THESIS

AN INDIE HYPE CYCLE BUILT FOR TWO:

A CASE STUDY OF THE PITCHFORK ALBUM REVIEWS OF

ARCADE FIRE AND CLAP YOUR HANDS SAY YEAH

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis investigates the whims of critical reception in the indie rock world and its effects upon the hype cycle. I define the *indie hype cycle* as a naturalized communicative process governing the flow of critical favor within the indie music community and identify its four primary phases as *entrance on to the scene*, *hype generation*, *backlash*, and *obscurity/visibility*. To understand the interaction between the hype cycle and critical reception, the project focuses on Arcade Fire and Clap Your Hands Say Yeah (CYHSY) as two bands emblematic of the critical divergence possible after initial success. It compares the reviews of the bands' debut and sophomore albums by Pitchfork, a prominent indie music website, and identifies *genre*, *elitism*, and *authenticity* as key constructs in the way the site frames the bands as indie, and thus, worthy of praise. I argue that an economy of authenticity—featuring *emotional*, *economic*, and *talent-*based forms—affects the indie hype cycle in a variety of ways. The thesis concludes that the mechanics of indie music criticism have extensive influence upon the indie hype cycle. The initial framing of band authenticity that accompanies debut releases can have years-long ramifications on the way that band is received and covered in the indie press. To inform its analysis, the thesis draws upon a wide variety of scholars including Ryan Hibbet, Michael Albrecht, and Devon Powers, along with commentators from the popular music press including Carl Wilson and Nitsuh Abebe.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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When Arcade Fire won the 2011 Grammy for Album of the Year, it shocked many music industry observers. Historically, bands like Arcade Fire have had to content themselves with the Best Alternative Music Album category, which was introduced in 1991 to recognize the "collegiate rock" considered too "esoteric for mainstream radio."[1] Though the category has boasted nominees like the not-so-alternative Paul McCartney, U2, and Sarah McLachlan, it has also celebrated its fair share of alternative icons including Radiohead, Beck, and Wilco. After the Alternative Album category was introduced, several of these acts also gained crossover nominations for overall Album of the Year.[2] But it was not until Arcade Fire won in 2011 that one of these bands actually got to give an acceptance speech. Their win is perhaps more impressive considering the mainstream competition they faced: Eminem, Lady Gaga, Lady Antebellum, and Katy Perry. Yet it was not only the industry that was surprised by the triumph of an indie band. Arcade Fire's lead singer, Win Butler, seemed perplexed at the award, uttering a shocked "What the hell?" to begin his acceptance speech.[3] Further confusion is evident in the flurry of blog posts and Facebook status updates from onlookers around the country demanding to know just who Arcade Fire was.[4] Nonetheless, those already "in the know" celebrated the victory. Kanye West's exclamation point-laced tweet conveyed his excitement: "Arcade fire!!!!!!!!!!! There is hope!!! I feel like we all won when something like this happens!"[5] Picthfork, the ever-snarky kingpin of indie music reviews, even let its guard down to call the win a "wonderful long-shot moment."[6]

Historically, the indie community has been wary of bands "selling out." Thus Pitchfork's celebration of Arcade Fire's mainstream emergence is a notable rupture in the typical narrative of indie's aversion to widespread popularity. If a key representative of indie is willing to laud

mainstream recognition, is "selling out" still the concern it once was? Alternatively, it may represent a subtle shift toward the mainstream on the part of Pitchfork and its readership. More likely, however, the love for Arcade Fire could be indicative of the way in which Pitchfork has staked its reputation on being a frontline indie prognosticator, able to discern the good bands from the bad. As such, Arcade Fire's Grammy win validates Pitchfork's place on the bleeding edge of good taste—Pitchfork knew about and championed the band seven years before the mainstream paid heed.

And yet, Pitchfork is not so steadfast in all of its pronouncements. Contrast the consistent praise heaped upon Arcade Fire with the cold shoulder given to another mid-2000s band: Clap Your Hands Say Yeah (henceforth CYHSY). While Arcade Fire and CYHSY exhibit certain differences when it comes to the music they make, they share many of the accepted hallmarks of indie music. Both are guitar-driven. Both are fronted by males who sing (arguably whiningly) in the upper reaches of their vocal register. Both have lyrics that address (albeit in different ways) the ennui, confusion, and paranoia inherent in modern life. Both have even been connected to the indie-approved influences of David Bowie and the Talking Heads.[7] Moreover, each band's debut, Arcade Fire's *Funeral* in 2004 and CYHSY's eponymous offering in 2005, was heralded with ecstatic praise. Such exultant words are usually reserved for more established bands who have had time to prove that their initial efforts were no fluke. Given these similarities, it would have been hard to predict the polar divergence awaiting their respective trajectories. By their second albums, the changing fortunes were already evident: Arcade Fire's *Neon Bible* was met with high praise, while CYHSY's *Some Loud Thunder* was the recipient of critical backlash. The negative reception carried over to CYHSY's third album, *Hysterical*. It was released after a four-year hiatus and just over a year after Arcade Fire's Grammy-winning effort, *The Suburbs* (also a

third album).[8] Unlike *The Suburbs*, *Hysterical* was met with middling reviews at best, and outright derision at worst. The A.V. Club highlighted two songs as lone "islands of excitement in an otherwise wide-open, lifeless sea."[9] Pitchfork damned the release with mediocrity, calling the band "needlessly chastened" and the album "smack dab in the middle of the road."[10] In one of the most searing critiques of all, *The Independent* claimed: "CYHSY now sound more or less exactly like The Killers. And we already have one of those."[11] The backlash that had already begun with CYHSY's second album, *Some Loud Thunder*, was still spitting venom four years later.

What explains the disconnect—one band remaining critical and cultural darlings, the other subjected to virulent derision? At its most basic, my research aims to answer this question by tracing the Pitchfork's critical response to the freshman and sophomore releases of Arcade Fire and CYHSY. Yet I intend to push beyond simply retracing the paths of critical reception and cultural favor and to delve into the tastes which inform these trajectories. I have chosen Arcade Fire and CYHSY because each band has been hailed numerous times as representatively "indie."[12] Nonetheless, they demonstrate wildly different early career arcs across a shared, limited timeline. After their aforementioned debuts in 2004 and 2005, each band released a sophomore effort in 2007.

Moreover, the focused timeframe coincides with a highly formative and influential period where the internet became a critical tool in shepherding the indie rock community. During this time, Pitchfork, the aforementioned music news and reviews website that launched in 1996, gained de facto status as the online hub of all things indie rock. By the mid-2000s, when the Arcade Fire and CYHSY albums were released, Pitchfork reigned supreme as the primary arbiter of indie taste. In 2005, the *Los Angeles Times* hailed the site as "an essential part of the iPod

generation's lexicon," claiming it was "synonymous with indie rock."[13] And in 2008, *The New York Times* recommended it as "the best site for music criticism on the web."[14] It has also been argued that the site has enormous power to either propel a band to success with a positive review or condemn it to irrelevance with a damning one.[15] Owing to its prominence, the site has also received its fair share of critique—sometimes sarcastic parody, sometimes ranting criticisms, and sometimes reviews of Pitchfork reviews which blend the two.[16] The first of these major harangues came to light in 2004—the same year Arcade Fire's *Funeral* was released. The criticism has only intensified in the interim.

Pitchfork's position as a critical lightning rod is perhaps unsurprising when its brand posture is considered. After all, its chosen name and logo—a pitchfork—suggest an aggressive stance and unceremonious skewering at the hands of an angry mob. With this in mind, the site may be purposefully inviting controversy. Certainly it has earned my ire as an indie music fan numerous times by playing provocateur and trashing albums I had previously enjoyed unselfconsciously. In fact, my love/hate relationship with Pitchfork is something which will no doubt seep into my later analysis. I will make all efforts to remain objective as I proceed, but I wanted to make a full disclosure before going any further. In any event, based upon the popular critiques noted above, a love/hate relationship with Pitchfork seems to be common.

Nevertheless, the site shrugs off its detractors, on its Kickstarter page, proclaiming itself as "the web's most popular music resource" with indie rock highlighted first in its list of covered genres.[17] To be sure, Pitchfork is arguably the preeminent indie tastemaker, currently garnering 3 million unique visitors per month, averaging thirty percent readership growth every year.[18] These statistics are fairly staggering when compared with other media criticism websites. For instance, the A.V. Club and PopMatters, both of which incorporate a much broader range of texts—

including film, books, and video games—only garner 2.6 million and 1 million unique visitors each month, respectively.[19] Even NPR Music (2.1 million unique visitors per month) and *Rolling Stone* (<1 million unique visitors per month) cannot measure up.[20] Clearly, Pitchfork's dominance in the indie community has made it an important battleground for the taste assessments leveled against Arcade Fire and CYHSY.

While the reception of Arcade Fire and CYHSY by the indie community is filtered to a large degree through Pitchfork, the notion of indie itself is more amorphous. So far, I have used the terms "alternative" and "indie" interchangeably. There are two main reasons for this. First of all, indie is broadly seen as an offshoot of the alternative genre christened in the late 1980s.[21] As a genre, alternative was melodic, loose, and creative "guitar music … topped by regular-guy voices" whose lyrics expressed "cynicism, confusion, hostility, self-mockery, disillusionment and sardonic humor, along with hints of well-guarded sincerity."[22] Within a decade, observers note how the genre was co-opted by the industry to become a very specific genre of "hard-edged rock distinguished by brittle, 70's-inspired guitar riffing and singers agonizing over their problems until they take on epic proportions."[23] Indie, meanwhile, (at least during the 2004-2007 timeframe—i.e. before its coronation by Grammy) can be seen as the true torchbearer for the original alternative sensibility—it was primarily guitar music featuring "regular" voices, all while managing to remain "untainted" by the major players in the industry.[24] The second reason why I have intermingled the alternative/indie terminology is because the mainstream still tends to do so. Take for example, the Grammys and the Alternative Music Album award—indie bands have had a near stranglehold on this category for almost a decade.[25] So while generic descriptors may have proliferated throughout indie/alternative subcultures in the early twenty-first century, the industry, and popular culture in general, have been slow to keep abreast of these

developments. In the end, given the bands chosen for this study—Arcade Fire and CYHSY—it makes more sense to keep the terminology rooted in the more specific indie tradition. Each of these bands has been repeatedly classified as indie rock, and perhaps more importantly, Pitchfork (indie ground-zero) has been implicated in the rise of each.

While indie has some obvious similarities with alternative music, trying to pin indie rock down to a precise definition or find some sort of consensus can seem an exercise in futility. It is one thing to interrogate the ways in which academics and journalists understand indie, but another to consider how the general public apprehends it. Turning to a resource like the *Urban Dictionary* yields interesting results. From defining indie as "independent of major labels/mainstream stuff," to "an obscure form of rock which you only learn about from someone slightly more hip than yourself," to "soft-style rock without screaming," the definitions fall into three main categories: business practice, ethos, and genre.[26] Using these as a basis, the most natural place to begin is with the term's origins as a descriptor of corporate "independence" for both bands and record labels.[27] Thus, many early alternative bands could have been considered indie because of the way they approached the business of music.[28] Kerry Smith's *Encyclopedia of Indie Rock* echoes this interpretation by characterizing indie rock as fiercely DIY (Do-It-Yourself).[29] Hewing to this logic, Smith traces indie all the way back to the 1960s with artists like Frank Zappa and The Velvet Underground. M.C. Strong takes a similar tack, tracing indie back into the 1970s and agreeing with the term's understanding as a "slang abbreviation for Independently [sic] released alternative records (i.e. not issued on a major label)."[30]

Wrapped up with the idea of indie as business practice is indie as an ethos. While DIY production is key in the first sense, the self-reliance underscoring DIY can pervade other aspects of life from fashion decisions to behavioral tendencies. Thus, "indie" has little to do with the

content of the music, and everything to do with the "type of people who listen to it […]

Pitchfork's shaggy-haired, skinny-jeans-wearing crowd."[31] This description evokes the

prototypical indie fan—the hipster.[32] When interpreting indie as ethos, it is the audience, not the

band, who functions as the definitional fulcrum. Thus, the common conception has been

reversed—fans are not made indie by the music they listen to; music is made indie by the type of

people who listen to it. In the same vein, Nitsuh Abebe, a writer at *New York Magazine* and

occasional Pitchfork contributor, cites "the idea that the performers are a lot like the audience" as

a core "indie value."[33] In indie bands, fans see a way to celebrate living life as part of the

faceless mob (albeit with underground, grassroots popularity)—imagining this to be a gateway to

unhindered authenticity. If mainstream success sweeps in and the band embraces (what fans

detect as) crass commercialism, they are labeled "sell-out." To be sure, the discourse surrounding

authenticity and selling out permeates the indie community.[34] This fact makes Pitchfork's

amenable reaction to Arcade Fire's Grammy win all the more problematic. If indie rock has

based its identity in opposition to the mainstream, it should follow that mainstream recognition

would be shunned, not applauded. As such, the Grammy win (and Pitchfork's reaction to it)

could be the first rumblings of an identity crisis about to engulf the indie community.

Finally, though indie has been used as commercial classification and subculture

descriptor, it also functions as a genre. Considering the diverse swaths of music that have fallen

under the jurisdiction of indie—from the wistful, quiet ramblings of Belle and Sebastian to the

hard-charging metal of Mastodon—identifying key generic hallmarks can be confounding. At its

most basic, the indie genre today might be characterized by low to medium production value and

a combination of lyrics and music that are "sedate, studious, and un-macho."[35] Of course, this

overlooks entire branches of indie inspired by punk, metal, dance, and rap. Abebe, however,

addresses this disparity by noting a dichotomous understanding of the term "indie." One camp of indie fans is affiliated with "popular indie," which he describes as "pop music for the 'thoughtful' person" (the studious version of indie music referred to above).[36] The other group of indie adherents prefers "experimental indie" because of its "mystery, strangeness, and noise."[37] While Abebe's description may not be entirely comprehensive (i.e. What of those who like both facets of indie? Are they more *indie* than the rest?), it does effectively get to the heart of indie as a contested term. Moreover, his distinction between "popular" and "experimental" preferences seems to capture the most salient tension when it comes to grappling with indie as a genre.

Despite the varied opinions, certain central elements seem to recur throughout the discourse. If these elements are condensed, a functioning (if by no means complete) definition of indie rock can be distilled. First of all, indie culture is obsessed with authenticity and averse to the being implicated in the mainstream. Be it through commercial independence, DIY efforts, or simply shunning the pop tropes embraced by the masses, indie tastes and attitudes are a mode of distinction. Second, while indie encompasses a great deal of generic characteristics, there is a basic tension between the "popular" and "experimental" which informs much of the music. Striking the proper balance between the two might well explain the difference between fleeting praise and canonization in the indie rock pantheon. This balancing act evinces a strange circularity underpinning the logic governing indie-dom. With "indie" a contested term, the only official arbiter is the critical apparatus. And yet, the assessments of those critics are dependent on ratification by a readership who are the fount of indie culture in the first place. As such, it is not just the reception of bands like Arcade Fire and CYHSY that is contested through sites like Pitchfork, but the very notion of indie itself. Thus, when investigating the divergent reception accorded the second Arcade Fire and CYHSY albums, I do not simply look for ways in which

one band is presented as sounding better than the other—I look for a divergence in ways in which they are positioned as indie. Perhaps one way to understand the backlash against CYHSY is by investigating accusations against the band's "indieness."

Such an assessment will have to grapple with the fact that, on the surface, there is much for indie mavens to like about both bands. One could even argue that CYSHY is the epitome of indie—after all, each of their three albums has been self-released, without the aid of record company promoters (thus they have a unique claim on authenticity), and they have been lionized throughout the indie community (at least early in their career). While some bands are called indie in a genre-sense, CYHSY is *also* completely indie in a production/business-sense. The seemingly contradictory dismissal of CYHSY's *Some Loud Thunder* (compared with the plaudits bestowed upon Arcade Fire's *Neon Bible*) points toward an implicit interplay between genre, taste, and criticism operating within indie rock. Based upon the immensity of that intersection and the comparatively diminutive scale of the thesis project, a case study seems a logical way forward. Choosing the first two albums from Arcade Fire and CYHSY as focal texts makes sense for reasons already outlined: each band has been labeled an indie touchstone, the releases occur over a manageable timescale, and the span coincides with Pitchfork's accretion and consolidation of clout in the indie community. Given the centrality of Pitchfork in the indie community, its reviews of each of the four albums will provide the indie-"authorized" version of their reception. This is not to say I will not work to corroborate the Pitchfork opinions with those found at other sites around the indie community, just that it will serve as the bellwether. Having selected the subjects for the case study as representative of indie rock, I plan to consider the following research questions:

1. How do the Pitchfork reviews of the first and second albums by Arcade Fire and CYHSY use genre, taste, authenticity, and elitism to situate each artist/album within (or outside of) the indie rock world?

2. What accounts for the critical backlash CYHSY experienced between their first two albums, while Arcade Fire was met with continuing high praise?

For nearly ten years, I have participated in the indie community as both a musician and a critic and am still unable to predict the whims of reception. As a musician, I have personally experienced the exhilaration that comes with glowing reviews and the heartbreak that attends a critical slogging. When asked to categorize my band in the messy context that is indie rock, I have awkwardly fumbled.[38] As a critic, I have at times agreed with prevailing opinion and, at others, made embattled arguments for records I felt unfairly dumped-upon by the indie cognoscenti. Despite having this multiplicity of perspectives, I still lack clairvoyance. I cannot unerringly discern which albums will come out on top (or bottom). And yet I believe, owing to the indie community's disarray, that it turns to sources like Pitchfork to outline acceptable taste within the indie genre. Naturally then, there is a great power inherent in Pitchfork's judgments—a power which, owing to its place as ruler of indie criticism, it can use with institutional impunity, for good or ill.

While my personal motivations stem from firsthand experiences with the indie community, they are not the only justification for this course of study. There are also a number of contributions this project can make to the field of Communication Studies. First of all, the project has as its focus a mediated communicative practice—namely the online communication of taste rules through criticism in the indie rock community. Second, the fact that the indie community is, in essence, virtual—only coalescing ad hoc around concert events—makes the

study all the more relevant by focusing on a contemporary digital phenomenon. Finally, the project further maps the genre of indie rock, which has heretofore been largely unexplored in Communication scholarship. As such, it bolsters the extant literature in these areas.

Beyond my personal experiences as a musician and critic, and even the justifications which make this a fruitful avenue of inquiry, there is still another reason why I have decided to pursue this topic. I have participated as a Grammy voter and know that bands do not win Grammys (or even receive nominations) out of the blue. Arcade Fire's Grammy win can be seen as a signal of the ascendency, growing prominence, and mainstream emergence of indie rock as a whole. As overall music sales winnow, indie rock makes proportional gains.[39] Where they were previously unable to crack the *Billboard* top album sales charts, indie artists now routinely do so.[40] All told, the music industry garnered around $6.3 billion from music sales and licensing in 2009 (the most recent year for which figures are available)—thus the monetary stakes are high.[41]

While the sales figures provide an economic justification for investigating indie rock, perhaps more importantly, they suggest its increasing cultural clout. Carl Wilson underscores this claim by arguing that indie rock enjoys "elite status and media sway […] disproportionate to its popularity."[42] Even though indie rock's cultural capital is on the rise, there has been a dearth of Communication scholarship investigating it. But what distinguishes indie rock from regular rock? Is it the fans? Certainly, indie fans have a reputation for elitism, one-upsmanship, snarky judgmentalism, and demonstrating knowledge of obscure music as a way of asserting status.[43] However, affecting any of these positions takes resources from the whole community—fans, bands, and critics. Naturally then, in order to tackle the indie rock identity, it is necessary to assess questions of genre (i.e. what makes a song/band indie rock), taste (i.e. what are the

aesthetics guiding indie rock fans), and criticism (i.e. what are the judgments molding the aesthetics of the fans).

I began with a question spurred by Arcade Fire's recent Grammy win: why has the band remained critical darlings while the praise for CYHSY quickly faded after their first album? After all, each band could be said to be quintessentially indie, being guitar-based, regular-voiced, and unaffiliated with a major record label. Pitchfork, the chief source of indie music reviews, was an obvious place to begin my ruminations, given its reputation for being able to make or break a band. But upon further inspection, it was not just the relative merit of indie albums that is contested and established at Pitchfork, but the nature and meaning of "indie" itself—both as a genre and taste structure. Owing to this, Pitchfork is not just a *convenient* site for its indie-representative qualities, but a *critical* site for its centrality in dictating the terms of the entire indie discussion. One research question seeks to understand this by investigating how Pitchfork deploys genre, taste, authenticity, and elitism in its reviews to establish the indie identity. In Pitchfork reviews of the first two albums from each band, Arcade Fire maintained high praise while CYHSY was subject to backlash on its second effort. The second research question seeks to understand this disparity, particularly investigating the way in which the bands navigated the hype cycle. Each of these avenues of study has potential to shed light upon mediated communication practices at work in a culturally and economically significant subculture which has not yet been significantly addressed within the field. With these research goals, the literature review focuses on three primary areas and their relation to indie: *genre* (i.e. what is indie music), *taste* (i.e. why do people like indie music), and *criticism* (i.e. how is indie music judged).

Literature Review

In order to interrogate the ways in which Pitchfork is arbiter of indie taste standards, I have chosen to look at the differing fortunes of Arcade Fire and CYHSY as a case study. Arcade Fire's first two albums earned high marks in their Pitchfork reviews, while the ecstatic praise attending the first CYHSY album dissolved in a wave of backlash that accompanied their second album. Exploring the interaction between genre, taste, authenticity, and elitism in the Pitchfork reviews is central to the task of untangling the ways in which the site sets the ground rules for classifying what makes a band or recording indie. As such, the following literature review begins by investigating genre theory and its relation to pop music. The genre section also establishes a working definition of musical genre which informs the rest of the project. After delving into genre, the literature review explores taste, again with a music focus. It explicates the major mechanisms driving indie tastes, particularly authenticity and elitism. As part of this section, notions of fandom are necessarily explored, particularly perceptions of what it means to be an indie fan (from both an insider's and outsider's perspective). Having established a framework from which to approach genre and taste, I then proceed to research perspectives on criticism. As with genre and taste, I highlight those perspectives that deal with criticism in a pop music context and pay close attention to those theories which consider criticism in an online context. Also of interest in this section is the roles technology and online criticism play in the formation of the indie subculture.

Genre

As noted above, a key goal of my investigation of genre theory is to pin down a solid definition of indie rock. But, in order to do that, it is necessary to take a preliminary detour into

the very notion of genre itself. I first investigate the broader concept of genre and then explore its incarnations in a specifically pop music context. From this, I synthesize a working definition of musical genre. I then integrate this definition with the already-established understanding of indie as an authenticity-obsessed subculture waging a pitched battle between the popular and the experimental.

Many scholars have grappled with the concept of genre, labeling it everything from "social contract" to "rhetorical construction" to "open system."[44] There is even less scholarly consensus on what its functions are. It has alternately been proposed that genres "specify the proper use" of "cultural artifact[s]," are created to enable critical analyses, regulate audience expectation, and are used by the industry as a means to control demand.[45] Naturally, the varying conceptions of genre lead to a corresponding plurality of ways in which it is identified. Ralph Cohen sums up the contradictory nature of genre nicely, noting that critics have variously relied on "meter, inner form, intrinsic form, radical of presentation, single traits, family traits, institutions, conventions, contracts" to identify its iterations.[46] Amidst all of this confusion, Jane Feuer perceptively acknowledges that the term is used differently between literature, film, television, and (by extrapolation) music.[47] She asserts that literary genres are primarily theoretical constructions defined by critics, while film and television genres are historical in that they arise from cultural acceptance.[48] Furthermore, she claims that television studies, being in its infancy, has not yet fully "differentiated between historical and theoretical genres."[49] The study of popular music seems to be in a similar formative state. Film and television critics are, however, working toward more fully-developed theoretical conceptions, not content with the historic "industrial or commonsense usage" of generic terminology.[50]

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Much of the existing literature on musical genre spends time interrogating the semantic differences between several words: genre, style, idiom, and form.[51] The distinctions between each of these are subtle and depend largely on the context in which the word is being used. For instance, a musicologist employing the word "genre" may intend a different meaning than a rock critic, and both will likely differ from the meanings ascribed to genre in common parlance. Rather than delve into the etymological roots of the words and their nuanced meanings, it suffices to acknowledge that they are complex and often used interchangeably—especially by the everyday listener. Thus, in crafting my definition of musical genre, I not only synthesize those academic definitions that have come before, but, acknowledging the aforementioned historical/theoretical divide, attempt to also approximate the term as it is bandied about by the popular audience.

I frame this approach via consideration the following question: who is responsible for codifying the generic taxonomy? Some have suggested that the industry is the fount of genre.[52] This argument cites genre's centrality to the business model and the corresponding need for corporate control of it. In the case of television, it has been argued that "unlimited originality" would be a "disaster," since audience delivery depends on the comfort offered by tried-and-true genres.[53] But corporate hegemony is a limited claim in today's fragmented music business. Though they still have sway, the major record companies no longer have the omnipresent power they once had.[54] The democratizing power of home recording and the internet has allowed many more voices to enter the fray. Unmoored from the constraints required to sell music as an industrial product, artists have more flexibility to explore the fringes of a genre.[55] This is not to say that those artists spurning the industry are agglomerating massive recognition, sales (of

albums or concert tickets), or airtime; however, as independents, there is no central industrial authority enforcing exacting generic requirements for each composition.

Whether genre is industry-defined or not, promotion is still vital to get music heard, thus record reviews are of great importance. For independent artists who do not have access to the major labels' network of contacts (or the financial resources to undertake significant promotional campaigns), an album review can be crucial.[56] The lack of overriding industry oversight in the indie realm provides an opportunity for sites like Pitchfork to step in and take control of the genre-delimiting process. Fittingly, some scholars have suggested that the task of creating and assigning generic nomenclature falls to the critics.[57] This supposition seems to offer more potential in the internet age than the industry-centric theory. A quick survey of two major record-reviewing publications certainly reveals a plethora of generic descriptors in use: *Rolling Stone's* review of the Kings of Leon's *Come Around Sundown* features references to no fewer than six genre (or sub-genre) types, including "doo-wop" and "garage-rock," while Pitchfork's review of Sufjan Stevens's *The Age of Adz* references three, including "twee-dance" and "glitch."[58] But placing the responsibility of genre creation solely in the hands of critics also has its limitations. Not every listener's experience of music can be said to be filtered through critical opinion. Moreover, those aware of the critical discourse may not adhere to its proclamations. Some have contested the legitimacy of critics in the first place. In the mid-20th century, Theodor Adorno criticized classical music critics, decrying their "[bringing] forth everything possible about the impression a work makes," from history to a composer's biographical details, because their knowledge of the technical aspects of music was deficient.[59] In the same way, modern pop music critics, many of whom are not trained in the technical language of music, search for ways to

describe the objects of their critical attention.[60] One of the easiest routes to take is that of association. Thus, they resort to explaining that Artist A "sounds like" Artist B.

To be sure, the tendency to assign genre by association was made manifest in the internet age and fits naturally within the database culture fostered by it.[61] For example, in the mid-2000s, MySpace was a key venue that enabled independent musicians to publish their songs on the internet. In addition to pre-defined genre categories, it offers a "sounds like" field in every musician profile. Naturally this results in everything from standard band associations to more flippant responses like "mediocre Schubert at best."[62] It is not only MySpace which fosters this relationality—much of the music software in use today, whether iTunes, Rhapsody, or Pandora, has a "similar artists" suggestion feature inbuilt. The same is true with online stores like Amazon which claim: "if you like Artist A, you will love Artist B!" The webs of interrelated association eventually reach critical mass, coalescing into ad hoc genres based upon the logic of the database.[63] With Pandora, the internet radio station, this tendency is taken to an extreme. When creating a station, listeners do not choose genres as the foundation, but instead choose individual artists. Thus, instead of understanding John Mayer or Brett Dennen as acoustic or mellow pop, these artists are instead presented as Jack Johnson-esque.[64]

Despite the prevalence of critical opinion and database-defined genre sets, individual listeners, as with industry-defined genre, still have the power to choose or reject these assignations. But is this veto power the only one accorded to audiences in the process of genre formation? It could be argued that listeners have been completely liberated to define their own generic rules thanks to the individuation afforded by recording and listening technologies. Nonetheless, I am inclined to agree with those who conceive of genre formation as a multivalent process, created by not just the industry, musicians, critics, or audiences, but by a combination of

them all. In this vein, Chris Atton calls genre a "social construction."[65] As social constructions,

popular music genres rely particularly on vernacular discourse for their establishment and

evolution.[66] Holt adopts the term "genre culture" to encapsulate this process, claiming that music

genres "are defined in relation to many of the same aspects as general culture."[67] The choice of

the descriptor "culture" is not without reason. Cultures are, by their nature, complex, ever-

evolving entities with multiple meanings ascribed to them. The same is true with musical

genre—specific instances are difficult to pin down and define, with understandings shifting from

person to person. Thus, no one side wields complete definitional power. Throughout much of the

20th century, the critical-industrial machinery dominated the discourse. The 21st century,

however, has seen a decided shift in power toward the creator and consumer.

The preceding paragraphs speak to how genre is assigned, but do not delve into its

precise meaning and function. To address this disparity, I offer the following synthesized

definition: *Musical genre* is comprised of those characteristics which delineate one grouping of

songs from another. It can encompass a wide range of textual components from instrumentation

and lyrical content to song structure and tonal system. Occasionally, extra-textual elements have

come to define genres, but for the purposes of this project, musical genre will be confined to

those elements appearing in the song itself.[68]While specific understandings of genre may vary on

a personal level, to be meaningful as such, genres must be subject to communal referendum.

Otherwise, they are merely impressionistic individual taxonomies. Genres are useful because

they allow communities to form around certain texts, creating shared interpretations and

expectations.[69] In this way, genre functions to enable and structure the relationship listeners have

with songs.

Franco Fabbri points to genre's ability to structure the listener-song relationship when he acknowledges how listeners are filled with "unease" upon confronting a new or "unknown musical genre."[70] According to him, new sounds can be disorienting when listeners "don't know what to listen to."[71] An explanation of why this happens can be found in Jacques Derrida's essay "The Law of Genre." His conception of genre revolves around its creation of limits which lead to "norms and interdictions."[72] It is exactly through these generic norms that audiences approach a work. Without a normative framework, listeners lack audible reference points and thus have trouble situating a song within their musical mind-map. This disorientation can have productive benefits, however. When norms are transgressed in unexpected ways, the birth of a new genre is often not far behind. Paradoxically, Derrida asserts that while no text can be "genreless"—always participating in "one or several genres"—the invocation and cementing of particular genres themselves beget their own undoing by establishing rule sets that are continuously tested (and altered) by new texts.[73] The idea of genre as its own worst enemy is admittedly counterintuitive.

However, Derrida was not alone in postulating the inevitable crumbling of genre. Frederic Jameson echoed this line of thought when he wrote that genres are only useful as "arbitrary critical acts," claiming that they "lose their vitality when…they come to be thought of as 'natural' forms."[74] When genres lose their vitality, they cease to be useful to the critical apparatus and begin to wither away. Though Jameson adds the element of time to Derrida's recipe for generic undoing, the two are otherwise in agreement. In both cases, it is when genres become normalized as part of the natural textual ecosystem that they lose their power.

Other scholars have introduced further nuance into the Derridian line of thinking. For instance, Fabbri sheds light on why some genres remain more resilient than others in the face of

this process. He makes a distinction between "rich" and "poor" genre codes. "Rich" codes are those that are not easily exhausted by analysis so as to become predictable, while "poor" codes are those that are easily reduced to a specific set of limited outcomes. He then draws a correlation between codal complexity and the perseverance of specific genres:

> The more a genre is founded on a group of complex rules, the more "rich" codes it will contain and the longer its rules will last. The opposite is then valid for those genres or systems consisting mainly of "poor" codes: the change of rules is much more noticeable.[75]

Implicit in this assertion is the fact that since simpler genres can be fully-explored and exhausted more quickly, they likewise spawn *new,* related genres at a faster rate. As soon as a genre is formulated and established, we have works situated within it that test its boundaries. These consistent assaults eventually lead to breaches in the wall surrounding that genre, if not its outright crumbling. It is through these porous boundaries that works emanating from within a genre are made free. They roam across the landscape to congregate, coalesce, and plant the flag of the next generic iteration. The simpler a genre's constitutive codes, the more prone it is to fracture and ultimate crumbling. Thus, the "poor" genres in particular call forth a cycle of generic death and birth that creates something of a feedback loop.

As genres proliferate, we increasingly see them as a necessary, naturalized feature of music. Their very fecundity is a seeming testament to their worth. Yet, the more fragmented the generic landscape becomes, the more difficult it becomes to fit a text precisely into the framework. For example, Pitchfork used fairly broad genre terms like indie pop, folk, and bluegrass to describe Sufjan Stevens's 2003 album *Greetings From Michigan: The Great Lakes State*. Whereas his 2010 album, *The Age of Adz*, was described in its Pitchfork review with decidedly more specific genre terms like twee-dance, electro-pop, and trad-folk.[76] Less than a decade later, note how an album from the same artist (while notably different in certain respects)

is met with much more specialized terminology. This specialization could simply be an exclusionary tactic on the part of Pitchfork—a way to assert its critical authority by maintaining an ever-increasing stable of genre descriptors. But the shotgun approach of referencing three completely different, poorly coded micro-genres might also be indicative of a struggle to locate the album generically. These descriptors are only understood by indie connoisseurs and are so specific that they are liable to be cast aside quickly. Recall the definition of the indie genre as a tension between the popular and the experimental. In this case, the review of Stevens's 2010 album demonstrates a nod toward the experimental-favoring, complexity-loving sect of indie fandom by embracing their specialist lexicon over the more populist language in the 2003 review.

In order to understand how Arcade Fire can be consistently celebrated by a juggernaut indie arbiter like Pitchfork, while CYHSY is relegated to "has-been" status, genre serves as a crucial analytical lens. The preceding exploration of genre highlights some aspects key to this study. First, in order to focus the analysis, I limited my definition of musical genre to those elements present in a song. When analyzing Pitchfork reviews of the Arcade Fire and CYHSY albums, the clarity provided by this definition helps me delineate between those instances in which the reviewer is critiquing generic elements and those instances where the critique is extra-generic in scope. Second, the emphasis on genre as a social construction and the difference between rich and poor genre codes provides additional analytical resolution from which I draw distinctions. It is important to remember that while Pitchfork may be the loudest herald of indie standards, the fans and bands also have a role in helping those dictates to become the norm. When these aspects of genre are viewed in combination with the notion of indie as an authenticity-obsessed struggle between the popular and experimental preferences, the

communicative implications become all the more apparent. The power to define the indie genre, it seems, is by no means absolute—instead, it is a complex process of negotiation between different factions in the community played out discernibly in the reviews published by Pitchfork. As part of my analysis then, I explore the effects of this debate over indie on the fortunes of Arcade Fire and CYHSY and show how popular indie currently holds sway within the indie community over its experimental counterpart.

Fandom & Taste

As I did with genre, I filter my explorations of taste through a popular music lens. I begin by outlining basic fandom and then progress more explicitly into indie fandom, looking in particular at the "hipster" as stereotypical indie fan. As part of my investigation into indie fandom, I consider both insider and outsider perspectives of what it means to like indie music. Interlaced with my interrogation of indie fandom, I also touch upon the concepts of elitism and authenticity—two mechanisms that have a key role in driving indie tastes.

As noted, to gain an understanding of why people like indie rock necessitates a consideration of both fandom and taste. We can start by interrogating the nature of the fan. What sets fandom apart from mere affinity? Perhaps it revolves around simple obsession. For instance, Matt Hills claims:

> Everybody knows what a 'fan' is. It's somebody who is obsessed with a particular star, celebrity, film, TV programme, band; somebody who can produce reams of information on their object of fandom, and can quote their favoured lines or lyrics, chapter and verse.[77]

And yet, these are not necessarily the caricaturistic, lonely sycophants and geeks such a description calls to mind. Hills goes on to describe fans as "highly articulate," adept at interpreting media in "interesting" and "unexpected ways," and active participants in

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communities.[78] But despite the seeming familiarity of the term, he claims that efforts to define and distinguish concepts like "fandom" and "cult fandom" in an academic context have been lacking.[79] He eventually concludes that "fandom is not simply a 'thing' that can be picked over analytically" or given "rigorous definition."[80]

Even if we accept that fandom in general is difficult to pin down with a precise definition, experience would indicate that, while fan behaviors might share broad similarities across all realms of fandom, each fan community exhibits different norms and expectations. What then, could be said of indie rock fans? The stereotypical template for the indie rock fan is the "hipster." Robert Lanham, author of *The Hipster Handbook*, defines a hipster as "one who possesses tastes, social attitudes, and opinions deemed cool by the cool. […] The Hipster walks among the masses in daily life but is not a part of them and shuns or reduces to kitsch anything held dear by the mainstream."[81] Furthermore, he claims that they feel they have "refined taste" and are "exceptionally cultured," yet "have one pop vice" in order to stay "well-rounded."[82] Along the same lines, some have said "millennial hipsters" are merely "uberconsumers" addicted to keeping up with the latest trends.[83] Mainstream publications like *Time* have piled on, describing hipsters as Coldplay-hating, ironic silk-screened T-shirt-wearing, Pabst Blue Ribbon-drinking "middle-class white youths" who go to great lengths to demonstrate "that they just don't care."[84] The cover of a 2008 issue of *AdBusters* even went so far as to decry the rise of hipsters as signaling the "dead end of Western civilization," lamenting hipster culture as "so detached and disconnected that it has stopped giving birth to anything new."[85] While these assessments of hipster culture range from scholarly to satirical to vitriolic, there is at least one core indie/hipster value that can be identified as transcending the caricatures proffered by sites like "Stuff Hipsters Hate" and "Hipster Runoff": elitism.

Where some fan communities are welcoming of all-comers (so long as they remain devoted to the same cultural object), indie culture is often parodied for its seemingly byzantine entrance requirements.[86] Of course, rigid norms, expectations, and codes could be said to exist in many music subcultures. But the elitism in indie rock does not function only to filter group membership, it also exudes an ambivalence for any music that has not been previously approved by indie tastemakers and an active disdain for music rejected by the same. Ryan Hibbett suggests that indie rock has a "symbiotic" relationship with mainstream music, deriving its value by setting itself in opposition to the mainstream. Wilson echoes this sentiment on a broader scope by arguing that fans affiliate with genre groups in order to "bar the doors of the clubs we *don't* want to claim us as members"[emphasis added].[87] Specifically dealing with indie rock, Hibbett argues that this kind of oppositional definition grants the genre an elite status where "obscurity becomes a positive feature" and "exclusion is embraced as the necessary consequence of the majority's lack of 'taste.'"[88] Indeed, a preference for the obscure is often manifest on the Pitchfork homepage as it strives to maintain credibility by being the first (or at least one of the first) to introduce of-the-moment bands. By oppositionally preferencing the obscure, indie elitism works to keep out curious onlookers, but also acts in a self-policing capacity *within* the community to ensure the "purity" of its ever-morphing canon.[89] Rob Horning goes one step further, suggesting that indie elitism reigns over not just the group identity, but self-identity as well. He argues that indie elitism has reductionist tendencies, trading the unique "particularity" of cultural objects for the uniformly "dreary common denominator" of perceived coolness. In this way, "everything becomes just another signifier of personal identity" until identity itself becomes burdensome because we are forced to constantly "curate it if only to avoid seeming like a hipster."[90]

With all of the subterfuge (both individually and on the part of the group) implicit in indie posturing, one might question whether indie taste is ever truly knowable. In a broader sense, thinkers from Kant to the modern day have questioned if there is even an objective way to determine taste at all.[91] In exploring the nature of personal taste, Wilson comes to the realization that his tastes "were reshaped by social experiences" and "altered by musical information."[92] The more he learned about artists' backgrounds and the communities that listened to their music, the more he came to enjoy it. If this were a universal trait, one might expect that indie hipsters would be some of the most sensitive and sympathetic listeners of all, given their reputed encyclopedic knowledge of music minutia.[93] Yet the elitism evinced by the indie fan community challenges this notion. Hibbett suggests a possible mechanism to explain this disconnect. Utilizing Pierre Bourdieu, he claims that cultural and social capital, as opposed to economic capital, are the primary assets available to indie rock fans. This seems reasonable given the young, extended-adolescence demographic typically associated with indie fandom.[94] Hibbett goes on to argue that cultural capital is innately perishable, losing "value as it becomes increasingly accessible."[95] This leads to a cycle where "indie rock [and its fans] must perpetually seek out new artists, records, and sounds" in order to avoid being subsumed by the mainstream."[96] Thus, to preserve their cultural capital, despite familiarity with a broad range of music, indie fans turn toward elitist, protectionist tendencies.

While Hibbett's explanation for what drives indie taste is plausible, reality is seldom so simple as to be composed solely of unidimensional cause and effect relationships.[97] Another mechanism that seems to be inextricably linked with determining indie taste is authenticity in opposition to the cravenly commercial mainstream. Many have keyed on its centrality to indie rock, calling it a "core" value and prominent defining aspect.[98] This is not to say that concerns

about authenticity are peculiar only to indie rock, just that, within the genre, the authentic is foregrounded, perhaps disproportionately so. What then, constitutes the authentic in indie rock? One mode of authenticity revolves around the perception of undue economic influences. As Hibbett notes:

> While most artists hope to reach a larger audience and generate more profit, their listeners are poised to attack or abandon at the slightest detection of ''selling out''—a phrase pivotal to preserving the myth of authenticity, which it defines in opposition to the commercially influenced.[99]

Commercial influence can be identified in a number of ways. For instance, a band on a small, independent label can sign to a major label. But determining a "sellout" is not always so straightforward. Sometimes, a band can be accused of selling out simply for altering its "sound" from album to album. As such, it makes sense that some have pointed to musical production value as a key factor in determining indie authenticity. Roy Shuker describes indie music as "raw and immediate" in contrast to an overproduced, technology-reliant mainstream.[100] In this way, and similar to elitism, indie depends upon an opposing mainstream from which it can distinguish itself. Further elaborating on the notion of raw production, Hibbett claims that the more present the physical sounds of the production process, be they "[tape] hiss, the pressing of buttons, technical glitches, distortion," the more the listener assumes the work is honest and authentic.[101] By breaking down the fourth wall and giving the listener a "behind the scenes" glimpse of the performer *au natural*, a recording can provide a knowing wink, as if to say: "Yes, we know a recording studio is an artificial environment, so why pretend otherwise?" Playing off this notion of the artistic aside, Michael Albrecht draws a useful distinction in noting two types of authenticity: "doing" and "showing doing."[102] The first type, "doing," is a "static authenticity" exhibited by "allegedly primitive cultures" that are "unable to move beyond merely 'doing.'" These cultures serve as "a resource pool for the second kind of authenticity"—"showing

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doing."[103] This second type of authenticity is "exemplified by the hipster" who circumvents the "artificiality of the mainstream" by pantomiming the realness conveyed by those exhibiting the first type of authenticity.[104]

> By "showing doing" and being able to skillfully navigate "real" and "artificial" cultural practices with an awareness of the complicated relationship between the authentic and the inauthentic, the hipster stakes out a position of authenticity with seemingly more agency than the culture from which they were able to draw their "realness."[105]

In this way, "traditional notions that privilege the authentic above the artificial" are inverted when "certain performances of artifice" assume the air of authenticity.[106] This sentiment is echoed by Hibbett, who claims that within indie rock "the *appearance* of authenticity" can be more important "than authenticity itself."[107] Naturally, prizing rehearsed authenticity is inherently contradictory. After all, the authentic is typically considered as such because it is genuine and original—not a facsimile or put-on performance. And yet, the fact that the indie community demands just such an authenticity reveals what may be an important lack of self-awareness. Either indie fans clamor for authentic music ironically (knowing it is technically impossible) or they are taken-in by the type of pseudo-authenticity described above. Whatever the case, investigating authenticity in indie rock calls for an Escher-esque lens capable of identifying the *trompe l'oeil* utilized within the indie community to placate its appetite for the authentic (knowingly or not). Despite these challenges, authenticity nonetheless serves as a gatekeeping mechanism that allows the indie community to demarcate its boundaries and shifting taste hierarchies.

The understanding of indie taste and fandom (along with the associated concepts of elitism and authenticity) provided by the research in this section is critical to my analysis in chapters three and four. For one, the baseline definitions established in this section allow me to

assess the relative deployment of each concept in Pitchfork reviews. As I do so specifically in relation to the Arcade Fire and CYHSY reviews, my aim is to identify and analyze the role these concepts play in the differing ways the albums were received. But in addition to helping me answer the research questions, my research into taste and fandom further helps me keep the project grounded in the field of Communication Studies. For instance, the revelation that elitism is essential to indie because the indie identity is defined in opposition to the mainstream underscores the indie identity as a mediated social construction. In a similar vein, the notion that *seeming* authentic is more important than *being* authentic to the indie identity is critical in describing what type of authenticity is being utilized in the Pitchfork reviews. In my analysis, I demonstrate how various types of authenticity (economic, emotional, and talent) play an explicit role in Pitchfork's critiques of Arcade Fire and CYHSY while elitism is evinced primarily in an implicit fashion.

Rock Criticism & Technology

As is evident from the previous two sections, genre and taste issues are critical to the project. However, with my primary text being Pitchfork album reviews of Arcade Fire and CYHSY albums, it is pertinent to explore scholarly perspectives on criticism. I begin by examining rock criticism and its functions. After establishing the basics, I incorporate a discussion of the impact technology has had upon rock criticism. In particular, I consider how technology allowed for the rise of Pitchfork and, more broadly, the indie community in general since it exists primarily in the ether as a virtual community.

Given the bully-pulpit Pitchfork occupies within the indie world, it makes sense to return to criticism as an important propagator of indie taste and assayer of authenticity. Even beyond

indie, the rock critics who make up the modern music press are widely regarded as "gatekeeper[s] of taste" and "arbiter[s] of cultural history."[108] While some decry their seeming preference for obfuscation, Roy Shuker argues that rock critics do, in fact, have a system.[109] He claims they use critical touchstones like artistic integrity and authenticity to "construct their own version of the traditional high-low culture split."[110] To understand the nature of the high-low culture split concocted by rock critics, it is useful to consider Carl Wilson's claim that, unlike early film critics who advocated for film to be considered as "high art," early rock critics rejected "elite taste, arguing no work was too humble for aesthetic contemplation."[111] Rock criticism, however, is not merely a search for the authentic and rejection of all classic "high culture" denotatives. It also involves the use of referents—genres, bands, songs—in order to situate a work in the context of a specific rock community. In doing so, the critic "imbue[s] particular performers, genres, and recordings with meaning and value" that the audience then accepts or disputes.[112] But from where does today's critic draw their authority? It is easy to imagine a gilded past when there were established countercultural point sources from which people received their critical opinions, whether newspaper (i.e. *The Village Voice*) or magazine (i.e. *Rolling Stone*). Realizing that this is a crude idealization, it is nonetheless clear that the ecosystem fundamentally changed as the internet allowed new avenues for bands, fans, *and* critics to thrive.[113] One might think a proliferation of critical voices would have diluted the critic's importance, yet there are those who argue otherwise. The proliferation in critical voices paralleled a corresponding explosion in the amount and variety of music made readily available thanks to digital technology.

Adrian North and David Hargreaves highlight three specific digital technologies that "have had a pronounced effect on the hierarchy of music production and consumption":

illegal/legal music download services which "revolutionized the way in which people obtain their music," portable mp3 players which makes mobile the entirety of a user's music library, and software which allows music composition and transformation.[114] They argue that technology has shifted the hierarchy from a composer-centric one with "passive audience[s]" and "clearly defined" listening environments to one where the composer must interact with an "active audience who can choose freely between and alter the works in question whenever and wherever they like."[115] Within the indie rock realm especially, it makes sense to add the bevy of digital home recording software, like Adobe Audition and GarageBand, to the list. These technologies shifted music recording from an expert-only realm to one in which amateurs could compete.[116] In doing so, recording technologies have allowed the creation and, perhaps more importantly, distribution of more and more music—music that might otherwise have been deemed commercially unviable. Before these technologies, being an independent recording artist was a nearly insurmountable challenge. Recording required equipment which required financial investment and expertise. Unhinged from corporate oversight and fused with technologies like the mp3 (which allowed for easy distribution), music (often free) flooded the marketplace. Listeners, resultingly, had more choice than ever before. Holly Kruse asks an important question in this regard: "In a universe in which a computer user potentially can access, for instance, thousands and thousands of songs, how do people know where to find music they like?"[117] Though some theorized the internet would allow music fans to "circumvent gatekeeping apparatuses of the mainstream industry," it seems that the gatekeepers have merely changed— whether online critic or an algorithm that guesses your tastes based upon previous purchases (some of them not even your own).[118] Wilson suggests that abundant choice available on the

internet has created an increasing number of fragmented subcultures, while at the same time making these subcultures more tolerant and less reliant on outside approbation.[119]

And yet, indie culture is particularly tied to the vagaries of critical opinion. Before internet resources like Pitchfork, resources for indie fans were limited to local record stores, other fans, and underground zines. Of these, to newcomers, the local record store was probably the most accessible option—after all, those developing an indie taste would not, most likely, be connected into the fan community until they had a working knowledge of the indie landscape. But calling an indie record store accessible might be being a little generous. While the snide arrogance on display in a fictional take on record stores—as it is in the novel and film versions of *High Fidelity*—may be over the top, there is nonetheless a grain of truth in the presentation.[120] Record stores could actually be humiliating places. Thanks to the internet, people can pick and choose their sources, avoiding those that may be unnecessarily uncomfortable.

Kruse argues that the internet shunts the need for physical locality by creating "virtual scenes"—complex "overlapping networks in which genre, geography, position in the independent or alternative music industry, and other factors" create correspondingly complex and overlapping social identity networks.[121] Of course, the idea of an online mediated fan community is not unique to Kruse. Research that began on virtual communities when the first generation internet took hold intensified as Web 2.0 technologies began to proliferate. Camelia Gradinaru makes a useful distinction in noting that there are both utopian and dystopian viewpoints surrounding the efficacy of online communities. Utopians see new media as opening up immense communicative potential, while the dystopians question whether online affinity groups can truly be called "communities" at all due to their streamlined, intermittent forms of interaction.[122] In a case study on Wikipedia—one of the larger communal spaces on the

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internet—Christian Pentzold asserts that "artificially crafted" communities have to make members "aware of their allegiance."[123] Pentzold also makes the distinction between those who are merely active at the site of an online community and those who are full-fledged members, claiming that "membership is based on compliance" with communal standards.[124] Nancy Baym has devoted the majority of her career to studying the way people form communities. Recently, she has even given some attention to online communities of music fans. In an article detailing the practices of Swedish indie fans, Baym notes the difficulty in accessing the indie community since it "is spread across multiple online spaces" and the corresponding time requirements to wade through the morass are steep.[125] Baym further questions whether "going to a [single] site is an appropriate strategy for studying community on the Internet."[126] While this problematizes the idea of focusing on Pitchfork album reviews as my primary text, the challenge is not insurmountable. To be sure, Pitchfork is a poor model of community. It was a site intentionally created without the ability for users to comment or provide feedback. Thus, it is a one-way resource for the community, whose members' only recourse for complaint is to avail themselves of forums on other sites if they choose to chastise or praise Pitchfork. Furthermore, Pitchfork's users are anonymous to one another. There is no required login, no personal profile, no avatar— in essence Pitchfork is just an iteration of an old media publishing format (like *Rolling Stone*) that happens to reside online. But the lack of interactivity is not the key issue for this project. Pitchfork was chosen because it represents the "authorized" indie viewpoint. It is the lynchpin in establishing the bounds of indie as a genre and identity. It is a site which spurs debate in the indie community, not a site where the fan community has recourse to actually *have* a debate. In this way, Pitchfork is a virtual representative of a larger virtual scene (indie).

Kruse's notion of "virtual scenes" becomes even more useful when coupled with Herbert Gans's idea of the "taste culture."[127] A taste culture is a "set of *cultural* strata in a society that roughly parallels the *social class* strata of that society."[128] Of course, the idea of taste culture parallels the Bourdieuian concepts of cultural/social capital and distinction. Each taste culture has differing cultural and social capital pools to draw upon in order to distinguish themselves from other taste cultures. George Lewis further refines the notion of taste culture by first arguing that there is no "one-to-one relationship between social class level and music consumption." He asserts that "popular music is dynamic," appealing to those across "social class, age, and education."[129] Lewis goes on to identify three important components in every taste culture: demographics, aesthetics, and politics.[130] He further subdivides the political category based upon three categories created by Raymond Williams: supportive/hegemonic, alternative/co-existing, and oppositional.[131] The upshot of this categorization is that while fans of the same taste culture may not align in all of the categories, they align closely in others—this is why taste cultures exist. Where then, does indie rock fit on this spectrum? For the most part, the demographics of the group are "upper-middle-class" and youth-skewing.[132] The "liberal-arts-college" penchant for "high concept," ironic bookishness evinced in much of indie rock (even in the experimental variety) indicates that the political dimension of indie fans trends toward the liberal and oppositional (which loves the contrarian, ironic reading of culture so often associated with hipsters).[133] The aesthetics, however, seem harder to pin down given the aforementioned tension existing between popular and experimental strains of indie rock. Regardless, the conception of the indie rock community as a virtual taste culture with imprecise aesthetic preferences is an essential undercurrent to my analysis of how Pitchfork employs genre, taste, authenticity, and elitism to formulate an indie identity.

The preceding section provided an overview of rock criticism and the functioning of online communities, calling attention to some concepts critical to the proposed study of Arcade Fire and CYHSY. First, I demonstrated how rock critics have historically been a hybrid of uberfan and critic who served as gatekeepers to various musical subcultures. This gatekeeping role has not diminished despite the proliferation of critical outlets found online. The historical perspective afforded by this research provides insight into the ways in which Pitchfork writers articulate their own (limited) authorial identities. It also provides a useful counterpoint by acknowledging that the communicative processes at work in the indie community may just be a modern reiteration of old media practices (i.e. *Rolling Stone*, *Creem*, etc.). Second, the concepts of the virtual scene and taste cultures are indispensible in understanding the complex intersection between indie rock and Pitchfork. The indie community as virtual scene is a complex discursive network. While it might be tempting to craft blanket characterizations, the notion of taste cultures helps keep my analysis rooted in the field of Communication Studies.

The literature review has established the critical foundation of this study in the topic areas of genre, taste/fandom, and rock criticism. First, the investigation into genre made clear: a definition of musical genre limited to those elements present in a song; and an emphasis on genre as a social construction with rich and poor coding. Then, exploring taste and fandom revealed: baseline definitions for taste and fandom; the essential nature of elitism in relation to indie; and how, when it comes to the indie identity, *seeming* authentic is more important than *being* authentic. Finally, the interrogation of rock criticism and associated online communities explained: rock critics as hybrid fan-critics acting as gatekeepers and the concepts of the virtual scene and taste cultures. Owing to the unique confluence of forces at play in the indie community (genre, taste, authenticity, and elitism) and its existence as a contemporary, mediated

virtual scene, there is a great deal of potential for making important contributions to the study of indie rock specifically, but contemporary popular music in general.

Methods & Outline of Chapters

The thesis will be divided into the following five chapters whose titles are taken from song titles on the Arcade Fire and CYHSY albums under investigation:

Chapter One: Upon a Tidal Wave of Young Blood

The first chapter provides the overall introduction to the topic and texts, situates them contextually, and then provides a review of the relevant literature that forms the backbone of my analysis. The topics and texts introduced in this chapter include indie rock, Arcade Fire, CYHSY, and Pitchfork. In particular, the rise of Pitchfork is explicated in order to provide context for the analysis that occurs in chapters three and four. This context further justifies the choice of Pitchfork as exemplar of the indie community. The literature review delves primarily into scholarship surrounding genre, taste, fandom, criticism, and online fan communities.

Chapter Two: Over and Over Again

The second chapter continues establishing the contextual framework for the rhetorical close readings of the Pitchfork reviews. The first subsection interrogates the nature of the "hype cycle," looking at its role in determining the fate of bands in the indie rock world. In this subsection, I incorporate the thoughts of those who have commented upon the phenomenon and craft my own definition of the "indie hype cycle." The second subsection investigates backlash and the so-called "sophomore slump"—the notion that a second album inevitably fails to live up

to its predecessor—to understand how these phenomena manifest themselves in the indie rock world and how they affect indie bands. The third subsection provides further context for Pitchfork by describing its typical review structures, its uniqueness within current music criticism, and the ways in which it exerts power upon the hype cycle. Information on the hype cycle, backlash, and Pitchfork is invaluable to the case studies presented in chapters three and four.

Chapter Three: Wake Up … Is This Love?

The third chapter is a side-by-side analysis of the reception of Arcade Fire's *Funeral* and CYHSY's eponymous album. These albums serve as baseline examples of positive reception for each band, and function as points of comparison for the sophomore albums detailed in chapter four. I begin by summarizing and contextualizing the bands' initial appearances on "the scene" and then provide details regarding the recording and making of each album. The second and third subsections are devoted to the reception of Arcade Fire's *Funeral* and CYHSY's *Clap Your Hands Say Yeah*, respectively. Each of these sections includes a broad synopsis of their respective album's reception gleaned from reviews at sites including: *Village Voice* and *Rolling Stone* (representatives of established press outlets); PopMatters, the A.V. Club, and All Music Guide (representatives of established, broad-focus websites); and Tiny Mix Tapes and Stereogum (representatives of more niche-oriented indie music websites). While the broad overview encompasses a large swath of critical opinion, since I demonstrate in chapter one that Pitchfork is representational of the indie rock community, its reviews of each album serve as the primary texts being analyzed. My analysis is informed by the research appearing in chapters one and two and is structured as a rhetorical close reading of these album reviews. My close reading

method is based on that pioneered by G. P. Mohrmann and Michael Leff.[134] I proceed through each of the Pitchfork album reviews on a line-by-line basis to "explicate the precise, often hidden, mechanisms that give a particular text artistic unity and rhetorical effect."[135] While conducting the analysis, I simultaneously identify references to genre, taste, authenticity, and elitism. In doing so, I tease out the discernable patterns and differences between the two reviews in order to gain insight into both the functioning of indie criticism and the articulation of the indie identity within these reviews.

Chapter Four: How to Keep the Car Running Upon Encountering the Crippled Elephant

The fourth chapter is a side-by-side analysis of the reception of Arcade Fire's *Neon Bible* and CYHSY's *Some Loud Thunder*. While *Neon Bible* was received in positive fashion (like *Funeral* before it), *Some Loud Thunder* received a critical harpooning. These albums are thus representative of the divergent fortunes potentially awaiting any indie band. The format of the fourth chapter mirrors that of the third chapter. I begin by summarizing and contextualizing the relevant happenings in each bands' careers (since their debut albums). The second and third subsections are devoted to the reception of Arcade Fire's *Neon Bible* and CYHSY's *Some Loud Thunder*, respectively. Each of these sections includes a broad synopsis of their respective album's reception gleaned from the same selection of sites used in chapter three. Once again, the Pitchfork reviews of each album serve as the primary texts being analyzed. Furthermore, I use the same method of rhetorical close reading to gain insight into both the functioning of indie criticism and the articulation of the indie identity within these reviews.

Chapter Five: Mountains Beyond Mountains, or the Same Mistakes

The fifth and final chapter features a synthesis of my research and analyses. I build off of the similarities and dissimilarities demonstrated in previous chapters. It is in this chapter where I attempt to encapsulate answers to the research questions with an eye toward the broader existence of indie. In addition, I offer tentative projections regarding the future of indie rock, Pitchfork's place in the critical pantheon, and Arcade Fire and CYHSY to see if any overarching trends are evident. I bring the entire project full circle by making reference to the most current assessments available on each band and their status and trajectory within the indie rock community. By doing so, I plan to have the beginnings of a model explaining the basic trials and tribulations suffered by indie bands, along with insight into the accelerating hype cycle and its potentially detrimental effects upon bands' careers.

Chapter 2: Over and Over Again

The literature review from chapter one provided the Communication-based perspectives on genre, taste, and criticism necessary to conduct a case study on the Pitchfork reviews of Arcade Fire and CYHSY. However, in order to address the case study effectively, I need to lay additional theoretical groundwork. The debut albums from Arcade Fire and CYHSY are both representative of hype, while their sophomore albums evince the differing trajectories possible within the hype cycle: continued hype and backlash. Also, given the analysis of Pitchfork reviews in chapters three and four, further context is required so as to better assess whether the rhetorical tactics revealed in the case study are novel or merely rote in nature.

As such, I begin by interrogating the nature of the indie rock hype cycle. Having a firm grasp on the typical flow of hype within the indie community is crucial for two main reasons. First, it provides a solid set of definitions for understanding buzz, hype, and the hype cycle (with its four phases: *Entrance onto the Scene*, *Hype Generation*, *Backlash*, and *Obscurity/Visibility*) within a Communication Studies framework. Second, it sheds light on whether the reception given to Arcade Fire and CYHSY is typical or unusual in terms of the hype cycle. If the two bands are seen as representative of the possible trajectories within the indie hype cycle, the conclusions drawn from the analysis hold the potential to be generalized across the indie community. After exploring hype, I explore the related notions of backlash and the "sophomore slump" in greater detail. Since the sophomore slump is typically framed as an inevitable challenge in a band's career, the information in this section provides useful context for understanding how Arcade Fire navigated the challenge and CYHSY were stymied by it. I investigate the origins of the concept, how it came to be an expected occurrence, and theories surrounding its root causes. Finally, having explicated the hype cycle and backlash, I explore

Pitchfork in greater detail. I begin by describing the characteristics and tendencies of typical

Pitchfork reviews by looking at length and scoring, among other traits. I also analyze the habits

of the individual reviewers for each of the focal texts to determine whether or not they are

markedly different from one another. In combination, these elements provide the context

necessary to situate the case study reviews and thus hone in on their defining features. As part of

this section, I also work to describe Pitchfork's role in the hype cycle. This allows me to

temporally locate the Arcade Fire and CYHSY reviews along the cycle's continuum (i.e.

beginning, middle, or end).

The Hype Cycle

In this section, my goal is to establish a definition for the indie rock hype cycle which

describes each of its major stages. To do so, I first investigate the hype cycle and the way it has

been described by others. As part of this, I explicate the difference between hype and buzz. Once

those terms are defined, I turn my attention to how the hype cycle has manifested itself within

the realm of indie rock. Having investigated the basics, I proceed to offer my four-part definition

of the indie hype cycle.

Though the notion of hype has been around since the early twentieth century, it was not

until more recently that it was recognized and mapped as a temporal, evolving cycle.[136] One of

the first (and most complete) descriptions of the hype cycle comes from a report published in

1995 by Gartner—an "information technology research and advisory company."[137] The report

forms the basis for Gartner's five-step hype cycle model. In chronological succession, the five

steps are: 1) the "technology trigger," 2) the "peak of inflated expectations," 3) the "trough of

disillusionment," 4) the "slope of enlightenment," and 5) the "plateau of productivity."[138] While

Gartner's hype cycle analysis is focused on how to properly time technology investments, much of its basic framework translates to hype cycles in the music world. Before crystallizing my definition of the indie rock hype cycle, it is important to investigate the ways that others have probed and described its contours.

In music, the hype cycle not only charts the rise and fall of individual artists, but also dictates how quickly critical (and communal) attention shifts from one artist to "the next big thing," thereby casting the initial artist aside. *n+1* magazine describes the cycle in anecdotal detail:

> You know the drill: the ginned-up enthusiasm of publicists combines with word of mouth (and blog) to create so-called buzz. Articles appear, posing one of three questions. For the new artist: is this the next big thing? For the established artist […]: will stratospheric expectations be met? For the figure whose stock is down: can a comeback be staged? Then the release date arrives […]; at last the thing itself can contend with its reception. But, wait, now backlash surges alongside the ongoing hype. And understandably, too: it's not nice being force-fed even the tastiest food. But hold on a second, here comes the backlash-to-the-backlash…[139]

It pays to note that hype is distinct from buzz. In an article probing the hype attending Bruce Springsteen's rise to prominence in the early to mid-1970s, Devon Powers traces the etymology of the term "hype" itself. The term first entered the lexicon in the first half of the twentieth century, and, by the mid-'50s, it had come to be associated with "deception" and "promotional publicity of a contrived, extravagant kind."[140] Buzz, on the other hand, is defined as a "fad" or "speculative or excited talk or attention relating especially to a new or forthcoming product or event."[141] Though the difference between these terms is subtle, it is nonetheless critical to understanding the nature of the hype cycle. Hype's relation with deception and contrivance lends it a decidedly negative connotation, while buzz's connection to excitement and fads gives it a more positive sensibility. This is not to say that the content of buzz is always positive (i.e. there can be bad buzz surrounding an album—"watch out for the album by X…it is

awful"), merely that its conceptual existence is viewed in a more positive light. In other words, buzz arises organically within the cultural sphere. While fads can be annoying, they are a naturalized phenomenon—they come and they pass, but they are not artificial. Hype, however, is an unnatural machination foisted upon people. It redirects the natural flow of buzz to create a feedback-loop where buzz can amplified to intolerable volume. Importantly, hype always involves taking recognition beyond its rightful level (or at least what is perceived as the rightful level). Though hype itself does not directly undermine a band's authenticity—hype can often focus on and praise authentic credentials—the frenzy which accompanies it can quickly tarnish reputations. In sum, *natural* buzz (i.e. authentic) feeds the *contrived* hype cycle (i.e. inauthentic). And yet, in the indie rock world, despite its negative connotations, hype seems to have become an equally naturalized feature of the landscape as buzz.

Despite its relatively recent provenance as a concept, the hype cycle is not a new phenomenon in music. Powers notes how rock critics latched on to the term "hype" by the end of the '50s and claims that they not only popularized the concept, but that it "continues to hold great purchase" within rock criticism today.[142] She also argues that because of an "increasingly fragmented musical marketplace," the music industry came to depend upon critical pronouncements and the publicity provided therein.[143] Herein lie the seeds of the hype cycle. As positive reviews proliferate, buzz intensifies. Each new bit of praise added to a stable of reviews makes a buzz-band seem all the more impressive. When people begin to pay attention to the amount of praise, rather than the individual content of constituent reviews, hype is born. Hype is thus "a process rather than a strategy in discourse," unhinged from the criticism which gave it impetus, inertia carries it forward.[144] Like a the life cycle of a star, hype can grow to gargantuan

proportions, gobbling up those who would stand against it until it collapses under its own weight, exploding outward in an obliterating wave of backlash.

Certainly, the hype cycle is not unique to indie rock, as it is possible to find films, novels, fashions, technologies, and more that have all been hyped out of proportion. However, just as the Gartner model has nuances specific to its technological focus, the model I propose for the indie hype cycle is tailored specifically to indie rock. The basic framework of all hype cycles may be similar, but they no doubt require adjustment based upon the unique context of their deployment. With that proviso articulated, I define the indie hype cycle as having four primary phases. First is what I term "Entrance onto the Scene." During this phase a band forms, plays its first gigs, and makes preliminary recordings (i.e. demos, EPs). If the music proves fruitful, the fanbase begins to grow and buzz begins to build via word-of-mouth processes. Mentions of the band may appear on social networking sites. If buzz is persistently positive, it can reach critical mass and launch the second phase of the indie hype cycle which I term "Hype Generation." The beginning of the second phase is marked by the first coverage in the indie music press. This coverage can be low-key (i.e. a mention on an mp3 blog) or more noteworthy (i.e. a feature on a major site like Pitchfork). Positive coverage and word-of-mouth continue to intensify the buzz, producing hype. Hype peaks when an album is announced and continues at a high level until the album is released (or leaked). Once the album is judged by the indie press (and wider community of listeners), the hype either continues until some new object of fascination eclipses the communal focus, or, if judged negatively, the hype abruptly reverses course, triggering the third phase of the cycle: "Backlash."

Backlash emerges as soon as negative coverage appears. While this can occur at any point in the hype cycle, backlash typically increases in severity in proportion to the length and

feverishness of the preceding hype. During phase three, positive comments may continue to appear in some quarters; however, negative sentiments gradually percolate throughout the community. The first indications of backlash can often be found in the comment sections of music blogs. If a major site like Pitchfork picks up on the groundswell and chooses to weigh-in, backlash reaches its extreme. Once the wave of backlash washes across the indie press, coverage of the band and album gradually dissipates. Depending upon the severity of backlash, an album can either lose some of its initial luster (but still be considered a quality album), or opinion can shift completely (a once celebrated album becomes reviled).

Up until this point, the phases of my proposed indie hype cycle have paralleled those laid out by Gartner (trigger, peak, and disillusionment) and *n+1* (buzz, hype, and backlash). While both Gartner and *n+1* suggest a resurgence of positive sentiment and equilibrium at a sustainable, productive level, I argue that this is not always the case. The post-backlash fourth phase offers two divergent options, so I bifurcate it as "Obscurity/Visibility." Unlike the previous phases, obscurity/visibility is not immediately adjacent in temporal terms—there is no consistent trigger event that launches a reappraisal. During the downtime between phases three and four, the backlash-adjusted assessment of a band and album simmers in the communal consciousness. Phase four allows for the indie community to listen to the music without a barrage of opinion-espousing press coverage. Listeners can engage the music either in live concert settings or via recording. Any coverage that does appear during this phase is typically neutral in nature. Common items reported during this time are upcoming tour dates and appearances in popular culture (i.e. soundtracks, references, etc.). It is in this reporting that the divergent paths of obscurity and visibility are played out. Those bands decimated by backlash are doomed to obscurity and receive little (if any) further reporting, while those that emerge with

their favored status intact maintain press visibility. Occasionally, if a band achieves extreme hype, no matter how fierce the backlash, coverage will persist through phase four (albeit with an obligatory tone). As soon as a new recording is announced, the hype cycle is free to begin anew—only this time, previous work exists as a benchmark for comparison. Thus, each band's career is marked by a series of consecutive hype cycles oscillating around a point of equilibrium. Successful bands are able to maintain visibility throughout the process, emerging from each album's hype cycle with an overall balance of positive assessment. Bands that repeatedly come up short at the end of each cycle quickly fall off of the radar of the indie press.

The preceding definition of the indie hype cycle, with its clear chronology of events, suggests a regimented flow of phases. While such a chronology is useful in establishing a model, it can make it seem a leisurely, orderly process. However, since the indie community largely exists in the digital realm, its hype cycle is anything but measured in its evolution. The explanation of the hype cycle offered by *n+1* at the beginning of this section hints at the dizzying pace of the process. Many have bemoaned its increasing alacrity as symptomatic of the modern, internet age. For instance, reacting to hype surrounding Lana Del Rey in 2011, Maura Johnston complained how hype is easy to build when "all online mentions have the salutary effect of inflating one's Google Page Rank."[145] Considering the ease of hype and its effectiveness in quickly selling records, it is little wonder that it has become ubiquitous. Perhaps its ubiquity has played a role in speeding up the process. Think of a song on endless repeat—it quickly loses its novelty (and can even grow maddening). Absence makes the heart grow fonder, as they say; however, scarcity does not necessarily translate into profit. And while profit may not be the number one concern and motivation for every artist, for those who wish to pursue music

professionally (and the record labels that work with them), finances are necessarily part of the equation.

To a community as obsessed with authenticity as indie culture is, hype can seem disingenuous—whether for its potential to be exploited for financial gain or its evincing of a herd-like mentality. It makes sense then, when Matt LeMay, a Pitchfork contributor, laments how the speed of the hype cycle has led to an "era of large-scale groupthink" within the indie community where "people aren't concerned with knowing a lot of bands so much as they're concerned with knowing the right bands."[146] This validates Ryan Hibbett's contention that cultural and social (rather than economic) capital are the primary resources deployed within the indie rock world—fans have a voracious, insatiable appetite for the new and must continually feed their addiction lest they lose cultural capital by being out of touch.[147] Building on the idea of an of-the-moment obsession, Eric Grandy notes how hype's inherent bombast (articulated through sites like Pitchfork and Hipster Runoff) can obfuscate the actual music *being hyped*.[148] Each of these arguments seems to implicate the rock critic as the central participant in the hype cycle. In the end, even Powers—who credits the accretion of reviews rather than individual agency as the key to the hype cycle—betrays some concern for a digital realm that allows for "dramas akin to Springsteen's [to] unfurl over days rather than years."[149]

Given these assessments by hype's detractors, and the prominence it takes in discussions surrounding indie, it is paradoxical that hype is so prevalent in indie rock criticism. If hype is antithetical to the indie ideals of independence and authenticity, it follows that indie bastions like Pitchfork should eschew fanning its flames. While indie critics have done their fair-share of hype squashing, there are an equal number of examples when they have bought in and promulgated it wholesale.[150] *Funeral* and *Clap Your Hands Say Yeah* are two albums that exemplify this trend

perfectly. As such, this section has established a solid framework in which to judge the Pitchfork reviews of both albums. The four-part definition of the indie hype cycle as entrance onto the scene, hype generation, backlash, and obscurity/visibility allows me to more precisely trace the flow of hype through both cases. Moreover, it provides a consistent background apart from which any anomalies stand out.

The Sophomore Slump, or Difficult Second Album Syndrome

Since backlash is one of the phases of the hype cycle—one visited upon CYHSY with particular strength—it makes sense to explore its related concept of the "sophomore slump" in greater detail. In this section, I first look at the concept's origin in education, then illustrate how it came to be taken up within the music world. With that foundation, I proceed to analyze different theories regarding the root causes of the sophomore slump and offer commentary on the ramifications of each. I conclude by highlighting the linkage between the sophomore slump and the level of debut success.

When considering the second album of any band, the notion of the sophomore slump, or difficult second album, inevitably crops up. Some bands are able to traverse the critical gauntlet relatively unscathed, while others emerge battered and bloodied. But what is the sophomore slump, and how did it come to be an expectation for second albums? The notion of the "sophomore slump" can be traced back to Mervin B. Freedman's 1956 article, "The Passage Through College," which describes the behaviors and typical characteristics of sophomore college students.[151] After meeting with success in a freshman year, many sophomores' performance suffers due to, among other factors, being "overconfident."[152] From this education-based incarnation, the idea quickly proliferated throughout the popular imagination, being used

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in reference to a variety of performance-related fields including sports, music, and even fashion.[153] Exactly how the idea was taken up in such different contexts is not clear. What is clear is the extent to which the notion of the sophomore slump has proven useful in a variety of contexts as a shorthand way of communicating an icon's failure to meet expectations.

Given the focus of this thesis project, it makes sense to turn our attention specifically to the way the term has been deployed in relation to popular music. By 1986, in an article about the band the Scorchers, *The New York Times* mentions "rock's notorious 'sophomore slump'." [154] *Chicago Tribune* agreed two years later with an article titled "Sophomore Slump" which provided a wide-ranging list of "acts that scored chart-topping, big-selling debuts and either stumbled or completely fell on their follow-up efforts."[155] Since the slump was already considered "notorious" by the mid '80s, having left a long list of artists in its wake, it can safely be said that it was an established concept by 2007 when the sophomore efforts of Arcade Fire and CYHSY were released. Being an established concept, however, does not mean that everyone agrees on its root causes.

There have been a number of theories proposed to explain the existence of the sophomore slump in the music world. One of the most common theories cites the expectations which accompany fame. Andrew Tijs brings up the success of Nirvana's *Nevermind* to call attention to the fact that "Second Album Syndrome [or sophomore slump in U.S. parlance] often doesn't affect bands who weren't infected by the insidious 'fame' virus on their debut."[156] He argues that fame and undue attention often undercut the "existential angst" it takes to make a good record.[157] Or, as Jasper Rees describes the perils of fame:

> A pop act bursts on to the scene with a sparkling set of songs about growing up in some deadly provincial backwater. While touring the album, which sails into the top 10, they write another set of songs, mostly in hotel rooms far from the deadly provincial backwater, and the second album flops.[158]

The idea that bands become disconnected from their initial inspiration is a tempting one. Certainly, the muse can depart at a moment's notice. Especially if a debut album is critically celebrated, it stands to reason that a band could become too self-conscious, trying to replicate their old sound rather than continue along the path of a natural sonic evolution. The "perils of fame" argument is usually invoked in tandem with the notion of a compressed creation timeline to explain the sophomore slump. The "compressed timeline" argument is summarized nicely by Dorian Lynskey: "you have a lifetime to make your first album and only a year or two to make your second."[159] Owing to this compressed timeline, the argument goes, bands are rushed by industrial constraints—either the label presses for new recordings or the band itself wants to cash in on unexpected success. To deal with this pressure, bands often resort to rehashing old ideas or trotting out songs that did not make the cut for the initial album.

The combination of the fame and timeline arguments seems compelling. Tijs, however, labels these theories "bullshit," pointing out that the Beatles released "twelve studio albums in seven years"—twelve albums that set a high standard for both popular *and* critical appeal.[160] He argues that the sophomore slump was not a concern to artists like Elvis Presley or the Beatles because they "were too busy recording their fourth album to care what people thought of their just-released second one."[161] While this is, at best, a flippant vindication of the industrial/critical process, Tijs does not place the entirety of blame upon the band. Instead, he argues that the listeners hold equal responsibility for second album failings. In fact, he argues that the sophomore slump is not "confined to the second album the band releases, but more often to the second album of theirs that we *hear*."[162]

This assertion brings up one last theory regarding the sophomore slump—namely, what Lynskey labels the "cult of the debut."[163] Lynskey argues that last twenty years have seen a

"fetishisation of newness."[164] Listeners prize the new above all else, casting what was once new to the side as soon as something even *newer* comes along. Lynskey does not offer an explanation regarding the mechanics of this process. But, if we extrapolate, it could be that the sense of wonder (and lack of context) that so often comes with new music motivates the "cult of the debut." In fact, the word "cult" suggests that "newness" has been transmogrified into an addictive substance. As addicts then, listeners and critics gain more pleasure from the rush of the new than they do from the music itself. And once there is some familiarity with the music—a frame of reference offered by previous albums—the pleasure gained takes on a decidedly different nature. I would argue that subtle pleasure is pleasure nonetheless. Subtle pleasure may even be the more sustainable form when compared with the quick-burning love of the new.

In the end, it would be tempting to choose one of these theories at the expense of others, but explanations are seldom so straightforward. Most likely, the sophomore slump arises through an interaction of them all. Moreover, the ratio of these probably varies from case to case. That said, fame seems to play a particularly important role. Not so much for the time (and economic) constraints it brings, or even for its ability to eviscerate musical inspiration, but instead, for the expectations and referentiality ushered in with it. After all, if a debut album is not highly lauded or widely known to begin with, there is not much point in declaring a sophomore slump. Sophomore slumps only become interesting as such when they follow a particularly striking debut effort. With that in mind, both Arcade Fire's *Neon Bible* and CYHSY's *Some Loud Thunder* seem like they would be perfect candidates for the sophomore slump. As such, the information from this section provides useful context for understanding how Arcade Fire navigated the challenge and CYHSY were stymied by it.

Contextualizing Pitchfork

Since Pitchfork reviews are the central texts analyzed in this study, it could be tempting to infer that Pitchfork (or even Arcade Fire and CYHSY) is the motivating reason why I undertook this investigation. However, this is not the case. Pitchfork and its reviews of Arcade Fire and CYHSY are merely the means by which I am attempting to better understand the whims of indie criticism. Arcade Fire and CYHSY are convenient case studies due to the high levels of hype which accompanied their debut releases and the contrasting paths of reception which followed. Pitchfork is convenient as the most prominent and representative site of indie criticism and the wider indie community. While I described that prominence in chapter one with quotations, parodies, and readership statistics, it is still necessary to more clearly define the Pitchfork mentality. To do so, I detail the mechanics of Pitchfork's review system, what makes it unique within the world of music criticism, and how it exerts its power upon hype cycle.

From the beginning, Pitchfork's scoring system has promised unparalleled granularity. Where *Rolling Stone* relies upon a coarse five-star scale, the A.V. Club on letter grades (with pluses and minuses), and PopMatters on a ten-point scale, Pitchfork offers its judgments on a finely-tuned decimal scale ranging from 0.0 to 10.0. Though 5.0 would make for a natural mean score, an analysis of 103 reviews published around the Arcade Fire and CYHSY reviews yields an average score in the 6.9 to 7.0 range.[165] This could be taken as a sign of Pitchfork's magnanimity (i.e. it consistently tends to rate albums as being better than average), but I argue that it is instead indicative of the *actual*, more constricted scoring range within which Pitchfork reviews typically operate. The website makes it clear that 8.0+ is considered a good score and indicator of quality by having it as a separate category under the "Best New Music" menu drop-down.[166] The fact that an 8.0 is positioned the threshold for quality and a 7.0 is the average

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indicate that scores in the 6.0-7.0 range are more damning than numerical instinct would

otherwise suggest. I am not claiming that Pitchfork *only* awards scores in the 6.0-8.0 range,

merely that this two-point span evinces a sharp gradient in terms of assessed merit. I argue that

scores awarded outside of this range, even more so for those scores outside of the 5.0-9.0 range,

are intended as statements rather than linearly translatable markings on a spectrum of quality.

To provide further clarity in terms of Pitchfork's scoring tendencies, it helps to consider

the frequency with which certain scores arise. As of February 14, 2012, Pitchfork has 12,689

reviews in its archive, dating back to 1999.[167] Likewise, 2,729 of these represent scores of 8.0 or

more—one every 4.6 reviews, or a rate of about one per review day (since five reviews are

published each day).[168] The "Best New Music" (BNM) distinction is significantly rarer, but less

well-defined since there is no specific score threshold that automatically triggers BNM status.

Since introduction of the category in January 2003, Pitchfork has granted BNM distinction to

395 albums—one for every 32 reviews, or a rate of approximately one every six review days.[169]

Another way of framing the data is to say that albums scoring 8.0 or more represent the top 22%

of Pitchfork reviews, while BNM selections account for the top 3%. Clearly, both of these

categories represent important levels of distinction within the Pitchfork hierarchy. In particular,

BNM classification is not only an exercise of power, but also a gamble on the part of Pitchfork—

the site's reputation is risked on every BNM assertion. Given the stakes, these reviews represent

incremental investments in Pitchfork's ultimate indie credibility. The more its reputation of indie

tastemaker is cemented, the more it becomes taken for granted (by readers) that all of its

pronouncements are justified.

The average scores and scoring frequencies presented above give good insight into the

numerical aspect of Pitchfork reviews, but I would be remiss if I did not also give context for the

equally critical written content. Though the length of Pitchfork reviews varies a great deal—in

my sample reviews ranged from 340 to nearly 1,200 words—the average review contains

approximately 600 words.[170] Given the variation evinced in my sample, it is unsurprising that

there is no overriding format or style governing the reviews. Some reviews break the "fourth

wall" by openly acknowledging the reviewer's existence in the real world, others hew more

strictly to describing only the music. Some wax philosophical, others inject flippant, sarcastic

asides. Thus, much of the framing of the review is left to the individual reviewer.

For instance, Brian Howe, who reviewed *Clap Your Hands Say Yeah* and *Some Loud

Thunder*, tends to keep his focus on the music, likes to pepper his writing with humorous one-

liners, and, on average, incorporates around three references to other bands in every review. His

reviews surrounding CYHSY's debut averaged just under 400 words, while those surrounding

Some Loud Thunder averaged 484.[171] On the other hand, David Moore, who reviewed *Funeral*,

typically begins with a lengthy thematic preamble before actually speaking to specific songs on

an album. His reviews surrounding *Funeral* average 674 words in length. Notably, he only wrote

twenty-eight reviews during his brief tenure at Pitchfork between August and December of

2004.[172] Yet his review of *Funeral* left a lasting impact on the website because it is often

referenced in news articles describing the importance of Pitchfork and rise of Arcade Fire.

Finally, Stephen M. Deusner, who reviewed *Neon Bible*, is fond of juxtaposing alternating sets of

positive and negative assessments, constantly offering two ways to look at album contents. His

reviews surrounding *Neon Bible* average 688 words and just two references to other bands.[173]

Clearly, based upon the preceding explication, there are subtle stylistic differences

between reviewers. And yet, despite the freedom accorded to the reviewer to frame each review

in whatever way he or she sees fit, individual reviewer identities are largely subsumed under the

banner of the outfit for which they write—Pitchfork, PopMatters, *Rolling Stone*, Tiny Mix

Tapes, the A.V. Club. To be sure, each of these sites has its own stylistic and tonal tendencies,

but they all follow a similar template, mixing context, description, and (often wry) analysis (to

varying proportions) in each review. When published, every review earns its publication's stamp

of approval—what started as individual opinion becomes the authorized viewpoint for critical

enclaves and the communities which read their pronouncements. Readers interpolate the

domineering influence and identity of the publication through the reviews they read.

Take, as evidence, the rarity with which modern music critics are singled out when fans

rant about reviews. For example, when discussing Pitchfork's "Top 50 Albums of 2011" list on

Stereogum, none of the nearly 200 commenters targeted specific reviewers in their critique of the

site. Instead, they asserted that they were "not a fan of Pitchfork" and tossed off gems like:

"Pitchfork: Tastemakers Without Taste" and "Pitchfork is in middle age and needs some serious

testosterone replacement therapy."[174] Even in discussions linked to specific albums, attention is

seldom turned to the critics themselves. This is not to say that Pitchfork's reviewers are never

singled out, just that it is rare. I should note that there is a site called RipFork which purports to

lampoon individual Pitchfork reviewers.[175] However, the site's name (as a play on Pitchfork) still

indicates that the overarching target is Pitchfork, albeit, by way of criticizing its reviewers.

Further evidence of Pitchfork's domineering over individual reviewer identity can be seen in

Facebook and Last.fm groups named "Pitchfork Sucks" and their Pitchfork-centric (as opposed

to critic-centric) comment sections.[176]

Before I move on, I should address some outliers to my publisher-trumps-critic argument.

It is true that some of today's music critics have parlayed their clout to carve out unique,

recognizable identities. But people like the *New York Times*'s Jon Pareles, *New York Magazine*'s

Nitsuh Abebe, and *The New Yorker*'s Sasha Frere-Jones are the exceptions, not the rule. The

Pitchfork review staff is largely bereft of differentiated personalities—as evinced by reviews.

Even Abebe's album reviews (he wrote 144 for Pitchfork between 2002 and 2010) are not

markedly different in tone than those of his compatriots, either at Pitchfork or elsewhere.[177] The

anonymity of Pitchfork reviewers (and modern music critics in general) is paradoxical. Despite

personal anecdotes to help frame the music and individual names attached to each review,

reviewers remain faceless on the whole. Thus, the way Pitchfork asserts its brand over the

individual identity of its reviewers is not unique in the world of music criticism.

Pitchfork's roles in the indie hype cycle, however, are distinct. Especially for marquee

cases of hype (like Arcade Fire and CYHSY), Pitchfork enters as a prominent voice early during

the hype generation phase. Given the rise of the blogosphere, Pitchfork is not always the first to

hype a band, but once it does, the hype is validated. The site has built its reputation on the early

adoption of indie music. Importantly, that early adoption is defined in opposition to mainstream

patterns of preference. As such, while the site is not always on the leading edge within the indie

community, it has little trouble in far outpacing its mainstream counterparts. An endorsement

from Pitchfork within the indie community nonetheless signals a high-watermark of praise and

codifies the communal opinion.

While Pitchfork plays a key role in generating hype, it plays equally crucial roles in the

backlash and obscurity/visibility phases of the hype cycle as well. For instance, in the autumn of

2007, Pitchfork began steadily hyping music by the band Black Kids—a band that had not yet

released a full album. In September, Pitchfork posted a link to the song "I'm Not Gonna Teach

Your Boyfriend How to Dance With You," proclaiming that it "grabs attention like a

breakdancer at a wedding reception with its scraggly lo-fi guitar, peppy synths, and ebullient

melodies."[178] A follow-up post in October predicted a promising future for the band: "At the rate they're going, [… Black Kids] will be able to release a remix album before they've even gone on a proper tour or put out an official record."[179] Two days later, Pitchfork awarded the band's four-song demo EP, *The Wizard of Ahhhs*, an 8.4 and BNM status.[180] The hype continued to build in advance of the group's debut release, *Partie Traumatic*. However, when the time came to review the album, Pitchfork's then-editor, Scott Plagenhoef, posted a picture of two pugs staring sadly out at the reader, with the caption "Sorry :-/" emblazoned across the top.[181] That was the extent of the review and the album was awarded an unceremonious 3.3. The verdict was in and the Black Kids hype bubble was instantly deflated. After that, the band only received fleeting coverage from Pitchfork as part of festival lineups.[182] Coverage at other music sites similarly falls off a precipice after 2008.[183]

Pitchfork's one-word review/apology demonstrates self-awareness regarding the roles it plays in the hype cycle. The *mea culpa* directly acknowledges Pitchfork's complicity in hype generation, but also serves as an implicit recognition that the site has the power to stop hype in its tracks by crystallizing backlash. Moreover, if the public statement of backlash is not followed by any continuing coverage (as was the case with Black Kids), Pitchfork consigns bands to obscurity and irrelevance. Since many indie music sites gather their leads from Pitchfork, visibility is reduced. It takes time, distance, and a willingness on the part of Pitchfork (or the indie community) for reappraisal to happen. Often, by the time meaningful recuperation is possible, bands have disintegrated or moved on to other projects.

The analysis of the hype cycle, sophomore slump, and Pitchfork provided in this chapter has provided three crucial pieces for the case study of Arcade Fire and CYHSY. First, the investigation into the hype cycle made clear the difference between buzz and hype and the

negative valence associated with hype due to its contrived, artificial nature. In addition, I offered

my definition of the indie hype cycle as a four-phase process: entrance onto the scene, hype

generation, backlash, obscurity/visibility. Second, exploring the concept of the sophomore slump

revealed its origins, how it became a naturalized part of the landscape of music criticism, and the

multiplicity of potential causes for it. More important was the conclusion that the utility of the

sophomore slump as a concept is directly proportional to the level of hype achieved on a debut

album. Finally, the analysis of Pitchfork reviews and reviewers established benchmarks against

which the reviews of Arcade Fire and CYHSY can be measured. Moreover, it offered further

insight into the ways in which Pitchfork interfaces with the hype cycle. In sum, the information

contained in this chapter is critical to understanding how the hype cycle (and Pitchfork) treated

Arcade Fire and CYHSY differently.

Chapter 3: Wake Up … Is This Love?

Unraveling the precise origin story of any band can prove to be a tricky undertaking. And yet, that story, regardless of how fanciful, fictitious, or factual it is, often plays a central role in the ways that critics approach and write about debut albums. Take, for example, Bon Iver's 2008 debut effort, *For Emma, Forever Ago*. It is hard to find a review that *does not* mention the album's genesis in a snowed-in cabin in the woods of Wisconsin and the songwriter's recent breakup.[184] While a tantalizing backstory may not be called upon in every review of a debut album, it is, at the very least, a common tactic. But backstory is not simply an engaging hook around which reviewers craft their reviews—it doles out benefits for all involved in the review process, bands and readers included. For one, backstory is useful as a way for bands to market themselves and establish their public persona. The press sheets that are included with albums sent to reviewers give bands (and their labels or publicists) agency to shape a consistent and/or unique brand. This process is especially important for new bands that have not yet established their place in the musical ecosystem. Moreover, backstory is useful to readers because it provides context for bands and albums. Particularly for new indie bands, the context provided by backstory gives readers an avenue from which to approach the music by locating the band in the existing framework of the indie community. In this way, backstory serves as a bellwether for the band's authenticity and thereby, a means for gauging the deservedness of its critical acclaim.

Backstory features prominently in the Pitchfork reviews of both Arcade Fire's *Funeral* and Clap Your Hands Say Yeah's self-titled debut—the two albums featured in this chapter. Therefore, I begin by investigating the formation and pre-debut workings of both bands. In particular, I explore how Arcade Fire's identity is grounded in emotional life experiences that enhance the band's authenticity, while CYHSY's persona of pure independence ultimately

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undermines its authenticity. These explorations provide the context against which the review-reported backstories are assessed in the analysis section. After establishing background details for both bands, I provide a broad overview of the reception of *Funeral*, followed by a rhetorical close reading of its Pitchfork review. Then, I repeat the process for *Clap Your Hands Say Yeah*. Finally, I end the chapter with a concluding discussion that summarizes how, despite similar levels of high praise, the mythos of Arcade Fire allows the possibility of continued praise, while that of CYHSY short-circuits any similar potential.

The Formation of Arcade Fire and CYHSY

Though the band offers no authorized version of its initial history, since 2003, the core of Arcade Fire has been husband and wife duo Win Butler and Régine Chassagne.[185] Butler moved from his childhood home in Texas to Montreal in 2001 to pursue a degree in religious studies at McGill University. He met Chassagne in 2003 (who briefly studied jazz at McGill) when she was singing jazz standards at the opening of an art exhibit.[186] The current lineup of the band (Butler and Chassagne, plus Richard Reed Parry, Tim Kingsbury, and Win's brother William Butler) coalesced in the summer of 2003, when the preliminary recording sessions for *Funeral* began at the Hotel 2 Tango recording studio in Montreal.[187] Based upon the strength of the band's live performances and its self-released EP, Arcade Fire signed with the independent North Carolina label, Merge Records, later that year.[188] Recording for *Funeral* continued in the winter of 2004, "at the Hotel and in Win and Régine's apartment" on a variety of recording media including "24 track 2 inch tape, ½ inch 16 track, ½ inch 8 track, optimus ctr-108, and G_d-forsaken Computer."[189] It was during this time that Chassagne's grandmother, the Butlers's grandfather, and Parry's Uncle passed away.[190] According to the liner notes, these deaths were

the namesake for the album: "when family members kept dying they [Arcade Fire] realized that they should call their record "Funeral", [sic] noting the irony of their first full length recording bearing a name with such closure."[191] The album was released on September 14, 2004, and quickly became the fastest-selling record in Merge history.[192]

While the origin of CYHSY is a little easier to trace than Arcade Fire's, there is still a fair amount of mystery. Part of that mystery is due to frontman Alec Ounsworth's reputed reclusiveness.[193] Ounsworth's shunning of the spotlight is evident in his evasive, flippantly absurd responses to many standard publicity inquiries. For instance, when asked by The Gothamist blog about the origin of the band's name, he responded "The name was uttered by The Great Fish Claude shortly before expiring atop the mighty Schuylkill river." [sic][194] Even on his personal website, the biographical details start by listing "Alec's favorite professional soccer players," touch upon his favorite foods, a childhood incident with his brother, and "the exterior plaster issues that plague Alec's home."[195] In one of the few interviews in which Ounsworth offers seemingly sincere answers, he describes his early fixation on music—from guitar and piano lessons as a child to beginning to write and record songs while in high school, he "didn't have any definite ambitions but [he] knew music was what [he] liked doing best."[196] Ounsworth graduated from Connecticut College in 2000, but it was not until 2004 when he signed on twin brothers and college friends Tyler and Lee Sargent that CYHSY began to take shape.[197] Soon thereafter, the Sargents moved to Brooklyn and recruited Robbie Guertin and Sean Greenhalgh to round out the lineup.[198] Despite the majority of the band living in Brooklyn, Ounsworth chose to situate himself in his childhood neighborhood of Mount Airy, Philadelphia.[199] Once the players were domiciled, writing and recording for the band's self-titled debut began. The band recorded the album with Keith Souza at Machines with Magnets and Adam Lassus at Fireproof

Recording.[200] *Clap Your Hands Say Yeah* was released in the summer of 2005 (no precise release date is given due to the self-released nature of the album) and distributed out of the Sargents' apartment.[201] It too was a quick-seller, moving 25,000 units by late autumn.[202]

Reception of *Funeral*

In this section, I begin by providing a broad overview of the reception accorded Arcade Fire's *Funeral* and then proceed with a rhetorical close reading of that album's corresponding Pitchfork review.

Funeral was released by Merge Records on September 14, 2004. By this time, hype was already mounting on the internet. In one of the first, albeit abbreviated, reviews of the album, indie mp3 blog Stereogum declared Arcade Fire a "band to watch" on September 9.[203] The celebratory review "highly" recommends the album, touting each track as "a revelation" taking cue from a wide variety of influences.[204] The Pitchfork review was next out of the gate, published September 13. The praise heaped upon the record by Pitchfork (which will be detailed below) was a seismic event in the indie rock press owing to the prominence of the site and the extremely high score awarded to the album—one of the highest ever awarded by the site to a new release. Pitchfork's *Funeral* review triggered massive album sales and crowned the site as the undisputed indie tastemaker. After Pitchfork's review, other players in the online indie press followed suit over the course of the next week. Tiny Mix Tapes called it "an amazing experience" and "one of the best albums of the year, hands down."[205] PopMatters described the record as "positively thrilling," arguing that the band "succeeds by keeping the listener guessing as to what lies around the next corner."[206] Even the A.V. Club, while offering a more measured

response, added to the hubbub by declaring that "Arcade Fire's version [of nostalgia-steeped-indie-rock-orchestra] may be common, but it's anything but humdrum."[207]

The crescendo of praise continued to build through the remainder of the year and on into 2005, gradually spilling out into major print publications. For instance, *The New York Times* chimed in on October 3 with a short, but glowing, review of the album, followed by a bigger feature article on October 18. In the same vein, *Rolling Stone*'s December 9 review has *Funeral* "[aching] with elegiac intensity," while Robert Christgau's January 25, 2005 assessment in the *Village Voice* is uncharacteristically magnanimous, calling the album "too fond of drama, but aware of its small place in the big world, and usually beautiful."[208] All but two (Tiny Mix Tapes and Stereogum) of the reviews mentioned here take pains to explain the band's backstory in some way (i.e. the recent deaths of relatives, married band leaders) and all but two (*Rolling Stone* and *Village Voice*) make reference to a variety of sonic equivalents and potential influences.[209]

Even beyond the selected examples, the critical response to Arcade Fire and *Funeral* was ecstatic. On Metacritic, a website which aggregates critical reviews of albums, films, television programs, and video games, the album has a metascore of 90, making it one of the highest ranked albums in the entire database.[210] While the buzz surrounding the band coalesced and proliferated around the release of *Funeral*, Pitchfork had been keeping tabs on Arcade Fire as early as May 12, with a post detailing the "bidding war" between indie labels that eventually led the band to sign with Merge.[211] They called the music samples available on the band's website at that time "pretty damn good" and expressed great hope for the upcoming album.[212]

Months later, and one day before the album was released, Pitchfork awarded *Funeral* a stratospheric 9.7 out of 10.0 and placed it in its "Best New Music" category. Reviewer David Moore opens the piece with an italicized question: "*How did we get here?*"[213] The first paragraph

of the review attempts to provide context for the question. Moore ruminates on "a generation overwhelmed by frustration, unrest, dread, and tragedy" and its instinctive aloofness.[214] According to his logic, aloofness leads to "isolation" and "solitude" which, in turn, leave us "politically and spiritually inert."[215] Worst of all, in Moore's estimation, is our resulting emotional impotence.[216] He argues that the popularity of "emo" as a musical style (heart-on-sleeve, excessively maudlin delivery) has debased emotion and robbed us of our ability to feel.[217] In six sentences, he meanders through the oft-discussed hallmarks of the modern malaise. This invocation serves two functions: first, as a segue into a discussion about music's ability to counter feelings of emptiness; second, and perhaps more importantly, it establishes a troubled world against which Arcade Fire can nobly struggle as heroes, nay, *saviors* of a generation.

If the first paragraph sets up Arcade Fire as musical messiahs, the second completes the transfiguration. First, Moore puts his approximation of the modern malaise into context—"we are not the first, or the last" to wonder how we got here.[218] This is where he brings in his first (and only) musical touchstone: David Byrne of Talking Heads fame. As an art-rock band working in the 1970s-'90s, the Talking Heads were widely adored by rock critics. Building upon that success, David Byrne, as a solo artist, has enjoyed critical favor and become a respected elder statesman in the indie community. Moore, however, cites Byrne simply for the sake of contrast, arguing that Byrne and Arcade Fire both offer musical answers to the opening question, but from wildly different perspectives. Byrne's answer is presented as an "ambivalence" and "disaffection" akin to "drowning."[219] Arcade Fire, on the other hand, are championed as an "enigmatic husband-and-wife" pairing who have triumphed over "real, blinding pain […] in a way that is both tangible and accessible."[220] By contrasting Byrne's "imagined" pain (i.e. the

modern malaise) with Arcade Fire's "actual" pain (i.e. the death of relatives), Moore makes a case for Arcade Fire as more authentic, and therefore, more worthy of admiration.

As noted in the opening chapter, the trope of authenticity resonates strongly in the indie community. Usually the authenticity discourse revolves around perceived economic influences and lo(wer)-fi production techniques; however, in this instance, Moore focuses on authenticity of emotion. Based upon his introductory lamentation about modern emotional bankruptcy, it becomes clear that Arcade Fire is the musical remedy. Moore argues that the band can shepherd us along on a cathartic journey of rebirth: "Their search for salvation in the midst of real chaos is ours; their eventual catharsis is part of our continual enlightenment."[221] In this way, Arcade Fire's pain is conflated with our/humanity's angst and their music—which provides catharsis for the band and its listeners—thus becomes critical to humanity's "enlightenment." Normally, such grandiose claims are quickly debunked or, at the very least, challenged by the indie community. While isolated attempts were made to pushback against the "excess of praise […] heaped upon the band by tastemakers looking to chew up and spit out the next underground icon," these were largely drowned out by the rising tide of praise.[222] I argue that the fixation on the band's emotional authenticity played an important role in combating future backlash.

As if crowning Arcade Fire as humanity's emotional savior was not enough, Moore proceeds to explicitly underscore their authentic credentials in his third paragraph. He carefully reveals the nature of the painful circumstances which accompanied the album's creation—the passing of Chassagne's grandmother, Butler's grandfather, and Parry's aunt. For Moore, *Funeral* represents a "subliminal recognition of the powerful but oddly distanced pain that follows the death of an aging loved one."[223] To begin with, I am not certain that lyrics rife with death-related imagery and themes (i.e. "buries," "spread the ashes," "time keeps creepin' through the

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neighborhood, killing old folks") qualify as subliminal.[224] Regardless, by backing up his

argument about Arcade Fire's pain being authentic, Moore makes a preemptive counterargument

to would be detractors who might otherwise question what kind of *real* pain a bunch of kids from

Montreal could know.

At this point, Moore finally turns his attention to the content of the album. He identifies

the dominant lyrical themes as "sickness and death," "understanding and renewal," childhood

innocence, and "the impending coldness of maturity."[225] He also notes a tension between the

theme of family and community suggested by the "neighborhood" motif and the bleakness

pervading the rest of the lyrics.[226] With a broad summary of themes established, Moore uses the

next four paragraphs of the review to more thoroughly explore those themes and their attendant

tensions in selected songs.

The review's fourth paragraph is dedicated exclusively to the opening album track

"Neighborhood #1 (Tunnels)." First, Moore lists the instrumentation, then makes a couple of

oblique stabs at generically categorizing the song, choosing "sumptuously theatrical" and

"epic."[227] While these are not genres per se, they begin shaping the reader's conception of the

music and where it fits within the indie context. If Arcade Fire is assumed, for the sake of this

project, to be operating in the realm of indie rock, then the descriptions of its music as lushly

ornate seem to place it on the "popular" (i.e. "pop music for the 'thoughtful' person") as opposed

to the "experimental" (i.e. "mystery, strangeness, and noise") side of the spectrum.[228]

After considering the instrumentation, Moore turns toward Win Butler's vocal delivery

and a corresponding lyrical explication. Moore describes Butler as having a "bold voice that

wavers with the force of raw, unspoken emotion"—another indication of emotional

authenticity.[229] The emotive delivery complements the "tragic" situation outlined by the lyrics

where two young lovers unite to escape the desolation of adulthood.[230] This synopsis of lyrical content does not offer much in the way of interpretation, but instead underscores the review's opening supposition that Arcade Fire have reclaimed emotion from the clutches of the heartless modern world. Unbridled emotion is their weapon against ennui.

To open his fifth paragraph, Moore argues that the "tone and sentiment" in "Neighborhood #1 (Tunnels)" serves as "an abstract mission statement" for the remainder of the album.[231] Though Moore does briefly nod toward genre, labeling "Neighborhood #2 (Laika)" as "conventionally rock-oriented," the majority of this paragraph continues probing lyrical meaning. He argues that the songs "Neighborhood #2 (Laika)," "Une Année Sans Lumière," and "Haiti" reinforce previously-noted themes of desperation, turmoil, and modern angst. As before, the lyrics are primarily summarized. Interpretation extends only so far as the aforementioned impressionistic themes drawn from them.

Paragraph six, follows the now-familiar template by briefly touching upon instrumentation, then diving yet again into the lyrics. The musical description of "Neighborhood #3 (Power Out)" does invoke a genre term in reference to its "driving pop beat."[232] As with previous genre call-outs, a category like "pop" explicitly places *Funeral* on the "popular" side of the indie bifurcation. Lyrically, the song is said to contend with the familiar theme of exasperation, while at the same time functioning as "an emotional call to arms."[233] Perhaps, as a result, Moore heaps a great deal of praise upon the track, calling it an "audacious anthem," "fist-pumping album manifesto," and "the album's towering centerpiece."[234] By interpreting "an emotional call to arms" as "centerpiece," the notion of Arcade Fire as authentic, emotional superhero is reified, further belying the creation of a robust band mythos as the review's foremost accomplishment.

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Moore's penultimate paragraph tackles three more songs: "Crown of Love," "Rebellion (Lies)," and "In the Backseat." As might be expected, he highlights moments of "empowering positivity" and despondence giving way to "catharsis," providing more credence for the review's central claim.[235] Emphasis is again given to the way in which the emotionalism is delivered—Butler's "plaintive" wail and Chassagne's introspective coo.[236] The fact that two final popular-leaning genre descriptors appear—"dance" ("Crown of Love") and "anthemic" ("Rebellion (Lies)")—further entrenches the album on the popular side of the indie divide.[237] Moore demonstrates a remarkably consistent critical frame and stays true to his basic argument throughout.

The concluding paragraph brings the review full-circle, back to its emotional center. Moore begins with the following argument: "So long as we're unable or unwilling to fully recognize the healing aspect of embracing honest emotion in popular music, we will always approach the sincerity of an album like *Funeral* from a clinical distance."[238] Thus, the slant of his review is laid bare. Moore's strident sentimentality was an attempt to eradicate the "clinical distance" he finds so distasteful in critical reviews. In other words, honest critics respond to honest music. Reviewers should not be fooled by affected, schmaltzy tripe, but instead, praise those works that resonate on an authentically human (i.e. emotional) level. By demonstrating how to unabashedly give himself over to music, Moore lays a blueprint for a new, more emotionally-attuned age of music criticism. In a sense, the review serves as a critical manifesto for Moore, and by extension, Pitchfork. As if to add an exclamation point on the idea, in a final fit of hyperbole, Moore declaims *Funeral* as an album "at last capable of completely and successfully restoring the tainted phrase 'emotional' to its true origin."[239]

While a line-by-line analysis of the review produced some important insights, taking it as a whole yields an even greater bounty. First of all, over half of the review (by word count) does not even speak to the music itself. Instead, it focuses on exposition: building the mythos of the band and the world to which it is reacting. In fact, Moore expends 365 out of the review's 922 words before deconstructing any specific musical elements—about forty percent! This organization allows Arcade Fire to seem larger than the music they make. Admittedly, establishing backstory is a common tactic in many debut album reviews. Nonetheless, the upfront expenditure of linguistic resources on backstory is notable because of the extent to which it supersedes critical analysis. Couple this disproportionate emphasis on mythos with the site's early, pre-buzz coverage of Arcade Fire, and the future of the band seems secure in Pitchfork's estimation. To be sure, even within the sections of the review that focused on the music, much of the content was devoted to lyrical assessments that only solidified the mythic stance being advocated for the band. In this review, Pitchfork has knighted a new indie standard-bearer and rhetorically positions Arcade Fire as musical saviors to make sure their critical prescience is actualized. The more Pitchfork can inflate the hype bubble with glowing praise, the more people will pay attention. The more people pay attention, the more respect for the music spreads. By feeding the hype cycle, Pitchfork looks smarter in hindsight because they were early champions of the band.

Interestingly, the word "indie" does not appear a single time in the review to describe Arcade Fire. While their indie status could simply have been taken for granted given Pitchfork's explicitly-stated "indie focus" and Merge's existence as an independent label, it is telling nonetheless.[240] Each of the generic descriptors used throughout the review hew to mainstream, popular genre categories like pop, dance, and rock. The phrasing could partly be due to the

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splintering of genre I noted in chapter one—in essence, the generic landscape was less fractured in 2004. But it could also be an intentional strategy on the part of the Pitchfork editorial staff. Regardless of its intentionality, the mass-appeal genres invoked subtly position Arcade Fire as a universal band that can be appreciated beyond the confines of indie rock. At the very least, they represent the "mainstream" of the indie community that congregates around Pitchfork.

Reception of *Clap Your Hands Say Yeah*

Building up a band's mythos and positioning them as capable of finding purchase beyond the indie realm is one reason Pitchfork's review of Arcade Fire was so effective. Pitchfork demonstrates a variation on the mythos-building strategy for the CYHSY debut. The myth articulated in the review focuses on CYHSY's independence rather than honest emotion and universality, and as a result the myth proved less robust in the long term despite its immediate success. In this section, I begin by providing a broad overview of the reception attending CYHSY's self-titled debut and then proceed with a rhetorical close reading of that album's corresponding Pitchfork review.

Clap Your Hands Say Yeah was self-released by the band in the first week of June, 2005. Unlike Arcade Fire, CYHSY did not have a great deal pre-release buzz. Certain blogs (i.e. Gothamist, Stereogum) had mentioned them in passing as part of concert listings, but commentary went little beyond that.[241] As such, once the album was released, the hype built extremely quickly. One of the first reviews to be found is on the mp3 blog Said the Gramophone which recounts the album as having some "amazing songs" that "sound like so many bands, but just way better."[242] Pitchfork was the first major outlet to post a review (detailed below), and as soon as it did so on June 21, the band caught fire, garnering rave reviews from an increasing

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number of critics. On June 23, while noting that the album was not "overly inventive" or "ground breaking" [sic], Tiny Mix Tapes proclaimed that it would "force even the most hardened listeners to throw in the towel" and give in to the happy music.[243] By the time PopMatters posted its review on August 2, the hype for the band had grown to fever pitch—so much so that hype itself became a major preoccupation of most of the band's reviewers. For instance, the PopMatters review starts off by facetiously espousing how "Clap Your Hands Say Yeah will save rock and roll." The critique is rounded out in more measured fashion, however, cautioning that while the band is "promising, […] they're only just getting started."[244] In his All Music Guide review, J. Scott McClintock echoes this sentiment:

> Those who have read the blogs and heard the hype might well be expecting the second coming. These people will be disappointed and post morose reviews on Amazon: "I was expecting sooooo much, but this album is only 'good.'" That's right! It's good. Not magnificent, not groundbreaking, but it is a new band's first album, and it is good—darn good.[245]

Despite the trepidation and calls for more measured assessment, the hype continued to balloon. The grassroots groundswell in popularity caught the attention of NPR's Jacob Ganz, who profiled the role that internet buzz played in the meteoric rise of the band on *All Things Considered* on November 29.[246] Even veteran music critic Robert Christgau of the *Village Voice* felt the need to comment on the hype in his review of the album in December, labeling the band the "indie-rock story of the year" and giving them an A-. While all of the reviews mentioned here call attention to CYHSY's independent, self-released resilience, they also all address the hype surrounding the band. This is a marked difference from the ways in which reviewers approached Arcade Fire's *Funeral*, and proves a critical distinction in the final analysis. As with *Funeral*, however, a number of sonic equivalents and antecedents are cited.[247]

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While critical response to *Clap Your Hands Say Yeah* was overwhelmingly positive, it did not quite reach the heights achieved by *Funeral*. The CYHSY album has a metascore of 84, compared to Funeral's 90—nonetheless, this is still an impressive achievement.[248] Though Pitchfork's full album review was not posted until June 21, the site's founder, Ryan Schreiber, did post a review of the track "In This Home on Ice" on June 14. Since most of those who read Pitchfork are familiar with the fact that Schreiber is its founder, when he chimes in, it is a signal of the album or song's importance. The single-paragraph review addresses the nascent hype and then does its best to amp it up by comparing CYHSY's sound to two key indie bands: "Alec Ounsworth's chorused vocals meet somewhere between a much poppier pre-*Loveless* My Bloody Valentine and the conventional indie songcraft of the Arcade Fire."[249] In describing Pitchfork's excitement for the upcoming album, Schreiber playful intones: "basically we're trying not to piss ourselves."[250]

One week later, Pitchfork awarded *Clap Your Hands Say Yeah* a 9.0 out of 10.0 and much-vaunted "Best New Music" status. Reviewer Brian Howe opens the review with a strangely prophetic line: "Maybe no one told Clap Your Hands Say Yeah that first impressions are important."[251] Howe quickly doubles back, however, with another, more vulgar postulation: "Or maybe they've just got massive sack."[252] From the beginning then, Howe makes the tone of his piece clear—lighthearted, flippant, and a tad snarky. He uses this opening as entrée to assessing the album's first track, "Clap Your Hands!." In stark contrast to David Moore's *Funeral* review, Howe addresses the music by his third sentence. Thus, despite its jokey intro, the review purports to be a more straightforward musical assessment than its counterpart. Even though he calls the song a weird, "potentially grating bit of snake-oil salesmanship," and notes how "a maniacal carny barking over a stuttering calliope isn't for everyone," Howe is clear to

emphasize that he "digs" it.[253] As part of this segment, he references Tom Waits as the first of many indie touchstones to appear in the review. By linking the band to a luminary like Waits from the get-go, Howe has already placed the band in rarified territory—just as Moore did for Arcade Fire by invoking David Byrne. The litany of comparisons that follow in the remaining paragraphs further cement the band as significant-by-association. Howe finishes the first paragraph by assuring the reader that the peculiarities of "Clap Your Hands!" are not indicative of the remainder of the album, promising "that this garish foyer gives out onto spacious, elegant chambers of clean lines and soft lights."[254]

Having used the first paragraph to ensnare the reader, Howe backpedals in the second paragraph to provide some context and background for the band. He begins by stating where the band is from ("Brooklyn"—notable as the indie mecca of New York City) and by listing two extremely different instruments used by the band ("harp and harmonica") to hint at their eclecticism.[255] Next, perhaps establishing a precedent for future reviewers of the album, Howe turns his attention to the hype surrounding the band with a passing reference to "rave press in their home city" and (vulgarly once again) how over "the past two weeks, [CYHSY has been] burning up the internet like a vintage Lohan nipslip."[256] The juxtaposition of a high-brow reference like Tom Waits and a low-brow reference like Lindsay Lohan helps establish Howe as a credible source—he is aware of what is going on at all levels of the cultural milieu. Since the hype had only begun gaining steam in the weeks leading up to the review, the small nod toward localized buzz is not surprising. In addition, the consistent low-brow references reinforce how Howe is not striving for impassioned sincerity or earnestness.

Scant details about the band revealed, Howe runs down a list of comparisons offered by critics so far (agreeing with Talking Heads, disagreeing with Wilco). His basic premise is that no

matter how many "referents" the band may "check in with" it has its own sound.[257] It is at this point that Howe makes a contradictory about-face. After chastising other critics for needless comparisons and arguing that the music "sings for itself," he describes the band through the use of other sonic equivalents:

> Clap Your Hands traffics in melodic, exuberant indie rock that pairs the shimmering, wafting feel of Yo La Tengo with a singular vocal presence that sounds like Paul Banks attempting to yodel through Jeff Mangum's throat. Or imagine the Arcade Fire if their music were more fun-loving and less grave.[258]

Citing so many indie demigods in a short span is liable to catch the attention of Pitchfork's indie readership. The Arcade Fire reference, however, serves to link the two bands. In this way, it could be an attempt to suggest that the band is destined for a similar trajectory and similar love within the indie community. Moreover, this paragraph (including the excerpt above) references a number of genres including "modern" rock, "new wave," and most specifically of all "indie rock."[259] While modern and new wave are suggested as references, CYHSY is explicitly assigned to the "indie rock" genre. Such a clear statement does not allow for negotiation—if Pitchfork, the hub of indie, deigns it so, then it must be so. What's more, this assignation (as with the one given to *Funeral*) seems to favor the popular rather than experimental faction in the indie community.

Howe's third paragraph opens by noting how CYHSY did not provide a press kit to accompany their album. This leads to a snide commentary on the role of publicists in rock criticism and the stock phrases which typically pepper their output. Lambasting the clichés of publicists serves to demarcate CYHSY as more authentic than those bands who rely upon PR. The PR focus also foreshadows the ideas Howe returns to in his conclusion. After the short tangent, he proceeds to identify musical elements in the next three (proper) songs on the album.[260] The vocals on "Let the Cool Goddess Rust Away," are compared to the Walkmen,

while "twist[ing]" guitars and "throbbing" bass are highlighted.[261] A comparison to another indie-fav, Interpol, appears in the comments on "Over and Over Again (Lost and Found)," while "stripped" down instrumentation, "synth wash," and "lilting vocals" get the attention.[262] "Details of the War" is lumped into the group with synonymic treatment. In consort, since the descriptions of these three songs call attention to elements fashionable in indie rock at the time, they further anchor the songs (and CYHSY) as reputably indie.

The review's second to last paragraph carries on in much the same way. Half of it is devoted to "stand out" track "The Skin of My Yellow Country Teeth."[263] The same sorts of indie-approved song elements are trotted out: "buzzing synth, […] contrapuntal bass, and shuffling drums."[264] In addition, Modest Mouse is invoked in reference to the guitar work—yet another highly-regarded indie band. Having established the sound of the song, Howe calls specific attention to Alec Ounsworth's "most memorable" vocal performance which sounds "as if someone were pressing his vocal cords to a fret board and bending them."[265] While the song has been described as having the hallmarks of popular indie rock, this last description at least hints that the vocals may shy toward the acquired tastes concordant with the experimental realm.

The other two songs in this section get the same treatment as those that came before: stylistic description ("fruit loop synth," "fuzzed-out bass," "fizzy guitars"); shout-outs to indie touchstones (Neutral Milk Hotel); and brief dalliances with genre categories ("unhinged pop").[266] While the incongruity of a phrase like "unhinged pop" once again recalls the tension between the popular ("pop") and the experimental ("unhinged"), the descriptions of indie-standard musical elements place the album squarely in the realm of popular indie.[267]

The final paragraph returns to ponder the incestuous relationship between publicity and indie rock. Howe celebrates CYHSY as "refreshing" specifically because they arrived *without* a

publicist-supplied mythos.[268] This, he claims, allows the listener to "hear the music with [his/her] own ears."[269] Oddly, this sentiment remains seemingly oblivious to the role critics (and Howe's review in particular) play in the formation of a band's indie identity. A more important irony comes to light in the last three sentences. After lauding CYHSY's lack of publicist-supplied mythos, Howe does the band the favor of creating one for them: "Clap Your Hands Say Yeah prove that it's still possible for a band to get heard, given enough talent and perseverance, without a PR agency or a label."[270] It is as if Horatio Alger were reborn as an indie music critic. Bringing in the idea of perseverance is particularly laughable in this case, given that the band had only released its debut album a couple of weeks before the review came out.

At this point, Howe argues that CYHSY is important for "indie rock" writ large as a "much needed kick in the pants."[271] He asserts that the emergence of such an independent band offers a unique opportunity for the indie community "to decide what a band sounds like of our own accord before any agency cooks up and disseminates an opinion for us."[272] As newly-minted Ragged Dicks then, CYHSY become emblematic of how the process of indie band discovery and reception is "supposed to work."[273] Thus, the band takes on importance as a rebuke to the old industry's PR machine. As the final sentiment, the reader is left uncertain as to whether it is truly the music that is important, or the brave new business model and hope for complete independence that CYHSY *represents*.

Looking at the review as a whole evinces more important trends. First of all, the review is significantly shorter than Moore's *Funeral* review—625 versus 922 words. The shorter length, however, is typical of Howe's reviews. Furthermore, a much greater percentage (nearly three-quarters) of the review is given over to describing and analyzing the music than was evident in Moore's review. That said, much of Howe's description resorted to synonymic wording which,

while placing the music firmly in the genre of indie rock, detracted from each song's potential individuality. Even when more "unique" descriptions were attempted, Howe often turned toward sonic equivalents. In total, there were nine references made to other bands when Howe was explaining the sound of CYHSY.[274] This is far more than Howe's average of three per review. The review's reliance upon referents occasionally made the descriptions feel cramped. After all, if CYHSY are merely proffering well-worn indie tropes, they may not be worthy of praise. Constant references to other bands can thereby impede the formation of a band's own, unique identity.

A broad view of this review also evinces the tendency of indie critics to bristle against the publicity machine—all this despite their being complicit in the promotion of bands. It is a play to reviewer authenticity—indie critics are fighting to be seen as authentic just as much as the bands they review. In the case of CYHSY, the anti-establishment fixation may have worked against the band's future viability. For one, the explicit mention of the hype surrounding a band can draw back the curtain on the world of indie publicity and criticism. Once a reader glimpses this hidden world, the magic can be lost when it seems every success is predicated upon carefully-delivered publicity campaigns. When this happens, it can seem like a band's accomplishments are not its own. It leads a reader to question whether appreciation for a band is justified.

Finally, the last paragraph of the review sets up an incomplete, even impossible mythos for CYHSY. In it, they are positioned as self-reliant indie heroes who give *every* listener the opportunity to approach them with pristine ears. This presents an unworkable conundrum— simply by virtue of the positive Pitchfork review (and the resultant cascade of hype surrounding the band), almost no listener can come at the band fresh. If someone has heard of CYHSY, it is most likely because of its coverage in the indie press. And that coverage is not without bias—

bias that a person can either agree with or react against. Unlike Arcade Fire, whose mythos is grounded in the subjectivity of emotion, CYHSY's mythos is strapped to the cold, calculating objectivity of the music business. Forced to live up to an impossible standard and play untainted indie savior to every listener, the band is hamstrung in a way that Arcade Fire was not. This mythos differential is a key difference between the Arcade Fire and CYHSY reviews that informs my analysis of the sophomore album pairing.

Conclusion

Both the *Funeral* and *Clap Your Hands Say Yeah* reviews put Pitchfork in the position of band advocate. That advocacy, however, framed their authenticity in differing ways. Arcade Fire was framed as emotionally authentic, while CYHSY was framed as economically authentic and untainted by the publicity machine. Moreover, the foci of the two reviews differed. The Arcade Fire review devoted a great deal of its content to mythos building, while the CYHSY review was presented as a more straightforward analysis of the music and rumination on the nature of publicity. Thus, both albums were celebrated, but the differing celebration had different effects on the hype cycle and future reception given to the bands. The emotional authenticity of Arcade Fire trumped the economic authenticity of CYHSY.

In reality, staking a claim on certain bands is something all music critics (and criticism websites) do. It is not unique to Pitchfork. The relationship between music and the sites which criticize it is a symbiotic one. If Pitchfork devoted all of its resources to tearing bands apart, those bands' careers might be cut short—and if this happened consistently enough, the predictability would lead either to a decline in readership or to a decline in bands willing to

become critical fodder. Pitchfork has to produce the occasional "it" band in order to incentivize both of these processes.

When Arcade Fire became Pitchfork's "it" band, the review was awash in earnest sentimentality and served as a clarion call to reclaim the life-affirming musical joy robbed by modern society. The album was positioned as a soothing salve for ennui and struck a nerve. America was in turmoil. It was an election year and resentment against George W. Bush was building on the left (and as a result within the indie community). Thus, a record to address the growing feelings of despondency and futility was a welcome one.

When CYHSY became the "it" band, the review was filled with hope, but hope filtered through an aloof snark. In the process, the review became a commentary on the machinations of the old music/publicity industry. CYHSY was presented as hope for a new way forward. However, the upfront acknowledgement of hype simultaneously called attention to the connection between the band's fame and the fickle whims of the indie rock press. If hype was responsible for catapulting them to fame, perhaps their music did not have much merit. This rupture helped undermine CYHSY's position as completely authentic, helping to kick-start (or at least prime) the backlash that soon engulfed them.

Both reviews are representative of two early (and successful) salvos in Pitchfork's bid to become ruling indie tastemaker. Interestingly, that power was exercised in contrasting ways. In the next chapter, I delve deeper into the concept of backlash as I investigate how Arcade Fire's *Neon Bible* and CYHSY's *Some Loud Thunder* were received. In doing so, I show how Pitchfork's framing of these two bands played an important role in their divergent fortunes. As a consequence, my analysis calls into question the ethical responsibilities that come with Pitchfork's being king.

Chapter 4: How to Keep the Car Running Upon Encountering the Crippled Elephant

When a band first appears on the scene, it has the benefit of anonymity. It is neither saddled with the weight of expectation nor the accumulated damage that comes from time in the spotlight. But, should a band be so lucky as to release a second album, they are faced with a radically altered critical landscape. By this point, their debut has made its way through the hype cycle, been assessed and reappraised with the perspective offered by distance. Thus, for any second album, comparisons are inevitably drawn against the benchmark of the debut. And when that debut was highly regarded, the challenge becomes even more difficult. This is the challenge that faced Arcade Fire's *Neon Bible* and Clap Your Hands Say Yeah's *Some Loud Thunder* in 2007. While both albums experienced a drop from their previous lofty scores, the drop suffered by CYHSY proved far more deleterious to the band (and its image as indie standard-bearers) than the one visited upon Arcade Fire.

In this chapter, I explore the ways Pitchfork mitigated the hype that it helped create for both of these bands. To do so, I first chronicle what happened to the bands since the release of their debut albums. This information helps frame my analysis of the reception of *Neon Bible* and *Some Loud Thunder*. Then, I provide a broad summary of the reception of *Neon Bible* and conduct a rhetorical close reading of its corresponding Pitchfork's review. As I noted in chapter three, Pitchfork staked a substantial amount of its reputation on Arcade Fire by awarding *Funeral* an extremely high score. Combine that with the emotionally authentic mythos it helped create for the band, and it is unsurprising that the backlash was mild—the review for *Neon Bible* simply dialed back on the superlatives and offered a more measured assessment. After attending to *Neon Bible*, I provide a broad summary of the reception of *Some Loud Thunder* followed by a rhetorical close reading of its corresponding Pitchfork review. Though Pitchfork also hyped

CYHSY, communal consensus began to question the level of praise given to the band. By foregrounding the hype and publicity process in its review of CYHSY's debut, Pitchfork saddled the band with economic authenticity. Compared with emotional authenticity, economic authenticity is far less sustainable. After all, a band can only be economically authentic once—after that, it is imbricated in the machinery of the music system, no longer a complete outsider. Given the way Pitchfork framed CYHSY's debut, it is perhaps inevitable that the backlash surrounding *Some Loud Thunder* was far more devastating than that experienced by Arcade Fire. When the review of *Some Loud Thunder* did nothing to squelch the tide of backlash, it helped preserve Pitchfork's critical reputation by demonstrating the site's willingness to turn against a former favorite.

Between the Debut and Sophomore Releases for Arcade Fire and CYHSY

The time between *Funeral* and *Neon Bible* proved to be eventful for Arcade Fire. Their fame growing and profile on the rise, the band toured relentlessly. From September 2004 through November 2005, they played an astounding 132 shows across the U.S., Canada, Europe, and even made stops in Japan and Brazil.[275] This is significant considering the fact that new indie bands are usually lucky to get a thirty-date national tour, along with a handful of festival dates. If a band is especially well-received, they may also tack on a brief European mini-tour. That is usually the extent of touring success a debut band can expect. As such, Arcade Fire's run is incredibly prolific. Their early tour stops were mostly small clubs, but once 2005 dawned and the band's notoriety had grown, they consistently sold out much larger venues—they even shared the stage with megastars like U2, David Byrne, and David Bowie.[276] That same year, they also

played a number of high-profile summer festivals like Primavera, Coachella, Lollapalooza, and Leeds.[277]

But the year was not just marked by a barrage of tour dates, Arcade Fire continued to reverberate throughout the press. Just seven months after the release of *Funeral*, the band graced the cover of the Canadian edition of *Time* magazine with the epithet "Canada's Most Intriguing Rock Band."[278] In September, as if its "arrival" were not yet cemented, the band made its U.S. network television debut as the musical guest on the *Late Show with David Letterman*.[279] The press sheet that accompanied the review copies of *Neon Bible* uses words like "hectic" and "overwhelming" to describe this time period, concluding that "by the time the year ended, the Arcade Fire were pretty damn tired. Happy and satisfied, yes, but really tired."[280]

After such an exhausting run, the band decided to step back from touring for a while. According to a feature in *Paste* magazine, Win Butler and Régine Chassagne bought a church in Farnham, Quebec and converted it into a combination recording studio/band barracks.[281] Arcade Fire sequestered themselves there throughout 2006, writing and recording the songs for their *Funeral* follow-up.[282] Though the majority of tracks were recorded in Farnham, select sessions were recorded in New York and Budapest (to capture the sounds of a Hungarian orchestra and a military men's choir).[283] The band worked with engineers Scott Colburn and Marcus Dravs and mixed the album in their church-cum-studio with Nick Launay.[284] Having wrapped recording and mixing, the band ventured out to perform their new material at a series of multi-night residencies in London, Montreal, and New York City.[285] In the final run up to *Neon Bible*'s release, Arcade Fire debuted new songs on the February 24 episode of *Saturday Night Live*.[286] The album was released on March 6, 2007, with anticipation running high among fans and critics alike.

CYHSY experienced their fair-share of success in the wake of releasing *Clap Your Hands Say Yeah*. Like Arcade Fire, CYHSY launched into an intense touring schedule after releasing their debut—a schedule that went almost straight through to the release of *Some Loud Thunder* in January of 2007. The band played an impressive 147 shows in this time period.[287] Tour stops included the U.S., Europe, Canada, Japan, and Mexico.[288] As with Arcade Fire, shows progressed from small venues to selling out large ones, and as larger audiences clamored for the band, CYHSY played a number of marquee summer festivals including: Coachella, Bonaroo, Roskilde, and T in the Park.[289] Concordant with the ceaseless touring, CYHSY's profile grew. The band continued to garner publicity months after their debut was released. *The New York Times* and Pitchfork ran multiple features.[290] The band made the rounds on the late night talk shows, playing *Late Night with Conan O'Brien* in December 2005 and *The Late Show with David Letterman* in March 2006.[291] Even NPR took notice of the CYHSY phenomenon.[292] Bolstered by the heightened profile, CYHSY spurned domestic record labels that came courting, and instead negotiated an independent distribution deal with the Alternative Distribution Alliance.[293]

While many indicators pointed toward success for CYHSY, backlash was brewing in certain corners of the community. Some reviews of the debut album published in the wake of the Pitchfork 9.0 questioned the hype. In August 2005, PopMatters asserted that hype made it difficult to appraise the band rationally and urged "let's not get ahead of ourselves here."[294] Five months later, *The Guardian*, labeled the album a "wasted opportunity."[295] The seeds of discontent spread beyond the initial album reviews, however. In particular, CYHSY's live performances were often the focus of derision. Early proponents of the band began backing off of the initial hype. Dan Beirne of mp3 blog Said the Gramophone explained how his jaw did not

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drop "as much as he would have liked" at a September 2005 gig.[296] In an April 2006 interview

with *The Washington Post*, Ryan Schreiber of Pitchfork admitted that he had "soured some on

the group" because they were not "that great live."[297] These comments suggest a heretofore

unmentioned criterion in assessing a band's indie authenticity—their live performances must live

up to their recordings. Poor live performance can insinuate that studio wizardry (not

performative talent) is responsible for the quality of a recording. It does not change the quality of

the album per se, only the lens through which it is viewed critically. Schreiber also expressed

disappointment that CYHSY had not given enough credit to the internet for its role in breaking

the band.[298] To be sure, Ounsworth in particular, kept the press at arm's length.[299] This critique is

especially noteworthy considering the way Pitchfork's review of *Clap Your Hands Say Yeah*

specifically addressed the hype and publicity process. Despite Brian Howe's railing against the

old-industry publicity machine in that review, Schreiber's comments (as Pitchfork representative

and Howe's superior) indicate his desire for Pitchfork to be recognized as the rightful heir to the

old publicity model.

　　Nonetheless, CYHSY soldiered on. *Some Loud Thunder* was recorded by the band in the

spring and summer of 2006, though they worked with Dave Fridmann as producer.[300] As the

release drew near, the disillusionment expressed by some critics percolated out into the indie

rock community. In response to a preview of the album posted on Stereogum, commenters

hurled barbs like: "They [CYHSY] sucked from the start" and "CYHSY are awful. Really, really

awful."[301] Amidst the building backlash, CYHSY self-released their sophomore album on

January 30, 2007.

Reception of *Neon Bible*

In this section, I provide a broad overview of the reception accorded Arcade Fire's *Neon Bible* and a rhetorical close reading of that album's corresponding Pitchfork review.

Neon Bible was released by Merge Records on March 6, 2007. After a two-and-a-half-year hiatus, excitement for a new album was running high. Given the love showered upon *Funeral*, the anticipation for *Neon Bible* was to be expected. In a marked contrast to the *Funeral* coverage, some of the first published reviews appeared in old-guard sources. For instance, on February 20, *Rolling Stone* offered praise—"excess with a point"—tempered with complaints targeting overabundant reverb that clouded the album's "avenging spirit."[302] The *Village Voice*'s February 27 review was similarly bet-hedging, calling the music more "nuanced" than that on *Funeral*, while noting the various "growing pains" on display.[303] In yet another pre-release review, PopMatters noted the album's "world-weary" themes, but nonetheless found it "a worthy successor [to *Funeral*]" because of "the music's unflagging passion."[304] The number of reviews that came out before *Neon Bible*'s official release date is a further testament to the high level of anticipation—especially since many of these appeared in more mainstream (as opposed to indie-centric) sources.

Though the initial reviews were largely tentative, once the album released on March 6, the reception grew steadily warmer. Tiny Mix Tapes posted a review decrying the gratuitous hype accompanying Arcade Fire's first release, but called *Neon Bible* "the sound of a talented band finding its true genesis."[305] *The New York Times* gave the band significant coverage in a 4,800-word feature article and hailed *Neon Bible* as "phenomenal."[306] The praise was equally ecstatic at the A.V. Club which proclaimed: "If there weren't some reason left to believe, it'd be pointless to make such a gorgeous album."[307] Themes like belief indicate that the mythos

established in tandem with *Funeral* carried over into *Neon Bible*—Arcade Fire are still musical emissaries who offer messages of hope to world-weary humanity. Overall, the critical response to *Neon Bible* was, like *Funeral* before it, overwhelmingly favorable. The album has a metascore of 87 on Metacritic, based on an aggregate of forty-seven reviews—fourteen more major reviews than *Funeral* received.[308]

As for Pitchfork, the website had been dutifully relaying news of *Neon Bible* since June 2006.[309] At that time, the album was neither finished nor had a name. Even still, the site eagerly reported every scrap of information—from the first concert announcements to forgivingly glowing reviews of secret warm-up shows that previewed *Neon Bible* as "huge, hysterical, [and] sublime."[310] In keeping with this trend, Pitchfork posted its review of the album on March 5— the day before the album's official release date. It scored an 8.4 and, like its predecessor, was awarded "Best New Music" status.

This time, review duties fell to Stephen M. Deusner. He opens the review by invoking two other texts. First, perhaps in an effort to demonstrate his (and Arcade Fire's) literary credibility, Deusner notes how the album shares its name with a novel by John Kennedy Toole. Second, and more telling, Deusner makes a reference to *Neon Bible*'s "more cloistered predecessor."[311] Already, though its name has not been mentioned directly, *Funeral* (and Pitchfork's grandiose assessment of it) hangs over the just-begun review of *Neon Bible* in Damoclean fashion. Think of it as an up-front assertion of power on the part of Pitchfork—a reminder of the role it played in "breaking" Arcade Fire in the first place. Just as easily as the band was built up, if *Neon Bible* falters in any way, the site can just as easily usher it into the afterlife. While reference to previous albums as benchmarks is nearly inevitable in reviews of

sophomore albums, the way the reference is frontloaded into the very first sentence is a high-visibility reminder that Pitchfork giveth, and Pitchfork taketh away.

From there, a series of contrasts is drawn to further distinguish *Neon Bible* from *Funeral*. On their sophomore effort, "the band looks outward instead of inward, their concerns [are] more worldly than familial, and their sound [is] more malevolent than cathartic."[312] These contrasts are followed by a rundown of *Neon Bible*'s main themes: anger, paranoia, and the modern malaise. The first paragraph sets the tone for the remainder of the review. It will not be the meditation on emotion and musical mythos that David Moore's review of *Funeral* was. Instead, Deusner's review of *Neon Bible* will constantly compare and contrast the two albums, thereby serving as referendum on not only Arcade Fire's merit, but the merit of Pitchfork's original assessment as well. Whether or not the consistent album comparison is an intentional strategy on the part of Deusner (or the Pitchfork editorial staff), it nonetheless serves to bolster the credibility of Pitchfork by reminding the reader of the site's critical prescience.

Deusner's review is brimming with equivocating language. He critiques one element only to negate that critique with counter-balanced praise. For instance, his second paragraph begins by knocking the band as occasionally "self-righteous," but then forgives them because "their scathingly critical perspective gives weight and direction to their nervy earnestness."[313] It seems like separating "scathing perspectives" and "nervy earnestness" from self-righteousness would be an impossible task, so it is not entirely clear what to take from this couplet. And yet, ending the sentence with praise hints that harsh criticism is not its true objective. At this point Deusner makes another *Funeral* reference: "If *Funeral* captured the enormity of personal pain, *Neon Bible* sounds large enough to take on the whole world."[314] *Neon Bible* is thus being positioned as the more ambitious of the two albums. But does unbridled ambition equate to equally unbridled

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praise? The 8.4 awarded suggests otherwise. However, given the expectations typically heaped

upon sophomore albums and the diminished novelty (i.e. listeners have heard the band before),

8.4 is still a very positive assessment.

Next, Deusner explains how the opening track's title "Black Mirror" is a reference to a

fortune-telling device. He opines that the band holds just such a mirror "up to the world,"

resulting in the dark, world-weary lyrical themes throughout the album.[315] Building on this idea,

the third paragraph begins with another reference to *Funeral*, arguing that that album's "raw,

large sound" has been "streamlined" on *Neon Bible*.[316] Attempting to describe this economy of

sound, Deusner makes his first reference to musical elements by citing "inventive guitar work"

and "steady drums" that provide a "controlled forward thrust" to the music.[317] While this is a far-

from-explicit description, it is the first moment that those unfamiliar with the band's sound

would have a chance to begin locating the band sonically. Clearly, the assumption is that

everyone reading the review knows Arcade Fire and has heard *Funeral*. Fittingly, the paragraph

ends with yet another direct comparison between *Funeral* and *Neon Bible*. Where *Funeral* was

"cathartic," *Neon Bible* is described as offering a "measured release."[318] Seeing more controlled

emotion as a potential deficit, Deusner admits that *Neon Bible* "could strike some listeners as a

disappointing follow-up."[319] Not one to shy away from dithering, he immediately strikes a

prognosticatory stance and argues that "the record's mix of newfound discipline and passion will

likely imbue it with a long shelf-life."[320]

The fourth paragraph opens with another description of the album's dominant musical

characteristics. Once again, Deusner argues that the songs exhibit a "forward motion."[321] He

points toward "immense church organs" and "Calexico horns" as specific instrumentation

choices that help effect this propulsiveness.[322] "Calexico" is also the first reference to another

band—the Tucson, Arizona-based indie band with a penchant for Spanish-influenced horn sections.[323] Deusner also cites the greater incorporation of Régine Chassagne as a vocalist as a "noticeable (and promising) development."[324] He argues that Chassagne serves as "capable foil" to the earnestness of Win Butler and equates her voice to "her soaring string arrangements."[325] Deusner is careful to note that those arrangements were written with "Owen Pallet of Final Fantasy"—another indie-approved band reference.[326]

While paragraph four made oblique references to sonic equivalents and refrained from making any *Funeral* comparisons, the fifth paragraph addresses both of them headlong. Here, Deusner argues that the evolution of Arcade Fire's sound, though not "drastic," sheds light on some "significant" new "touchstones."[327] "Davids Byrne and Bowie" are brought up in connection with *Funeral*. Although these are commonly cited sonic equivalents for that album, the reference is all the more meaningful to those in the know who are aware that both of these luminaries have praised Arcade Fire and shared a stage with the band.[328] *Neon Bible*, on the other hand, is said to evoke Bruce Springsteen due to its "wordy songs and aggressive shuffle" and "compression of so many styles and sounds into one messy, exciting burst."[329] The comparison to Springsteen is the opening salvo of a section that attempts to locate the band generically. "Ocean of Noise" is labeled a "shoreline samba" and "Bad Vibrations" works to blend "girl-group and new wave."[330] These genre category call-outs are significant for the fact that they are not ones readers might expect based upon *Funeral*. When considered in combination with the Springsteen reference, the growth of the band's sound toward a broader sonic palate is further underscored.

Having emphasized the shift (and expansion) in sound, Deusner levels an attack against Butler's "clunky lyrics" in paragraph six.[331] He complains that Butler tends to "overstate and

sensationalize."[332] He also complains about the "deliberate" and "faux-antiquated" rhymes that crop up throughout the album.[333] This complaint is a bit surprising considering how the lyrics of *Funeral*, which are similarly sensationalized, were held up in Moore's review as attributes instead of detriments.[334] After spending the better part of a paragraph slogging Butler's lyricism as ham-fisted, Deusner pulls an unsurprising about-face. In his estimation, the vocal delivery and accompanying music are more important to the meaning of the songs than the lyrics themselves—"whenever a line falls flat on *Neon Bible*, the music, always hurtling forward, picks it up and carries it along."[335] By constantly undercutting his criticisms, Deusner (under the aegis of Pitchfork) seems to be working to appease both those poised to unleash backlash and those with unconditional love for the band. Whether or not this is sound argumentation, it effectively neutralizes both hype *and* backlash by giving equal ammunition to the opposing viewpoints.

Paragraph seven swings back toward praise. Its first sentence directly categorizes Arcade Fire as "indie" and notes how the band "work[s] best in the album format."[336] This is the most explicit way in which Arcade Fire is positioned as indie and also the only time the term appears in the entire review. Once again, *Neon Bible* is compared against *Funeral*, only this time, *Neon Bible,* described as "more finely tuned," takes the clear upper hand.[337] To underscore *Neon Bible*'s superiority in this regard, Deusner further calls it "a shapely work" which "sustains a mood that's both ominous and exhilarating."[338] The outpouring of praise on display works to counteract the harsher words of the previous paragraph. Nonetheless, as the reader has been conditioned to expect, at this point, Deusner beats a small retreat. No matter how "powerful" the individual songs are, they can lack coherence, teeter toward "inaccessibility," and even be "uninspiring" when abstracted from the context of the overall album.[339] While Deusner's wording makes it clear that *Neon Bible* tows the proper line as an album, the suggestion of weak

songs-as-individual-units primes his final critique. He argues that "everything" after the opening track "flows seamlessly […] until the final track."[340]

The penultimate paragraph targets album-closer "My Body Is a Cage," as a pitiful exercise in "the sort of pained melodrama that fuels the band's detractors."[341] Deusner equates the lyrical style of the track to that of Trent Reznor (of Nine Inch Nails). This final sonic touchstone is notable in that it operates as an *unfavorable* comparison—at the time Pitchfork's coverage of Reznor and his musical output was largely derisive and dismissive.[342] Given Pitchfork's view of Reznor and this comparison's place late in the review, it seems to be designed to catch the reader's attention. This is elitist, exclusionary framing. As such, it is one of the more damning critiques of the entire piece. Deusner suggests that had the album ended a track earlier on "No Cars Go," the overall feeling evoked would have been "more generous."[343] Continuing to nitpick, he argues that a "No Cars Go" finale would have made more sense thematically.

With these complaints laid out, Deusner reassumes the mantle of Arcade Fire apologist in his closing paragraph. He concludes that the band is "firmly rooted in the here and now" despite the "press coverage and fan obsession" engulfing them—a nod towards the Arcade Fire's authenticity, and thus, credibility (and rightful place) in the indie pantheon.[344] The final line further emphasizes the band's universality, describing how they grapple to comprehend the world and tumultuous times in which they live. Arcade Fire aims "to see it [the world] for what it really is"—these are *real* people with *real* concerns.[345] In this way, the band takes on the role of the everyman. Though Springsteen is not directly invoked again, everyday humanity is certainly a Springsteenian theme—a subtle connection which brings the review full circle. Not content to leave his assessment there, Deusner tacks on a final, ambiguous statement: "or at least as it

appears in the distorted mirror they hold to it."[346] Either he is arguing that a distorted mirror (and picture of reality) is the best anybody can manage in modern times, or that Arcade Fire's view of reality is fundamentally distorted. The ambiguity inherent in this statement is a fitting end to the review given the equivocation evident throughout. Deusner has positioned the piece as one that can be read either for or against the album—the 8.4 and "Best New Music" classification are the only indications of Pitchfork's "authorized" interpretation.

On the whole, the review is 914 words in length. While approximately the same length as Pitchfork's *Funeral* review, the content of the *Neon Bible* review is significantly different. First of all, little time is devoted to developing or accentuating the mythos of the band. The review relies upon its readers' preexisting knowledge of Arcade Fire to create the context for *Neon Bible*. Relatedly, the review is framed as a comparison between the sophomore and debut albums of Arcade Fire instead of an outright evaluation of *Neon Bible* in its own right. While neither of these tendencies may be particularly unique to reviews of sophomore albums, they nonetheless form the basis for a tonal shift that may inform part of the backlash mechanism. Especially in the case when a debut is highly regarded, a comparison-based technique seems prone to leave the reviewer of a sophomore effort wanting.

Deusner's review of *Neon Bible* also demonstrates a more explicit effort at positioning Arcade Fire as indie. Along with specific use of the word "indie," the review also calls forth niche genre categories like "shoreline samba" and "girl group" en vogue at the time that would appeal to the omnivore tastes typically associated with indie fans. Nonetheless, the genres invoked—along with touchstones like Bruce Springsteen—clearly communicate that while the music may be adventurous, it is still deeply rooted on the popular, rather than experimental side of the indie community.

By striking a balance of positive and negative comments (with a bias toward the positive) and maintaining Arcade Fire's popular-indie positioning, Pitchfork works to defuse dissent. This is important because it reveals how reviews are not only vehicles for communicating critical assessments, but also tools that Pitchfork uses to manage its identity as a credible authority. Since the *Neon Bible* review plays to as wide an audience as possible, chances are that the expectations of most of that audience will be met. Readers of every opinion can find a moment of resonance with the review. Even those who write Arcade Fire off as too mainstream can clearly read the way the review codes the band as such—thus, Pitchfork is not trying to fool them into believing Arcade Fire is experimental. Providing a mix of criticism and praise for every opinion helps deflate the unsustainable hype that had accompanied Arcade Fire's debut while preserving a respectable reputation for the band.

Reception of *Some Loud Thunder*

A carefully-balanced sophomore album review is critical to cementing a band's place in the indie community. By looking at how Pitchfork handled CYHSY's *Some Loud Thunder*, we will gain insight into how the site frames reviews which do not mitigate backlash. In this section, I provide a broad overview of the reception accorded CYHSY's *Some Loud Thunder* and a rhetorical close reading of that album's corresponding Pitchfork review.

Some Loud Thunder was self-released by CYHSY on January 30, 2007. The band had been touring almost nonstop since the release of their debut in the summer of 2005. While their debut album had been warmly received, a backlash was growing amongst those in the indie community who felt the hype was overblown and unwarranted. On January 16, 2007, Music blog Stereogum offered one of the first, albeit brief, reviews of *Some Loud Thunder* and declared

"Not sure if *SLT* will win 'em [CYHSY] new fans, but we are sure it'll get people talking."[347] As

if on cue, readers began commenting. Some liked the album, some placed it in the category of

"horrible, unlistenable garbage," and others predicted an untimely end to the hype cycle "this

album is going to die, really really quickly."[348] *Rolling Stone* was one of the next major outlets to

weigh-in, describing the album as "less energetic and more all-over-the-place" and coming to the

damning conclusion that "*Some Loud Thunder* will do as a place holder, but that's about it."[349]

On January 23, Bret Gladstone of the *Village Voice* was a bit more forgiving, but nonetheless

complained that the "heavy handed" production "muddled" the overall album.[350]

The torrent of middling reviews crested on the January 30 release date. All Music Guide

proclaimed that CYHSY had "taken a step backward," the A.V. Club decided that band was

guilty of "overreaching," and Tiny Mix Tapes offered an especially stinging assessment:

> Clap Your Hands Say Yeah sound like they have a lot of heart—but then again, so do a
> lot of high school talent-show bands. […] With only dubious distinctions left and without
> a good story to back it all up, Clap Your Hands Say Yeah have to fight an uphill battle in
> order to get the timely reverence they achieved with their self-titled debut.[351]

Even three months later when PopMatters posted its review of the album, reviewer Nick Pearson

had not warmed to the effort and described it as having an "awkward and uncomfortable

sound."[352] It is worth noting that each of the reviews mentioned here (along with many others)

highlight two key elements in relation to *Some Loud Thunder*: 1) the early hype surrounding

CYHSY, and 2) the album's abrasive production (particularly on opening track "Some Loud

Thunder"). Both of these considerations appear in the Pitchfork review.

Overall, the critical response to *Some Loud Thunder* was tepid. The album has a

metascore of 63 on Metacritic, based on an aggregate of thirty-six reviews. While this constitutes

eight more reviews than *Clap Your Hands Say Yeah* received, it represents a twenty-one point

drop in metascore—one of the largest falls on record for a sophomore album in the Metacritic database.[353]

As for Pitchfork, the website first reported on *Some Loud Thunder* on December 5, 2006—just under two months before its release date.[354] The story also highlights two tracks from the album, equating "Love Song No. 7" to Aerosmith if "if Aerosmith were intentionally creepy and liked accordions" and praising Dave Fridmann's "signature [production] majesty" on the track "Underwater (You and Me)."[355] The comparison to Aerosmith—a band much reviled in the indie community for its apparently inauthentic bombast and rock-star posturing—portended the lukewarm reception *Some Loud Thunder* received in Pitchfork's January 29 review. The album was awarded a 7.2 and failed to garner "Best New Music" status—a further indication that CYHSY was on the outs in indie-land.

Unlike Arcade Fire, whose first two albums were assessed by two different Pitchfork reviewers, both CYHSY albums were reviewed by the same critic—Brian Howe. Perhaps this consistency of perspective informs the way in which Howe begins his *Some Loud Thunder* review by directly confronting the hype surrounding the band and its ramifications. The review starts by humorously acknowledging the ubiquity of CYHSY in the indie community during 2005: "Unless you've been living under a rock that is itself under a larger rock—or you're not an indie rock fan—the Clap Your Hands Say Yeah story should have a folkloric familiarity to you."[356] The flippant tone is in keeping with the opening gambit Howe employed in his review of the CYHSY debut. Yet, already, CYHSY has firmly, and *exclusively*, been relegated to the realm of indie rock. Moreover, Howe acknowledges how the band has taken up residence in the indie consciousness as an archetype for do-it-yourself success. For those who somehow avoided

the hubbub, Howe provides a brief rundown with the pertinent details: an unsigned independent band, six-figure album sales, and great music.[357]

The second paragraph reflects upon the hype which accompanied CYHSY's success. It opens with a cautionary adage that equates "online opinion" to "a magnifying glass in sunlight" and warns that objects of its attention quickly meet a fiery end.[358] This tactic serves not only as an oblique attack against the hype cycle (of which Pitchfork is a prime player), but also as a sort of preemptive eulogy or apology for CYHSY. The band is thus positioned as *victims* of the critical system, not hubristic fools who have wrought their own undoing. Howe continues with the apologist tone to describe how the popular conception of the band "reflected longing more than reality."[359] He sees CYHSY's fate as being sealed when "mainstream publications" adopted the band as "avatar" for "independent music's democratic new frontier."[360] In Howe's estimation, the proliferation of coverage cemented the band's mythos of complete indie-pendence. Some "myths," he argues, "beg to be debunked."[361] The elitist insinuation here is that Howe (and by extension, Pitchfork) are the ones to do that debunking—how dare the mainstream try to claim the band.

Howe's third paragraph chronicles the backlash in response to CYHSY. He argues that the critical alchemy which "transformed [CYHSY] from a unique phenomenon to a creative ideal" made the music (in its own right) "difficult to hear above the din of warring ideologues."[362] Howe then quotes another critic who, two weeks before, had predicted that a critical "kicking" was coming for the band.[363] The insertion of another critical voice into the fray further disturbs the (typically) solipsistic world of the music review. Usually, reviews are not presented as conversations between critics, but as solitary judgments meted out by the reviewer or publication. In essence, reviews often become an exercise in ego—"this is *my* opinion and this

is why *I* am right." Even still, when read side by side (as aggregators like Metacritic increasingly allow), reviews interact at a virtual critical colloquium. Howe's reference to another critic effectively draws back the curtain to reveal music criticism as a communal conversation that feeds the hype cycle rather than a series of insular exercises that are abstracted from it. The quotation also sets up an indictment against the music press's tendency to conflate hype and musicianship. Howe argues that knee-jerk critical backlash is not necessary so long as "we're careful not to get our distaste for packaged mythology mixed up with distaste for the music itself."[364] Isolating "packaged mythology" as a sticking point is paradoxical since the band entered the scene with no pre-established myths—instead, these were all critic-created (of which Howe was one of the first). Thus, critics are repulsed by their own creation, and like Saturn, devour them for fear of losing dominance.

Before moving on, Howe notes how critics had pondered the myriad of ways CYHSY would build upon its debut effort. He also manages one more jab at the critical machinery by noting how the band "had little to do with its own hype."[365] To bolster this claim, he explains that frontman Alec Ounsworth is "by all credible reports a very private person who disdains public opinion."[366] Given these facts, Howe expresses a lack of surprise at the musical shape of *Some Loud Thunder*—in a sense, the album is self-evident.

His spirited attack on the critical machinery and defense of the band out of the way, Howe finally turns his attention to analyzing the music on *Some Loud Thunder* in paragraph four. He expended 334 words in his preamble—over one third of the review. So far, CYHSY has been positioned as lambs before an impending critical slaughter. Howe, in turn, is positioned as a credible, authentic critic who is able to see beyond the hype and inauthentic trappings of modern publicity. In keeping with that forgiving outlook, Howe proceeds to make the first of only two

direct comparisons between *Some Loud Thunder* and *Clap Your Hands Say Yeah*. With an evenhanded approach, he claims that while *Some Loud Thunder* is less "consistent" than its predecessor, it is still "an adequate follow-up that contains a handful of fantastic songs, a handful of uneven ones, and a handful of duds."[367] A word like "adequate," however, suggests that the praise offered in the review will only be faint in nature.

Next, Howe praises the "dense" production work of Dave Fridmann, being sure to name-check some of the other indie-approved bands (Flaming Lips, Mercury Rev, Mogwai) with which he has worked.[368] These references are not intended to suggest sonic equivalents for CYHSY, merely to establish Fridmann's credentials as a producer. Though he praises Fridmann's production work on the whole, Howe argues that Fridmann "does the band a disservice" on the album-opener "Some Loud Thunder."[369] It is at this point that Howe draws his second comparison to the debut album. He opines that "Some Loud Thunder" opens with the "same sort of vague antagonism" evident in the debut album's opening track. Despite the "ugly distortion" masking the track, Howe is not deterred from classifying it as a "peppy indie rock song."[370] This is the second time in the review CYHSY are generically categorized as indie. For the next several sentences, Howe wonders whether the discordant production work on "Some Loud Thunder" was intentional. He alternately surmises that the track might sound better on vinyl and that it works as an obvious, yet effective "fuck-off."[371] Nonetheless, he concludes that it is "a drag to listen to."[372]

The fifth paragraph is devoted to what *Some Loud Thunder* does well as an album. Howe contends that the album's "most engaging songs" feature "cracked, brassy vocals, shaggy rhythms, and luxuriant melodies"—in other words, the characteristics which marked CYHSY's debut effort.[373] Three songs are spotlighted in this section as especially fine examples: "Mama,

Won't You Keep Them Castles in the Air and Burning?," "Love Song No. 7," and "Underwater (You and Me)." He makes a brief genre reference ("luau-rock") in connection to the first, but spends most of the paragraph describing the songs' musical elements ("woozy harmonies," "fizzy shimmer," "reverbed guitar," "bouncy melody").[374] While none of these elements are bound to one specific genre, together, they evoke the hallmarks of popular indie music at that time. To close out the paragraph, Howe argues that Fridmann's "sumptuous" production allowed CYHSY to "tweak" their sound "with excellent results."[375]

Staying balanced, the sixth paragraph stands as counterpoint to the praise appearing immediately before. As with the *Neon Bible* review, the (tame) criticisms offered here are couched in the language of equivocation. First, Howe notes that "*Some Loud Thunder* bogs down in some uneven ideas." To illustrate this, he describes "Emily Jean Stock" as a "vitalizing" interplay between "acoustic jangle" and "garage-psych," but claims Ounsworth's "drooping" vocals are particularly "hokey."[376] Once again, the cited genres cohere within the indie paradigm. Moreover, Ounsworth's voice has been unique from the outset, so honing in on it as strange does not hold much weight as a critique—the band was accepted (and lauded), weird vocal stylings and all. Howe's criticism of "Satan Said Dance" is similarly threadbare. He labels it an "indie-dance track" (yet another indie genre categorization) that is "goofy yet fun," but wryly wonders whether "the indie world is comfortable enough with its relationship to dancing to enjoy a song about Hell being a place where Satan makes you dance."[377] When the strongest criticism that can be leveled against a song is its seeming incongruity with its intended fanbase, it could be that the reviewer is simply casting about for something, *anything* to critique in order to maintain an air of impartiality.

Even when Howe describes "Yankee Go Home" as "admittedly overcooked," he reveals he has "a soft spot" for the track. This half-hearted critique is further undermined when he goes on to describe the song as "Destroyer-caliber"—the only indie touchstone invoked in the entire review. Somehow, these three tracks are still described as "problematic."[378] The harshest words are confined to a single sentence where the tracks "Arm and Hammer" and "Upon Encountering the Crippled Elephant" are characterized as "stillborns."[379] This is the extent of the criticism Howe offers. Considering that these are the two shortest songs on the album—both being two minutes or less—they seem strange, if easy targets for criticism. The songs' lengths suggest that they were meant only as (potentially toss-off) interludes anyway.

In his final paragraph, Howe turns his attention back to the hype surrounding the band and wonders if it may have "exert[ed] a subtle influence on CYHSY after all."[380] He then constructs an elaborate (if coincidence-reliant) argument to support this supposition. First he notes Ounsworth's instinctual avoidance of the hype-fed spotlight. Then he notes how *Some Loud Thunder* is a "murkier, weirder album" that is "pulled in too many different directions."[381] Finally, he cites the title of the album itself as a reference to the "extra-musical cacophony that Ounsworth claims to be unaffected by."[382] While all of these factors could play into the scenario Howe has concocted, some of his logical leaps seem a bit of a stretch.

Fond of adages, Howe ends the review in kind: "A wheel's stationary hub might not care about its spin, but it still feels the pressure of all those whirling spokes."[383] Regardless of the obvious contradiction of the laws of centrifugal force, the phrase's intended meaning is important. The final argument made is that CYHSY was not immune to the hype—they succumbed to the pressure and it affected their artistic output. The resulting corollary is that the band sacrificed its sonic authenticity to appease (or needlessly react against) the overwhelming

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hype. More than any of the lightweight critiques offered in the review, this final assertion is the most damning in the indie community. As noted in chapter one, the indie community is authenticity obsessed. When it is revealed (or suggested) that a band caves to outside pressure, they can quickly be forsaken. Thus, if CYHSY let slip their authenticity, they could never live up to the myth of complete independence the indie community created for them. It does not matter whether or not CYHSY's authenticity was *actually* compromised—the insinuation was made, and the havoc wrought.

As a whole, Howe's review of *Some Loud Thunder* is bit of a conundrum. On one hand, nearly half of the review's 900 words are devoted to a meditation on hype and its consequences.[384] Throughout the introduction, CYHSY is vigorously defended—it is critics (and the larger critical machinery) who are vilified. And when the music itself is assessed, the praise is consistently more cogent than the criticism. Furthermore, the word "indie" is used five times to describe the band, its sound, and the type of people who like its music. This places the band firmly within the wheelhouse of Pitchfork. Also, even though only a single indie touchstone was invoked (Destroyer), it served as a complimentary comparison for CYHSY. On the other hand, the album was denied "Best New Music" status and was only awarded a 7.2—a mediocre score by Pitchfork standards. The criticisms at the end of the review seem out of character with the final score and what could otherwise be read as an overall positive assessment.[385] This form of meta equivocation is less effective at neutralizing backlash than the explicitly textual equivocation evident in Deusner's review of *Neon Bible*. When the equivocation is textual, it gives readers clear arguments that might resonate with a variety of perspectives. When equivocation has to be parsed out via a disconnect between textual content and awarded score, the clarity dissipates and readers are left without firm footing and defer to the score as the

clearest indicator of quality. Thus, with the indie community unwilling (or unable) to read between the lines, the review does nothing to temper the backlash against CYHSY—much to the band's detriment.

Conclusion

The *Neon Bible* and *Some Loud Thunder* reviews both put Pitchfork in the position of reneging on some of the exuberant praise it bestowed on Arcade Fire and CYHSY. And yet, the backpedaling manifests itself in starkly different ways. When a band is greeted with unexpected and glowing praise for its debut effort, backlash is almost inevitable. It can be a challenge to reach great heights when past achievements serve as the benchmark for success. Bands either succeed or falter under this pressure. Critics are keenly aware of this potential.

Thus, when it came to Arcade Fire's sophomore effort, *Neon Bible*, Pitchfork openly and repeatedly brought the band's debut album, *Funeral*, in for comparison. At the same time, the review struck a praise-favoring balance between praise and criticism, refraining from unchecked superlatives. Since the praise had the slight advantage, the comparisons against *Funeral* worked to the benefit of Arcade Fire—a positive association. The strength of the debut thus buoyed the follow-up. The framing of the review crafted a safe depressurization of the hype surrounding Arcade Fire which allowed the praise to settle in at a more sustainable level.

When it came to CYHSY's sophomore effort, *Some Loud Thunder*, much of the focus was devoted to the nature of hype itself. As was the case with the Pitchfork review of their debut effort, an explicit linkage was made between the band and the debt it owed to hype. By questioning the effect hype had upon the ultimate sound of *Some Loud Thunder*, the review damaged the authentic credentials of CYHSY. Thus, despite an opening attempt to stave off

backlash (or at least argue against its unmitigated advance), the review instead further fueled the negative reactions against the band.

Both reviews are representative of the way Pitchfork exercises its authority to deflate runaway hype bubbles that it had a role in creating. That said, the exertion of authority manifests itself in two distinct ways: one benign, the other more authoritarian. Based upon the evidence presented in the case study, Pitchfork seems to know its place well. Its reviews reflect the majority (or most vociferous) shifts in sentiment of the indie community. In the case of Arcade Fire, more restrained criticism met a band whose emotional authenticity carried it safely through the hype cycle. In the case of CYHSY, economic authenticity proved an unsustainable mythic foundation. As such, when the review was written, little could be done to rein in the advance of backlash.

Chapter 5: Mountains Beyond Mountains, or the Same Mistakes

When I began this project, I described the basic premise to a good friend of mine who is an avid indie fan and working musician. I explained how I wanted to understand the whims of critical reception in the indie world. I told him I was perplexed by the way Arcade Fire and Clap Your Hands Say Yeah—two broadly similar bands with numerous indie hallmarks (guitar-driven music, normal male voices, lyrics about modern life)—could experience vastly different trajectories of reception, Arcade Fire remaining critical darlings and CYHSY cast aside. Without missing a beat, my friend rattled off a troubling response: "Could it be that Arcade Fire is just better than Clap Your Hands Say Yeah? Maybe Clap Your Hands Say Yeah just suck."

The question certainly problematizes my preceding analysis. How can I be sure I am comparing aesthetic apples to aesthetic apples? But upon further thought, the question underscores a deeper issue. What governs aesthetic choices in general? This question is obviously too vast to address in this paper—philosophers have been struggling with questions of aesthetics for eons after all. And yet, despite all of the uncertainty surrounding *why* we make aesthetic assessments, these judgments are made on a daily basis in the popular press. Aesthetic evaluation is the stock-in-trade of Pitchfork or any piece of music or art criticism. Thus, lest I get caught up in the quagmire of aesthetic *whys*, it is important to remember that this project is instead grounded firmly in the realm of the *how*—namely, the hows circulating around the mechanics of indie criticism.

My personal experience as both indie critic and musician informed this focus. Though I had long been involved in and an avid consumer of indie album reviews, I still had no idea how they worked or the rhetorical tactics which suffused them. Of course, I had a vague notion of the snark and name-dropping inherent in reviews at sites like Pitchfork. I also held a belief that indie

criticism could make or break a career. These vague understandings permeate the indie community. But I wanted to know more. At one time (and maybe even still) I aspired to become an indie rock star. Questions haunted me. Had the critical reception of our albums helped determine the viability of my band? Had I mishandled the framing of our publicity? (And no, I do not intend to answer these particular questions here—consider them rhetorical.)

Arcade Fire's win for Album of the Year at 2011 Grammy Awards piqued my interest. Here was an example of a successful indie band. My thoughts immediately turned to the way I had first heard of the band—a Pitchfork review. Given the dominance of Pitchfork in the world of indie criticism, I chose it as a representatively indie site for study. Arcade Fire would be the exemplars of consistent critical praise and CYHSY would be the representatives of praise-turned-backlash. I began my research with the intention of accounting for this difference and conclude my study in similar fashion. I begin the concluding chapter by offering answers to the research questions that appeared in chapter one. Then, I extrapolate those findings to suggest how they might be applied to the wider world of indie rock (and criticism in general). As part of this, I comment on the import of my findings within the field of Communication Studies and suggest avenues for future study. After doing so, I conclude by considering the future of indie rock and the places of Pitchfork, Arcade Fire, and CYHSY within it.

Addressing the Research Questions

Based upon the way I came to my topic and my interests in it, I decided to consider two research questions, the first of which is:

1. How do the Pitchfork reviews of the first and second albums by Arcade Fire and CYHSY use genre, taste, authenticity, and elitism to situate each artist/album within (or outside of) the indie rock world?

To address question one, I began by consulting the relevant scholarship on genre, taste, authenticity, elitism, and rock criticism. This inquiry appears in the literature review section of chapter one and contains several important points. For genre, I established a definition for musical genre limited to the textual components of the song; noted the difference between rich and poor genre codes; and highlighted the tension between popular and experimental preferences within the indie community. For taste, I honed in on two key elements within the world of indie rock: authenticity and elitism. For authenticity, I noted the difference between "doing" and "showing doing" and its corollary in the indie identity of *seeming* authentic (showing doing) being more important that actually *being* authentic (doing). Along with this came acknowledgement of the indie community's inherently contradictory thirst for authenticity—an authenticity which is largely manufactured. For elitism, I explored how it affects those within and without of the indie community by preferencing the new over the old to preserve cultural capital. For rock criticism, I investigated its historical importance and evolution, then argued that despite the indie community existing primarily as a virtual, internet-based scene, Pitchfork's place within that community is not as a site of interaction, but as a site that catalyzes debate elsewhere. Thus Pitchfork represents an old media model in a community predicated upon the bonds of new media.

The findings from chapter one inform my analyses of the Pitchfork reviews that appear in chapters three and four. Taken as a whole, I argue that the reviews lean heavily upon genre and authenticity to frame the bands' indieness, whereas elitism is employed to a lesser extent. Given

Arcade Fire's continued critical success, I had initially expected to see them positioned as more generically indie than CYHSY. To my surprise, the genre callouts and sonic equivalents appearing within the reviews clearly locate *both* bands within the popular branch of indie. In fact, Arcade Fire is often positioned surprisingly close to the mainstream aesthetic (i.e. via comparison to Bruce Springsteen). Since indie rock defines itself in *opposition to* the mainstream, it is counterintuitive that a band linked to more mainstream tendencies would find lasting praise. Arcade Fire's success in this regard indicates that the popular-leaning indie faction currently holds more sway than the experimental faction. As such, albums reviews that cater to popular indie preferences hold more potential to resonate within the community than those that do not.

While genre is used similarly throughout the reviews, it turns out that authenticity is a key differentiator. Just as the adage goes about the importance of first impressions, the reviews of each band's debut albums establish a framework within which the reviews of the sophomore albums operate. The *Funeral* review emphasizes Arcade Fire's *emotional* authenticity where the *Clap Your Hands Say Yeah* review emphasizes CYHSY's *economic* authenticity. These differing forms of authenticity are interwoven into the band mythos presented in each review.

Emotional authenticity dovetails nicely with the extended adolescence evinced by much of the indie fanbase. Many indie fans are youths in transition to adulthood, uncertainly seeking out their own truths and identities in the world.[386] Amidst the modern malaise, the meaningful human connection promised by emotion can be hard to resist. Emotional authenticity allows fans to project themselves into the place of Arcade Fire, find cathartic release, and emerge renewed. On the other hand, economic authenticity also plays into the independent mindset of the indie fanbase. CYHSY is true to itself and untainted by corporate influence. Fans can see CYHSY as a

hopeful avatar that validates their own chances for self-made success in the world. Yet, economic authenticity is inherently less sustainable than emotional authenticity. Pure economic authenticity is only possible once because after initial exposure, the concept is tarnished by the band's association with critics, distributors, and the economic exchange that comes with selling records. Mythos grounded in emotional authenticity can remain in place in spite of a band's success. Thus, I argue that it is not sufficient for an indie band to simply be presented as authentic—it must be presented as the *proper type* of authenticity in order for praise to be sustainable. In this case, emotional authenticity trumps economic authenticity.

When it comes to elitism, there is some bleed-over between it and the concepts of genre and authenticity. For instance, when a review contains references to sonic equivalents, these can simultaneously work to situate a band generically *and* as an elitist filter to exclude those unfamiliar with the reference. Within each of the reviews studied, elitism typically operates on an implicit level. Just by virtue of being a Pitchfork review of an indie rock album, a certain amount of exclusive language is expected. Thus, while elitism is an identifiable trait within indie rock, it does not play an explicit role in this case study.

The second of my research questions is:

2. What accounts for the critical backlash CYHSY experienced between their first two albums, while Arcade Fire was met with continuing high praise?

To answer question two, I began by consulting the relevant scholarship on the hype cycle, backlash, and the related concept of the sophomore slump. This inquiry appears in chapter two and contains several important points. For the hype cycle, I clarified the difference between buzz (natural/authentic) and hype (artificial/inauthentic) and posited a definition of the indie hype cycle as a four-phase process including: entrance onto the scene, hype generation, backlash, and

obscurity/visibility. Moreover, I discussed how the internet has accelerated the speed of the hype cycle. For backlash and the sophomore slump, I argued that backlash is proportional to the amount of hype a band receives beforehand—as such, based upon the strength of their debut albums, both Arcade Fire and CYHSY were primed to receive substantial backlash and suffer sophomore slumps. Nonetheless, as the question suggests, Arcade Fire weathered the critical firestorm while CYHSY were battered by it.

Together with those from chapter one, the findings from chapter two inform my analyses of the Pitchfork reviews that appear in chapters three and four. In total, my research illuminates three key factors that drove the divergent receptions visited upon the sophomore albums of Arcade Fire and CYHSY. The first factor influencing the divergent reception is the disparity between the band mythologies of Arcade Fire and CYHSY. As I noted earlier, Arcade Fire's emotional authenticity created a more sustainable band mythos than the economic authenticity of CYHSY. The way a band is perceived is cemented at the time of a debut release. This is not to say that future releases cannot alter communal perception, merely that the initial framework is the necessary starting point from which alterations must begin. Thus, I argue that an authentic mythos/backstory is a crucial lynchpin in predicting the end result of the indie hype cycle.

The second factor in the divergence between Arcade Fire and CYHSY is the upfront acknowledgement of hype's role in the success of CYHSY. Not only do the Pitchfork reviews of *Clap Your Hands Say Yeah* and *Some Loud Thunder* explicitly address the debt the band owes to hype, but the broad majority of album reviews appearing elsewhere do as well. While Arcade Fire owes an equal amount of their success to critical hype, it is not a common theme in reviews of their output. Again, it all comes back to authenticity. But this is yet a different type of authenticity—authenticity of talent. By calling so much attention to the role of hype, reviews put

the talent of CYHSY into question. The band's success became attributed to the hype cycle rather than innate ability or clever songcraft. As such, I argue that it is crucial for a band's authenticity of talent to remain unchallenged for it to effectively weather backlash.

The final explanation for the divergence between Arcade Fire and CYHSY is a bit more conspiratorial in nature. I argue that Pitchfork had a greater stake, and therefore made a greater investment, in the ultimate success of Arcade Fire. The site's review of *Funeral* was its first bow as indie tastemaker and the indie community and national media took notice. Pitchfork gave the album one of the highest scores it has ever given to a debut. The resultant hype was thus a validation of Pitchfork's prescience. Since it was the review (and band) that brought widespread notoriety to the site, Pitchfork had a great deal on the line when it came to *Neon Bible*. Its tastemaking ability validated by *Funeral*, Pitchfork could afford to be coyer in its assessments of *Clap Your Hands Say Yeah*. The lower score, the hype focus, the references to multiple sonic equivalents—all of these belie Pitchfork's less strident advocacy for CYHSY compared to Arcade Fire. When *Some Loud Thunder* arrived in tandem with a sea change in opinion regarding CYHSY, Pitchfork was able to undercut the album because the site's reputation was already secure. Thus, I argue that the increasing clout Pitchfork acquired in the wake of its *Funeral* review has allowed it more flexibility to turn its back on one-time favorites.

Each of these reasons represent key features of the Arcade Fire/CYHSY case. I do not attempt to claim that they represent an all-encompassing explanation for the divergence in reception, but they are the most salient aspects based upon my research and rhetorical analysis. Looking back, I realize that while the framing of my second question held the object of my focus (the divergent reception facing Arcade Fire and CYHSY), it could have been worded to more explicitly highlight the underlying concern: how Pitchfork influences the hype cycle. Wording

aside, I have been able to grapple with the interface between indie criticism and the hype cycle nonetheless.

Contributions to the Discipline

Though I have been able to address my initial research questions in detail, my project has also made some valuable contributions to the wider discipline of Communication Studies. First of all, I contributed to the small but growing body of scholarship surrounding popular music. Each study in the field enhances overall understanding of the communicative mechanisms operating within the music world and this one is no exception. Furthermore, I chose to focus upon a musical subculture (indie) that has not been widely studied to this point—a subculture that is primarily virtual in its existence. As such, vital communication of communal (musical) standards and expectations occurs in album reviews at sites like Pitchfork. Using Pitchfork reviews as my central texts helped decode some of the communicative traits and tactics evident in indie music reviews.

Second, by focusing on Pitchfork reviews, I began the process of charting the contours of indie criticism centered around a major player in the community. As part of this, I demonstrated how indie reviews are in conversation with one another, solidifying communal opinion and thereby affecting the hype cycle—a process driven entirely by communication (i.e. reviews, fan interactions, comments, etc.). Following from this, I showed how important communicative framing is within the context of indie reviews. Authenticity, genre, and elitism are deployed to varying extents to frame bands as indie and to suggest the overall merit of their music. In particular, I described how the concept of authenticity is critical within the indie context and how it manifests itself in many communicatively important iterations.

Finally, I established a basic framework for the indie hype cycle and explored the related concept of backlash. Each is an inherently communicative process involving critical sites like Pitchfork, mp3 blogs, and other fan interactions. Many times the level of a band's success is dependent upon how cleanly it can navigate the hype cycle. As part of this I showed how authenticity is a negotiated communication process that can either help or hinder a band's viability. Thus, the hype cycle and backlash (as communicative processes) have real-world implications and affect the careers and fortunes of indie musicians.

Together, these findings offer valuable contributions to Communication Studies as initial forays into realms of indie rock and popular music. But clearly, there is the potential for more scholarship to be done. For example, it would be beneficial to undertake a wider survey of Pitchfork content so as to gain a more complete picture of the indie rock titan. Whether through future case studies on different bands or by focusing on specific time periods, a more complete understanding of the mechanisms undergirding Pitchfork would be beneficial to indie rock scholarship. Relatedly, future scholars might take and adapt the research I have done on the hype cycle and backlash to first validate my model by applying it to other cases in indie rock, and then test its applicability in popular music and other aspects of the entertainment industry. Hype is an important process to study because of the increasing amount of cultural output being hyped and the internet-enabled acceleration of the cycle. Despite its growing importance to our cultural life (and its internal economics), there is a relative dearth of scholarship on the topic. As such, I encourage future scholars to take up hype as a fruitful avenue of inquiry.

Extrapolating to Indie and Beyond

By choosing to undertake a case study, my findings are ultimately limited directly to the texts I focused on—Pitchfork, Arcade Fire, and CYHSY. Thus, making sweeping conclusions about the mechanics of *all* indie criticism (or music criticism in general) is a dubious endeavor. The same goes for generalizations about the overall functioning of Pitchfork. To draw those kinds of conclusions, I would need a much larger dataset. That said, I believe that this case study sheds light upon some important mechanisms at work within indie criticism and its interaction with the hype cycle.

In my literature review, I defined indie culture as one obsessed with authenticity and averse to being implicated in the mainstream. Based upon the results of my case study, the importance of authenticity is underscored. Authenticity—of emotion, economics, talent—is a major theme in each of the reviews. Moreover, Pitchfork's (and ultimately, the indie community's) judgments of Arcade Fire and CYHSY revolve around the way that authenticity is presented. As a result, authenticity (of emotion and talent) could be a key indicator of any indie band's longevity and progression through the hype cycle. Considering indie stalwarts like Wilco, Radiohead, and Belle and Sebastian certainly seems to bear this out—each of these bands has been hailed for their ability to articulate emotionally resonant music while remaining true to themselves. Though these specific types of authenticity might not translate into mainstream popular music, it would make sense if there were a parallel set of authentic attributes emphasized in that realm. An economy of authenticity seems to underpin much of our cultural output.

Though the mainstream is typically anathema to authenticity, aversion to the mainstream, surprisingly, does not seem a universal trait in the indie community. For instance, Arcade Fire has consistently been positioned as capable of crossover success through references to the band's

more standard rock tendencies and relation to acts like Bruce Springsteen.[387] This finding is paradoxical given the initial supposition that indie defines itself in opposition to the mainstream. While the indie identity may still be set against the mainstream on the whole, my research indicates that there are gaps in its enforcement. Pitchfork seems to pick and choose when to enforce a strict boundary—doing so when it is to its advantage to assert indie-pendence and blurring the boundary when it would help to broaden a band's appeal. It seems to follow that this intermittent elitism would translate to other sites of indie criticism as well.

Along with the revelations about authenticity and mainstream affiliation, I described Pitchfork's important roles within the hype cycle. But I suggest that the relationship is not unique to Pitchfork—all sites of indie criticism have a role in perpetuating and advancing the hype cycle. While the assertion would need to be tested, it would make sense if this interlinkage between criticism and hype extends well beyond indie culture into other facets of the entertainment industry. The same hype cycle mechanics might even govern the way news is covered since it so often seems a story is hyped beyond all proportion until its utility is eviscerated (i.e. political scandals, disasters, etc.). I am not arguing that all the phases are the same, merely that the notion of hype has broad applicability.

Even if hype were confined only to the indie music realm, given its all-pervasive nature and the way it influences aesthetic choices and consumer decisions, there are some important ethical ramifications. The hype cycle can lay waste to the careers and livelihoods of indie bands. As such, the power to make or break bands should not be wielded glibly with reckless abandon. Critics have a responsibility to recognize that there are people behind the objects of their attacks. Recognition of responsibility need not take the fun out of the critical process. Sites like PopMatters seem to offer one way forward—a more measured, respectful tone and framing of

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each review as a personal reflection.[388] When critics are brought more into the spotlight, they are less likely to use the reputation of their publication as a shield behind which they can hide. The personal responsibility that comes with decreased anonymity might reduce careless attacks. But then again, Pitchfork has positioned itself as a skewerer. It could be difficult for the site to reverse course at this point.

Admittedly, Arcade Fire and CYHSY are two exceptional cases. However, I feel they are representative of two typical trajectories of reception indie bands face: one a champion against backlash, the other overcome by it. I believe that the preceding case study made and supported that argument, and as a result has yielded some important findings that have implications beyond the immediate subjects of Pitchfork, Arcade Fire, and CYHSY.

And yet, just over a year after Arcade Fire's triumphant win at the Grammys, the fallout from the divergent receptions of Arcade Fire and CYHSY can be seen with increasing clarity. Arcade Fire's third album, *The Suburbs*, has a metascore of 87, while CYHSY's third album, *Hysterical*, has a metascore of 69.[389] Thus, the divergence persists. Arcade Fire are still indie darlings. CYHSY are still (broadly) considered has-beens. Pitchfork's dominance over indie criticism remains undisputed—in fact, its readership is growing.[390] Someday though, it seems inevitable that the balance will tip towards a new (as yet unrecognized) upstart. Just as *Rolling Stone* slipped from its unquestioned perch, so too may Pitchfork. Until that time, it will continue to pass judgment upon bands and tweak the hype cycle as it does so. Bands will be beneficiaries of its praise and others will crumble in the face of its criticism. But it is heartening to know that one of those bands most ravaged by the hype cycle is able to maintain a defiantly positive outlook. In a *Billboard* interview leading up to the release of *Hysterical*, Alec Ounsworth was asked about *Some Loud Thunder*'s reputation as a sophomore slump. He defended the album:

"The second record definitely has a place with us. It's not some sort of write-off album."[391] I have to agree with his assessment. It gives me hope because it provides reassurance that though the music may fall out of favor, the people behind it can persevere.

Endnotes

[1] Several sources at the time directly linked the Alternative category to the type of rock music played on college radio including: Jon Pareles, "Grammy Nominees Announced," *The New York Times*, January 11, 1991, accessed September 21, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/1991/01/11/arts/grammy-nominees-announced.html. "Grammys Return to New York," *Times Daily*, May 25, 1990, 8B. The "esoteric" comment comes from: Stephen Holden, "Grammys Still Try to Play it on the Safe Side," *The New York Times*, February 17, 1991, 26.

[2] The exact number of alternative bands gaining Album of the Year nomination depends upon how "alternative" is defined. Taking a fairly broad, rock-based definition of alternative, eleven alternative albums earned nominations between 1991 and 2010: Radiohead (3), Beck (2), R.E.M. (2), The White Stripes (1), Gnarls Barkley (1), Garbage (1), Pearl Jam (1).

[3] James Reed, "Indie rock gets its due, but will it catch fire?," *The Boston Globe*, February 20, 2011, accessed August 17, 2011, http://articles.boston.com/2011-02-20/ae/29343941_1_indie-win-butler-arcade-fire.

[4] Nitsuh Abebe, "Arcade Fire and the 'Never Heard of It' Grammys," *New York Magazine*, February 15, 2011, accessed August 17, 2011, http://nymag.com/daily/entertainment/2011/02/arcade_fire_and_the_never_hear.html.

[5] Tom Breihan, "Arcade Fire Win the Album of the Year Grammy," *Pitchfork*, February 13, 2011, accessed September 21, 2011, http://pitchfork.com/news/41559-arcade-fire-win-the-album-of-the-year-grammy/.

[6] Ibid.

[7] For Arcade Fire: "David Bowie Praises The Arcade Fire," *Soul Shine Magazine*, November 29, 2004, accessed October 23, 2011, http://www.soulshine.ca/news/newsarticle.php?nid=1320. "Arcade Fire Teams Up with David Byrne for *The Suburbs* Deluxe Edition," *Consequence of Sound*, May 10, 2011, accessed October 23, 2011, http://consequenceofsound.net/2011/05/arcade-fire-teams-up-with-david-byrne-for-the-suburbs-deluxe-edition/. For CYHSY: "You Look Like David Bowie @ Movable Hype 3.0," *Brooklyn Vegan*, June 21, 2005, accessed October 23, 2011, http://www.brooklynvegan.com/archives/2005/06/you_look_like_d.html. "Clap Your Hands Say Yeah, Meet David Byrne," Brooklyn Vegan, August 10, 2005, accessed October 23, 2011, http://www.brooklynvegan.com/archives/2005/08/clap_your_hands_7.html.

[8] *The Suburbs* was released by Merge Records on August 2, 2010, while *Hysterical* was self-released on September 12, 2011.

[9] Chris Martins, "Hysterical," *A.V. Club*, September 20, 2011, accessed September 21, 2011, http://www.avclub.com/articles/clap-your-hands-say-yeah-hysterical,61900/.

[10] Ian Cohen, "Hysterical," *Pitchfork*, September 15, 2011, accessed September 21, 2011, http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/15805-hysterical/.

[11] Simon Price, "Album: Clap Your Hands Say Yeah, Hysterical (V2)," *The Independent*, September 11, 2011, accessed September 21, 2011, http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/reviews/album-clap-your-hands-say-yeah-hysterical-v2-2353031.html.

[12] For one example for Arcade Fire, see: Jon Pareles, "The Arcade Fire: Beyond Indie," The New York Times, July 28, 2010, accessed October 23, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/01/arts/music/01arcade.html?pagewanted=all. For one example for Clap Your Hands Say Yeah, see: Ryan Bort, "KEXP @ CMJ 2011, Day 1: Clap Your Hands Say Yeah," KEXP, October 19, 2011, accessed October 23, 2011, http://blog.kexp.org/blog/2011/10/19/kexp-cmj-2011-day-1-clap-your-hands-say-yeah/.

[13] David Pierson, "The Zeitgeist Guys," *Los Angeles Times*, March 7, 2005, accessed September 25, 2011, http://articles.latimes.com/2005/mar/07/entertainment/et-pitchfork7.

[14] Virginia Heffernen, "Coldpage," *The New York Times*, July 13, 2008, accessed September 25, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/13/magazine/13wwln-medium-t.html?pagewanted=print.

[15] A number of articles have referenced Pitchfork's make-or-break potential, including: Dave Itzkoff, "The Pitchfork Effect," *Wired*, 14, no. 9 (2006), accessed September 26, 2011, http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.09/pitchfork.html. Greg Kot, "Pitchfork E-zine Tells Indie Fans What's Hot and Not," *Honolulu Advertiser*, May 8, 2005, accessed September 26, 2011, http://the.honoluluadvertiser.com/article/2005/May/08/il/il22p.html. J. Freedom du Lac, "Giving Indie Acts a Plug, or Pulling It," *The Washington Post*, April 30, 2006, accessed September 26, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/04/28/AR2006042800457.html. Jon Caramanica, "Pitchfork, Music Criticism's Upstart, Grows Up," *The New York Times*, July 14, 2010, accessed September 26, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/15/arts/music/15pitchfork.html.

[16] Examples of Pitchfork parodies include: Something Awful's scathingly snarky "RichDork" parody which compared everything to Radiohead and *The Onion's* "Pitchfork Gives Music a 6.8" where it spoofily recounts a review of the entire concept of music written by Pitchfork editor-in-chief, Ryan Schreiber. Citations for the above are as follows: "RichDork Media and Music Reviews and General Pretentiousness," *Something Awful*, April 19, 2004, accessed September 25, 2011, http://web.archive.org/web/20080627004409/http://www.somethingawful.com/fakesa/richdork/. "Pitchfork Gives Music a 6.8," *The Onion*, September 10, 2007, accessed September 25, 2011, http://www.theonion.com/articles/pitchfork-gives-music-68,2278/. For a good rundown on the variety of criticisms leveled at Pitchfork, see: Matthew Shaer, "Die, Pitchfork, Die!: The Indie Music Site that Everyone Loves to Hate," *Slate*, November 28, 2006, accessed September 25,

2011, http://www.slate.com/id/2154469. For examples of Pitchfork-style reviews of Pitchfork and its content, see: www.pitchforkreviewsreviews.com; Amanda Dobbins, "The Ten Least Flattering Quotes from *n+1*'s Pitchfork Review," *Vulture*, September 6, 2011, accessed September 25, 2011, http://nymag.com/daily/entertainment/2011/09/pitchfork_n1.html; and "A Pitchfork Review of a Day in Pitchfork," *PopSense*, August 12, 2009, accessed September 25, 2011, http://www.popsense.com/2009/06/popsense-pitchfork-review.html.

[17] "Pitchfork," *Kickstarter*, accessed September 25, 2011, http://www.kickstarter.com/pages/pitchfork.

[18] "Advertising," *Pitchfork*, accessed September 3, 2011, http://pitchfork.com/ad/. Whether this impressive growth is compatible with sustaining Pitchfork's indie credibility is outside the scope of this project. Nonetheless, it merits attention over the next several years.

[19] Statistics for the A.V. Club readership come from: Steve Johnson, "A.V. Club Doing Its Own Street Festival Too," *Chicago Tribune*, September 7, 2011, accessed October 23, 2011, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2011-09-07/entertainment/ct-ent-0908-onion-av-club-music-fest-20110907_1_music-festival-street-festival-onion. Statistics for PopMatters readership come from: "Advertising on PopMatters," *PopMatters*, accessed October 23, 2011, http://www.popmatters.com/pm/advertising/. Other interesting comparison points include AllMusic/AllMovies/AllGames which gain around 3 million unique visitors each month (combined): Anthony Bruno, "AllMusic.com Folding into AllRovi.com for One-Stop Entertainment Shop," *Billboard.com*, February 28, 2011, accessed October 23, 2011, http://www.billboard.biz/bbbiz/industry/digital-and-mobile/allmusic-com-folding-into-allrovi-com-for-1005051732.story.

[20] Chris Richards, "NPR the Music Powerhouse? Totes dude.," *The Washington Post*, March 19, 2011, accessed October 23, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/03/18/AR2011031805430.html. The article also notes that MTV (with its diverse, TV-program-biased portfolio) gains 7.1 million unique visitors each month.

[21] As an ethos, alternative music "defined itself in opposition to mainstream rock" and its practitioners had few aspirations for widespread notoriety—it was a cynical reaction to the conformity bred by the industry. Neil Strauss, "Forget Pearl Jam. Alternative Rock Lives.," *The New York Times*, March 2, 1997, accessed September 24, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/1997/03/02/arts/forget-pearl-jam-alternative-rock-lives.html.

[22] Jon Pareles, "A New Kind of Rock," *The New York Times*, March 5, 1989, accessed September 24, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/1989/03/05/arts/home-entertainment-recordings-soundings-a-new-kind-of-rock.html.

[23] Strauss, "Forget Pearl Jam."

[24] I realize that is a loaded statement, implying that indie somehow operates separate from the industry, but that is not my argument here. Indie, like alternative before it (though in a more gradual way), has gained mainstream acceptance—as exemplified by the 2011 Grammy going to Arcade Fire. In this way, the genre may be no less "tainted" than late '90s alternative. Nonetheless, this paper will focus on a time period before that mainstream acceptance came to fruition. It is in this sense that I am arguing indie exemplifies the alternative ideals.

[25] From 2004 onward, every nominee and winner in the Alternative Music Album category (except, possibly, for Depeche Mode)—thirty-nine bands in all—can safely be categorized as indie. I argue this because, though they evince diverse styles, each has received widespread coverage and hype in the indie press. Thus, while they might not all be the prototypical "indie" sound (which is discussed in the proceeding paragraphs), they are exemplary of the insatiable omnivorism enacted by indie fans.

[26] "Indie," *Urban Dictionary*, accessed September 26, 2011, http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=indie.

[27] "Indie Rock," AllMusic, accessed August 23, 2011, http://allmusic.com/explore/style/indie-rock-d2687.

[28] Nirvana's association with Sub-Pop Records is a prime example of this.

[29] Kerry L. Smith, *Encyclopedia of Indie Rock* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2008), xv.

[30] M. C. Strong, *The Great Indie Discography*, Second Edition (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2003), ix.

[31] Claire Suddath, "How Pitchfork Struck a Note in Indie Music," *Time*, August 15, 2010, accessed August 23, 2011, http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2007424,00.html.

[32] Here again, I should proceed cautiously, offering full disclosure. It would be all too easy to cash in on the popularity of hipster-bashing and conflate an anti-hipster attitude with an anti-Pitchfork attitude. I have certainly complained about both when discussing music with my friends. However, it will be important (as always) for me to remain as objective as possible when discussing hipsters. Moreover, it will be important to keep in mind that a critique of hipsters is not always an implicit critique of Pitchfork (and vice versa)—while hipsters can read Pitchfork, not all hipsters do; neither can all Pitchfork readers be said to be hipsters.

[33] Nitsuh Abebe, "Indie Will Eat Itself," *Pitchfork*, March 12, 2010, accessed September 25, 2011, http://pitchfork.com/features/why-we-fight/7773-why-we-fight-1/.

[34] For two examples of the centrality of authenticity and selling out, see: Kerry L. Smith, *Encyclopedia of Indie Rock* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2008), xv. Roy Shuker, *Understanding Popular Music Culture* (London: Routledge, 2008), 21.

[35] Nitsuh Abebe, "The Decade in Indie," *Pitchfork*, February 25, 2010, accessed August 23, 2011, http://pitchfork.com/features/articles/7704-the-decade-in-indie/.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid.

[38] This, of course, calls into question the usefulness of indie as a genre since one of its main functions is to organize music into discernable, describable categories.

[39] For winnowing industry, see: David Goldman, "Music's Lost Decade: Sales Cut in Half," *CNNMoney*, February 3, 2010, accessed August 17, 2011, http://money.cnn.com/2010/02/02/news/companies/napster_music_industry/. For indie sales gains, see: Squeo, "Independent labels now have 31.2% market share on 2011 album sales, as long as you look at it through frosted glass on uppers," *Tiny Mix Tapes*, August 12, 2011, accessed August 17, 2011, http://www.tinymixtapes.com/news/independent-labels-now-have-312-market-share-2011-album-sales-long-you-look-it-through-frosted-.

[40] Ann Powers, "The Mainstream Is a Dying Beast," *Slate*, January 27, 2011, accessed August 17, 2011, http://www.slate.com/id/2281158/.

[41] Goldman, "Music's Lost Decade."

[42] Carl Wilson, "The Trouble with Indie Rock: It's Not Just Race. It's Class.," *Slate,* October 18, 2007, accessed September 5, 2011, http://www.slate.com/id/2176187/.

[43] Robert Lanham, *The Hipster Handbook* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), Kindle edition.

[44] For genre as "social contract," see: Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (London: Routledge, 2002), 92. For genre as "rhetorical construction," see: Jane Feuer, "Genre Study and Television," in *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled,* ed. Robert C. Allen (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 141. For genre as "open system," see: Ralph Cohen, "History and Genre," *Neohelicon* 13, no. 2 (1986): 95.

[45] For the purpose genre as specifying the proper use of cultural artifacts, see: Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 92. For genre as tool of critical analyses, see: Cohen, "History and Genre," 95, For genre as regulator of audience expectation and tool to control demand, see: Stephen Neale, *Genre* (British Film Institute, 1980), 55.

[46] Cohen, "History and Genre," 88.

[47] Feuer, "Genre Study and Television," 139-59.

[48] Ibid., 140.

[49] Ibid., 141.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Examples of this can be seen in: Holt, *Genre in Popular Music,* 12-13. Allan F. Moore, "Categorical Conventions In Music Discourse: Style And Genre," *Music & Letters* (2001): 432-42. Christopher Dawes, "Imploding Musical Genre: Locating a Modern Phenomenon in Postmodern Thought," (Master's Thesis, McMaster University, 2006), 4-31. And even, to a degree (though not specifically about genre): Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge Classics, 2002), x-xxiii.

[52] Holt calls the industry "a major force in the standardizing and popularizing of genres." Holt, *Genre In Popular Music*, 25. Jameson argues that "generic specifications are transformed into a brand-name system" as a result of industrial commodification, Adorno too claims that "types of popular music are carefully differentiated in production." Theodor W. Adorno, *Essays on Music*, trans. Susan H. Gillespe (Berkley: University of California Press, 2002), 446. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 95. Feuer also references this assumption in her discussion on the three approaches to genre: Feuer, "Genre Study and Television," 144-5.

[53] Feuer, "Genre Study and Television," 144.

[54] Each of the following articles discusses how the influence and power of major labels has been eroded in the internet age. David Goldman, "Music's Lost Decade: Sales Cut in Half," *CNNMoney*, February 3, 2010, accessed August 17, 2011, http://money.cnn.com/2010/02/02/news/companies/napster_music_industry/. Megan Mcardle, "The Freeloaders," *The Atlantic*, May 2010, accessed October 23, 2011, http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2010/05/the-freeloaders/8027/.

[55] It could be argued that artists are even incentivized to push generic boundaries to differentiate themselves from countless other acts.

[56] For example, Marc Geiger, vice president of the entertainment agency William Morris Endeavor and co-creator of Lollapalooza, made the claim that a positive Pitchfork review can have a payoff in the millions of dollars. Steven Hyden, "Music Agent Claims that an Artist Can Make $1 Million Off of One Good *Pitchfork* Review," *A.V. Club*, October 13, 2011, accessed October 16, 2011, http://www.avclub.com/articles/music-agent-claims-that-an-artist-can-make-1-milli,63381/.

[57] For two examples pointing toward critics as the source of genre, see: Cohen, "History and Genre," 88. Stanley J. Solomon, *Beyond Formula: American Film Genres* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jocanovich, 1976), 2.

[58] My selection of these two publications is meant to be representative of both the "low-brow" mainstream (*Rolling Stone*) and the "high-brow" mainstream (Pitchfork). In addition, the two reviews I selected are meant to be representative of significant works in the respective camps. Ryan Dombal, "Sufjan Stevens: The Age of Adz," *Pitchfork*, accessed November 7, 2010, http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/14738-the-age-of-adz/. Will Hermes, "Kings of Leon: Come Around Sundown," *Rolling Stone*, accessed November 7, 2010, http://www.rollingstone.com/music/reviews/album/45342/223211.

[59] Adorno, *Essays on Music*, 197.

[60] The non-professional status of pop-music critics is acknowledged (and perhaps celebrated) by many, including: Chris Atton, "Popular Music Fanzines: Genre, Aesthetics, and the "Democratic Conversation," *Popular Music and Society* 33, no. 4 (2010): 517-31. Devon Powers, "The "Folk Problem," *Journalism History* 33, no. 4 (2008): 205-14.

[61] Lev Manovich's notion of the database culture is certainly of interest here. Lev Manovich, "Database as Symbolic Form," *Convergence* 5, no. 2 (1999): 80-99.

[62] "The Tanukis," Myspace, accessed November 7, 2010, http://www.myspace.com/thetanukis.

[63] This is not to suggest that building suggestion-making algorithms is an easy process. The music genome project upon which Pandora is built has been in development for over a decade. Rob Walker, "The Song Decoders," *The New York Times*, October 14, 2009, accessed October 16, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/18/magazine/18Pandora-t.html. In fact, creating an accurate, effective recommendation system is seen as one of the holy grails for the new cloud-based media companies (like Netflix, Spotify, Rhapsody, etc.). Netflix even sponsored the "Netflix Prize" between 2006-2009 to encourage developers to create better predictive algorithms. "The Netflix Prize Rules," Netflix Prize, accessed October 16, 2011, http://www.netflixprize.com//rules.

[64] This comes from an experiment I conducted on Pandora.com on November 7, 2010. Trying to select a prominent popular artist, I chose Jack Johnson. The first two artists that appeared on the Jack Johnson station I created were John Mayer and Brett Dennen.

[65] Chris Atton, "Popular Music Fanzines," 523.

[66] Holt, *Genre In Popular Music*, 3, 14.

[67] Ibid., 19.

[68] In this case, I was specifically thinking of the term "indie" which rose to mainstream prominence as a generic marker in the 21st century. Initially, the term signified independent artists (i.e. those unaligned with major record labels), but eventually came to connote the type of music these artists created, even after many of the more popular acts signed to major labels.

Naturally, as an affiliative descriptor, the category encompassed a broad diversity of sub-genres (indie rock, indie rap, indie folk, etc.). The term's current ambiguity and lack of connection to specific sonic characteristics (though some would argue that there *are* specific indie sounds), while certainly worthy of scholarly consideration, add a layer of complexity that would be challenging to address in so limited a space. Thus, I have deemed it outside the scope of this essay.

[69] Fabbri and Neale both point toward the expectation-structuring function of genre. Fabbri, "A Theory of Muscial Genres," 56-7. Neale, *Genre*, 55. Steve Neale, "Questions of Genre," *Screen* 31, no. 1 (1990): 45.

[70] Fabbri, "A Theory of Muscial Genres," 56.

[71] Ibid., 56.

[72] Jacques Derrida, "The Law of Genre," *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (1980): 56.

[73] Ibid., 65.

[74] Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 131-2.

[75] Fabbri, "A Theory of Muscial Genres," 62.

[76] Brandon Stosuy, "Sufjan Stevens: Greetings from Michigan: The Great Lakes State," *Pitchfork*, July 27, 2003, accessed September 26, 2011, http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/7510-greetings-from-michigan-the-great-lakes-state/. Dombal, "Sufjan Stevens: The Age of Adz," *Pitchfork*, October 12, 2010, accessed January 19, 2012, http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/14738-the-age-of-adz/.

[77] Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 2002), ix.

[78] Ibid., ix.

[79] Ibid.

[80] Ibid., xi.

[81] Robert Lanham, "Definition of a Hipster," *The Hipster Handbook*, accessed August 31, 2011, http://www.hipsterhandbook.com.

[82] Lanham, *Hipster Handbook*, 75-77.

[83] Zeynep Arsel and Craig J. Thompson, "Demythologizing Consumption Practices: How Consumers Protect Their Field-Dependent Identity Investments from Devaluing Marketplace Myths," *Journal of Consumer Research* 37, no. 5 (2011): 796.

[84] Dan Fletcher, "Brief History: Hipsters," *Time*, July 29, 2009, accessed August 31, 2011, http://www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1913220,00.html.

[85] Douglas Haddow, "Hipster: The Dead End of Western Civilization," *AdBusters*, July 29, 2008, accessed August 31, 2011, http://www.adbusters.org/magazine/79/hipster.html.

[86] Take, for example, *The Indie Cred Test*—a book published by *Chunklet Magazine* that features almost 200 pages and thousands of incisive, satirical questions regarding the reader's relative "indieness" (i.e. "How much longer is your beard than your hair?"). Ryan Dombal, "Chunklet's The Indie Cred Test," Pitchfork, October 12, 2011, accessed October 23, 2011, http://pitchfork.com/features/paper-trail/8686-chunklets-the-indie-cred-test/.

[87] Carl Wilson, *Let's Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 17.

[88] Ryan Hibbett, "What Is Indie Rock?," *Popular Music and Society* 28, no. 1 (2005): 57.

[89] Using the word "canon" here may be a bit dubious since it carries with it notions of authoritative intransigence. Yet it seems necessary. At any point in time, if one were to take a snapshot of the indie rock community, there is an accepted "canon" of approved artists circulating within its confines. That the canon can change very rapidly (month-long timescales), I have tried to indicate with the nod toward its "ever-morphing" status.

[90] Rob Horning, "The Death of the Hipster," *Marginal Utility*, April 13, 2009, accessed August 31, 2011, http://www.popmatters.com/pm/post/the-death-of-the-hipster-panel/.

[91] For a direct questioning of taste's objectivity, see: Wilson, *Let's Talk About Love*, 73. But, as Wilson notes, this debate has ranged throughout the history of aesthetic theory—from Kant's absolutist frame to the postmodern relativists, the argument has seesawed from objectivity to subjectivity and back.

[92] Ibid., 15.

[93] For instance, the *Uncyclopedia*'s facetious guide "How To Be a Hipster," rates the "memorization of musical trivia" as "arguably the most important part of the hipster lifestyle." "How To: Be a Hipster," *Uncyclopedia*, accessed October 23, 2011, http://uncyclopedia.wikia.com/wiki/HowTo:Be_a_hipster#Memorize_obscure_musical_trivia.

[94] For the hipster demographic made visual, see: Kate Kiefer, "The Evolution of the Hipster 2000-2009," *Paste*, December 3, 2009, accessed October 23, 2011,

http://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2009/12/the-evolution-of-the-hipster-2000-2009.html. For discussion of the hipster demographic, see: Carles, "Meme Content Breakdown: The Evolution of the Hipster," *Hipster Runoff*, December 8, 2009, accessed October 23, 2011, http://www.hipsterrunoff.com/tag/hipster-demographic.

[95] Hibbett, "What Is Indie Rock?," 64.

[96] Ibid.

[97] This is not to insinuate that Hibbett was arguing for unidimensionality.

[98] Examples include the following: Wendy Fonarow, *Empire of Dirt: The Aesthetics and Rituals of British Indie Music* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2006), 28-30. For authenticity as "core" of indie, see: Shuker, *Understanding Popular Music Culture*, 21. For authenticity as a defining aspect of indie, see: Holly Kruse, "Local Identity and Independent Music Scenes, Online and Off," *Popular Music and Society* 33, no. 5 (2010): 631.

[99] Hibbett, "What Is Indie Rock?," 64.

[100] Shuker, *Understanding Popular Music Culture*, 21.

[101] Hibbett, "What Is Indie Rock?," 62.

[102] Michael Mario Albrecht, "Acting Naturally Unnaturally: The Performative Nature of Authenticity in Contemporary Popular Music," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 28, no.4 (2008): 387-388.

[103] Ibid., 387.

[104] Ibid., 388.

[105] Ibid.

[106] Ibid., 381.

[107] Hibbett, "What Is Indie Rock?," 71-2.

[108] Shuker, *Understanding Popular Music Culture*, 169.

[109] Ibid.

[110] Ibid., 170.

[111] Wilson, *Let's Talk About Love,* 85.

[112] Shuker, *Understanding Popular Music Culture*, 170.

[113] As Adam Sternbergh said in his article on fanboys: "If there is one thing the internet is good for, it's bringing together like-minded people, then convincing them that their opinion is the only valid one in existence." Adam Sternbergh, "Tyranny of the Fanboys," *New York Magazine*, July 23, 2010, accessed October 17, 2011, http://nymag.com/news/intelligencer/67292/.

[114] Adrian C. Ward and David J. Hargreaves, *The Social and Applied Psychology of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008): 1-2.

[115] Ibid.

[116] One of the more prominent examples of a band that rose to prominence on home recordings alone is Clap Your Hands Say Yeah. Their initial record was self-recorded and distributed, yet sold over 125,000 copies and gained recognition from NPR as one of the 50 most important records of the decade.

[117] Kruse, "Music Scenes, Online and Off," 635.

[118] Ibid.

[119] Wilson, *Let's Talk About Love*, 85.

[120] In the movie, an example of this arrogance can be seen when a customer calls to ask Barry (a record store employee) if he has Stevie Wonder's "I Just Called to Say I Love You" and Barry responds: "It's sentimental tacky crap. Do we look like the kind of store that sells I Just Called to Say I Love You? Go to the mall."

[121] Kruse, "Music Scenes, Online and Off," 629-30.

[122] Camelia Gradinaru, "The Potential Role of New Media in the Creation of Communities," *Argumentum: Journal of the Seminar of Discursive Logic, Argumentation Theory & Rhetoric* 9 (2011): 137-61.

[123] Christian Pentzold, "Imagining the Wikipedia community: What do Wikipedia authors mean when they write about their 'community'?," *New Media & Society* 13, no. 15 (2011): 718.

[124] Ibid.

[125] Nancy Baym, "The New Shape of Online Community: The Example of Swedish Independent Music Fandom," *First Monday* 12, no. 8 (2007): http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/1978/1853.

[126] Ibid.

[127] Herbert J. Gans, "Popular Culture in America: Social Problem in a Mass Society or Social Asset in a Pluralist Society?," in *Social Problems: A Modern Approach*, ed. Howard S. Becker (New York: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 1966), 549-51.

[128] George H. Lewis, "Who Do You Love?: The Dimensions of Musical Taste," in *Popular Music and Communication,* ed. James Lull (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1992), 139.

[129] Ibid., 141.

[130] Ibid., 144-45.

[131] Ibid., 145.

[132] Wilson, "The Trouble with Indie Rock."

[133] Ibid.

[134] Rhetorical close reading is first articulated as a method in: Michael Leff, "Textual Criticism: The Legacy of G.P. Mohrman," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 72, no. 4 (1986): 377-90. One of its first implementations can be seen in: Michael Leff, "Dimensions of Temporality in Lincoln's Second Inaugural," *Communication Reports* 1, no. 1 (1988): 26-31.

[135] This summation of the goal of rhetorical close reading comes from: Carl R. Burgchardt, ed., *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism*, 4th ed. (State College: Strata Publishing, Inc., 2010), 199.

[136] Powers traced the etymology of "hype" with the *Oxford English Dictionary*. I cross-referenced this with *Merriam-Webster*. "Hype," *Merriam-Webster*, Definition 4, accessed January 24, 2012, http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hype.

[137] "About Gartner," Gartner, accessed February 10, 2012, http://www.gartner.com/technology/about.jsp. Jackie Fenn, "When to Leap on the Hype Cycle," Gartner, January 11, 1995, accessed February 10, 2012, http://www.gartner.com/id=484408.

[138] For reference, the definitions of Gartner's five steps of the hype cycle are provided in this note. "Technology Trigger: A potential technology breakthrough kicks things off. Early proof-of-concept stories and media interest trigger significant publicity. Often no usable products exist and commercial viability is unproven. Peak of Inflated Expectations: Early publicity produces a number of success stories—often accompanied by scores of failures. Some companies take action; many do not. Trough of Disillusionment: Interest wanes as experiments and implementations fail to deliver. Producers of the technology shake out or fail. Investments continue only if the surviving providers improve their products to the satisfaction of early adopters. Slope of Enlightenment: More instances of how the technology can benefit the enterprise start to crystallize and become more widely understood. Second- and third-generation

products appear from technology providers. More enterprises fund pilots; conservative companies remain cautious. Plateau of Productivity: Mainstream adoption starts to take off. Criteria for assessing provider viability are more clearly defined. The technology's broad market applicability and relevance are clearly paying off." "Hype Cycle Research Methodology," Gartner, accessed February 10, 2012, http://www.gartner.com/technology/research/methodologies/hype-cycle.jsp.

[139] "The Hype Cycle," *n+1*, April 28, 2008, accessed January 22, 2012, http://nplusonemag.com/hype-cycle.

[140] "Hype," *Merriam-Webster*, Definition 4.

[141] "Buzz," *Merriam-Webster*, Definition 2e, accessed February 10, 2012, http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/buzz.

[142] Devon Powers, "Bruce Springsteen, Rock Criticism, and the Music Business: Towards a Theory and History of Hype," *Popular Music and Society* 34, no. 2 (2011): 203-4.

[143] Powers, "Bruce Springsteen," 206.

[144] Ibid., 208.

[145] Maura Johnston, "Is Lana Del Rey the Kreayshawn of Moody, Electro-tinged "Indie"?," *The Village Voice*, September 15, 2011, accessed January 24, 2012, http://blogs.villagevoice.com/music/2011/09/lana_del_rey_secret_show_glasslands.php.

[146] Matt LeMay, "The Year in Indie Rock – Hype Cycle," *LimeWireMusicBlog*, December 20, 2007, accessed January 22, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W1FnIqZfdSI.

[147] Hibbett, "What Is Indie Rock?," 64.

[148] Eric Grandy, "That Sweet Spot After the Hype Cycle Has Totally Run Its Course, or: I Can Finally Listen to Merriweather Post Pavillion Again!," *Seattle Weekly*, May 17, 2011, accessed January 24, 2012, http://blogs.seattleweekly.com/reverb/2011/05/that_sweet_spot_after_the_hype.php.

[149] Powers, "Bruce Springsteen," 216.

[150] Bands like Black Kids (see page 57)—who had a lot of pre-album buzz, but then were given a dreadful review of their debut effort—are exemplars of this tendency. It remains to be seen whether Lana Del Rey can weather the building backlash.

[151] Mervin B. Freedman, "The Passage Through College," *Journal of Social Issues* 12, no. 4 (1956): 13-28.

[152] Rebecca B. Rubin, Elizabeth E. Graham, and James T. Mignerey, "A Longitudinal Study of College Students' Communication Competence," *Communication Education* 39, no. 1 (1990): 1-14.

[153] Database searches of the phrase "sophomore slump" yield a multitude of references. *The New York Times*'s pre-1980 database, for instance, shows the term used in reference to education, hockey, baseball, and football, with the earliest reference dating to 1956—the same year of Freedman's analysis. After 1980, results show it in wider use: from fashion (1986) to music (1986) to tennis (1989) and more. Searching LexisNexis Academic (which only goes back to just before 1980) for the phrase shows the first reference in 1977 in regards to the second album released by the McGarrigle sisters.

[154] Robert Palmer, "The Pop Life: Zouk, New Musical Amalgram, a Hit," *The New York Times*, November 12, 1986, accessed February 2, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/1986/11/12/arts/the-pop-life-zouk-new-musical-amalgram-a-hit.html.

[155] Gary Graff, "Sophomore Slump," *Chicago Tribune*, August 30, 1988, accessed February 2, 2012, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1988-08-30/features/8801260572_1_record-companies-and-retailers-r-b-singer-freddie-jackson-sophomore-slump.

[156] Andrew Tijs, "Diagnosing Second Album Syndrome," *The Enthusiast*, May 15, 2009, accessed February 2, 2012, http://www.theenthusiast.com.au/archives/2009/diagnosing-second-album-syndrome/.

[157] Ibid.

[158] Jasper Rees, "Suffering from second novel syndrome? You are not alone," *The Telegraph*, September 4, 1999, accessed February 2, 2012, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/4718323/Suffering-from-second-novel-syndrome-You-are-not-alone.html.

[159] Dorian Lynskey, "Are You Suffering from DSAS?," *The Guardian*, September 18, 2003, accessed February 2, 2012, http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2003/sep/19/3.

[160] Tijs, "Second Album Syndrome."

[161] Ibid.

[162] Ibid.

[163] Lynskey, "DSAS."

[164] Ibid.

[165] To conduct this analysis, I compiled all of the Pitchfork reviews from the weeks that each of the four focal reviews were published (September 12-16, 2004 for *Funeral*, June 19-23, 2005 for *Clap Your Hands Say Yeah*, January 29-February 2, 2007 for *Some Loud Thunder*, and March 5-9, 2007 for *Neon Bible*). I recorded the score, word count, reviewer, artist, album title, and date of review. I took the reported average from this data set. "Album Reviews," *Pitchfork*, accessed February 14, 2012, http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/293/, http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/294/, http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/299/, http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/300/, http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/394/, http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/395/, http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/439/, http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/440/.

[166] "Best New Music," *Pitchfork*, accessed February 14, 2012, http://pitchfork.com/best/high-scoring-albums/.

[167] "Album Reviews," *Pitchfork*, accessed February 14, 2012, http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/635/.

[168] "8.0+ Reviews," Pitchfork, accessed February 14, 2012, http://pitchfork.com/best/high-scoring-albums/137/.

[169] "Best New Music," *Pitchfork*, accessed February 14, 2012, http://pitchfork.com/reviews/best/albums/40/.

[170] From the analysis of Pitchfork reviews first noted in note 165.

[171] Ibid.

[172] "Album Reviews: David Moore," *Pitchfork*, accessed February 14, 2012, http://pitchfork.com/search/more/1/?filter=album_reviews&query=david+moore, http://pitchfork.com/search/more/2/?filter=album_reviews&query=david+moore.

[173] From the analysis of Pitchfork reviews first noted in note 165.

[174] Amrit, "Pitchfork's Top 50 Albums of 2011," *Stereogum*, December 11, 2011, accessed February 14, 2012.

[175] "About," *RipFork*, accessed February 14, 2012, http://ripfork.com/about/.

[176] "Pitchfork Sucks," *Facebook*, accessed February 14, 2012, http://www.facebook.com/pages/Pitchfork-Sucks/170074916337866. "Pitchfork Sucks," *Last.fm*, accessed February 14, 2012, http://www.last.fm/group/Pitchfork+sucks.

[177] "Album Reviews: Nitsuh Abebe," *Pitchfork*, accessed February 14, 2012, http://pitchfork.com/search/more/1/?filter=album_reviews&query=nitsuh+abebe, http://pitchfork.com/search/more/8/?filter=album_reviews&query=nitsuh+abebe.

[178] Marc Hogan, "On Repeat: Black Kids: "I'm Not Gonna Teach Your Boyfriend How to Dance With You" [MP3/Stream]," *Pitchfork*, September 21, 2007, accessed February 15, 2012, http://web.archive.org/web/20071011004555/http://www.pitchforkmedia.com/article/download/45801-black-kids-im-not-gonna-teach-your-boyfriend-how-to-dance-with-you-mp3stream.

[179] Marc Hogan, "New Music: Black Kids: "Hurricane Jane (Beige remix)" [MP3/Stream]," Pitchfork, October 3, 2007, accessed February 15, 2012, http://web.archive.org/web/20071011042355/http://www.pitchforkmedia.com/page/forkcast/46065-black-kids-hurricane-jane-beige-remix-mp3stream.

[180] Marc Hogan, "Black Kids: The Wizard of Ahhhs," *Pitchfork*, October 5, 2007, accessed February 15, 2012, http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/10743-wizard-of-ahhhs-ep/.

[181] Scott Plagenhoef, "Black Kids: Partie Traumatic," *Pitchfork*, July 22, 2008, accessed February 15, 2012, http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/11617-partie-traumatic/.

[182] "Black Kids," *Pitchfork*, accessed February 15, 2012, http://pitchfork.com/artists/5486-black-kids/.

[183] I searched for the term "Black Kids" at the following sites and all meaningful coverage ceases in 2008: "Black Kids," *PopMatters*, accessed February 15, 2012, http://www.popmatters.com/pm/search/results/e358583a9d84b4874f249f49ee4d7796/. "Black Kids," *Tiny Mix Tapes*, accessed February 15, 2012, http://www.tinymixtapes.com/search/node. "Black Kids," *The A.V. Club*, accessed February 15, 2012, http://www.avclub.com/search/?submit.x=0&submit.y=0&submit=Search&q=%22black+kids%22. "Black Kids," *Stereogum*, accessed February 15, 2012, http://stereogum.com/?s=%22black+kids%22.

[184] Just a quick survey of *For Emma, Forever Ago* reviews yields several prominent references to the album being recorded in a cabin, including Pitchfork, *Village Voice*, Tiny Mix Tapes, and *Paste*. Stephen M. Deusner, "Bon Iver: For Emma, Forever Ago," *Pitchfork*, October 4, 2007, accessed January 19, 2012, http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/10709-for-emma-forever-ago/. Melissa Giannini, "Bon Iver's *For Emma, Forever Ago*," *Village Voice*, February 19, 2008, accessed January 19, 2012, http://www.villagevoice.com/2008-02-19/music/more-rustic-beautiful-folkiness/. Andrea Domanick, "Bon Iver: For Emma, Forever Ago," *Tiny Mix Tapes*, accessed January 19, 2012, http://www.tinymixtapes.com/music-review/bon-iver-emma-forever-ago. Jason Killingsworth, "Bon Iver," *Paste*, August 9, 2008, accessed January 19, 2012, http://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2008/08/bon-iver.html.

[185] The band offers no bio section on their own website, instead providing a link to Wikipedia which details a fractious early history in which original members Myles Broscoe, Brendan Reed, and Dane Mills (consecutively) quit the band in late 2002 and early 2003 after tensions erupted between them and frontman Win Butler. "Arcade Fire," *Wikipedia*, accessed January 21, 2012, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arcade_fire.

[186] The information about the pre-band lives of Butler and Chassagne comes from a McGill alumni magazine and the band's bio on All Music Guide. "The Arcade Fire is Red Hot," *McGill News*, Winter 2004, accessed January 19, 2012, http://www.mcgill.ca/news-archives/2004/winter/newsbites/three/. Andrew Leahey, "Arcade Fire," *Allmusic*, accessed January 19, 2012, http://www.allmusic.com/artist/arcade-fire-p673409/biography.

[187] Arcade Fire, *Funeral* Liner Notes, Merge Records, September 14, 2004.

[188] Leahey, "Arcade Fire."

[189] Arcade Fire, *Funeral* Liner Notes.

[190] Leahey, "Arcade Fire."

[191] Arcade Fire, *Funeral* Liner Notes.

[192] Kot, "Pitchfork E-zine."

[193] Ounsworth's reclusiveness is mentioned in much of the press surrounding the band, including: "Clap Your Hands Say Yeah: A Word of Mouth Revolution," *The Independent*, February 24, 2006, accessed January 19, 2012, http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/clap-your-hands-say-yeah-a-word-of-mouth-revolution-526118.html. Brian Howe, "Clap Your Hands Say Yeah: Some Loud Thunder," *Pitchfork*, January 29, 2007, accessed January 21, 2012, http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/9820-some-loud-thunder/.

[194] Jen Carlson, "The Gothamist Band Interview: Clap Your Hands Say Yeah," *The Gothamist*, June 15, 2005, accessed January 21, 2012, http://gothamist.com/2005/06/15/the_gothamist_band_interview_clap_your_hands_say_yeah.php.

[195] Alec Ounsworth, "Biographical Info," accessed January 21, 2012, http://alecounsworth.com/.

[196] "CYHSY: A Word of Mouth Revolution," *The Independent*.

[197] "Alec Ounsworth: Clap Your Hands, Go Solo," *NPR Music*, accessed January 21, 2012, http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=122497820.

[198] J. Scott McClintock, "Clap Your Hands Say Yeah," *Allmusic*, accessed January 19, 2012, http://www.allmusic.com/artist/clap-your-hands-say-yeah-p737640/biography.

[199] "CYHSY: A Word of Mouth Revolution," *The Independent*.

[200] "Music: Clap Your Hands Say Yeah," *Clap Your Hands Say Yeah*, accessed January 21, 2012, http://clapyourhandssayyeah.com/music.

[201] "Stream the New Clap Your Hands Say Yeah Album: Hysterical," *Discosalt*, September 12, 2011, accessed January 21, 2012, http://discosalt.com/blog/2011/09/12/stream-the-new-clap-your-hands-say-yeah-album-hysterical/.

[202] "CYHSY: A Word of Mouth Revolution," *The Independent*.

[203] "Band to Watch: Arcade Fire," *Stereogum*, September 9, 2004, accessed January 26, 2012, http://stereogum.com/875/band_to_watch_arcade_fire/franchises/band-to-watch/.

[204] Ibid.

[205] Wyatt, "The Arcade Fire: Funeral," *Tiny Mix Tapes*, September 14, 2004, accessed January 26, 2012, http://www.tinymixtapes.com/music-review/arcade-fire-funeral.

[206] Zeth Lundy, "Arcade Fire: Funeral," *PopMatters*, September 16, 2004, accessed January 26, 2012, http://www.popmatters.com/pm/review/arcadefire-funeral.

[207] Noel Murrary, "The Arcade Fire: Funeral," *The A.V. Club*, September 20, 2004, accessed February 18, 2012, http://www.avclub.com/articles/the-arcade-fire-funeral,11275/.

[208] Robert Christgau, "Harmonies and Abysses," *Village Voice*, January 25, 2005, accessed January 26, 2012, http://www.villagevoice.com/2005-01-25/music/harmonies-and-abysses/.

[209] In the course of four reviews, Arcade Fire is compared to the following artists: Stereogum (Walkmen, Modest Mouse, Broken Social Scene, Polyphonic Spree); Tiny Mix Tapes (Motown, Neutral Milk Hotel, The Sugarcubes, New Order, The Pixies, The Talking Heads); A.V. Club (Neutral Milk Hotel, Radiohead, The Shins, David Byrne); PopMatters (Pixies, Michael Stipe, David Byrne, Polyphonic Spree, Phil Spector, Crispin Glover).

[210] Of the thirty-three reviews of *Funeral* compiled on Metacritic, eight of these are perfect 100s, twelve are in the 90s, seven in the 80s, five in the 70s, and only one in the 60s. "Arcade Fire: Critic Reviews," Metacritic, accessed January 26, 2012, http://www.metacritic.com/music/funeral/critic-reviews. If reissues, compilations, comebacks, and live albums are excepted, *Funeral* can be seen as the twenty-sixth most favorably reviewed album in the database. Moreover, if rap albums are removed from the remainder, it bumps all the way up to number fourteen. "Album Releases by Score: All Time," Metacritic, accessed January

26, 2012,
http://www.metacritic.com/browse/albums/score/metascore/all?sort=desc&view=condensed.

[211] Chris Rediske, "The Arcade Fire Sign to Merge, Tour in June," *Pitchfork*, May 12, 2004, accessed January 26, 2012,
http://web.archive.org/web/20040807044105/http://pitchforkmedia.com/news/04-05/12.shtml#story4.

[212] Ibid.

[213] David Moore, "Arcade Fire: Funeral," *Pitchfork*, September 12, 2004, accessed January 26, 2012, http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/452-funeral/.

[214] Ibid.

[215] Ibid.

[216] Ibid.

[217] Ibid.

[218] Ibid.

[219] Ibid.

[220] Ibid.

[221] Ibid.

[222] Casey Rae-Hunter, "Arcade Fire: Funeral," *Dusted*, October 11, 2004, accessed January 27, 2012, http://www.dustedmagazine.com/reviews/1742.

[223] Moore, "Arcade Fire: Funeral."

[224] Arcade Fire, *Funeral* liner notes, "Neighborhood #1 (Tunnels)" and "Neighborhood #4 (7 Kettles)."

[225] Moore, "Arcade Fire: Funeral."

[226] Ibid.

[227] Ibid.

[228] Ibid.

[229] Ibid.

[230] Ibid.

[231] Ibid.

[232] Ibid.

[233] Ibid.

[234] Ibid.

[235] Ibid.

[236] Ibid.

[237] Ibid.

[238] Ibid.

[239] Ibid.

[240] "Advertising," *Pitchfork*, September 29, 2004, accessed January 28, 2012, http://web.archive.org/web/20040929110318/http://pitchforkmedia.com/ad/.

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[242] Dan Beirne, "You Will Pay for Your Excessive Charm," *Said the Gramophone*, June 9, 2005, accessed January 28, 2012, http://www.saidthegramophone.com/archives/2005_06.php.

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[244] Stephen Stirling, "Clap Your Hands Say Yeah: Clap Your Hands Say Yeah," *PopMatters*, August 2, 2005, accessed January 29, 2012, http://www.popmatters.com/pm/review/clapyourhandssayyeah-st2005.

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[246] Jacob Ganz, "To Generate Buzz, Clap Your Hands on the 'Net!," *NPR*, November 29, 2005, accessed January 29, 2012, http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5023133&ps=rs.

[247] In the course of four reviews, CYHSY is compared to the following artists: Tiny Mix Tapes (Jack White, David Byrne, Thom Yorke, Talking Heads, The Sundays, Ride); PopMatters (Talking Heads, Neutral Milk Hotel, Arcade Fire, Bob Dylan, Stevie Wonder, Nina Simone, Interpol); All Music Guide (Talking Heads, John Cale, Neutral Milk Hotel, Joy Division); Village Voice (The Feelies).

[248] Of the twenty-eight reviews of *Clap Your Hands Say Yeah* compiled on Metacritic, one of these is a perfect 100, nine are in the 90s, ten in the 80s, six in the 70s, and only two in the 60s. "You're your Hands Say Yeah: Critic Reviews," *Metacritic*, accessed January 29, 2012, http://www.metacritic.com/music/clap-your-hands-say-yeah/critic-reviews. The highest scoring album of 2005 was Sufjan Stevens's *Illinois*, which achieved a 90. CYHSY's 84, puts them firmly into the top thirty albums released that year listed in the Metacritic database. "Album Releases By Score: By Year," accessed January 29, 2012, http://www.metacritic.com/browse/albums/score/metascore/year?sort=desc&view=condensed&year_selected=2005.

[249] Ryan Schreiber, "Clap Your Hands Say Yeah: "In This Home on Ice"," *Pitchfork*, June 14, 2005, accessed January 29, 2012, http://web.archive.org/web/20050616012104/http://www.pitchforkmedia.com/tracks/05-06-14.shtml.

[250] Ibid.

[251] Prophetic because it may turn out that the "first impressions" created by indie rock critics helped doom the band to inevitable backlash. Howe, "Clap Your Hands Say Yeah."

[252] Howe, "Clap Your Hands Say Yeah."

[253] Ibid.

[254] Ibid.

[255] Ibid.

[256] Ibid.

[257] Ibid.

[258] Ibid.

[259] Ibid.

[260] By "proper" songs, I mean to say ones that include lyrics and run over a minute and a-half. No offense to the short interludes, of course.

[261] Howe, "Clap Your Hands Say Yeah."

[262] Ibid.

[263] Ibid.

[264] Ibid.

[265] Ibid.

[266] Ibid.

[267] Ibid.

[268] Ibid.

[269] Ibid.

[270] Ibid.

[271] Ibid.

[272] Ibid.

[273] Ibid.

[274] This does not count the three from the "Wilco (not hearing it), Talking Heads (okay), and Neutral Milk Hotel (getting warmer)" section since Howe was using them to comment on other critics, not to explain specific sonic elements.

[275] Of these shows, 65 were in the U.S., 37 in Europe, 25 in Canada, 3 in Brazil, and 2 in Japan. "Past Dates," *Us Kids Know*, accessed January 31, 2012, http://www.arcadefire.net/tour/past/.

[276] "Arcade Fire: Neon Bible," Merge Records Press Sheet, February 28, 2007.

[277] "Past Dates," *Us Kids Know*.

[278] Alexis Petridis, "Arcade Fire, Neon Bible," *The Guardian*, March 1, 2007, accessed January 31, 2012, http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2007/mar/02/popandrock.shopping.

[279] "Late Show with David Letterman: Episode Dated September 14, 2005," *IMDb*, accessed January 31, 2012, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0628741/.

[280] "Arcade Fire: Neon Bible," Merge Records Press Sheet, February 28, 2007.

[281] Sean Michaels, "Inside the Church of Arcade Fire," *Paste*, April 11, 2007, accessed January 19, 2012, http://www.pastemagazine.com/action/article/4047/arcade_fire.

[282] "Arcade Fire: Neon Bible," Merge Records Press Sheet.

[283] Michaels, "Arcade Fire."

[284] Ibid.

[285] "Past Dates," *Us Kids Know*.

[286] "Episode 1490, Season 32: 'Rainn Wilson and Arcade Fire'," *SNL*, accessed January 31, 2012, http://www.nbc.com/saturday-night-live/recaps/#cat=32&mea=1490&ima=29744.

[287] "Past Shows," *Clap Your Hands Say Yeah*, accessed January 31, 2012, http://web.archive.org/web/20070108095203/http://www.clapyourhandssayyeah.com/shows_past.php.

[288] 94 U.S., 43 in Europe, 5 Canada, 4 Japan, 1 Mexico. Ibid.

[289] Ibid.

[290] For instance, *The New York Times* ran a piece on the band entitle "Clap Your Hands Say Yeah: Ready to Gloat at the Reunion" on September 25, 2005 and another one entitled "A Qualified 'Yeah' to Fame," on December 30, 2005. Picthfork ran an interview with the band on November 6, 2005, a concert review on March 9, 2006, and a chat with Alex Ounsworth on January 25, 2007.

[291] For Conan reference: "News," *Clap Your Hands Say Yeah*, March 8, 2006, accessed January 31, 2012, http://web.archive.org/web/20070110165937/http://www.clapyourhandssayyeah.com/news.php. For Letterman reference: "Late Show with David Letterman: Episode Dated March 2, 2006," *IMDb*, accessed January 31, 2012, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0771847/.

[292] The band appeared on World Café, was featured in a live concert broadcast from the 9:30 Club in Washington D.C., and had its rise to stardom detailed in a November 2005 NPR article. "News," *Clap Your Hands Say Yeah*, March 8, 2006, accessed January 31, 2012, http://web.archive.org/web/20070110165937/http://www.clapyourhandssayyeah.com/news.php.

[293] The band did sign with the London-based Wichita Recordings to handle European distribution. Ryan Schreiber, "Interview: Clap Your Hands Say Yeah," *Pitchfork*, November 6, 2005, accessed February 2, 2012, http://pitchfork.com/features/interviews/6187-clap-your-hands-say-yeah/.

[294] Stirling, "Clap Your Hands Say Yeah."

[295] Betty Clarke, "Clap Your Hands Say Yeah: Clap Your Hands Say Yeah," *The Guardian*, January 19, 2006, accessed February 2, 2012, www.guardian.co.uk/filmandmusic/story/0,,1690047,00.html.

[296] Beirne, "Begin the Beguine," *Said the Gramophone*.

[297] Freedom du Lac, "Giving Indie Acts A Plug," *The Washington Post*.

[298] Ibid.

[299] The New York Times described Ounsworth as "the unhip hipster who has little interest in contemporary reference but finds his band's music to be suddenly of the moment." The article further documents how the band turned down an appearance on the television program *The O.C.* and how Ounsworth does not read the band's press or surf much on the internet. David Carr, "A Qualified 'Yeah' to Fame," *The New York Times*, December 30, 2005, accessed February 2, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/30/arts/music/30clap.html.

[300] "Clap Your Hands Talk New LP," *Pitchfork*, October 4, 2006, accessed February 2, 2012, http://web.archive.org/web/20061022001236/http://pitchforkmedia.com/article/news/38951/Clap_Your_Hands_Talk_New_LP.

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[303] Garrett Kamps, "Anthemic Canucks Raise the Terror Alert," *Village Voice*, February 27, 2007, accessed February 4, 2012, http://www.villagevoice.com/2007-02-27/music/anthemic-canucks-raise-the-terror-alert/.

[304] Adrien Begrand, "Arcade Fire: Neon Bible," *PopMatters*, March 2, 2007, accessed February 4, 2012, http://www.popmatters.com/pm/review/the-arcade-fire-neon-bible/.

[305] Gumshoe, "The Arcade Fire: Neon Bible," *Tiny Mix Tapes*, March 6, 2006, accessed February 4, 2012, http://www.tinymixtapes.com/music-review/arcade-fire-neon-bible.

[306] The 4,800 word feature story on Arcade Fire: Darcy Frey, "One Very, Very Indie Band," *The New York Times*, March 4, 2007, accessed February 4, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/04/magazine/04arcade.t.html?ref=music&pagewanted=all. The review of *Neon Bible*: Sia Michel, "Arcade Fire: Neon Bible," *The New York Times*, March 5, 2007, accessed February 4, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/05/arts/music/05choi.html?adxnnl=1&ref=music&pagewanted=all&adxnnlx=1328375013-Llv4+8ga9KiGKHJkCo3VmA.

[307] Kyle Ryan, "Arcade Fire: Neon Bible," *The A.V. Club*, March 6, 2007, accessed February 4, 2012, http://www.avclub.com/articles/arcade-fire-neon-bible,7939/.

[308] Of the forty-seven reviews of *Neon Bible* compiled on Metacritic, seven of these are perfect 100s, fourteen are in the 90s, fourteen in the 80s, eight in the 70s, two in the 60s, and one in the 50s. "Neon Bible: Critic Reviews," *Metacritic*, accessed February 4, 2012, http://www.metacritic.com/music/neon-bible/critic-reviews.

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[310] "Arcade Fire Announce Shows," *Pitchfork*, December 7, 2006, accessed February 4, 2012, http://web.archive.org/web/20070107092537/http://www.pitchforkmedia.com/article/news/40057/Arcade_Fire_Announce_Shows. Rob Mitchum, "The Arcade Fire: Canterbury High School, Ottawa: 19 January 2007," *Pitchfork*, January 22, 2007, accessed February 4, 2012, http://pitchfork.com/features/articles/6526-the-arcade-fire/. Stephen Trouss, "The Arcade Fire: Porchester Hall, London; 1 February 2007," *Pitchfork*, February 5, 2007, accessed February 4, 2012, http://pitchfork.com/features/articles/6536-the-arcade-fire/.

[311] Stephen M. Deusner, "Arcade Fire: Neon Bible," *Pitchfork*, March 5, 2007, accessed February 4, 2012, http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/9946-neon-bible/.

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[313] Ibid.

[314] Ibid.

[315] Ibid.

[316] Ibid.

[317] Ibid.

[318] Ibid.

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[321] Ibid.

[322] Ibid.

[323] "Band," *Casa de Calexico*, accessed February 4, 2012, http://www.casadecalexico.com/band.

[324] Deusner, "Neon Bible."

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[326] Ibid.

[327] Ibid.

[328] Ibid.

[329] Ibid.

[330] Ibid.

[331] Ibid.

[332] Ibid.

[333] Ibid.

[334] As an example, consider the *Funeral* line "And there's something wrong in the heart of man, you take it from your heart and put it in your hand!" It demonstrates oversimplification where emotion is the answer to the modern malaise. Arcade Fire, *Funeral* Liner Notes.

[335] Deusner, "Neon Bible."

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340 Ibid.

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343 Deusner, "Neon Bible."

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Club, January 30, 2007, accessed February 7, 2012, http://www.avclub.com/articles/clap-your-hands-say-yeah-some-loud-thunder,7988/. Mr. P, "Clap Your Hands Say Yeah: Some Loud Thunder," *Tiny Mix Tapes*, January 30, 2007, accessed February 7, 2012, http://www.tinymixtapes.com/music-review/clap-your-hands-say-yeah-some-loud-thunder.

[352] Nick Pearson, "Clap Your Hands Say Yeah: Some Loud Thunder," *PopMatters*, April 16, 2007, accessed February 7, 2012, http://www.popmatters.com/pm/review/clap-your-hands-say-yeah-some-loud-thunder/.

[353] Of the thirty-six reviews of *Some Loud Thunder* compiled on Metacritic, eight are in the 80s, seven in the 70s, eleven in the 60s, four in the 50s, and six in the 40s. "Some Loud Thunder : Critic Reviews," *Metacritic*, accessed February 7, 2012, http://www.metacritic.com/music/some-loud-thunder/critic-reviews. For detail on the largest "sophomore slumps," see: Jason Dietz, "Sophomore Slump? Comparing the Second Albums of Buzz Bands," *Metacritic*, April 10, 2010, accessed February 7, 2012, http://www.metacritic.com/feature/best-and-worst-second-albums.

[354] Katie Llewellyn, "Clap Your Hands Reveal New Album, Post MP3s," *Pitchfork*, December 5, 2006, accessed February 7, 2012, http://web.archive.org/web/20061219220018/http://www.pitchforkmedia.com/page/news/2006/12/5/Clap_Your_Hands_Reveal_New_Album_Post_MP3s#40016.

[355] Ibid.

[356] Brian Howe, "Clap Your Hands Say Yeah: Some Loud Thunder," *Pitchfork*, January 29, 2007, accessed February 7, 2012, http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/9820-some-loud-thunder/.

[357] Ibid.

[358] Ibid.

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[360] Ibid.

[361] Ibid.

[362] Ibid.

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[365] Ibid.

[366] Ibid.

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[369] Ibid.

[370] Ibid.

[371] Ibid.

[372] Ibid.

[373] Ibid.

[374] Ibid.

[375] Ibid.

[376] Ibid.

[377] Ibid.

[378] Ibid.

[379] Ibid.

[380] Ibid.

[381] Ibid.

[382] Ibid.

[383] Ibid.

[384] By my count, the review uses 439 words to ruminate on hype, leaving the remainder for consideration of the music itself.

[385] Given the fact that the Pitchfork editorial staff ratifies the final score (and copy), and owing to the abrupt shift in tone, there may be evidence of edits made (or forced) by the Pitchfork editorial team. While such a supposition can only be conjecture, the incongruities are certainly cause for consideration.

[386] Haddow, "Hipster," *AdBusters*.

[387] In a sense, Arcade Fire's 2011 Grammy win is the mainstream industry's recognition of that crossover potential—and thus, validation of Pitchfork.

[388] PopMatters is one of the few sites of indie criticism that publishes pictures of the reviewer (and a brief bio) at the bottom of many (but not all) of its album reviews.

[389] "Arcade Fire: The Suburbs," *Metacritic*, accessed February 22, 2012, http://www.metacritic.com/music/the-suburbs, "Clap Your Hands Say Yeah: Hysterical," *Metacritic*, accessed February 22, 2012, http://www.metacritic.com/music/hysterical.

[390] "Advertising," *Pitchfork*, accessed September 3, 2011, http://pitchfork.com/ad/.

[391] Jason Lipshutz, "Clap Your Hands Say Yeah Returns After Sophomore Slump," *Billboard.com*, September 16, 2011, accessed February 2, 2012, http://www.billboard.com/news/clap-your-hands-say-yeah-returns-after-sophomore-1005356322.story#/news/clap-your-hands-say-yeah-returns-after-sophomore-1005356322.story.