed her when a clip of her song "Where do Broken Hearts Go" played.[44] For Carey, her multiracial identity led to early critics describing her as white,[45] with Nelson

[40] Ibid., 199-200.
[41] Michael Eric Dyson, "Mariah Carey and 'Authentic' Black Music," in *Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 145.
[42] Ibid., 146.
[43] Clive Davis, *The Songbook of My Life*, 319.
[44] Narada Michael Walden, *Whitney Houston: The Voice, the Music, the Inspiration*, 73.
[45] Joe Lynch, "Mariah Carey in 1990: Critics Loved Her, Thought She Was White, *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment* September 16, 2015 https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/the-juice/6699720/mariah-carey-1990-critics-white [accessed July 17, 2019].

George describing her as "'the Debbie Gibson of soul'"[46] because he believed she was a white singer appropriating black music. Some critics took issue with her singing black music when her upbringing by her white mother made it seem unjustified.[47] Dyson describes this situation as "the anxiety of authenticity," which is motivated for some by the frequent uncredited appropriation of black music. However, the definition of black music and who should be performing it varies depending on the situation, even if some individuals' conclusions seem categorical.[48] While exploring definitions of "white music," Jason Lee Oakes summarizes a major issue of racial definitions nicely in the following statement: "…generalizations about white music run the risk of appearing as crude stereotypes (which, to a large extent, they are), but it must be recognized that whiteness, as a discursive construct that has been defined historically in contrast to equally conjectural notions of blackness, is inevitably one dimensional (especially ignoring the many hues between black and white)."[49]

Also important to note is the differing degrees of race-oriented criticism endured by black and white divas. The sort of comments made about Houston and Carey's music not being properly informed enough by contemporary black music are absent from much of the writing on white divas, even though they often reference African-American vocal

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[46] Pier Dominguez, "Why Do We Keep Trying to Solve a Problem Like Mariah?" buzzfeednews.com December 13, 2016, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/pdominguez/justice-for-glitter [accessed August 19, 2019]. Nelson George's article on Mariah Carey in the November 1991 issue of *Playboy* is quoted here.

[47] Rob Tannenbaum, "Emotions," *Rolling Stone*, November 14, 1991 https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-album-reviews/emotions-252643/ [accessed July 17, 2019].

[48] Michael Eric Dyson, "Mariah Carey and 'Authentic' Black Music," in *Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture*, 144-145.

[49] Jason Lee Oakes, "Pop Music Racial Imagination, and the Sounds of Cheese," in *Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate*, ed. Christopher J. Washburne and Maiken Derno (Routledge: New York, 2004), 57.

ornamentation and timbre and lyrical subject matter. In *Rolling Stone*, articles about singer Christina Aguilera often reference her use of gospel, R&B, and jazz without any mention of race. Aguilera's Latino heritage is sidelined, perhaps in part because of her Caucasian appearance and her general avoidance of Latin-American musical influences. In a 1999 profile on Aguilera, author Anthony Bozza quotes *Total Request Live* (an MTV show popular with American youth that first aired in the late 1990s) host Carson Daly as stating, "Her range is amazing. She can do gospel and R&B if she wants to, and can really perform.[50] In a 2003 interview, pop artist Justin Timberlake stated that "the cool thing about Christina is she can basically do so many things with her voice."[51] Where African-American artists must balance between ethnic heritage and mainstream taste, often coming up short for some listeners, some white artists, like Aguilera, have been able to appropriate black musical influences and receive praise about their flexibility. It seems as though the dominance of whiteness means that articulating a coherent culture is unnecessary, and borrowing elements from other cultures inspires appreciation among some Americans.

Céline Dion's vocal flexibility has also allowed a degree of stylistic variety, but to the detriment of her critical reception. To provide one of many examples of this in the press, in a 1998 *Rolling Stone* article Rob Sheffield describes her as "the human anti-NAFTA petition."[52] In his book *Let's Talk About Love: Why Other People Have Such*

[50] Anthony Bozza, "The Christina Aguilera Store (So Far)," *Rolling Stone*, October 28, 1999, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/the-christina-aguilera-story-so-far-241369/ [accessed August 19, 2019].
[51] Jancee Dunn, "Justin Timberlake and Christina Aguilera: Double Trouble," *Rolling Stone*, June 26, 2003, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/justin-timberlake-and-christina-aguilera-double-trouble-244042/ [accessed August 19, 2019].
[52] Rob Sheffield, "R.," *Rolling Stone*, November 26, 1998, https://www.rollingstone

Bad Taste, Carl Wilson suggests that Dion's vocals suggests that Dion's "vocal personality is completely written by different producers, in which she seems almost like a vocal submissive."[53] He concludes that "she is not R&B, not vanilla, not 'standards/Broadway,' not bubblegum, not country, only dabbles in classical 'crossover,'" which leads him to ask, "what kind of music *is* it?"[54] Ultimately, Wilson sees the singer, and believes that she sees herself, as a channel for a voice, not a distinct musical personality. Rather than criticizing her for cultural appropriation, he is troubled by her lack of a distinct musical persona.[55]

While Aguilera and Dion have continued their careers with the same stylistically varied approach without commercial consequences (and seemingly without moralistic hand-wringing), the criticism Houston received, described above, motivated her to consciously incorporate more contemporary black-identified material. Frequent collaborator Narada Michael Walden writes that much of the material on her first two albums was a "hybrid, a compromise."[56] Her critics had identified this as betraying black music by consciously playing down certain musical qualities to appeal to a white audience.[57] Houston's next release after the unfortunate Soul Train event addressed this issue by including several R&B-radio friendly tracks. Clive Davis writes that including the "very successful songwriting and production team of L.A. Reid and Kenny 'Babyface' Edmonds" resulted in not only a number-one Hot 100 hit in the title track

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.com/music/music-album-reviews/r-100346/ [accessed August 19, 2019].
[53] Carl Wilson, *Let's Talk About Love* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 67.
[54] Ibid, 54. Emphasis in original.
[55] Ibid., 67.
[56] Narada Michael Walden, *Whitney Houston: The Voice, The Music, The Inspiration*, 73.
[57] Ibid.

"I'm Your Baby Tonight," but also four Top 10 R&B hits. The album sold fewer copies than her first two, but still "peaked at number three on the pop charts, [and] was a number-one R&B album."[58] Clearly, this approach allowed Houston to cross over to the African-American market, but it reduced her appeal to the mostly white mainstream.

Tables 6.1a and 6.1b below illustrates that, according to RIAA, Houston's first two albums, and the first singles released from them, all sold extremely well in the United States. RIAA data for her third album *I'm Your Baby Tonight* and its title track shows that for both sales decreased significantly. In fact, this album sold less than half of the previous one and less than a third of the first. The single only achieved a Gold Certification (between 500,000 and one million units).

Table 6.1a: Whitney Houston RIAA Sales Data, First Three Albums[59]

Album Release Date | Title	Certification Date | Sales
2/21/85: Whitney Houston	6/24/85 : Gold 8/26/85 : Platinum 7/25/99: 13x Multi-Platinum
5/28/87 : Whitney	7/28/87: Gold 7/28/87: Platinum 11/29/95: 9x Multi-Platinum
11/4/90: I'm Your Baby Tonight	1/15/91: Gold 1/15/91: Platinum 4/5/95: 4x Multi-Platinum

[58] Clive Davis, *The Songbook of My Life*, 321-322.
[59] RIAA, "Gold and Platinum: Whitney Houston," riaa.com, https://www.riaa.com/gold-platinum/?tab_active=default-award&se=whitney+houston#search_section [accessed July 25, 2019]; All RIAA sales data retrieved from this source.

Table 6. 1b: Whitney Houston RIAA Sales Data, First Single (First Three Albums)[60]

Single Release Date | Title	Certification Date | Sales
11/22/85: How Will I know	3/11/19: Platinum 12/6/95: Gold
4/27/87: I Wanna Dance With Somebody (Who Loves Me)	7/28/87: Gold 2/13/89: Platinum 2/13/19: 3x Multi-Platinum
9/28/90: I'm Your Baby Tonight	11/27/90: Gold

Table 6.2 below illustrates performance on two of Billboard's album charts: the Billboard 200 (which measures the most popular of all albums during a given week via a combination of sales data) and R&B/Hip-hop Album Sales (which measures the most popular of R&B/Hip-Hop albums during a given week via a combination of sales data). Houston's first album remained on the former chart for 162 weeks and on the latter chart for 116 weeks – 46 weeks less than on the Billboard 200. This indicates less popularity with the demographic the R&B/Hip-Hop album chart targets.

[60] RIAA, "Gold and Platinum: Whitney Houston," riaa.com, https://www.riaa.com/gold-platinum/?tab_active=default-award&se=whitney+houston#search_section [accessed July 25, 2019]; All RIAA sales data retrieved from this source.

Table 6.2: Whitney Houston Album Chart Performance, First Three Albums

Release Date | Title	Billboard 200: Peak Total Weeks | Date of Peak[1]	R&B/Hip-Hop | Total Weeks | Date of Peak[2]
2/21/85: Whitney Houston	1 | 162 | 3/8/86	1 | 116 | 6/22/85
5/28/87: Whitney	1 | 85 | 6/27/87	2 | 75 | 7/11/87
9/28/90: I'm Your Baby Tonight	3 | 50 | 12/8/90	1 | 53 | 12/22/90

Billboard's Hot 100, Adult Contemporary, and R&B/Hip-Hop Songs charts demonstrate less variance, even though Hot 100 performance is stronger. The Hot 100 and Hot R&B/Hip-Hop Songs charts of the 1980s and 1990s incorporated both radio airplay and sales data, and the Adult Contemporary chart measured radio airplay only. Compared to the sales figures above, the more similar numbers in Table 6.3 might suggest that radio airplay evens out differences in sales for a given song. One significant difference to point out is the peak at number seven on the AC chart for "I'm Your Baby Tonight." This suggests that the song was played less often, even though it remained on

[1] "Whitney Houston Billboard 200," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, https://www.billboard.com/biz/search/charts ?page=3&artist=Whitney%20Houston&f[0]=ts_chart_artistname%3AWhitney%20Houst on&f[1]=itm_field_chart_id%3ABillboard%20200&f[2]=ss_bb_type%3Achart_item&so lrsort=ds_peakdate%3Aasc&type=2 [accessed July 25, 2019]; Following total number of weeks on Billboard charts does not include additional charting inspired by Houston's passing.

[2] "Whitney Houston Top R&B/Hip-Hop Albums," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, https://www.bill board.com/biz/search/charts?artist=Whitney%20Houston&f[0]=ts_chart_artistname%3A Whitney%20Houston&f[1]=itm_field_chart_id%3ATop%20R%26b/hip-hop%20 Albums&f[2]=ss_bb_type%3Achart_item&type=2&solrsort=ds_peakdate%3Aasc [accessed July 25, 2019].

the chart for longer than the other two (28 weeks). Houston's more R&B-oriented approach was less popular with the 25-49 mostly white women listening to AC stations.

Table 6.3: Whitney Houston Chart Performance, First Single from First Three Albums

Release Date Title	Hot 100: Peak | Total Weeks | Date of Peak[1]	AC: Peak | Total Weeks | Date of Peak[2]	R&B: Peak | Total Weeks | Date of Peak[3]
11/22/85: How Will I know	1 | 23 | 2/15/86	1 | 20 | 2/15/86	1 | 19 | 3/8/86
4/27/87: I Wanna Dance With Somebody (Who Loves Me)	1 | 18 | 6/27/87	1 | 22 | 7/4/87	1 | 15 | 7/4/87
9/28/90: I'm Your Baby Tonight	1 | 19 | 12/01/90	7 | 28 | 12/15/90	1 | 17 | 12/1/90

Although her early music was clearly gospel and even funk-influenced, Carey's strong desire to incorporate more contemporary R&B and rap elements in her music had become clear early in her career. This change first emerged dramatically on her fifth studio album *Daydream*.[4] Tommy Mottola had been hesitant to make the change and included thoughts on the topic in his autobiography. He writes that "going down the path that she wanted to go could only result in a narrower audience and less airplay formats,

[1] "Whitney Houston Hot 100," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, https://www.billboard.com/music/whitney-houston [accessed July 25, 2019].
[2] "Whitney Houston Adult Contemporary," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, https://www.billboard.com/charts /search?artist=whitney+houston&title=&label=&chart_name=Adult+Contemporary&chart_date= [accessed July 25, 2019].
[3] "Whitney Houston Hot R&B/Hip-Hop Songs," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, https://www.billboard.com/charts /search?artist=Whitney+Houston&title=&label=&chart_name=Hot+R%26B%2FHip-Hop+Songs&chart_date= [accessed July 25, 2019].
[4] Tommy Mottola, *Hitmaker: The Man and His Music*, 245, 290.

and it could possibly alienate the broad spectrum of consumers who loved and bought her music."[67] When the album's first single, "Fantasy" and the single's accompanying video achieved massive success, he celebrated it but did not want to "frame her entire career that way," even if she felt strongly about doing so.[68]

The effect of altering her style from a more traditional, but still black-oriented, style to one more focused on modern R&B and hip-hop affected her sales is suggested by the tables below. Compiled from RIAA sales data, the tables 6.4a and 6.4b summarize the sales for Carey's second, third, fifth, and sixth albums (leaving out her eponymous debut, her first Christmas album, and albums following *Butterfly*).

Table 6.4a: Mariah Carey, RIAA Sales Data, Select Releases[69]

Album Release Date Title	Certification Date | Sales
9/13/91 Emotions	11/12/91: Gold 11/12/91: Platinum 9/27/94: 4x Multi-Platinum
8/29/93: Music Box	10/27/93: Gold 10/27/93: Platinum 11/5/97: 10x Multi-Platinum
9/29/95 Daydream	11/28/95 : Gold 11/28/95: Platinum 11/18/98: 10x Multi-Platinum
9/12/97 Butterfly	10/15/97: Gold 10/15/97: Platinum 12/15/99: 5x Multi-Platinum

[67] Ibid., 275.
[68] Ibid., 278.
[69] RIAA, "Gold and Platinum: Mariah Carey," riaa.com, https://www.riaa.com/gold-platinum/?tab_active=defaultaward&se=mariah+carey&col=format&ord=asc#search_section [accessed July 25, 2019]; All RIAA sales data retrieved from this source.

Table 6.4b: Mariah Carey, RIAA Sales Data, Select Releases

Single Release Date Title	Certification Date | Sales
8/14/91: Emotions	10/15/91: Gold
7/23/93: Dreamlover	9/22/93: Platinum 9/22/93: Gold
9/8/95: Fantasy	11/7/95: 2x Multi-Platinum 11/7/95: Platinum 11/7/95: Gold
8/22/97: Honey	9/24/97: Platinum 9/24/97: Gold

Of this group of albums, *Emotions* performed the worst commercially. This album's first single "Emotions" only achieved a Gold certification from RIAA and is the only single from the album to have sold enough for an RIAA certification. A combination of poor single performance and a more funk and R&B-oriented sound may account for this decreased appeal. Carey's next release *Music Box* is much more pop-friendly and includes not only the first single, "Dreamlover," which sold Platinum, but also "Hero," which also sold enough copies for a Platinum certification. *Daydream*, Carey's first album to incorporate elements of contemporary black music (including cameos by rappers and hip-hop-oriented accompaniment), doubtless achieved 10x Platinum sales (ten million copies) partly on the strength of its singles. These include "Fantasy," released first, but also "One Sweet Day," which sold 2x Platinum. The latter track remained at number one on *Billboard*'s Hot 100 chart for sixteen weeks, a feat only matched in 2017 by "Despasito," by Luis Fonsi and Daddy Yankee featuring Justin Bieber.[70] Carey's next album, *Butterfly*, followed a similar musical track, but

[70] Gary Trust, "This Week in Billboard Chart History: In 1995, Mariah Carey & Boyz II Men Began a Record Run at No. 1," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/chart-

incorporated a softer vocal style. The album's first single, "Honey," achieved a Platinum certification about a month after its release but never sold enough for another certification. Carey would not sell enough of an album for a certification higher than 3x Platinum until her 2005 "comeback" album *The Emancipation of Mimi*.[71]

The chart below provides data for the same four albums from the Billboard 200 and the R&B/Hip-hop Album Sales charts. Clearly, *Emotions* and *Music Box* performed better in the mainstream market. Surprisingly, *Daydream* shows a seven-week difference in chart appearance between the Billboard 200 (with 81 weeks) and R&B/Hip-Hop (with 74 weeks). *Butterfly* chart performance shows a ten-week difference in longevity between these two charts, with the stronger showing on the Billboard 200 (on which the album also reached the number one spot). According to these charts, the sales performance for the gospel-influenced but pop-friendly *Music Box* realized Carey's biggest gap between these two markets.

beat/8046929/mariah-carey-boyz-ii-men-one-sweet-day-this-week-in-billboard-chart-history-1995 [accessed July 25, 2019].

[71] Carey's well-documented and highly public breakdown in 2001, as well as her problematic recent performances, have contributed to this to some extent.

Table 6.5: Mariah Carey, Album Chart Performance, Select Albums

Release Date Title	Billboard 200: Peak | Total Weeks | Date of Peak[72]	R&B/Hip-Hop | Total Weeks | Date of Peak[73]
9/13/91 Emotions	4 | 54 | 10/05/91	6 | 44 | 11/23/91
8/29/93: Music Box	1 | 128 | 12/25/93	1 | 86 | 9/18/93
9/29/95 Daydream	1 | 81 | 10/21/95	1 | 74 | 10/21/95
9/12/97 Butterfly	1 | 55 | 10/4/97	3 | 54 | 10/4/97

Table 6.6 below demonstrates a consistent trend for the first singles from *Emotions* and *Music Box*: both "Emotions" and "Dreamlover" achieved higher placement on the Hot 100 and Adult Contemporary charts than on Hot R&B/Hip-Hop Songs. In fact, "Dreamlover" only reached the number two spot on the AC chart, but stayed on this one the longest, for thirty-two weeks. Significantly, "Honey" performed well on the Hot 100 and R&B charts but did not place at all on the Adult Contemporary or Adult Top 40 charts. Clearly, the contemporary R&B/hip-hop elements in this song were deemed unsuitable for the AC radio audience who felt uncomfortable with more contemporary black music.

[72] "Mariah Carey Billboard 200," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, https://www.billboard.com/biz/search/charts?page=1&artist=Mariah%20Carey&f[0]=ts_chart_artistname%3AMariah%20Carey&f[1]=itm_field_chart_id%3ABillboard%20200&f[2]=ss_bb_type%3Achart_item&solrsort=ds_peakdate%3Aasc&type=2 [accessed July 25, 2019].

[73] "Mariah Carey R&B/Hip-Hop Albums," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, https://www.billboard.com/biz/search/charts?artist=Mariah%20Carey&f[0]=ts_chart_artistname%3AMariah%20Carey&f[1]=itm_field_chart_id%3ATop%20R%26b/hip-hop%20Albums&f[2]=ss_bb_type%3Achart_item&type=2&solrsort=ds_peakdate%3Aasc [accessed July 25, 2019].

Table 6.6: Mariah Carey Chart Performance, First Single from Select Albums

Release Date Title	Hot 100: Peak | Total Weeks | Date of Peak[74]	AC: Peak | Total Weeks Date of Peak[75]	R&B: Peak | Total Weeks Date of Peak[76]
8/14/81: Emotions	1 | 20 | 10/12/91	1 | 18 | 10/19/91	1 | 16 | 11/2/91
7/23/93: Dreamlover	1 | 29 | 9/11/93	2 | 32 | 9/25/93	2 | 27 | 9/11/93
9/8/95: Fantasy	1 | 25 | 9/30/95	8 | 26 | 10/14/95	1 | 25 | 9/30/95
8/22/97: Honey	1 | 20 | 9/13/97	N/A	2 | 22 | 9/13/97

Though not uniformly dramatic, Houston's and Carey's numbers highlight a lack of color-blindness in radio airplay, a conclusion justified by the writing of communications scholar Joseph Turow. He writes that by the 1990s "the segregation of radio by race, age, gender, income, and lifestyle became so taken for granted that it was even built into research on formats." This extended to avoiding "phone numbers in what researchers call HDBAs, or "high density black areas" during the research process.[77]

[74] "Mariah Carey Hot 100," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, https://www.billboard.com/biz/search/charts?page=1&artist=Mariah%20Carey&f[0]=ts_chart_artistname%3AMariah%20Carey&f[1]=itm_field_chart_id%3AHot%20100&f[2]=ss_bb_type%3Achart_item&solrsort=ds_peakdate%3Aasc&type=2 [accessed July 25, 2019].
[75] "Mariah Carey Adult Contemporary," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, https://www.billboard.com/biz/search/charts?artist=Mariah%20Carey&f[0]=ts_chart_artistname%3AMariah%20Carey&f[1]=itm_field_chart_id%3AAdult%20Contemporary&f[2]=ss_bb_type%3Achart_item&type=2&solrsort=ds_peakdate%3Aasc [accessed July 25, 2019].
[76] "Mariah Carey Hot R&B/Hip-Hop Songs," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, https://www.billboard.com/biz/search/charts?artist=Mariah%20Carey&f[0]=ts_chart_artistname%3AMariah%20Carey&f[1]=itm_field_chart_id%3AHot%20R%26b/hip-hop%20Songs&f[2]=ss_bb_type%3Achart_item&type=2&solrsort=ds_peakdate%3Aasc [accessed July 25, 2019].
[77] Joseph Turow, *Breaking up America: Advertisers and the Rise of the New Media World*, 101.

Obviously this practice suggests both different listening preferences and differently formatted stations for white and black listeners. The latter may have exacerbated the former, but this would not have succeeded without some preexisting biases shaping Americans' musical taste.

Eric Weisbard points out both the "deplorable existence of racially separate music categories" and "the laudable success of popular music in creating enduring spaces for different populations to express themselves with the confidence of insiders."[78] In the case of Houston's decreased success with her R&B-focused third album, it seems that "deplorable" certainly describes this situation, in which a white audience with limited tolerance for black musical style could avoid hearing many of these singles on the radio, singles that appealed more to the R&B (mostly black) demographic. Appealing to a smaller and generally less wealthy audience meant selling fewer records. All this reinforces the fact that a color-blind approach may have dominated policy debates, and some Americans may have adopted the ideology of not "seeing color," but these numbers help to prove that color factored into both public and private racial issues.

Houston's connection to racial politics becomes more complicated when considering her recording and performance of the National Anthem for Superbowl XXV in 1991.[79] Because the performance took place in the midst of the Gulf War, connections to this military operation were inevitable for some, and Houston's interpretation conveys

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[78] Eric Weisbard, *Top 40 Democracy: The Rival Mainstreams of American Music*, 323.
[79] An important fact to note is that the performance the audience heard at the Superbowl was recorded in the studio as both a requirement of Superbowl producers and of the performance context, since the sound at the venue would have made it difficult for Houston and the orchestra she performs with to properly hear one another. The sources cited in this paragraph all detail this process and the rationale behind it.

a sense of positivity for these events. This was especially important considering that Superbowl viewers and listeners of the single experienced Houston's rendition in the context of the first major military conflict since Vietnam.[80] Another response to the war, the release of the song and documentary short "Voices that Care" (discussed in Chapter Two), more explicitly expressed support for this particular conflict and the troops fighting it. That the song was written in 1991 allowed association of the song with the conflict, and with contemporary popular music.[81] For the "Star Spangled Banner," tradition and associations run deep. In *The New Yorker*, author Cinque Henderson writes that "black Americans have long felt ambivalent about 'The Star Spangled Banner.'"[82] Until Houston interpreted the song, the fact that "the machinery of state violence has too often been used against black people" meant that "a song about bombs and rockets [did not] hold much appeal."[83] As an African American, Houston's performance of the song for such a large audience certainly influenced perceptions, but so did her emphasis on the word "free," elongated by a change from 3/4 time to 4/4 that lengthened the word from

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[80] Luke Kerr-Dineen, "How Whitney Houston's Iconic National Anthem Set Off a Pointless Controversy," ftw.usatoday.com, February 2, 2017 https://ftw.usatoday.com/2017/02/whitney-houston-national-anthem-video-super-bowl-51-2017 [accessed August 21, 2019]; Chris Cuomo and Andrew Paparella, "Whitney Houston's Star Spangled Secret," ABC News, February 16, 2012, https://abcnews.go.com/blogs/entertainment/2012/02/whitney-houstons-star-spangled-secret/ [accessed August 21, 2019].

[81] David Foster, Linda Thompson, and Peter Cetera. "Voices that Care." Giant. 1991. https://www.Youtube.com/watch?v=Ol6vr5_CY1o [accessed April 28, 2018]; David Jackson, "Voices that Care," directed by David Jackson and James Yukich. February 28, 1991, documentary short, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KJ1S_UNaWps [accessed April 28, 2018].

[82] Cinque Henderson, "Anthem of Freedom: How Whitney Houston Remade 'The Star Spangled Banner,'" *newyorker.com*, January 27, 2016 https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/anthem-of-freedom-how-whitney-houston-remade-the-star-spangled-banner [accessed August 21, 2019].

[83] Ibid.

one count to three.[84] That this interpretation was inspired by that of well-regarded African-American musician and composer Marvin Gaye only strengthens the ties to black cultural heritage,[85] helping a new group of Americans to embrace the anthem.

Houston's interpretation influenced those of many other performers, including Branford Marsalis and Bruce Hornsby, Beyoncé Knowles, and Mariah Carey.[86] For Henderson and others who embrace these gospel-tinged performances, the Star-Spangled Banner becomes more meaningful as a national anthem when it reflects America's musical culture and ethnic make-up. Other critics have reached the conclusion that more emotive and melismatic renditions fail to convey the proper cultural and political meaning for an anthem that should be performed without much embellishment. *The American Conservative* even featured an article titled "Oversinging & Murdering the National Anthem."[87] In this piece, author Rod Dreher writes that many performances feature "oversinging," which he defines as "that trashy-baroque, show-offy style that has become so popular."[88] For him, performing the anthem in this style constitutes "national-anthem butchery."[89] This opinion is also reflected in a conversation on a message board for the publication *The Straight Dope*. Many participants in the conversation, titled "Sing Our National Anthem the Right Way!", criticize embellished performances of the

[84] Ibid.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Rod Dreher, "Oversinging & Murdering the National Anthem," *The American Conservative*, July 29, 2012, https://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/oversinging-national-anthem/ [accessed September 17, 2019].
[88] Ibid.
[89] Ibid.

National Anthem, with some insisting that a proper performance avoids melismatic improvisation.[90]

Between this message board and Dreher's article, the common theme is that the gospel influence does not belong in a performance of the Star-Spangled Banner. Some of these individuals may not recognize this influence as such, but many surely do, as this vocal style (frequently associated with black singers) has played such an important role in American popular music since at least the 1960s. Without making explicit references to the origins of this approach or the race of its practitioners, the naysayers seem to convey that black performing styles do not belong with the national anthem. In a country in which some citizens either try to conclude that racial problems no longer exist or try to reinforce white supremacy, ignoring non-white culture and political issues helps to maintain the illusion of equality or of a proper hierarchy. Being faced with the culture of an oppressed minority on the world stage reminds these segments of the audience of the existence and importance of black music, and of black lives.

Another, more cynical (but not race-related) observation is in order: Houston originally performed the anthem for the Superbowl, which happened to take place in 1991 during the Gulf War. The single was released because of the positive reception of Houston's rendition. That is, her label Arista seized this opportunity to turn a profit. This happened again in 2001, when Arista released the single after the September 11 terrorist

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[90] Anonymous, "Sing Our National Anthem the Right Way!", *The Straight Dope*, February 6, 2011, https://boards.straightdope.com/sdmb/showthread.php?t=596162.

attacks.[91] While this surely inspired and comforted some listeners, it also highlights the industry's use of conflict and tragedy to make money.

The next section will explore in greater detail the challenges black artists faced to achieve mainstream success after the anti-disco fallout in the late 1970s. In the period of resurgence of African-American music in the mainstream that followed in the 1980s, artists utilized various strategies to encourage broader appeal while maintaining stylistic integrity. This discussion will begin in the late 1970s and explore the various elements leading to the rejection of black music, discuss the 1980s recovery of black music in the mainstream, and then analyze musical and lyrical features that helped artists Houston, and later Carey, achieve massive success beginning in the mid-1980s.

African-American Music in the Mainstream's Good Graces

Though disco may seem distant from Adult Contemporary, the struggle to get black music back into the mainstream after disco's late 1970s rejection influenced the shape of black artists' resurgence, and the musical environment on AC formatted radio stations. Alice Echols describes the backlash against disco as motivated by stylistic dissatisfaction, suspicion of technologically defined music, economic frustration, as well as racism and homophobia.[92] Many accounts of this phenomenon seem to blame either musical or social factors, but Echols notes that the situation was more complicated, writing

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[91] Andrew Dansby, "God Bless America On Top," *Rolling Stone*, October 24, 2001, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/god-bless-america-on-top-238847/ [accessed August 21, 2019].
[92] Alice Echols, "One Nation Under a Thump: Disco and its Discontents, in *Hot Stuff: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture* (New York: Norton, 2010) 208-213.

> "It is easy to depict discophobia as a by-product entirely of the conservative turn. Certainly, for some, disco's hegemony was yet another affront – further evidence of the growing power of racial and sexual minorities and the shrinking power of white straight men. However, the backlash against disco is by no means entirely reducible to straightforward racism and homophobia. After all, some African Americans objected to disco on the grounds that it bleached R&B to such an extent that the music became soulless. Likewise, some gays loathed disco."[93]

The consequences of discophobia were clear nevertheless. Eric Weisbard notes that "the disco backlash swept aside nearly all black commercial music apart from R&B radio."[94] The percentage of hits by blacks fell from "[occupying] one-third of pop hits since 1968…to one-fifth in 1980, then one-twentieth in 1981 and one-tenth in 1982." Black music was associated with maligned dance music.[95] MTV's focus on rock and new wave also contributed to the dearth of black artists in the mainstream in the 1980s. David Brackett notes that by the early 1980s these barriers to success for black artists "received increased attention…drawing attention to the racial politics of crossover."[96] In fact, NAACP released a report in 1987 that described popular music as "a field of 'white domination.'"[97]

In such a field, black artists succeeded rarely in the 1980s mainstream, and even when they did, they had to handle racial identification carefully. Mirroring Dyson's previously-quoted statement on adapting to meet mainstream expectations, Weisbard writes that Michael Jackson and Prince achieved success on MTV and in the broader American market, but that their "racial identification" was perhaps purposefully muted.

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93 Ibid., 211.
94 Eric Weisbard, *Top 40 Democracy: The Rival Mainstreams of American Music*, 63.
95 Ibid.
96 David Brackett, "Crossover Dreams," in *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music*, 285.
97 Eric Weisbard, *Top 40 Democracy: The Rival Mainstreams of American Music*, 65.

In the colorblind cultural and political environment – hostile to admitting racism yet often profoundly racist – it comes as no surprise that artists would accommodate whites by reducing overtly black cultural references, and that some Americans would assume that success resulted from consciously crafting "less black" public personae and musical styles.

David Sirota examines this issue from a somewhat different angle, that of "'nice' blackness," and "not-so-nice blackness." The former refers to "rich, nonconfrontational" African-American public figures, while the latter describes blacks who were seen as "working-class, intolerant of racism," and so forth.[98] In the earlier years of her career, Whitney Houston seemed to portray the former, and Public Enemy the latter. In a country overwhelmed by racial conflict, some Americans with the privilege to do so avoided being reminded of inequality in any manner than made them uncomfortable. In some cases, this meant avoiding or criticizing some more aggressive-sounding African-American music. AC radio often provided playlists that facilitated a focus on "'nice' blackness."

To navigate this terrain, Houston, and later Carey, articulated black influences early on in ways that the mainstream (white) audience would allow, which changed over time to include more explicit hip-hop references. After achieving massive success and facing either external or internal pressure to release more distinctly contemporary black music, they changed stylistic focus. The numbers discussed above, including the absence of "Honey" from the AC chart, suggest the commercial consequences of stylistic change,

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[98] David Sirota, Movin' On Up?" in *Back to Our Future: How the 1980s Explain the World We Live in Now – Our Culture, Our Politics, Our Everything*, 193-194.

as well as the interplay between artists' stylistic choices and the larger social implications of these choices. Houston's incorporation of R&B moved more distinctly to a more clearly black-identified genre, one disseminated more on the R&B format and received less warmly by the mainstream tracked by the Hot 100 and AC charts. In a sense, she sounded too confrontational. Carey incorporated some highly popular hip-hop elements in some tracks, while others (namely ballads) mostly maintained much the compositional and vocal style that had helped fuel her earlier popularity. Because of the mainstream popularity of these elements, her commercial appeal maintained until the release of *Butterfly*.[99]

One may wonder what made these artists' earlier work more appealing to the mainstream, and to white adult women in particular (AC's demographic). Comparing the early and later work of these artists reveals clear shifts, but the lack of black musical influence in earlier releases is less apparent than derisive comments about it suggest. The two songs analyzed in detail below demonstrate that early on, both women's work clearly referenced African-American music, but did so in a pop-friendly idiom (representative of "nice blackness").

In addition to Houston's collaborator Narada Michael Walden's previously-stated comment that Houston's early music was a "hybrid" of pop and R&B, scholar Richard Allen Rischar writes that "the black ballad of the mid-to-late 1980s had been dominated by a vocal and production style that was smooth and polished, led by Whitney Houston, Janet Jackson, and James Ingram."[100] A note sent to Whitney Houston's manager Clive

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[99] Obviously this is in relative terms.
[100] Richard Allen Rischar, "One Sweet Day: Vocal Ornamentation and Style in the African-American Popular Ballad, 1991-1995," PhD diss., University of North Carolina-

Davis from Barry Manilow reinforces this perspective: "'just returned from Europe and wanted to let you know that Whitney, Aretha, and Dionne (and friends) are all over the radio!...You've become the Jewish Berry Gordy!'"[101] Here Manilow refers to the mainstream popularity of these black artists, but it also recalls the criticism many of Berry Gordy Jr.'s Motown artists face for looking and sounding "too white," a criticism also endured by Houston.

Rischar notes that 1990 brought more crossover success for singers who incorporated African-American influences, namely a greater degree of vocal ornamentation.[102] Rougher vocal timbre and instances of more overtly sexual lyrics also tend to characterize some of the music that appealed in the 1990s to both a predominantly white mainstream and a mostly black R&B audience. Mariah Carey serves as an example of this trend, which was supported by a mainstream audience more welcoming to rap and R&B (versus pop) than had existed in much of the previous decade. Houston's music also incorporated a certain degree of vocal ornamentation and timbral variety, in addition to some lyrics that did more than subtly allude to romantic encounters – such as "dancing with somebody." But this last reference, paraphrased from the first single from her second album *Whitney* (1987), "I Wanna Dance With Somebody," and the song's setting, demonstrate the pop-friendly incorporation of African-American stylistic and lyrical elements. The promotional video also reinforces an interpretation of the lyrics that avoids

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Chapel Hill, 2000, 2-3: Rischar suggests that these artists performed poorly on the R&B charts, but chart data suggests that this was not the case.

[101] Clive Davis Letters, "Letter from Barry Manilow," January 20, 1986.

[102] Richard Allen Rischar, "One Sweet Day: Vocal Ornamentation and Style in the African-American Popular Ballad, 1991-1995," 3.

sexual connotations. Clearly, a strong effort was made to suggest that the song was about dancing.[103]

Table 6.7: Whitney Houston, "I Wanna Dance with Somebody (Who Loves Me)" 1987[104]

Introduction a :00 – :10 Introduction b :11 – :31		Call and response between bass and synthesized percussion Improvised vocals begin at :06 Syncopated synthesized brass melody
Verse 1 :32 – :48	Clock strikes upon the hour And the sun begins to fade Still enough time to figure out How to chase my blues away	Pared down: bass and percussive elements with synth fills at deceptive cadences (after lines 3 and 6) Verses from C#M to d#m Prominent bass
Pre-chorus 1 :49 – 1:02	I've done alright up 'til now It's the light of day that shows me how And when the night falls Loneliness calls	Modulate to G# minor (V/V in F#M) Add guitar and synth: counter syncopated vocal rhythm Thicker vocal timbre Elaboration on last word of second line Highest note on "day"
Chorus 1 1:03 – 1:38	Oh! I want to dance with somebody I want to feel the heat with somebody Yeah! I want to dance with somebody With somebody who loves me Oh! I want to dance with somebody I want to feel the heat with somebody Yeah! I want to dance with somebody With somebody who loves me	Back to F# Major Simplified and shortened synth/brass (like Introduction b) Same bass (and additional elements) as Introduction b Vocal gospel influence "Dance" is double-coded Emphasis on "heat"
Verse 2 1:39 – 1:55	I've been in love and lost my senses Spinning through the town Sooner or later the fever ends And I wind up feeling down	*Descending interval from "feeling" to "down"

[103] IMVDb, "I Wanna Dance With Somebody," imvdb.com, https://imvdb.com/video/whitney-houston/i-wanna-dance-with-somebody [accessed December 2, 2019].
[104] George Merrill, Shannon Rubicam, "I Wanna Dance with Somebody (Who Loves Me)," track one on *Whitney*, Arista, 1987, compact disc.

Table 6.7: Whitney Houston, "I Wanna Dance with Somebody (Who Loves Me)" 1987, Continued

Pre-chorus 2 1:56 – 2:09	I need a man who'll take a chance On a love that burns hot enough to last So when the night falls My lonely heart calls	*Ascent to and emphasis on "burns"
Chorus 2 2:10 – 2:41	Oh! I want to dance with somebody I want to feel the heat with somebody Yeah! I want to dance with somebody With somebody who loves me Oh! I want to dance with somebody I want to feel the heat with somebody Yeah! I want to dance with somebody With somebody who loves me	
Bridge 2:42 – 2:57	*Somebody who, somebody who* Somebody who loves me *Somebody who, somebody who* To hold me in his arms	*Call and response: choir asks question 1st and third lines choir asks question, Houston answers 2nd and 4th lines
Pre-chorus 3 2:58 – 3:11	I need a man who'll take a chance On a love that burns hot enough to last So when the night falls My lonely heart calls	*On "calls" modulate to G# Major
Chorus 3 3:12 – 3:43	Oh! I want to dance with somebody I want to feel the heat with somebody Yeah! I want to dance with somebody With somebody who loves me Oh! I want to dance with somebody I want to feel the heat with somebody Yeah! I want to dance with somebody With somebody who loves me	
Outro 3:44 – 4:51 (Fade-out 4:38 – 4:51)	*Dance* C'mon baby *Dance* *Dance* Get with this boy *Dance* Don't you want to dance *Dance* With me baby Don't you want to dance *Dance* With me boy Hey don't you want to dance *Dance* With me baby With somebody who loves me	*Call and response between bass and synthesized percussion (Introduction a) *Call and response between Houston and male singers

In fact, as Table 6.7 illustrates above, the song begins with call and response between bass and synthesized percussion. Houston enters at :06 singing improvised flourishes that respond to the accompaniment. She continues this interaction when a syncopated synthesized brass melody enters at :11 and continues until just before the first verse. These first thirty-one seconds establish both the high energy level of the song and the interplay between different performing elements and, for Houston, with the song's melody. Initially, the latter effect is subtle, with a likely rhythmic alteration from all eighth notes on "still enough time" to a dotted eighth-sixteenth-eighth figure. In the second verse, she sings all eighth notes at this point in the section, which probably reflects the original rhythm but also adds variety to an essentially strophic setting. Both verses consist of two phrases, performed by Houston in a pure vocal timbre. The pared down accompaniment allows the vocals to dominate, but they respond in the deceptive cadences (V-vi in F# Major) after lines three and six.

The pre-choruses oriented around G#-minor feature a more aggressive-sounding vocal timbre, and additional instrumental backing that includes guitar and synthesizer. Houston's performance emphasizes the fifth word of the second line with an accent and a higher pitch. In the first such section, this word painting affects the word "day," and in the other two the word "burns" receives this treatment.

In the choruses, synthesized brass plays a simplified version of the figure played during the second portion of the introduction (Introduction b) with the same bass (and additional elements). "Heat" is emphasized by a modified choir that gives these sections a gospel quality. Houston's more heavily weighted solo vocals minimize this influence, which suggests a spiritual component to the choruses' double-coded message: "dancing"

is either a social or intimate sexual activity. Because of this variability, the song seemed appropriate for a large range of listeners.

The backup vocals are more prominent in the bridge, which features a call and response between Houston and these singers. Table 6.7 above illustrates this exchange with Houston's vocals (that respond to the backup singers' questions) in italics. The relatively lengthy outro uses a similar method, with a deep male voice stating "dance," and Houston's spontaneous-sounding come-ons alternating. The bass and synthesized percussion also interact in this way, which recalls the song's beginning while adding to this pop-friendly, yet gospel influenced, outro. At this point, the influence of African-American music in even the most pop-friendly of Houston's early hits should be clear, even if some listeners felt that the translation of these characteristics for the mainstream disguised Houston's musical heritage.

For Mariah Carey, even if her desire to shift to a more contemporary black-oriented style came mostly from internal motivation, her early music did incorporate more traditional elements, such as choir-like backup vocals and elaborately embellished solo vocals. From the beginning of her career, these influences were more explicit than they were at a similar point in Houston's career, but this is likely because, as Rischar notes, black culture in general, and musical genres and performing styles, enjoyed greater acceptance in the early 1990s (and throughout the decade).[105] Even if some black music, such as rap, generated controversy, black music still found eager listeners.

[105] Richard Allen Rischar, "One Sweet Day: Vocal Ornamentation and Style in the African-American Popular Ballad, 1991-1995," 1-4.

Carey's 1991 single "Emotions," the title track from her second album, incorporates many elements from The Emotions' 1977 release "Best of My Love" and Cheryl Lynn's "Got to be Real" from 1978. In his *Rolling Stone* review of the album, Rob Tannenbaum claims that Carey and her co-writers "shamelessly recycle the chords" from these songs.[106] The bass part and verse texture of both songs clearly informed the composition of "Emotions," but, copyright issues aside,[107] these references seem more akin to sampling than to the unoriginal songwriting usually assumed for pop.

This song's accompaniment restyles funk for the 1990s: the accompaniment is motivically repetitive with an emphasis on the bass, but with a cleaner texture and dry-sounding timbres. Carey's lyrics and vocal melodies are original to this song. The album credits her, along with Trey Lorrenz and David Cole, for the choral-sounding background vocals that demonstrate a clear gospel influence with a thinner texture and dry-sounding timbre – like sexy gospel. The gospel association is strengthened with the frequent use of call and response, demonstrated with italicized text in Table 6.8 below. As this table illustrates, in the choruses the simulated choir joins Carey to complete the first line and continues through all of line two. This strengthens the lyrical sense of the second line commenting on the first. In chorus 4, the choir responds to line three with "emotions" beginning at the end beat three. This contrasts with the other choruses, in which this

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[106] Rob Tannenbaum, "Emotions," *Rolling Stone*, November 14, 1991, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-album-reviews/emotions-252643/ [accessed July 25, 2019].

[107] Roger D. Friedman, "The Sound of Sameness," *Spin Magazine*, December 1998, https://books.google.com/books?id=4wK_Oz2Yz7IC&pg=PA68&lpg=PA68&dq=spin+roger+friedman+mariah+carey&source=bl&ots=ERxh4aOizf&sig=8zU0kOrbIVXaMoLl8f6zeePWtoA&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiBityFyaHRAhXG7YMKHeXbC3QQ6AEIRzAH#v=onepage&q=spin%20roger%20friedman%20mariah%20carey&f=false [accessed September 3, 2019].

space is filled only with instrumental accompaniment. All choruses end with “higher than the heavens above,” which adds a spiritual element to this spirited love song and reinforces gospel associations. In the outro, Carey responds to lines one and three with “yes you do” and “yeah,” respectively. After this, during her whistle-register solo, the choir responds to itself in what is a sort of varied chorus performed by this simulated choir.

Solo vocals like those mentioned above flaunt Carey’s wide range and her array of available vocal timbres. As shown with bolded lyrics below, this is most dramatic when she sings in the whisper register at the end of the pre-choruses (on “inside”), and more elaborately at the end of the bridge (appropriately on “high”), and during the outro.

Table 6.8: Mariah Carey, “Emotions,” 1991[108]

Introduction :00 – :16	Textless vocal improvisation	
Chorus 1 :17 – :33	You've got me feeling emotions *Deeper than I've ever dreamed of* You've got me feeling emotions Higher than the heavens above	Second line performed with chorus, reinforces elaboration of first line with second “Heavens above” religious reference, strengthens gospel associations
Verse 1 :34 – :49	I feel good I feel nice I've never felt so satisfied I’m in love I’m alive intoxicated flying high	

[108] Mariah Carey, Robert, Clivillés, and David Cole, “Emotions,” track one on *Emotions*, Columbia, 1991, compact disc.

Table 6.8: Mariah Carey, “Emotions,” 1991, Continued

Pre-chorus 1 :50 – 1:06	It feels like a dream when you touch me tenderly I don't know if it's real but I like the way I feel **inside**	Whisper register
Chorus 2 1:07 – 1:23	You've got me feeling emotions *Deeper than I've ever dreamed of* You've got me feeling emotions Higher than the heavens above	
Verse 2 1:24 – 1:40	In the morning when I rise You are the first thing *on my mind* And in the middle of the night I feel your heartbeat next to mine	Performed by choir
Pre-chorus 2 1:41 – 1:56	It feels like a dream when you love me tenderly I don't know if you're for real but I like the way I feel **inside**	Whisper register
Chorus 3 1:57 – 2:30	You've got me feeling *emotions* *Deeper than I've ever dreamed of* You've got me feeling emotions higher than the heavens above Oh, you've got me feeling *emotions* *deeper than I've ever dreamed of* Oh baby, you've got me feeling emotions higher than the heavens above	
Bridge 2:31 – 3:11	You know the way to make me lose control When you're looking into my eyes You make me feel so **high** Oh, oh, babe, oh, babe Eh, alright, alright Ahh Ooh, ooh, hey, hey Whoa	3:04 transition to chorus 4 Whisper register Underlined text: echo

Table 6.8: Mariah Carey, “Emotions,” 1991, Continued

Chorus 4 3:12 – 3:28	You've got me feeling *emotions* *Deeper than I've ever dreamed of* Oh, you've got me feeling *emotions* *Emotions* Higher than the heavens above	Call and response with choir
Outro 3:29 – 4:08	Oh yeah, you've got me feeling emotions Yes you do Oh yeah, you've got me feeling emotions Yeah *Higher, emotions* *Deeper than I've ever dreamed of* Whoa, oh, you, emotions *emotions* ooh You got me feeling higher	Carey comments on her own statements 3:46: whistle-register figures Choral accompaniment with call and response within choir Carey returns in lower register

In fact, these pre-chorus and bridge lyrics were clearly written to provide a more appropriate place to sing in this high register, and the outro in particular provides time and aural space for Carey to exhibit this ability. Interestingly, these whistle register figures end at 3:58, and at 4:06 we hear the lowest pitch in the song. In between, we hear Carey laughing, as if highlighting the (unlikely) ease with which she demonstrates such a broad vocal range.

As demonstrated in these analyses, Houston and Carey both incorporate African-American elements within highly successful pop-friendly songs. The former artist’s approach could suggest that her race required her to downplay black stylistic influence, while Carey’s more ambiguous physical appearance motivated, or at least allowed, her to assert that part of her heritage. Carey’s more obvious black musical references may also help to prove Rischar’s conclusions that assertions of black musical culture were more acceptable in the mainstream beginning around 1990, even if the instrumental and vocal

call and response in "I Wanna Dance With Somebody (Who Loves Me)" from 1987 helps to retain a sense of Houston's black orientation. Houston's vocal elaborations, while not quite melismatic, and the use of a choral background singers in the choruses, certainly recall traditional African-American performing practices. Samuel A. Floyd, Jr. writes that "aesthetic deliberation about African-American music requires a perceptual and conceptual shift from the idea of music as an object to music as an event," and that "it is the singer – the one the one who not only sings but also modifies the song," who plays the most crucial expressive role through their alterations, or commentary on, both lyrics and vocal melody.[109] This summarizes the signifyin(g) practice to some extent, and it describes some elements of Carey and Houston's music. Both singers even utilize vocal commentary that Floyd specifically cites: Carey sings "Oh yeah,"[110] and both vocalists incorporate "embellishment and improvisation"[111] in their studio recordings.

These practices also recall Olly Wilson's concept of "the heterogeneous sound ideal." Wilson defines this as "a common approach to music making in which a kaleidoscopic range of dramatically contrasting qualities of sounds (timbre) is sought after in both vocal and instrumental music."[112] This variety of sounds includes the "myriad of vocal sounds used in performance (moans, groans, yells, screams, shouts,

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[109] Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., "The Object of Call-Response: The Signifyin(g) Symbol," in *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 232.
[110] Ibid., 233.
[111] Ibid., 232.
[112] Olly Wilson, "The Heterogeneous Sound Ideal in African-American Music (1992)," in *Signifyin(g), Sanctifyin', & Slam Dunking: A Reader in African American Expressive Culture*, ed. Gena Dagel Caponi (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 160.

shifts in sonority)."[113] Floyd connects Wilson's observations to his own concept of signifyin(g), and to "Call-Response tropings" more broadly.[114] Floyd also cites the ring shout as foundational for African-American music. This includes the spiritual, the genre in which "musical practices from throughout black culture converged."[115] Many elements cited in these two analyses recall Floyd's description of elements found in the spiritual, including call-and-response, "hums, moans, grunts, vocables, and other rhythmic-oral declamations…constant repetition[116] of rhythmic and melodic figures and phrases...timbral distortions of various kinds; musical individuality within collectivity" and so forth.[117] Floyd suggests using the qualities of the shout as a "frame in which all black-music analysis and interpretation can take place."[118] Even though much of the music analyzed in this chapter was targeted toward a mostly white mainstream, the analysis utilizes Floyd's approach to highlight elements of African-American musical culture that in many cases have been so thoroughly assimilated by others that they hardly seem inspired by black music without more careful consideration.

Rischar notes another challenge in analyzing such music: because vocals dominate such recordings, they "challenge the tendency to valorize the instrumental and compositional aspects of popular music found in musicological studies, although such a

[113] Ibid.
[114] Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., "The Object of Call-Response: The Signifyin(g) Symbol," 262.
[115] Samuel A. Floyd Jr., "Ring Shout! Literary Studies, Historical Studies, and Black Music Inquiry," *Black Music Research Journal* 11 (1991): 267.
[116] In the music analyzed here repetition is mostly found in accompanimental material.
[117] Samuel A. Floyd Jr., "Ring Shout! Literary Studies, Historical Studies, and Black Music Inquiry," 267-268.
[118] Ibid., 268.

study would retain the emphasis on musical athleticism."[119] This approach challenges that valued in rock, which frequently privileges virtuosity on electric guitar and other instruments. To analyze these vocals, a transcription would prove helpful, but this resource is not without its issues. First, as composer and music scholar Winkler notes, the goal is to "make a transcription, then analyze it,"[120] but "the transcription itself must itself rest on analytic presuppositions."[121] This means that expectations of the song, the style, the singer, and one's own taste and musical experience influence how the recording is heard and notated. As Winkler writes, he "was looking for specific things in the music, and [he] found them."[122] The Western notational system – its strengths and limitations – also influence transcription. John Shepherd notes that Western notation primarily evolved around Western music of the church and secular court, and reflects some elements of the tradition: a preference for clear, not varied, timbres, more precise pitch placement, and harmonic and thematic development in large-scale forms.[123] Analysis has privileged the score more than performances or recordings,[124] and the latter are what communicate all elements of the work, short of its reception.

What notation can help to illustrate for Houston and Carey is the virtuosity of their vocal ornamentation. The range of rhythmic complexity varies, but here I will

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[119] Richard Allen Rischar, "One Sweet Day: Vocal Ornamentation and Style in the African-American Popular Ballad, 1991-1995," 8.
[120] Peter Winkler, "Writing Ghost Notes: The Poetics and Politics of Transcription," in *Keeping Score: Music, Disciplinarity, Culture* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997), 194.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Ibid.
[123] John Shepherd, "Text," in *Key Terms in Popular Music and Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), 160-161.
[124] David Brackett, "Music," in *Key Terms in Popular Music and Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999) 126.

highlight Carey's work in verse two of "Dreamlover," from her 1993 album *Music Box*, and verse two of Houston's recording of "I Have Nothing," from the soundtrack to the 1992 film *The Bodyguard*. Figure 6.4 below illustrates how Carey adds a variety of ornaments to a repeated vocal line. In the first, line, for instance, she adds a sixteenth note on the second half of beat three to her performance of the last syllable of "another," thus creating an anticipation of the next pitch (F), on beat four. [125]

Figure 6.4: Mariah Carey, "Dreamlover" Verse two (partial), 1:44-2:24

I don't want a-no-ther pre-ten - der no to dis-i-llu-sion me one
more time Whis-per - in' words of for - e -
ver Playin' with my mind

On beat two of measure two of this verse, Carey adds four descending sixteenth notes on beat two, elongated the annunciation of the last syllable of "pretender." Following this, she sings a more elaborate figure on the word "time" that starts on a chromatic E-flat. In measure six, she emphasizes the last syllable of "forever" with an accented figure on beat two. This figure is notated as beginning with A – B-flat, but the second note could also be considered a B double-flat. At 100 beats per minute, these figures flow rather quickly as

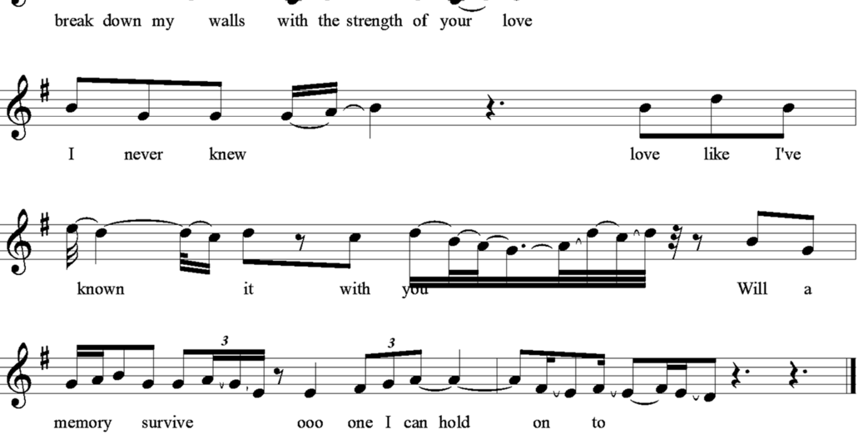
[125] Mariah Carey and Dave Hall, "Dreamlover," track on *Music Box*, Columbia, 1993, Compact disc; All discussion of this song references this recording and liner notes.

the song progresses, indicating Carey's skill at accurately performing appropriate ornaments for this mid-tempo song.

Much of Houston's ornamentation in "I Have Nothing" follows similar parameters – minimal additional notes that fill in melodic or rhythmic gaps.[126] However, the slower tempo makes these figures much more prominent, and at some points more elaborate ornaments call greater attention to themselves. In Figure 6.5 below, these more minimal gestures are clear in measures one, two, three, five, seven, and eight. In some cases, as in measure two, Houston adds a sixteenth-note embellishment to a longer note, thus maintaining interest and forward motion in an otherwise rhythmically static point in the phrase. Measure four introduces the first of the more virtuosic ornamentation, with a syncopated sixteenth-eight-note figure that ends on a quarter note. Houston sings this on the consonant syllable "mmm." The most dramatic melisma elongates and emphasizes the word "you" through most of beat three. As the notation suggests, this rhythmic complexity and compression makes the third beat of measure six the most emotionally expressive point in the verse. The increased volume in this measure adds to this effect, as does the lower pitch and relatively lower volume of the next two measures.

[126] David Foster and Linda Thompson, "I Have Nothing," track two on *The Bodyguard: Original Soundtrack Album*, Arista and BMG Entertainment, 1992, compact disc. All discussion of this song references this recording and liner notes.

Figure 6.5: Whitney Houston, “I Have Nothing,” Verse two



Western notation allows for the graphic representation of these elements, but subtle pitch variation, timbre, and rhythmic complexity are at least as important, if not more so, in many recordings, and they are difficult to notate in this system. For instance, in the first verse of “I Have Nothing,” Houston sings “Share my life / Take me for what I am / ‘Cause I’ll never change all my colors for you” in her head voice. In the second line, on “take,” she sings a grace note approximately a quarter tone lower than the word’s final pitch. On the line’s last word, “am,” Houston moves down from the primary pitch. The effect is subtle, as it nearly coincides with a rather abrupt ending to the line. These examples recall Winkler’s attempt to transcribe pitches sung by Aretha Franklin’s. He writes that her style “cannot adequately be represented as a succession of notes

understood as 'atoms of pitch – single, static points in music time and space.'"[127] Houston's intentional lack of precision in such cases recalls a similar principle: her selective lack of precision adds meaning that a more straightforward interpretation would lack. The variety of timbre in this recording also adds to the song's interpretation. Moving from verse one to pre-chorus one, Houston begins to sing in her chest voice. Combined with a louder volume and faster lyrical rhythm, this change marks a different state of mind than the preceding verse. The lyrics convey demands to the lover addressed by Houston, but pre-chorus one sounds much more aggressive (see below for lyrics).

Whitney Houston, "I Have Nothing," verse one and pre-chorus one lyrics

Verse One	**Pre-Chorus One**
Share my life, take me for what I am	I don't really need to look very much further
'Cause I'll never change all my colors for you	I don't wanna have to go where you don't follow
Take my love, I'll never ask for too much	I won't hold it back again, this passion inside
Just all that you are and everything that you do	Can't run from myself, there's nowhere to hide

Much of Carey's work in the late 1990s incorporated more of a fuzzy vocal timbre and soft volume, almost like that of a whisper, singing in her head voice. In "Honey," from her 1997 album *Butterfly*, she showcased both this new approach and her chest and head voice.[128] This song serves as an example of how the layers in a thick homophonic texture can vary in timbre, with each conveying its appropriate material. An example of these timbres used simultaneously can be found in the second chorus (2:32-

[127] Peter Winkler, "Writing Ghost Notes: The Poetics and Politics of Transcription,"190; Winkler's writing cites Robert O. Gjerdingen, "Shape and Motion in the Microstructure of Song" *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 6 (1988): 36**.**
[128] Mariah Carey, Sean Combs, Kamaal Fareed, Steven Jordan, Stephen Hague, Bobby Robinson, Ronald Larkins, Larry Price, and Malcolm McLaren, "Honey," track one on *Butterfly*, Columbia, 1997, compact disc.

2:52 album version or 4:30-4:50). In this section, layers of whispery vocals perform the basic chorus material, while melismatic improvised figures flow in between and over this content in her chest voice. Carey also alternates between timbres successively within a section, as in verse two (2:13-2:32 album version or 4:10-4:29 video edit), the lyrics of which are reproduced below.

Mariah Carey, "Honey," Verse Two

I can't be elusive with you, honey (I like that)
'Cause it's blatant that I'm feeling *you*
And it's too hard for me to leave abruptly
You're the only thing I wanna *do*

This section is mostly sung in chest voice, with some figures in a clear-timbre head voice. However, the whispery timbre is used for the words "you" at 2:21 and "do" at 2:30. Carey's flexible rhythmic articulation also adds an important element to this song. The vocal melody often begins on off-beats, and Carey accentuates this by singing on the latter part of the beat. Inspired by sampled elements of "Hey DJ" by World's Famous Supreme Team,[129] Carey reproduces the rhythmic tension of the keyboard figure with by accenting off-beats with a more relaxed sense of rhythm.

These descriptions of Carey and Houston serve as examples of Western notation's shortcomings, especially for music originally conceived as a recording, not as written notation. This rhythmic play would appear overly complex in writing and would lack information about how the recording actually sounds. Carey's timbral variety would be reduced to adjectives (as it is here, but without a thorough explanation). And Houston's

[129] Various contributors, "'Honey' by Mariah Carey," whosampled.com, https://www.whosampled.com/Mariah-Carey/Honey/ [accessed August 20, 2019].

quarter-tone grace notes could look avant-garde when interpretive might be a better way to describe them. Even Western art music, developing simultaneously with notation, must rely on oral transmission to some degree, whether directly (instructor to student, a live performance) or indirectly (a recording).[130]

The utilization of such vocal ornamentation challenges an expectation that expressions of African-American style "connect with mainstream aesthetic models" lest they be relegated to the R&B market and potentially face critics' ridicule.[131] Clearly, music with African-American influences was attractive to the mainstream, even if those influences were less obvious than that of R&B-oriented artists. Critics have been more difficult to please. For example, Gerri Hirshey, writes that performances and recordings that did not meet these expectations in the 1960s were said to suffer from a "syndrome" called "oversouling."[132] The late 1990s "vocal contortionists" (as Hershey describes Carey, Bolton, and Céline Dion) endured similar criticism, but often without a racialized name for highly emotive and frequently virtuosic vocal style. Or, as William Ruhlmann describes it, these musicians "oversing."[133]

The limitations on the incorporation of black musical style and criticism of vocal style highlight the unavoidable association of vocals and race. Timbre in particular has been used as an identifier of both the individual and group identity of singers. In terms of African-American vocalists, this could refer to hearing some vocalists as "black" due to

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[130] Peter Winkler, "Writing Ghost Notes: The Poetics and Politics of Transcription," 172.
[131] Richard Allen Rischar, "One Sweet Day: Vocal Ornamentation and Style in the African-American Popular Ballad, 1991-1995," 125.
[132] Gerri Hirshey, "The Nineties," *Rolling Stone*, November 13, 1997.
[133] William Ruhlmann, "The 1990s: The Digital Revolution Begins." In *Breaking Records: 100 Years of Hits* (New York: Routledge, 2004) 197. Please see introduction for a more complete quotation of Ruhlmann's writing.

connecting a similar timbre or vocal style to black vocalists. Nina Eidsheim writes that, "where race is believed to be a stable category, it is then believed to be audible in vocal timbre."[134] Miriama Young writes that, through repeated and focused listening of records, "listeners…began to distinguish between different performers, and to gradually become attached to certain labels and artists." This led to the "present-day adoration and valorization of the musical star."[135] In the context of Eidsheim's writing, Young's statements reinforce the idea that listeners work to identify vocal characteristics with the goal of determining the identity of the vocalist. This statement refers to a broad listener experience, but Eidsheim's discussion focuses on how social and individual views on race affect both basic identification of a vocalist in terms of race, and the qualitative assessment resulting from the perceived identity of the singer. She writes,

> "what underpins such assessments is the general belief that we can identify and know sound. Once the assumption is in place that sound is knowable, what then becomes 'knowable' through sound are values and beliefs in a given society – concerning, say, race, ethnicity, gender, or class. In other words, when the beliefs are in place that we can know sound, and that the meaning we infer from it is stable, then *whatever we believe is projected onto the sound*."[136]

Much has been written about the connection between timbre and its production. Kate Heidemann writes that "vocal timbre telegraphs the interior state of a moving body,

[134] Nina Eidsheim, "The Micropolitics of Listening to Vocal Timbre," *Postmodern Culture* 24 (2014): 9.
[135] Miriama Young, "Latent Body – Plastic, Malleable, Inscribed: The Human Voice, the Body and the Sound of its Transformation Through Technology," *Contemporary Music Review* 25 (2006): 86.
[136] Nina Eidsheim, "The Micropolitics of Listening to Vocal Timbre," 7. Emphasis in original.

presenting the listener with blueprints for way of being and feeling."[137] Describing the "visceral nature of music listening,"[138] Heidemann describes the physiological response to vocals as mimetic, or the "physical sensations affiliated with music perception and conceptualization."[139] That is, listening to music inspires a physiological response, such that the listener imagines how the vocal apparatus and body produce those sounds and imitate them, either internally or externally. Because, as Young writes, "as listeners, we can only ever *imagine* the artist we hear in a recording. . . the listener will unwittingly use timbral clues to create a visual imagining of the physical image they hear."[140] Heidemann describes the listening process and subsequent physiological, or simply intellectual, response, as one that emerges from engagement with the recording through a lens (so to speak) of previous experience.

Although voices on a record are disembodied, and music video merely adds a visual (not physical) element to the dissemination of popular music, physicality is always a factor in reception. When a listener identifies a vocalist as black, social and cultural assumptions an individual makes about African-American bodies and people factor into assessments of the music. As an example, take a piece on black vocalists of the early 2000s by Ann Powers titled "The New Conscience of Pop Music." Powers describes the music of Mary J. Blige, Destiny's Child, and Missy Elliot as influenced by hip-hop. As such, these artists are "more individualistic, more confrontational," and their songs take

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[137] Kate Heidemann, "A system for Describing Vocal Timbre in Popular Song," *Music Theory Online* 22 (2016): 1.
[138] Ibid., 2.
[139] Ibid., 4.
[140] Miriama Young, "Latent Body – Plastic, Malleable, Inscribed: The Human Voice, the Body and the Sound of its Transformation Through Technology," 90. Emphasis in original.

on some of rap's more aggressive elements "instead of merely floating past them on a cushion of strings and strummed guitars."[141] She compares this approach to that which "demand[s] attention…through prettiness" – that of divas who achieved fame earlier.[142] Powers writes that, since Houston and Carey have adopted musical and visual elements, they "have made some of the best music of their careers."[143] More "authentic" blackness inspired greater aesthetic appreciation from Powers.

Eidsheim writes that "non-sonic aspects, including preconceptions of race, tend to influence how sound is perceived."[144] Considering how prominently these women were marketed through visual media such as posters, television performances, music videos, and CD liners, it seems only natural that this would factor into reception. In fact, such material was designed to help build the brand of these artists and maximize on their musical talent and skill, their charismatic presence, and their physical appearance in a way that would likely achieve a desired result from listeners. For example, Kristen J. Lieb writes that the early public image of Mariah Carey aimed for "the subtle presentation of her beauty, not her sexuality [and] this slowed down her path" through the cycle of fame and a loss of relevance.[145] Houston's path was similarly planned, but her personal struggles derailed her career.[146] All of this is to say that assessments of vocals incorporate a lot more than the vocals in isolation, or even with musical accompaniment.

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[141] Ann Powers, "The New Conscience of Pop Music," in *The Pop Rock and Soul Reader: Histories and Debates* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 495-496.
[142] Ibid.
[143] Ibid.
[144] Nina Eidsheim, "Voice as Action: Toward a Model for Analyzing the Dynamic Construction of a Racialized Voice," *Current Musicology* 93 (2012): 10.
[145] Kristen J. Lieb, *Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry: The Social Construction of Female Popular Music Stars*, 127.
[146] Ibid., 127-128.

The changing image and fortunes of Houston and Carey demonstrate this: the "not-so-nice" black sound and image recalled activism and otherness for many in the mostly white mainstream audience and appealed to R&B's demographic.

In addition to the issue of race, the fact that these singers are clearly identified, both aurally and visually, as women has shaped perceptions of the music, as has the predominantly female composition of the fan base. Such emotive material rejects the expectation for women to maintain a pleasing composure in public, even though such behavior can constitute evidence that women are emotionally unstable or immature.[147] Even in this more traditional performative role, women can rebel, but positive reception is far from guaranteed.

With the preceding analyses and comments in mind, the next section examines the role of music critics and scholars in shaping the reception of public personae and musical contributions of Houston and Carey. By reflecting on their navigation, as women, of a tenuous social and political environment, and their accomplishments as recording artists, producers, and (in Carey's case) composers, a more charitable perspective takes shape than that offered by existing writing on these artists.

Genre Bias in Music Criticism and Analysis

These artists have achieved massive sales, worldwide fame, and inspired the adoration of millions of fans. Clearly, however, music critics are not among these

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[147] Joanne Gottleib and Gayle Wald, "Smells Like Teen Spirit: Riot Grrrls, Revolution, and Women in Rock," in *The Popular Music Studies Reader*, ed. Andy Bennett, Barry Shank, and Jason Toynbee (New York: Routledge, 2006) 359. This source focuses on performance practices for female punk rockers, but some points, like that paraphrased above, translate to expectations and assumptions about female behavior or a larger scale.

engaged admirers. While critics have made positive comments about the work of Houston and Carey, they were often qualified by highly critical statements. For example, a generally positive review of Mariah Carey's third album *Music Box* concludes as follows: "In fact, *Music Box* is so precisely calculated to be a blockbuster that its impact is ultimately a little unnerving." Here, the quality that inspires author Stephen Holden's suspicion is its "madeness," a term coined by Jason Lee Oakes to describe "the songwriting and/or technological craft that goes into…production."[148] While the planning and production Holden finds problematic is not limited to pop records like Carey's, it seems like this is where it is typically recognized. Where a highly produced rock album might be noted for creatively using the studio as a compositional tool, pop artists, particularly women, face assumptions that the studio allowed others to cynically craft songs and tracks that will mesmerize a passive audience while hiding the artist's deficiencies. Such claims – of "madeness" –have been used to justify critique of artists' and songs' emotional sincerity and aesthetic worth, and to question the agency of the star, regardless of their involvement in the project. The result of this "calculation" is deemed low quality, or "bad music," because of the demonstration of what Oakes describes as its "forthright display of the human effort and calculation that went into a product."[149] The music becomes something other than music, judged by assumptions about the artist's frequently questioned involvement in the process. Even Carey, with her years of songwriting and production experience, still faces questions about whether she has done

[148] Jason Lee Oakes, "Pop Music Racial Imagination, and the Sounds of Cheese," in *Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate*, 54.
[149] Ibid., 54

these things to any significant extent. Early in her career, critics suggested that her vocals were studio-produced until she recorded *MTV: Unplugged*.[150]

What comes across for many music critics, and some members of the public, as real and significant about both Houston and Carey is their status as difficult, unstable women. They want too much, work too hard at too many tasks, and when they fail publicly, they only prove what was assumed about them from the beginning: their claims of accomplished, assertive musicianship and mature personal behavior was a façade. Ron Moy concurs, writing that "even on those rare occasions when a female musician has gained control over many aspects of her career…any perceived creative [or personal] lapses are seized upon by critics as exemplifying overambition, with the artist needing to spread the authorial load (presumably by seeking male help)."[151] This recalls the previously-quoted comment describing Clive Davis as a "Svengali" and Houston an unwitting accomplice, as well as assumptions about the role of marketing and production tricks in Carey's success (not to mention having been married to the president of Sony Music). In addition, the 2000 *Rolling Stone* article by Mim Udovitch that describes the apparent expectation for female artists to look sexy also describes Carey as a "busy diva" and a "dizzy dame," but he notes that "her dizziness in no way indicates a lack of purpose or intelligence; if anything it indicates an excess of those qualities. She is happy, she is in charge, and she is happy to be in charge."[152] The last sentence seems flattering enough, but the clause preceding it implies that Carey's focus and intellect are liabilities when

[150] Tommy Mottola, *Hitmaker: The Man and His Music*, 239. Carey's *MTV: Unplugged* was successful enough that the network replayed it three times as much as other episodes.
[151] Ron Moy, *Authorship Roles in Popular Music* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 25.
[152] Mim Udovitch, "The Whirling Diva (Mariah Carey)," *Rolling Stone*, February 17, 2000 [accessed July 26, 2019].

they should be identified as assets. Furthermore, the worst aspect of such statements is their authors' apparent ignorance of their negative connotations.

When both artists endured public downfalls, critics, and some members of the public, were ready to point to overworking and/or poor decision making, and these events worked to their detriment. Houston's volatile marriage and struggle with drug abuse were well-documented by an eager press.[153] Carey's unplanned appearance on *Total Request Live* in 2001, in which she showed up with an ice cream cart and behaved erratically, was followed a few days later by hospitalization. The brevity of this episode has not discouraged continuing recollections of Carey's meltdown: in 2016, a Refinery29 article titled "15 Years Ago Today, Mariah Carey Stripped, Brought Ice Cream to *TRL*."[154]

Beyond Houston and Carey, other singers have experienced personal struggles in the public eye, and the press responded with characteristically gleeful cruelty. In a 2005 interview on *Larry King Live*, just after Hurricane Katrina, Céline Dion emphatically argued for leniency for mostly African-American looters in New Orleans and then sang "A Prayer" to honor those who had died and who were struggling to survive.[155] Carl Wilson points to Dion's Québécoise identity and her childhood in an impoverished

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[153] Rob Markman, "A Timeline of Whitney Houston's Battle with Drug Abuse," *mtv.com/news*, http://www.mtv.com/news/2497086/whitney-houston-drug-abuse-timeline/ [accessed August 20, 2019].
[154] MTV, "Mariah Carey's Ice Cream Meltdown," *mtv.com*, http://www.mtv.com/video-clips/8q204f/mariah-carey-s-ice-cream-meltdown [accessed August 20, 2019]; Greg Heller, "VH1 Edits Out Bizarre Mariah Clip," *Rolling Stone*, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/vh1-edits-out-bizarre-mariah-clip-244028/ [accessed August 20, 2019]; Vanessa Golembewski, "15 Years Ago Today, Mariah Carey Stripped, Brought Ice Cream to *TRL*," refinery29.com, https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2016/07/116815/mariah-carey-trl-breakdown [accessed August 20, 2019].
[155] Carl Wilson, *Let's Talk About Love: Why Other People Have Such Bad Taste*, 25, 38-39.

family as two crucial elements missing in most people's criticism of her behavior, which Wilson describes as conveying the theme "'Céline Dion goes crazy!'"[156] What he misses is that Dion lost her emotional composure on television, a mistake even more serious for a woman than seeming "too cold." The most dramatic case is one that *Rolling Stone* author Vanessa Grigorgiadis describes as "the most public downfall of any star in history" – that of Britney Spears.[157] Grigoriadis's article is titled "The Tragedy of Britney Spears," but includes the following passage, which makes light of an altercation: "Before her first hospitalization, Britney shut herself in the bathroom with her youngest son for three hours, wearing only panties, arguing with cops who tried to give her a sweater. "Don't cover me up," she said. "I'm fucking hot." – meaning warm, although the other interpretation of the word is funnier." Finding humor in an incident involving a young child and an unstable mother seems inappropriate, but Spears was then a diva (though not a virtuosic one) experiencing a profound crisis for all the world to see. Of course journalists and the public would take pleasure in documenting and observing her misfortune.

Men in similar circumstances tend to become either tragic geniuses or resurgent heroes in the public eye. Sociologist Patricia Donze writes that "the romantic myth of the insane artist is a powerful cultural representation and foundational component of artistic talent," but that "this is myth is gendered…as these positive connotations of insanity are

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[156] Ibid., 25.
[157] Vanessa Grigoriadis, "The Tragedy of Britney Spears," *Rolling Stone*, February 21, 2008, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/the-tragedy-of-britney-spears-241056/ [accessed August 20, 2019].

reserved for male artists."[158] For example, Eric Clapton struggled for many years with substance abuse, but his reputation only seems to have been strengthened by issues often portrayed for men as a rite of passage: blues/rock artist battles with the devil to gain valuable perspective and enhanced creative powers. Female artists' (pop artists in particular) trials more often focus on romantic relationships, childrearing, and other domestic matters that often delegitimize them – Houston, (especially) Carey, and Dion recovered personally and professionally from their struggle to differing degrees. Coverage of Spears still often mentions her meltdown, especially when evidence of mental illness emerges. Regardless of the circumstances of their struggles and how they behaved afterword, "crazy" – rather than complicated or even world-weary – is still attached to these women's reputations.

Such assumptions of instability and weak personal character feed into the idea of divas battling one another out of a desire for prestige or a larger fan base. Producer for both Carey and Houston Narada Michael Walden described competition and artistic insecurity in Aretha Franklin, Whitney Houston, and Mariah Carey as both Franklin and Carey engaged with Houston or her recordings. This indicates that these artists were aware of one another, and of their tenuous position as reigning stars.[159] It bears noting, though, that Franklin recorded or performed with both artists, indicating that professional self-interest, and respect, prevailed. In addition, when questioned with comparisons between her and Carey, Houston concluded that though some similarities existed in

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[158] Patricia Lynne Donze, *Pop Stars and Gender: The Relation of Representation, Promotion, and Listener Preferences to Artist* (Ph.D diss, University of California-Los Angeles, 2011), 20.
[159] Narada Michael Walden, *Whitney Houston: The Voice, The Music, The Inspiration*, 78-80, 100.

performing style, both artists brought different elements to their work, and that neither could be considered superior: "I think that Mariah is Mariah, and that's what she should be known for."[160]

In any case, competition certainly informs how divas are marketed. "VH1 Divas," a taped lived performance consisting of several divas' solos, duets, and group performances, has suggested that these women square off against one another in this context since the program's inception in 1998. As previously noted, Columbia hoped that Carey would compete with Houston. These practices suggest ongoing or potential catfights between insecure women battling for the prize of top diva. That the industry seems complicit in this framing is an understatement, a conclusion reinforced by the "great 1995 pop diva pileup":[161] between October 2 and October 10, Madonna, Mariah Carey, Whitney Houston, and Janet Jackson all released material. In addition to the previous quotation, Degen Pener describes the event as going "trill-to-trill," and includes stats for each artist.[162] This latter point highlights the fascination with this high-stakes battle for massive commercial success, which is portrayed as though only one victor can emerge. To this end, Donze writes that, "by framing promotion in a way that symbolically pits token women against each other as contestants in the sport of symbolic dominance of men by other men, this practice devalues the contribution of the stars themselves and divides women who…might themselves which to collaborate with each

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[160] ccishot564, "Whitney Houston 7 notes in under 1 second (vocal agility)," YouTube video, published February 21, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=He3MviRoacg [accessed July 20, 2019].
[161] Degen Pener, "Divas Duke it Out on the Charts," *Entertainment Weekly* October 6, 1995, https://ew.com/article/1995/10/06/divas-duke-it-out-charts/ [accessed July 20, 2019]; cited in Gerri Hirshey, "The Nineties," *Rolling Stone*, November 13, 1997.
[162] Ibid.

other."[163] Donze notes that promotional practices disrespect men as well, so perhaps this is more "a problem of the industry and not a problem of gender discrimination."[164] After all, the perceived battle between divas is not for respect, but for fame, sales, and recognition of raw ability – hardly the stuff of male artists' industry struggles.

The press certainly has played a role in such depictions, but a near-absence of scholarly analysis on female pop artists' music suggests that academics have determined this material unworthy of study. Numerous sociological studies on industry promotion, gender politics elucidate challenges like those described above, but few in-depth musical analyses explore how music, lyrics, and interpretation function together and create potential meanings. This contrasts with work on artists designated female-singer-songwriters, whose obvious compositional role, less obvious studio role, documented skills as instrumentalists, and less sexualized marketing set them apart from pop stars to suggest alignment with the critically-approved genre of rock. Significantly, they are also mostly white.[165] Scholars such as Lori Burns and Mélisse Lafrance tease apart these women's compositions, in the process legitimizing this music, and these artists, as aesthetically valuable.[166]

Perhaps female-singer-songwriters (such as Sarah McLachlan and Tori Amos, who were most popular in the 1990s) offer a more appealing point of identification, since

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[163] Patricia Lynne Donze, *Pop Stars and Gender: The Relation of Representation, Promotion, and Listener Preferences to Artistic Success*," 24.
[164] Ibid.
[165] Rupert Till, "Singer-Songwriter Authenticity, the Unconscious and Emotions (Feat. Adele's 'Someone Like You')," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Singer-Songwriter*, ed. Katherine Williams and Justin A. Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 295
[166] Lori Burns and Mélisse Lafrance, *Disruptive Divas: Feminism, Identity, and Popular Music* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

they seem to have avoided demands that they perform only as mere singers (a traditional role for women), and both their music and images project conventional femininity. These are mature artists writing for grown women, while, as Diane Railton notes, "the pleasures of 'pop' are something that we must learn to grow out of,"[167] or even reject to prove one's competence (since many adult women love and purchase pop records) . These are problematic approaches to pop considering the genre's popularity on Adult Contemporary stations. In fact, judgements made about this music may have inspired critics' conclusions about pop audiences. As Kembrew McLeod writes, such artists have a "significant audience among women. Critics' [and scholars'] near-uniform reaction to such artists may be based as much on aesthetic reasons as on the need to carve out a distinct identity for themselves in opposition to these artists' audiences."[168]

While the contributions of female-singer-songwriters and other rock-identified artists add valuable observations and perspectives through their music, women rockers still find themselves featured by critics in "women in rock" articles that call attention to their work while marginalizing them within this category, portraying them as a novelty, and then ignoring them until the next such issue.[169] Women continue to struggle for recognition within masculine-coded rock, and criticism of female pop artists (or male artists with a mostly female audience) tends to use derogatory gendered language to

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[167] Diane Railton, "The Gendered Carnival of Pop," *Popular Music* 20: 2001, 330.
[168] Kembrew McLeod, "Between Rock and a Hard Place: Gender and Rock Criticism, in *Pop Music and the Press*, ed. Steve Jones, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 102
[169] Marion Leonard, "Rock and Masculinity," in *Gender in the Music Industry: Rock, Discourse, and Girl Power* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 34-36.

describe the features, and audience, of the music. Women in music, not just women in rock, struggle for respect in a male-dominated society.

This begs the question of whether avoiding in-depth analysis of such artists' music helps to challenge the status quo, and or if it harms the cause of women musicians because it implicitly calls into question their integrity. Drawing attention to supposedly anti-feminist images and musical choices instead of documenting achievements serves to discredit pop artists while maintain the distinction of rock as superior. Just as more than approach to feminism rightly exists, so too various routes to aesthetic achievement and impression management (to borrow Erving Goffman's term[170]) can lead to valuable contributions. In this patriarchal society, perhaps the best role for feminist scholars is to investigate a variety of female artists, not just the ones who seem to meet standards that typically benefit male musicians.

Conclusion: Romance in Public

This male-centered myth of genius, the assumption of excessive technological intervention, and qualms about racial representation have all contributed to critics' and scholars' negative conclusions (or telling silence) about these divas' (and others') contributions. However, stating that Houston, Carey, or other such artists are "crazy" non-geniuses, aren't involved in composition and production, and either hide or appropriate racial elements for greater commercial success is hardly necessary when all one has to do is describe an artist or the music as "pop" to achieve proper derision for

[170] Erving Goffman, "Performances," in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959), 10-46.

particular public personas, musical styles, audiences, and even radio formats. Significantly for many female artists, term "pop" has a way of reducing public recognition of their agency in whichever roles they play. As this chapter has argued, artists like Houston and Carey were so valued as exceptional singers that their taste eventually determined their recording material. This allowed them to record songs with settings informed by contemporary black music and to change public image. In Carey's case, her personal clout allowed her to move to a different recording company twice when the working environment had become hostile to her intentions in the late 1990s and early 2000s. These facts can easily get lost in the slew of media coverage that frames these artists' struggles as evidence of immaturity or incompetence.

Within pop, the ballad in particular has faced perhaps the most derision. In many cases, such negative commentary has focused on the abject feminine, as though this maligned genre and the female gender are naturally connected. As Rischar writes, "for a woman to sing a ballad is a natural thing, in the sense that it is normative and non-ironic."[171] This statement suggests that men performing ballads can have a comedic effect, whether they purposefully exaggerate the genre's performative and lyrical elements in a way that ridicules them or perform the song earnestly, thus questioning calling the singer's masculinity into question. This suggests that ballads, with their outsized musical elements and presumably insincere, clichéd lyrical content, should generate ironic performing and listening practices for listeners who otherwise engage with "good" music – that is, rock. As the feminine-coded category that gives rock its

[171] Richard Allen Rischar, "One Sweet Day: Vocal Ornamentation and Style in the African-American Popular Ballad, 1991-1995," 137.

oppositional and aesthetically superior meaning, pop does much more than describe its own associations. As a genre within pop, the ballad acquires much of its meaning through its coding as a conveyer of feminized, commercialized, sentimental material associated with a marginalized population (women).

This helps to explain how many reviews of Houston's and Carey's music incorporate variations of the problematic "oversinging" and "oversouling" comments discussed earlier in this chapter. For example, Rischar writes that "in popular discourse" Whitney Houston's hit cover of Dolly Parton's "I Will Always Love You" "became a symbol of vocal excess and pop histrionics.[172] And in an otherwise positive review of Carey's 1999 album *Rainbow*, *Rolling Stone* writer Arion Burger writes, "*Rainbow*'s ballads are predictably banal."[173] Incorporating both artists in the same egregious insult, journalist Jim Farber writes that "Whitney and Mariah give us ersatz gospel and supper-club soul,"[174] It seems as though the emotional expression in these songs is deemed insincere in part because of its intensity, and the hybrid of gospel and pop, or soul and pop, is considered invalid. So a black pop singer, or a white pop singer appropriating black musical style, must convey emotion without "oversinging," and incorporate just the right enough among of black influence to avoid "oversouling" yet still sound expressive. Given such complex negotiations, it hardly seems fitting to condescendingly suggest that these ballads are "just love songs."

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[172] Ibid., 140.
[173] Arion Berger, "Rainbow," *Rolling Stone*, November 25, 1999, https://www.rolling stone.com/music/music-album-reviews/rainbow-190409/ [accessed July 19, 2019].
[174] Jim Farber, "Unison," *Entertainment Weekly*, January 25, 1991, https://ew.com/art icle/1991/01/25/unison/ [accessed January 19, 2019]; cited in Linda Lister, "Divification: The Deification of Modern Female Pop Stars," *Popular Music and Society* 23, 2001, 2

Such criticism frequently suggests a sense of short-sightedness and disposability for both this material and the industry that produces it. That is, extremely popular, female-oriented love songs must be cynical creations of the modern music industry expertly crafted and marketed to generate profits. And a radio format that has played this music since its initial period of popularity and has generated high ratings compared to other formats is just cashing in. To describe the scope of this perception as narrow would be an understatement, since addressing the subject of romance hardly began with the advent of the modern popular music industry. Discussing nineteenth century opera, musicologist Ted Gioia writes that "songs [that] express romantic yearnings and the laments of the lovelorn [was] hardly a new development in Western music," even if "the scope of these yearnings and feelings tend to be far more expansive than those found in" earlier material.[175] Though this material emerged in the context of the period's Romanticism,[176] one can easily argue that the idealization and pursuit of intense emotions and experiences has continued. Richard Crawford notes that, by the 1920s, portrayals of "courtship and romantic love…emerged as absorbing, sometimes mysterious personal adventures."[177]

Discussing romance at the end of the 20th century, Eva Illouz notes the continuation, even intensification, of this conception in the modern world. She describes a "collapse of overarching, life-long romantic narratives" that have been replaced in

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[175] Ted Gioia, *Love Songs: The Hidden History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 165.
[176] Ibid.
[177] Richard Crawford, "The Golden Age of the American Musical," in *America's Musical Life: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 669.

postmodern culture by “the briefer and repeatable form of the affair.”[178] She connects this preference for short, intense experiences to the influence of capitalism. That is, “consumption rests on the drive toward excitation because the purchase and experience of new commodities are a source of pleasure, and the affair, with all the excitement of a new lover, feeds this drive as well.”[179] The postmodern individual seeks out one novel experience after another, only making a selection after viewing many options – this describes the experience of shopping for shoes or a car, as much as it describes dating.[180]

Illouz notes that this intensity is realized in the most conventionalized sources: movies, music, literature. These idealized expressions can feel the most real, “even if, when reflected upon, they are readily viewed as ‘unreal.’”[181] That is, these cultural products may engender perceptions that feel the most sincere, but they can also “generate irony and self-consciousness.”[182] These observations reflect the emotional engagement with love songs and the understanding that these depictions might not reflect one’s reality. Their intensity engenders both a sense of realness and a suspicion of fiction, even as one might expect real life to match the lyrics and musical elements.

Illouz also observes that members of the educated middle class that she interviewed as part of her study tend to display “an elaborate anticonsumerist ethos,” rejecting romantically-themed products, convention, consumption, and “emphatic expressions of emotion.”[183] These respondents seem incredibly conflicted about

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[178] Eva Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1997), 173.
[179] Ibid.
[180] Ibid.
[181] Ibid., 183.
[182] Ibid.
[183] Ibid., 253.

commoditized expressions of romantic sentiment: “not only were they avid consumers of romantic commodities but also they were likely to experience the *stereotypical* romantic moments they otherwise often deride.”[184] The difference is how consumption of these products differs with one’s class. Financial resources and social standing can influence these “romantic moments,” which can create a sense of superiority for one able to purchase or aesthetically enjoy something out of reach for someone with less money and cultural competency. So a middle-class listener may express discomfort with or derision of sentimental depictions of romance, but many enjoy them anyway, as long as they come in the right package. Thus, rock’s love songs have been appreciated as all-time greats expressing significant elements of human experience in an aesthetically valuable way, while pop’s love songs (ballads in particular) can be described by this group as unintellectual, feminized, and baldly commercial. That the AC format has generated healthy advertising revenues only adds to such derisive assumptions, since such stations have programmed ballads as a means of making money.

Since women – as both artists and listeners – are more readily identified with pop than with rock, and pop has come to represent the values that the educated, middle-class listeners ostensibly stand against, the stereotyping of pop and the people connected to it connects to a lower social stature. For female musicians, and musicians with a predominantly female audience, this results in what scholar Megan Berry describes as “the difficulty female musicians in the popular music industry have traditionally had attaining commercial success whilst gaining or maintaining artistic credibility.”[185] This is

[184] Ibid., 262. Emphasis in original.
[185] Megan Berry, “Gender Identity, The Queer Gaze, and Female Singer-Songwriters,” in

reflected in assessments of divas like William Ruhlmann's in this chapter's introduction: He writes that Whitney Houston and Mariah Carey "wildly oversing, investing with gobs of undifferentiated emotional force lyrics that did not justify all that embellishment."[186] Also noted in the introduction is an unstated, possibly unintentional critique of gospel-influenced singing.

Ruhlman does suggest that Carey's mixed race helped her appeal to more listeners, and that "she was younger and lighter-skinned [than Whitney Houston], attributes that, however crass it may be to admit, contributed to her breakthrough and her ability to remain commercially successful throughout the decade."[187] Even if Carey's ambiguous ethnicity allowed greater acceptance by the mainstream audience, her emphasis on R&B and hip-hop initiated in in the latter half of the decade pushed them away, demonstrating that her skin color was less important than the "color" of her music. The same proved true for Houston, whose fan base became more limited after her stylistic change. The singers that Ruhlmann (and likely others) identifies with the AC format succeeded in this realm with material that incorporated appropriated black musical style.

The features described above – timbral variety, call-and-response, rhythmic complexity, and so forth – had become American music more than black music, and thus appealed to adult white female radio listeners. These statements call attention to the racial profile of American popular music, of the music contributed by these two artists, of AC

Cambridge Companion to the Singer-Songwriter, ed. Katherine Williams and Justin A. Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 246.

[186] William Ruhlmann, "The 1990s: The Digital Revolution Begins," in *Breaking Records: 100 Years of Hits* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 196-197.

[187] Ibid.

playlists, and of adult women with discretionary income. The material in this chapter calls attention to biases some assumed had been neutralized, biases disseminated on a format that some have defined as a politically unimportant one.

The arguments here also suggest the complex negotiations that take place for American listeners. Judging by sales figures, many Americans love and consume "romantic commodities," but asserting dominance through gender, class, and race-based bias has come to play an increasingly important role in a country in which more citizens have less material power. Avoiding music that's "too black," or criticizing music that's "too white" could be as much an act of individual social positioning as reflections on commercialism and aesthetic value. The conclusion that follows explores how acceptable genres have changed in the 21st century to include pop, even if some of its practitioners still await their reappraisal.

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CHAPTER SEVEN:
WOMEN'S MUSIC AND GENDERED FICTIONS ON ADULT CONTEMPORARY

Earlier in radio's history, shaping content to draw in a female audience included conclusions that women were naturally more emotional, less confident, fond of fantasy over real life, and in need of simplified material, namely in advertisements, to help them appreciate a message.[1] By the mid-1970s, very little additional research had been done on women listeners, who worked outside the home in increasing numbers but still made most household buying decisions. To draw women to some stations, Middle-of-the-Road (MOR, the precursor to AC) playlists were "softened" to appeal more to this stereotyped woman, by playing feminine-coded soft rock and pop.[2] DJs' and programmers' approaches changed as well, with many playlists specifically geared toward what they perceived as the modern adult woman.[3] When MOR became AC by the end of the 1970s, it drew in a broad audience, but the "adult woman demographic" was still the target.[4] A model for a radio format designed to attract these women had thus emerged, even with the deficient audience research.

Those early observations about women seem problematic by some standards, but they join statements about specific artists played on AC that have been well tolerated. For example, William Ruhlmann's description of Michael Bolton's voice as "wheezy" joins his previously quoted characterization of Mariah Carey and Whitney Houston as

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[1] Kim Simpson, *Early '70s Radio: The American Format Revolution* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 67.
[2] Ibid., 69.
[3] Ibid., 82-88.
[4] Ibid., 87.

"investing…gobs of undifferentiated force" into their singing. In line with this negative perception, journalist Vince Aletti writes that the work of one of Houston's producers (Walden) is "neo-conservative pop, perfect fodder for Adult Contemporary radio, where contemporary is an assurance that nothing disturbingly novel will be heard."[5] Based on these statements, one could conclude that these artists' work, with its apparent excess of emotion and lack of innovation, plays in isolation on these formats, with little outside appeal. Everyone else listens to good music on other stations.

However, this dissertation has demonstrated that the music of artists like Bolton, Carey, and Houston, not to mention countless others played on AC stations, such as Wilson Phillips, Ace of Base, Matchbox Twenty, and Train, has clearly appealed to many American demographic groups, and the adjectives appropriate for describing their work are much more varied than the comments above would indicate. Because of AC, music has reached listeners both during its initial period of popularity, on both these and other stations, and after, once other formats have added more contemporary tracks to their playlists. For artists like these, who are often left off "greatest-ever" lists that could otherwise canonize them, Adult Contemporary radio helps to keep their contributions alive – for both the artists and their fans. To again quote the Gary Trust article cited in this dissertation's introduction, "AC is the place where songs go to live forever."[6]

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[5] Vince Aletti, "Whitney," *Rolling Stone*, August 13, 1987. https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-album-reviews/whitney-245386/ [accessed July 22, 2019].
[6] Gary Trust, "The Top 100 Adult Contemporary Songs Ever," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video, and Home Entertainment*, July, 15 2011, https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/chart-beat/469226/the-top-100-adult-contemporary-songs-ever [accessed July 5, 2017].

Elements of this line of thinking could be described as "poptimism," that branch of popular music criticism that aims to celebrate pop (and, by extension, its audience). Its practitioners work to counter the influence of "rockism," music criticism that, as Kelefa Sanneh writes in a 2004 *New York Times* piece, "means idolizing the authentic old legend (or underground hero) while mocking the latest pop star; lionizing punk while barely tolerating disco; loving the live show and hating the music video; extolling the growling performer while hating the lip-syncher."[7]

Sanneh argues for recognizing the worth of a broader array of music by acknowledging the role of commercialism in many great works, not just pop, that some of the music with staying power doesn't fit the rockist definition of good music, and that simply arguing that new kinds of artists fit the old requirements of authenticity perpetuates the problems it aims to solve. For pop to be recognized as aesthetically valuable music with cultural resonance, one must change the definition of value, not to lower standards, but to broaden possibilities. As he writes, "You can argue that the shape-shifting feminist hip-hop of [Christina] Aguilera is every bit as radical as the punk rock of the 1970s…but then you haven't challenged any of the old rockist questions (starting with: Who's more radical?), you've just scribbled in some new answers."[8]

He concludes that we should "stop trying to hammer young stars into old categories," that criticism needs to form "new prejudices" to fit the new music.[9] A piece from 2017 by Michal Hann titled "Is Poptimism Now as Blinkered as the Rockism it

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[7] Kelefa Sanneh, "The Rap Against Rockism," *The New York Times*, October 31, 2004, https://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/31/arts/music/the-rap-against-rockism.html [accessed September 8, 2019].
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.

Replaced?"[10] concludes that new prejudices had been formed at the time of his writing to the extent that some critics insisted on the value of pop the way rock critics have assumed the transcendence of that music. Hann writes that poptimism was one of many ideologies that had "cease[d] to be alternatives and become hegemonies."[11] He claims that pop has become "normative," that to which everything is compared, and these comparisons can be just as restrictive as rockist ones for granting approval.[12]

This piece reflects many of the sentiments expressed by Saul Austerlitz in his 2014 pieces for the *New York Times*. This author also argues that approving of pop and disdaining rock has become a requirement for music writers, who must demonstrate their open-mindedness by articulating sympathy with the "taste of 13-year-olds."[13] Like Hann, he claims that "poptimism has become a cudgel with which to selectively club music that aims for something other than the whoosh of an indelibly catchy riff."[14]

Both authors also seem to reflect a larger concern, that of the threat of cultural influence coming from people other than straight white men. Sanneh argues in his essay, and ethnomusicologist Elizabeth Keenan agrees, that much of the criticism of pop and those who love it focuses on the music being identified as that often made by and for women. Austerlitz cites "13-year-olds" as fans of Katy Perry, but the gender of these

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[10] Michael Hann, "Is Poptimism Now as Blinkered as the Rockism it Replaced?" *The Quietus*, May 11, 2017, https://thequietus.com/articles/22389-rockism-poptimism [accessed September 8, 2019].
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Saul Austerlitz, "The Pernicious Rise of Poptimism," *The New York Times*, April 4, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/06/magazine/the-pernicious-rise-of-poptimism.html?_r=0 [accessed September 8, 2019].
[14] Ibid.

teenagers is obvious.[15] As Keenan writes, this is "a gendered slam against the critics who earliest embraced poptimism without actually coming out as sexist."[16]

Keenan also notes that "music criticism is always a focus of a critic's *habitus*, i.e. their particular social position that incorporates a variety of aspects of identity as well as cultural capital."[17] In the past several years, tastes have become more "omnivorous," rather than separated between high and low. Some writers have concluded that this has led to there being no taste at all, because everything can and will be considered valuable. For music critics, the concern is that this approach has encouraged the appreciation of unworthy music, but perhaps it just creates the possibly for the proper recognition of more music than white male-dominated rock. Even if some poptimists have become dogmatic in their expectations for pop's reception, contemporary criticism still covers both pop and rock. The difference between the 2010s and, say, the 1990s is that pop music is less often considered an example of production excess, disingenuous collaborative songwriting, and the taint of commercial success and more a music worthy of discussion on its own terms. That is where this dissertation fits. Recognizing the work of artists played on the Adult Contemporary format (in some cases Adult Top 40) aims to add credibility to these contributions, not to diminish the worth of the kind of rock artists who have been celebrated since the 1960s.

Recognizing my own habitus, I must recognize that my identification with underdogs has influenced many of my choices and flavored my writing in this

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[15] Elizabeth Keenan, "Gender Trouble: 'Poptimism' and the Male Critical Voice," *Bad Cover Version*, April 9, 2014 https://badcoverversion.wordpress.com/2014/04/09/gender-trouble-poptimism-and-the-male-critical-voice/ [accessed September 8, 2019].
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid. Emphasis in original.

dissertation, even if the artists I chose to discuss struggle for critical reception but achieve massive commercial success. Implicit (and sometimes explicit) in negative assessments of pop artists is dismissal of the female audience, who deserve to be respected for their taste as much as other groups. Standing up for these artists means supporting their listeners.

Appraising these artists' contributions also means understanding both implications for adult-female oriented radio formats and for the broader import of their work, which includes more than the pleasure of listening and spreads to larger social and political concerns. Michael Bolton's "sensitive guy" approach to traditional heterosexual relationships pairs well with his liberal but mainstream political activities (supporting Bill Clinton, for instance). Wilson Phillips and Ace of Base released pop that fit in, for different reasons, with prominent neoliberal attitudes. Matchbox Twenty, Vertical Horizon, Nine Days, Shawn Mullins, and Train all expressed the uncertainties of late twentieth century youth and masculinity that many women identified with. David Gray achieved both commercial and critical success because of the accessible music on *White Ladder* and because of an ideology of authenticity that favors male songwriters whose music seems close to the heart and distant from commercial concerns (even if it isn't). Whitney Houston and Mariah Carey contributed vocal mastery and emotive interpretations while navigating a sexist and racist environment that made attractiveness a blessing and a curse. Because of their race and commercial success, their connection to black music has been problematic; choosing to target the R&B audience resulted in less widespread airplay for an American mainstream uncomfortable with some black culture.

Critics and scholars describe the content already played by radio formats, and musical style influences which songs are deemed appropriate for the AC audience. Aside from categories of music and radio stations, radio's practice of distinguishing demographic groups from one another owes its existence to the medium of radio itself. Without the ability to produce carefully crafted programming with relatively minimal cost (compared to traditional television), the multitude of formats and sub-formats, each targeted toward a particular type of listener, would be limited to a few. Simon Frith writes that popular culture "constructs" an audience, that it "creates our understanding of what popularity is," and that "successful pop music is music which defines its own aesthetic standard."[18] Popular music is meaningful because it creates communities of listeners, because it provides models for identity development and methods of expression that set the standards by which communities and music are judged. Radio is certainly an element of popular music culture, and the way music is categorized by format, and also by genre and gender, factors into who listens to which music, by which means, as well as aesthetic assessments of that music. Radio can even determine which artists get signed and how the record industry markets them.

All this activity is fueled by, and feeds into, social and political power. The ability to categorize, segment, and label is a sign of privilege, and in the United States for over one-hundred years much of this activity has taken place via mass media controlled by those already in power. However, the goal is to appease the public, to encourage listening and purchasing choices – a rather unpredictable endeavor in which who holds power is

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[18] Simon Frith, "Towards an Aesthetic of Popular Music," (1987) in *Taking Popular Music Seriously: Selected Essays* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2007), 261.

less clear. As Michael Eric Dyson writes, "the struggle over language and identity – over which work is legitimate and which is not, and over who gets to decide – is unmistakably a struggle of power."[19] And it is a struggle, not a battle that has been won.

Financially, the buying power of the Adult Contemporary audience has granted these listeners their own format. This has not translated to the power represented by the critical acceptance of music identified with and/or played on AC from the mid-1980s to the late 1990s. Those with discursive power have mostly maintained negative conclusions about the artists who achieved not only mainstream but also Adult Contemporary success in the period covered in this dissertation, even if the aesthetic value of modern pop has been increasingly supported by critics (as discussed above and in Chapter One). Michael Bolton is still often synonymous with "bad music for women," Whitney Houston's name often recalls her substance abuse instead of her musicianship, and Mariah Carey is portrayed (and admittedly sometimes behaves) like a stereotypically difficult diva (which has distracted attention from a phenomenal career as a singer, songwriter, and producer). Even Matchbox Twenty titled their greatest hits album *Exile on Mainstream* – in adapting the Rolling Stones album title *Exile on Main St.*,[20] they call attention to their unappreciated (perhaps even by the band) pop-rock status. The audience, and the means of reaching that audience, are implied in this criticism. That is, being "exiled on mainstream" refers to both mainstream channels of dissemination like AC stations and to

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[19] Michael Eric Dyson, "Shakespeare *and* Smokey Robinson: Revisiting the Culture Wars," in *Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture*, 125.
[20] Lenny Kaye, "Exile on Main Street," *Rolling Stone*, May 12, 1972, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-album-reviews/exile-on-main-street-96177/ [accessed September 3, 2019]. *Exile on Main St.* is a 1972 album by the British group The Rolling Stones.

the listeners who support this music. Perhaps the artists with the best reception of their 1990s and early 2000s hits have been Wilson Phillips (at least partly due to their association with '60s rock stars and "positive" tough-love messages) and David Gray (as former heir-apparent to Bob Dylan).

By discussing and analyzing the context and music of these artists, this study has demonstrated the significance of Adult Contemporary as a site of negotiation for genre associations, gender and racial dynamics, and the identity of artists, critics, and this demographic group. A format often portrayed as a bland combination of unadventurous hits for white adult women is evidence of segmentation by genre, gender, age, race, financial resources, and aesthetic cachet, by radio, advertisers, the record industry, critics, and listeners. The negative repercussions of these practices are numerous. Harm has been apparent when fewer female artists have signed because record companies conclude that they will appeal primarily to women (who are assumed to buy less music because they are not as invested as fans); when women have been accepted in fewer creative roles, and marketed as generically different because women in rock are aberrant; when years down the line after its release, the music of male artists has trumped those of women in "best of" lists, album guides, and ratings; when disparagement of a pop artist has implicated their audience as well, suggesting (or stating) that the taste of female fans demonstrates an inferior intellectual capacity. Such criticism and limitations could discourage girls and women from becoming musicians in the first place, thus reproducing one aspect of gender inequality. These consequences have been fueled to a large extent by what Kembrew McLeod describes as the "ideology of rock criticism," which "shapes the critical reception of contemporary artists and helps to write the history of rock [and] has

functioned to exclude the voices of many kinds of pop artists and audiences."[21] This practice sets "the discursive criteria for who is worthy of attention, [contributing] to the reproduction of inequality within the music industry"[22] – and in many cases outside of it.

What could be considered competition for cultural capital has often supported the status quo through frequent associations that have marked the identity of artists and consumers in important ways. As American wages have stagnated, and the power of ordinary citizens (and confidence in that power) to improve conditions erodes, worth has been increasingly established through empowered consumer choice rather than workplace roles. Culturally, this has been conveyed through expressions of taste, which have often been informed by longstanding inequality in assumptions about aesthetic judgement – the most relevant in this discussion being that between the superior taste of (white) men, who apparently represent everyone, and women, whose taste is questionable and who come to represent only themselves. Male fans can partake in this process by associating themselves with "good" music by "real" musicians who speak "universal" truths and contrasting their consumption choices against (equally) commercially influenced pop and music made by (and supposedly only for) women. Men aren't alone in consciously associating themselves with select musicians and genres to improve their social standing. But since musical connoisseurship has traditionally been a male domain, this activity is more effective for them because of assumptions that men know more about the subject, and that their assessments are more accurate. This is ideally what poptimism works to counter.

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[21] Kembrew McLeod, "'★ 1/2': A Critique of Rock Criticism in North America." *Popular Music* 20 (2001): 52.
[22] Ibid.

The observations in this conclusion suggest that men and women have generally listened to different music. However, in some cases, as with many of the artists featured in Chapters Three and Four, the playlists of rock or alternative stations overlapped (and obviously individuals have listened to formats not targeted to their demographic). Groups segmented by the medium of radio, with its calculations about audiences, probably have not been separated to the same extent by listening preferences. Perhaps most importantly, Adult Contemporary has been one of the most popular formats, suggesting that both loyal women and men have been listening to these stations. Clearly, the designation between the music and listening practices of men and those of women, even in the mid-1980s to late 1990s, needed reappraisal, and this dissertation has begun this process.

Plenty of work remains for scholars to examine conclusions about pop artists' images from the privileged position of the present to better understand why such perceptions became (and for the most part remain) commonplace. The music deserves analysis as well, to understand it on its own terms. Until the same attention has been granted to great pop artists as has been lavished on rock's canon, the work is nowhere close to complete. I plan to explore publishing material from this dissertation in edited form and to produce more work on this general subject, because I could not possibly have covered the broader range of artists on AC from the mid-1980s through the 1990s. Ultimately, I chose to focus on artists who could represent a handful of artist categories – male singers, pop groups, troubled young men, male singer-songwriters, and divas – and themes – genre distinctions, female desire, neoliberal principles, postindustrial struggles, postfeminism, race, and so forth.

Continued study of artists played on the Adult Contemporary format will include writing more about the contributions of Matchbox Twenty, Train, and others, moving to the early 2000s and the crisis that resulted from the rise of online downloading. I would also like to expand upon my study of female vocalists known as divas to include contemporary 21st century artists and to further explore Mariah Carey's career. Carey is a prolific artist whose public persona has dominated perception of her contributions, and musical analysis would yield insight into her work as a singer, songwriter, and producer. This work will take place against the context of political, gender-focused, and racial implications similar to that studied in this dissertation. However, radio has become less relevant over time, and study of web-based methods of dissemination will be necessary as I continue my research and writing. In any case, a great deal of work remains to better understand this music.

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EDUCATION

M.M. Music History: West Virginia University, Music History, 2012

MM. Music Performance: University of Washington, Music Performance, 2008

B.M. Music Performance: Boise State University, Music Performance (*Magna Cum Laude*), 2005

PUBLICATIONS

"Nostalgia, Appropriation, and the New Right in Early 1990s Pop," *Pop and Politics*, Routledge, Projected 2020.

"MC Solaar and the Influence of Globalization on Local Hip-Hop Aesthetics," *Journal of World Popular Music* 5:2, 2019.

"Place, Space, and Time in MC Solaar's American Francophone," *M/C Journal* volume 16, issue 3, June 2016

Master's Thesis (West Virginia University Master of Music History, 2012):
Signifyin' on the Blues: West African Retentions, American Music, and the Blues in the Hands of Eric Clapton.

FELLOWSHIPS, GRANTS, AND AWARDS

Student Innovators/Research Award
–2019

Graduate Block Grant
– 2019

Merit Scholarship
– 2018

Friends of Music Travel Award
– 2017

Rey M. Longyear Research and Travel Award
– 2017, 2018, 2019

Keith B. MacAdam Scholarship
– 2016-2017

Student Travel Award
– 2017

Graduate Travel Award
– 2015, 2016

Teaching Assistantship
– 2014-2016

Non-Service Fellowship
– 2013-2014

Graduate Assistantship
– 2010-2011

Undergraduate Scholarship
– 2000-2005

Dean's List with Honors
– Fall 2000, Spring 2001

Dean's List with Highest Honors
– Spring 2003, Fall 2003, Spring 2005

Dean's List with High Honors
– Spring 2001, Fall 2004

INSTRUCTIONAL EXPERIENCE

University of Kentucky 2014 – 2016
Teaching Assistant/Instructor

University of Kentucky 2015
Adjunct Instructor

West Virginia University 2010 – 2011
Graduate Assistant

Boise State University 2003-2004
Adjunct Instructor