

**Tracing sonic identities: Hearing the artist and being
yourself in popular music culture**



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This thesis is dedicated to the memories of three *grandes dames*:

Rose Frances Farragher (1928-2020),

Betty Violet Grealey (1931-2017),

and Loretta Lynn (1932-2022).

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Abstract

This thesis presents and elaborates the concept of sonic identities. A sonic identity is the sense that a listener has of who a popular artist is, deriving not only from the artist's music but also from any discourse or material pertaining to the artist. Central to the thesis is the reciprocity of identity formation between listener and artist: 'who' the artist can 'become' depends on who the listener already is, on who the listener becomes through the artist's music, and so on. I argue that sonic identities are integral to popular music culture, broadly conceived.

I begin this thesis by defining sonic identity, before reviewing relevant literature and establishing my conceptual and theoretical foundations. In Chapter 3, I prioritise the artist's side of listener-artist reciprocity, as I analyse the sonic identity of Rostam via his track 'Half-Light'. In Chapters 4 and 5, artist and listener are on equal footing, as I analyse a listening diary charting my engagement with Loretta Lynn and Janelle Monáe, two artists previously unknown to me. Following Chapter 6, in which I lay the theoretical and methodological groundwork for the remainder of the thesis, Chapters 7-10, prioritising listeners over artists, analyse interviews and listening diaries provided by respondents. The interviews focus on an artist treasured by each respondent, while the diaries trace each respondent's familiarisation with an unknown artist. I interpret these datasets primarily through the idea of autobiographical significance (Peck & Grealey, 2020); an artist and their music are autobiographically significant if one or many listener identities inaugurated or affected by the artist and their music have endured over time. I end the thesis by summarising my findings and theorising

the connections between sonic identities and the ideological values underpinning popular music production and reception, before suggesting possible uses of the sonic identity concept within the broader field of popular music studies.

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1: What are sonic identities?

As its name suggests, popular music is about people. Who its artists are is essential to what this art can do, and who it enables its audiences to be is perhaps its most consequential effect. In this thesis, I wish to analyse these dynamics comprehensively; I wish to explore how these two *whos* bring each other into being. To do so, I will introduce and elaborate on what I call *sonic identities*.

What is a sonic identity in relation to popular music? In the most general sense, a sonic identity is the overall sense a given listener has of who a popular music artist is.¹ By this, I do not simply mean this listener's understanding of that artist's biography, personality, sense of self, or some combination of all those things. Rather, I mean something more encompassing and, arguably, more abstract. The artist's sonic identity is the container of *all* the meanings that define them in the mind—and the ears—of the listener in question. It is the broadest unique interpretive category in which all artist-relevant meanings are housed.

Even if only because we are talking about a specifically musical culture, I contend that the most consequential of these meanings are those offered by the artist's music itself. For this reason, 'sonic' leads the concept. But this container does indeed include other meanings from other sources that pertain to the artist. Most obviously, there is what the literary critic Gérard Genette calls 'paratext':

¹ I use the term 'artist'—instead of 'star' or 'musician', say—to grant the widest applicability to my arguments. Some artists might not count as stars, nor wish to; some might not consider themselves musicians, nor be considered as such by others. But surely few would seriously deny they are artists.

information 'such as an author's name, a title, a preface, [or] illustrations' that 'ensure[s] the text's presence in the world' and for which the author takes responsibility (Genette, 1997: pp. 1-10). Popular music's obvious paratextual tendencies include artists' monikers, album titles and artwork, and music videos. Beyond such information is the potential for what Genette calls 'epitext' (p. 3). This is more diffuse, free-floating information, such as journalistic discourse or everyday conversation, information which, while pertaining to the artist, differs from paratext in that it does not form part of the deliberate frame of an artwork itself, and can exist without the artist's input or consent. As such, information about the artist's biography, personality, and/or sense of self may of course be involved in an artist's sonic identity. But again, these meanings depend on the artist's music for most of their invocations, as well as for their ultimate sense. Without the music, the artist's identity-as-artist is an impossibility; as such, this identity is a primarily sonic phenomenon.

Even equating a sonic identity with a listener's 'overall sense' of who an artist is obscures the way these phenomena exist. After all, they are developed through constant exposures to the artist in different stances, from different angles. And there is no natural end to this development. A sonic identity's form is always amenable to change of one kind or another, whether in the vein of consolidation or contradiction; how and why these changes occur in a discrete, not necessarily musical, listener-artist encounter will depend no less on the listener than the artist. More importantly, these encounters are always partial. As Cook writes, we could conceive of each piece of music as a Gestalt comprising individual units whose perception 'is determined by their relationship to the

whole' (1990: p. 40). In my view of popular music, the artist's sonic identity is, in a given encounter, this Gestalt. As Cook notes, though, the scale of many pieces of music—he is writing about classical music, but the principle still applies—make this perception of the whole quite difficult, if not impossible (pp. 41-42). We might attend to some aspects of a piece on one day, and others on the next. Each encounter reveals something of the sonic identity, but not everything. And even then, I really mean 'only something of the sonic identity as embodied by that piece'. Insofar as each piece by an artist is expressively different from its fellows—and insofar as the artist's sonic identity is the category which corrals all the meanings of all their music—no single one of them can express the sum of the meanings of all. Nor, again, would it be possible for a listener to achieve a comprehensive, once-and-for-all interpretation of any single piece anyway.

Every piece of musical, paratextual, and epitextual information leading back to a particular popular music artist presents, then, different information relating to that artist's sonic identity. While I argue that the artist's sonic identity is the most general idea expressed in a listener's encounter with a given piece of music (or piece of paratext or epitext), the whole of a sonic identity is never expressed in such an encounter. Instead, there is always some information—often a great deal—that gets left out of that partial apprehension, but which the listener has nevertheless previously assimilated about the artist, and which awaits its own re-invocation when the circumstances of another, future encounter permit or invite it. The artist's sonic identity, then, is rather the whole stock of artist-relevant meanings that have been accruing and re-arranging over the course of a given listener's life *as a listener*, and which are accessible to that

listener's consciousness. To borrow from Deleuze, the meanings of a given piece/paratext/epitext 'participate' in the sonic identity:

To participate means to have part in, to have after, to have in second place. What possesses in first place is the ground itself. Justice alone is just, says Plato. As for those whom we call the just, they possess the quality of being just in second, third or fourth place ... or in simulacral fashion. (2014: p. 78)²

In this sense, the sonic identity is the ground, and its partial expressions in discrete encounters are only participations in it at a remove. That ground, nevertheless, is itself always shifting and reforming as a result of these participations.

This participatory dynamic resonates with the Derridean law of genre, cited by Born and Haworth in their recent contribution to genre theory, which holds that, while no text can help participating in one or many genres, they nevertheless do not decisively belong to that genre or those genres as a consequence of that participation (2018: p. 610). Indeed, genre offers a handy template for exemplifying some of the key aspects of the existence of sonic identities. For instance, Fabbri argues that each genre is necessarily fluid in that, while it might tend successfully to '*denote*' the same thing to most people, what it '*connotes*' will be much more 'diverse' and vary between individuals (1982: p. 132). In the same sense, a track by a given artist may reliably denote that artist's sonic identity to an audience possessing a certain minimum of familiarity, but connote different things to each member of that audience, to the end that each forms an idiosyncratic interpretation that nevertheless feeds back into the vessel

² Indeed, as Deleuze later writes, 'we can never formulate simultaneously both a proposition and its sense; we can never say what is the sense of what we say' (p. 208). Analogously, the sonic identity is the sense, and the proposition its iteration in a given encounter.

of what was originally denoted. Similarly, genre also models the kind of excess of signification that sonic identities also have. Much as genres can be understood as ‘imbu[ing] artworks with significance beyond their thematic content’ (DiMaggio, 1987: p. 441), so too do artists’ sonic identities absorb the significations of their discrete materials into an overarching, yet still itself distinct, sense.

But I have said that a sonic identity is the ‘most general idea’ expressed in an encounter with any such materials; does not genre beat the sonic identity to this status? I would say no – or, at the very least, that it will be enlightening to work on the assumption that answer is no. A few pages ago, I defined sonic identity as ‘the broadest *unique* interpretive category in which all artist-relevant meanings are housed’, and this emphasis on uniqueness indicates what I think is decisive in this regard. While engaging with an artist whose music denotes certain genres will of course feed into our understanding of those genres, I maintain that the experience of the artist themselves is what remains most relevant during that engagement; that it is of more consequence, in other words, how the denotations of genre in the artist’s music signify something about the artist than vice versa. A recurring theme of this thesis will be how popular music culture is organised in such a way as to place this emphasis on the uniqueness of artists. And of course, this observation prompts the acknowledgement that genre is more than just a useful analogy for understanding how sonic identities exist; it is also itself implicated in that existence.

The sonic identities of popular music artists, then, are central to our engagement with the music we receive in their name. They are the first of those

two *whos* I alluded to. What is there to say about the other? As I have already remarked, the listener is not simply the vacant recipient of artist-determined information. Rather, they play an active role in the creation of sonic identities. This also invites an analogy with genre: much as 'genre is not only "in the music," but also in the minds and bodies of particular groups of people who share certain conventions' (Holt, 2007: p. 2), so too is the sonic identity of an artist. While each listener's particular sense of that sonic identity will, again, be unique to them, there will nevertheless be some factors in that sense that are shared, whether implicitly or explicitly, between groups of listeners who have engaged with the sonic identity of the artist in question. Fundamentally, in this sense, the artist depends on the listener to exist as an artist in the world. The artist can plot and craft their expressions as meticulously as they like, but it is ultimately their listeners who will interpret them in ways that cannot be predicted, or even necessarily accounted for. The circumstances of their lives and selves are the context of all encounters with the artist, and these circumstances change all the time. By the same token, the listener is not themselves unmoved or unchanged by these encounters. As Dibben has suggested, 'music is not simply a means by which cultural narratives are represented, but is instead a means by which they are experienced and internalised'; in this way, music actively plays a role in 'the construction of subjectivity' (2008: p. 184). In other words, listening to popular music is a self-forming activity for the listener. Since I am arguing that the artist's sonic identity is the frame for their music's meanings, that activity can be conceived as the co-constitution of listener and artist identities.

2: Identity and popular music

I'm different and I don't care who knows it
Somethin' about me
It's not the same, yeah

– Randy Newman, 'I'm Different'

This thesis, then, is concerned with identities on 'both sides' of musical listening. If I want to investigate how listeners perceive sonic identities in music, I must also consider the identities of the listeners themselves, since this process of identification is inter-personal and reciprocal. These initial concerns quickly lead to others. What specific links are made between perceived musical materials and the conceptual stuff of the identity/ies of the artist/s 'behind' them? How exactly, do artist and listener each exert their influence on the identity of the other? Before these problems can unfurl, the term at their centre must first be explored: identity.

Understood in the sense of 'who and/or what one is as a person', philosophical interrogations of identity trace back through millennia to multiple cultural sources, from Plato to the *Upanishads*, from Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching* to the philosophy of Gautama Buddha (Leary & Tangney, 2012; see also Collins, 1982 for a discussion of the self in Buddhism). In Western philosophy, the matter has garnered continued attention from its Platonic origins to the present day, passing through Aristotle, Descartes, Hume, and Wittgenstein, among others, with the emphasis broadly shifting from considerations of the (im)materiality of the soul, to consciousness of the self and one's perceptions thereof, then to consciousness of the self as situated in a world populated and conditioned by

the selves of others (Barresi & Martin, 2011).³ This eventual emphasis on the socially situated and extended conscious experience of the self also characterised early psychological literature touching on the subject, such as William James' *The Principles of Psychology* (1890/1990) and Freud's writings on the structure of the mind (see Freud, 1940/2006 and 1923/1995).

Much recent sociological and psychological scholarship has maintained this focus on the self as something negotiated between internal and external forces and perceptions. The following section will explore such perspectives in more detail. An overview of discussions of identity in relation to music will follow, and the review will end with an account of scholarly work that addresses the specific issues central to my own project, such as musical recognition, creativity, and the perception of authorial identity.

First, I should acknowledge a new term that has already crept into the discussion: 'self'. This term is closely related to identity, and the two are often used synonymously. However, 'self' denotes a more sentient state: an umbrella might be said to have an identity, but not a self, for instance. It has been noted that these terms have sometimes been used with careless interchangeability (Oyserman et al., 2012); some of the following literature makes specific demarcations between them. I will clarify this where necessary, but where 'self' and 'identity' are treated as interchangeable, both may be understood under the definition of 'who and/or what one is as a person'.

³ Though intriguing, mathematical or logical discussions of identity (see Garrett, 1998; Olson, 2017; and Noonan & Curtis, 2018) are far enough removed from the sociological and psychological senses of identity concerning me here as to render them omissible from this review.

2.1: Reviewing the literature

2.1.1: The sociology and psychology of identity

In the last century, an insight underlying sociological and psychological scholarship on identities and selves has been their disunity. Although Dollimore has argued that our notions of selfhood have long been defined by crisis (Dollimore, 1997: p. 254), it is now the very notion of the *a priori* self that has disintegrated. What were previously regarded as definitively stable qualities to be uncovered and referred to came to be seen as divided and contingent – as made and not found. Many have identified this development with the ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’ that marks the postmodern era (Lyotard, 1984: p. xxiv), a view summarised by Lawlor thus: ‘just as there is no transcendent measure for discourses, there is no identity constitutive of the self (or of the subject). Instead of identity, I find, inside of myself, difference’ (Lawlor, 2011: p. 697). This echoes Jameson, who notably differentiated between the ‘alienation’ of the modernist subject and the ‘fragmentation’ of its postmodern successor (Jameson, 1992). This trend away from the transcendent self is salutary, although it ought not overwrite the ways people might continue to orient themselves in terms of such a self.

The undermining of the unitary self relates to a common critical-theoretical view of the individual as trapped in, and defined by, wider structural forces of societal power. Althusser famously described the ‘interpellation’ of the subject, whereby the individual is only made into a subject when hailed as one by the agents of ideology, and thereby granted significance within prevailing power

structures. This ‘can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: “Hey, you there!”’ (Althusser, 1970/2014: p. 264); since ‘ideology has *no outside*’ (p. 265), this is something that has always already occurred, beginning with the rites of birth itself. Similarly, Foucault suggested that ‘there are not, between the links of [power’s] network, any golden sands of basic freedoms’ (Foucault, 1979; see also Foucault, 1980), that is, no workable ground ‘outside’ ideology. However, Foucault also emphasised the agency of individuals themselves precisely as constituents of power networks, coining the term:

technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (Foucault, 1988: p. 18)

How or whether such transcendent states as perfection and immortality are attainable is a question I will defer; what counts is the insight that individuals possess the potential to govern their being in pursuit of certain ambitions of selfhood, despite the ostensible restrictions imposed upon them by networks of power. In this vein, Butler has argued that while gender, and indeed biological sex, is not an inherent, natural state but a discursively regulated, iterative performance, this nevertheless allows for individual agency precisely because it casts ‘identity as an *effect*, that is, as *produced or generated*’ (Butler, 1990/2015: p. 201; see also Butler, 1993/2011: p. 15). Such views help illustrate how discursively consolidated and delineated environments restrict individuals’

actions, and undermine notions of 'pure' autonomy, while still leaving room for individual volition within power structures.

How important is identity to people? Manuel Castells has gone so far as to characterise our interconnected global societies by 'the pre-eminence of identity as their organizing principle' (Castells, 1996/2000: p. 22). He defines identity as 'people's source of meaning and experience', and notes that, '[f]or a given individual, or for a collective actor, there may be a plurality of identities' (Castells, 1997/2010: p. 6). These plural identities defer to a dominant identity, and differ from roles, which for Castells are institutionally imposed and 'organize ... functions', rather than meanings (p. 7). On these terms, then, identity is paramount; we order our experiences in terms of who they make us into. This is a strong claim, but it resonates with the sense that societies' core units are individuals, and that functioning societies require those individuals to have identifiable characteristics—identities—to which they, and others, can refer. Certainly this rings true with when considering the values dominant today in industrial capitalist societies, where the individualism of the neoliberal turn at the end of the 20th century has been followed, not unrelatedly, by a dramatic upturn in the discursive importance of identity politics.

McCracken's work provides memorable categories for discussing individuals' lives in terms of identity, emphasising its variegated, project-like nature. He identifies numerous sub-types of self that operate within individuals, often simultaneously, sometimes antagonistically. Notable among these are: the 'radiant' self, which invests totally and credulously in transformational life-projects (2008: p. 141); the 'swift' self, whose operations are amoral, pragmatic,

and oriented towards satisfying immediate impulses (p. 124); and the overarching 'global' self, a kind of background disposition which allows for any transformational possibilities, and holds no prior conditions for including a new facet of an individual's overall identity, no matter how contradictory (p. 300). While these categories risk generalising complicated interplays of identities, they do help pin down the main modalities of our contemporary identity-forming activities and dispositions, including those of musicians and listeners: a teenager who feigns fondness for their crush's favourite singer is being guided by their swift self, for instance, while a musician who, say, leaves a successful touring rock group to make experimental noise music cassettes might be living radiantly. Importantly, these categories also suggest that different identities and contradictory behaviours can simultaneously manifest on different timescales within the same individual.

In its emphasis on identities as projects, McCracken's thinking shares an affinity with Giddens' earlier work on identity in modernity. As Giddens argued, 'Self-identity is not a distinctive trait, or even a collection of traits, possessed by the individual. It is *the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography*' (1991: p. 53). Moreover, 'identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor—important though this is—in the reactions of others, but in the capacity *to keep a particular narrative going*' (p. 54). Giddens thus differentiates between an individual's selective, overarching identity narrative and the potentially contradictory behaviours and dispositions from which this identity is reflexively constructed. This highlights the possibility of discrepancies between, for instance, how a musician might expect their identity to be interpreted, and how

listeners might actually interpret it; or indeed, between how a listener might understand the effects on their self-identity of the music of the artist and the ways these effects are perceived socially – or not. Giddens also suggests psychological bases for understanding identity projects, isolating ‘trust’, ‘risk’, ‘doubt’, and ‘shame’ as key impulses that motivate and regulate identity-forming behaviours, in a globalised world bereft of ‘final authorities’ (p. 141) that might otherwise sanction them. These impulses are echoed in the psychological literature on identity, which has much to say about how and why people manage their identities.

The fields of psychology and social psychology have seen the development of divergent yet often complementary theories of identity and self-management. One main theoretical strand, Identity Theory (IT), views identities as agencies enacted by individuals, each of whom is socially situated in such a way that certain identities become internalised, whether these identities are externally defined roles, social group characteristics, or personally conceived individual qualities (Burke & Stets, 2009). These hierarchised identity-agents are mediated inter- and intra-individually by socially shared symbolic meanings. To determine behaviour, using these unsteadily defined terms, individuals negotiate between their perceptual ‘*input*’, i.e., what they are experiencing in a given moment, and their ‘*identity standards*’, i.e., what their identity conceptions permit them to suffer or do (p. 62). IT contrasts somewhat with Social Identity Theory (SIT), which defines identity in terms of group membership rather than individual role-taking; however, as Burke and Stets note elsewhere (2000: p. 234), the difference between IT and SIT is broadly one of emphasis between ‘who one is’

(SIT) versus 'what one does' (IT), both of which can be sympathetically investigated (see also Thoits & Virshup, 1997; Stryker, 2008: pp. 24-27). These theories offer a combined framework for studying behaviour and cognition in terms of identity, helping to analyse how musical production and consumption proceed. For instance, an artist's creative acts could be interpreted as behaviours that align their situated perceptions of what they are creating with the standards of their self-understood artist identity. A listener's preferences could also be understood in this way: music is preferred which satisfies the standards of the identity relevant in a given situation.

Turning from the philosophical and sociological to more psychological perspectives, the *Handbook of Self and Identity* (2012) contains a wealth of research elaborating different aspects of the psychology of identity. Alicke et al. discuss the consequences of people's self-comparisons, both with their own past or future selves and with others. This comparative dynamic of identity negotiation, arguably central to artistic influence and collaborative creation, also pertains to listeners' relations to artists. Meanwhile, Swann Jr. and Buhrmester argue that our tendency to defend our identity coherence is a universal and overriding one, even if the identity in question has negative terms or consequences. This argument helps contextualise, say, artists' deviations from previous creative paths, or the loyalty of fans to their favourite artists despite variations in their quality and style. Strikingly, Schlenker discusses the varyingly conscious, autonomous, and involuntary mechanisms of self-presentation, and problematises the distinction between expression-as-authentic and presentation-as-inauthentic. This discussion aggravates debates around the authenticity of

the personae that artists manifest, asking us to consider what kind of identity functions supposedly inauthentic artistic expression may serve rather than dismiss such functions as contradictions of a self-hood that is somehow, by contrast, ineffably genuine.

The foregoing literature offers useful conceptual structures and vocabularies for interpreting musicians' and listeners' identities, and by extension the listening experience that brings them together. If we follow this literature in placing identity near to or at the heart of worldly experience generally, then this ought also to extend to 'both sides' of artistic experience specifically. There are numerous lessons from this literature about the nature of identity in the sense of 'who and/or what one is as a person' that I will take forward in this thesis. They might be anchored in three general observations: identity is constructed, not immanent; identity is socially learned and iteratively performed; and identity is multifaceted—even contradictory—and not univocal. Specifically, I align myself with two of the theoretical perspectives outlined above. Firstly, I endorse, and will make analytical use of, the Identity Theory of Burke and Stets and the self-identity concept of Giddens. Following IT, I argue that identities are best understood as commingling—often competing—agencies that act through an individual, determining that individual's perception of, and behaviour in, a given situation. And I find Giddens's autobiography-rooted notion of self-identity a useful master concept for replacing the everyday, arguably overly-general use of the word 'identity' to mean just 'who and/or what one is as a person'. These concepts will be put to use later in the thesis, particularly in my analyses of listeners.

Having discussed identity generally, I will now address existing literatures that specifically relate music production and consumption to identity.

2.1.2: Music and Identity

Identity has for some time been a major theme in musicological scholarship. Before investigating this scholarship, we might note Hargreaves et al.'s distinction between '*identities in music* ... those aspects of musical identities that are socially defined within given cultural roles and musical categories', and '*music in identities*', that is, 'how we use music as a means or resource for developing other aspects of our individual identities' (2002: p. 2). This profitable distinction helps demarcate zones of study, but it should be remembered that these categories ultimately depend on and feed back into one another in practice. A listener who is using 'music in identities' to negotiate, say, their sexual identity, will often—if not necessarily—be doing so in conversation with the '*identities in [that] music*'.

Sociologically-oriented musicology has often been concerned with music's mediation of social relations, including those social relations which define identity categories – broadly corresponding with '*identities in music*'. Although the 'homology' view of this mediation process—that music materially reflects the social relations that produce it—has been defended as one type of mediation (Toynbee, 2000: p. 115; Hesmondhalgh & Born, 2000: p. 35), a more nuanced view is that music iterates and partially constructs these social relations as it mediates them (Stokes, 1994: p. 4; Frith, 1996a: p. 111). A valuable framework for interpreting musically mediated social relations comes from Born, who posits

four planes on which mediation occurs. On the first, music mediates between the social agents at the level of production and performance; on the second, music mediates between and within 'imagined communities, ... virtual collectivities or publics based on musical and other identifications'; on the third, 'music refracts wider social identity formations' such as race and gender; and on the fourth, music mediates the agency of macro-level forces, such as cultural institutions or economic systems (Born, 2011: pp. 378; see also Born, 2013). These planes, which are 'irreducible to one another and ... articulated in contingent and non-linear ways through relations of affordance, conditioning, or causality' (p. 378), provide a ground on which to analyse the spaces and processes in and by which music mediates identity categories.

As Hesmondhalgh and Born have noted, our musical identities and identifications are no less fragmentary than are identities in general (2000: p. 33), and subject to the same constructive management. DeNora's book *Music in Everyday Life* (2000) has helped illuminate this. Based on respondents' testimonies regarding the functions of music in their lives, she showed how music can function as a technology of the self, following Foucault's notion mentioned earlier. DeNora usefully attends to individuals' interactions with musical forms and structures, and how identity management can take place here as much as at a more symbolic level. In her words:

Music is a "mirror" that allows one to "see one's self". It is, also, however, a "magic mirror" in so far as its specific material properties also come to configure (for example, transfigure, disfigure) the image reflected in and through its (perceived) structures. (p. 70)

This emphasis on intra-individual musical identity mediation reasserts the idiosyncrasy of individuals' interactions with music, although these interactions themselves are inevitably contextualised by social identities mediated 'outside' the individual. Nevertheless, the internal mediations DeNora discusses here will be given particular attention in later chapters, when I analyse which musical features listeners deem relevant to their identification of and with an artist in their music.

Hesmondhalgh, drawing on Nussbaum, has discussed music in terms of the Aristotelian notion of personal flourishing, which music abets by exercising our senses and accommodating inward- and outward-directed emotional experiences and reflections (see first chapter of Hesmondhalgh, 2013). However, Hesmondhalgh also reminds us of the social and psychological forces that restrict all of our identity projects (pp. 40-41), recalling Foucault and Butler on individual freedom within power structures: no agency is totally free, and neither music nor identity can be created in a vacuum. This also recalls the instability of the broadly useful music-in-identities/identities-in-music distinction: our options for bringing music to bear on our identities (music-in-identities) will always already be delimited by prior associations between certain musics and identity categories (identities-in-music). Each helps to constitute the other, and it is important to attend to where and how these categories elide.

2.1.3: Artistic Identities and Sonic Identifications

To close this review, I will discuss literature that directly addresses the perception and/or interpretation of artist identity in artistic or musical works themselves.

2.1.3.1: Musical Meaning

To understand how listeners might perceive an artist's identity in their music, we must first address how they might interpret musical sound at all. In a thorough summary of our auditory mechanisms at the most foundational level, Bregman has outlined what he terms 'auditory scene analysis', the process by which we decipher which individual components make up the conglomerate sounds we hear (2001: p. 11). This complex and potentially multi-system activity is executed through both 'automatic' and 'voluntary' schemata, as well as a range of logical standards applied to statistical regularities in environmental sounds (it is more likely that a single sound source will produce harmonics than that multiple sources will resonate sympathetically, for example) (p. 14); a consensus regarding the source is then achieved through these operations. Bregman's work offers an empirically grounded system for exploring how listeners differentiate between sound components within songs, and suggests how the perceptual salience of these components might be ordered. Most importantly, it acknowledges the variable nature of perception, emphasising that it is selective yet non-arbitrary.

From a similar perspective, Clarke has outlined a far-reaching theory of musical meaning based on ecological principles of perception (2005). This view 'emphasizes the structure of the environment itself and regards perception as the pick-up of that already structured perceptual information' (p. 19). This pick-up is oriented towards the subjectively determined 'affordances' of a percept in its environment, i.e., what uses the percept permits given its 'invariant' material properties. The perceptual skills facilitating this pick-up are oriented towards

action, evolutionarily adapted, and amenable to enhancement within individuals (pp. 21-23). By emphasising this latter point, this framework is able to account for musical meaning from the 'base level' of perception all the way up to the most abstracted interpretations, accommodating the processes of enculturation that condition our aesthetic value-systems, as well as the dynamics of perception at the level of moment-to-moment conscious experience (see also Clarke, 2011).⁴

Some scholars have also investigated the specifically emotional, empathic, and affective dynamics of musical listening. Clarke et al. (2010) have suggested there are six main ways in which music can influence emotion, including by activating emotion-linked memories, thwarting or rewarding expectations of musical form, and instigating 'emotional contagion', which latter notion has been elaborated upon by Davies (2011). More recently, Clarke et al. (2015) have offered a review of empathy literature and an intricate model for explaining empathy fostered through music; the utility of this framework lies in its combination of cognitive, emotional, and affective factors that engender interpersonal connections between artist and listener. Kassabian has also offered an affect-based account of listening in our age of 'ubiquitous listening', emphasising affect's interpolation and regulation of our musical-interpretive attentions and dispositions (Kassabian, 2013). Kassabian's emphasis on different attention levels recalls Adorno's diagnosis of 'deconstructed listening' (1938/1991), whereby listeners fail to comprehend total musical forms and absorb only fragments at a lower level of attention. By de-emphasising cognitive aspects of

⁴ There are some affinities between Clarke's view and semiotic theories of musical meaning (see e.g. Nattiez, 1990; see also Windsor, 2004 for a comparative discussion). However, the ecological framework is preferred, being simpler, more flexible, and free of the linguistic hang-ups that sometimes see semiotic musicology's reach exceed its grasp.

musical experience, affective and emotional accounts of musical listening open the door to listener responses that might resist cognitive clarity, such as the association of certain sounds with intangible emotional memories or un-analysed mood states. Such phenomena will be explored in detail in later chapters.

2.1.3.2: Perceiving the artist

This project would not be the first to focus specifically on how audiences perceive the artist in a work. A notable work in this vein is Alfred Gell's work *Art and agency: an anthropological theory* (1998), in which Gell proposes that 'art-like situations' can only be counted as such if they provoke the reading of the artist's agency behind it, what Gell calls the 'abduction of agency' (p. 13). Moreover, 'the index [that is, the artwork] is itself seen as the outcome, and/or the instrument of, social agency'. Gell elaborates on this theory by classifying the varying possible relations of agency between art objects and social actors, and arguing for the existence of an 'isomorphy of structure between the cognitive processes we know (from the inside) as "consciousness" and the spatio-temporal structures of distributed objects in the artefactual realm – such as the oeuvre of one particular artist ... or the historical corpus of types of artworks' (p. 222). This isomorphy is the suggested basis of our tendency to abduce human agency specifically.

Gell's theory has been challenged on some points. Born (2015), for instance, questions the residual humanism in Gell's understanding of agency, and notes how his totalising emphasis on sociality clashes with musical traditions that actively claim autonomy from social relations. However, popular music, with its overt emphasis on the human and the social, is resolutely not one such

tradition. As such, despite these criticisms, and his own focus on visual arts, the principles of Gell's theory remain auspicious points of departure for thinking about the inference of an artist's identity from their music, as well as, at a wider scale, for conceptualising the artist's musical oeuvre and extra-musical output together as a distributed musical-para/epitextual object that signifies their identity. Indeed, Gell articulates an idea about the agential traces of individuals that pre-empts my own conception of sonic identities outlined earlier: 'The person is ... understood as the sum total of the indexes which testify, in life and subsequently, to the biographical existence of this or that individual' (pp. 222-223). Gell means this of all people, artists or not. But for a popular music artists, existing uniquely in the world as just that, the most prominent and engaged indexes through which their agency can be abducted are usually the sonic ones of their musical output.

In much non-academic and public-oriented academic writing in this vein, there is a tendency to frame music's meanings within the biographies of the musicians who make it. Life-and-works style biographies of Western art music composers have often read their subjects in such terms, interpreting works via psychological analyses of the artist themselves – see, for instance, Gilliam's biography of Richard Strauss (1999). Journalistic and non-academic writing on popular artists is often more brazen in this regard. Greil Marcus' *Mystery Train* (1975), for instance, speaks of artists like Elvis Presley and Sly Stone as indispensable individuals whose personae refracted the underlying fundamentals of an American meta-identity. Such works take liberties in their narrativisation of artistic works and lives, but nevertheless offer useful orienting material for this

study by illuminating the concerns that define fans' inter-personal connections to artists, such as how those artists capture the *Zeitgeist*, or how, despite their fame and riches, they are really just like us.⁵

Within academia, some scholars writing on popular music specifically have placed an analytical emphasis on authorship and authorial identity. Both Middleton and Clarke have discussed popular song authorship as dialogism between stylistic and narrative voices, analysing songs by Eurythmics and Eminem respectively. While Middleton (1995: p. 468) justly notes that popular musicians cannot claim complete control over the highly connotative voices they invoke, his acknowledgement of Eurythmics' ironic streak suggests a counter to that problem: that artists can reflexively or ironically acknowledge the connotative volatility of their materials, or can at least be heard as doing so by their listeners. In other words, irony becomes a means to total authorial intentionality. Clarke's discussion of Eminem, following the dialogism of Bakhtin (see Bakhtin, 1981), highlights a similar problem: that of reconciling conflicting authorial voices active within the same work (2005: pp. 92-93). Again, we might suggest that there is a higher, total authorial category grasped by listeners—perhaps only implicitly—which subsumes these contradictory voices, even those that may explicitly present themselves as the 'true' authorial voice. This resonates too with Auslander's claim that the popular artist's persona is their primary object of performance; his 'meta-persona' concept is in many ways an alternative version

⁵ The '33 1/3' series, in which albums are unpacked by prominent fans, also typifies these tendencies, and in varying styles: contrast Daphne Brooks' (2005) earnestly hagiographic reading of Jeff Buckley's *Grace* with L. D. Beghtol's (2006) ironical, authenticity-decrying insider take on Magnetic Fields' *69 Love Songs* (which, nevertheless, repeatedly plays up to the mysterious talents of frontman Stephin Merrit).

of the all-subsuming category I am positing sonic identities to be (2006: pp. 116-117). Indeed, Auslander's formulations are apt starting points for my own study, although he focuses mainly on live performance (see also Auslander, 1999), while I prioritise the record. His ideas will be scrutinised further in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

One framework already available for interpreting popular musicians' personae specifically via their records comes from Moore's work. Striking a similar note to Auslander, Moore claims that a record 'make[s] itself known to us' primarily '[t]hrough the identity of the singer' (2012: p. 179), and outlines the axes along which this communication occurs: the extent of the singer's narrative involvement in the song (whether they appear as either 'performer, persona [or] protagonist') (p. 181); the listener's narrative involvement in the song (as either 'protagonist ... antagonist ... [or] observer') (pp. 184-185); and the attitude of the musical environment towards the lyrical content (whether 'inert ... quiescent ... active ... interventionist ... [or] oppositional') (p. 191).⁶ By differentiating between these functions and affordances, Moore lays the groundwork for persona analysis, and my own study will invoke his framework in my analysis of a sonic identity in Chapter 3.

Lastly, there are some notable empirical studies which specifically investigate the limits of genre/style/artist recognition/assignation speeds. Gjerdingen and Perrott (2008) noted the remarkable accuracy with which participants could differentiate between genres from snippets of sound as short as 250ms, and point to timbre as the parameter that facilitates this. Later,

⁶ Negus (2011) has outlined a similar perspective.

Krumhansl (2010) tested identification speeds for specific artists, songs, and decades of origin, again noting participants' remarkable confidence in making such identifications, while helpfully noting the apparent proximity of the different pieces of target information to each other in participants' memories. In a more systematically analytical study, Plazak and Huron (2011) investigated how quickly different aspects of their musical test material were detected by participants, finding that instrumentation and genre were apprehended before metre and tempo, for instance (p. 39). The results of these studies illustrate the prodigious sensitivity the average listener has to the information latent in musical sound, and the ease with which they can intuitively identify specific variations between different pieces of music. This further supports the notion that the listeners can—though may not always—readily differentiate between the definitive characteristics of different popular artists, and that we assimilate this information whether we know it or not.

2.1.3.3: The Voice

With the voice being one of the primary markers of identity, the literature on voice is central to the study of identity inference in popular music. A cornerstone of this literature is Roland Barthes' essay 'Grain of the voice', which he defines as 'the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue' (1977: p. 270), linking the voice inextricably with the individual body that produces it. This has set the tone for many other writers. Cavarero asserts, for instance, that all voices and bodies are unique (2005: p. 4), while, in a particularly deep ontological inquiry into the voice, Connor has argued that 'my voice ... is me, it is my way of being me in my

going out from myself', claiming that the voice is a means of the self's becoming, rather than a tool for a pre-given self's expression (2000: p. 5). Elsewhere, he has insisted that there can be no 'unasccribed' voices (2016: p. 5); that is, a voice must always belong to someone or something. Similarly, Dolar describes voices as essential to our existence as 'social beings': 'it seems that the voice stands at the axis of our social bonds, and that voices are the very textures of the social as well as the intimate bond of subjectivity' (2006: p. 14). Regarding vocal music specifically, Stras has argued that the voice can function as a symbol of its vocaliser's biography insofar as it reflects what they have undergone in life (2006), while Frith, in a similar vein, has claimed that the voice 'stands for the person more directly than any other musical device' (1996b: p. 191) – and also noted how this power accentuates the voice's potential for identity transformation, or indeed deception (p. 197). Tunbridge's discussion of the 'haptic voice', a notion that 'encourages a conception of voice that may sound as if it is based in the body, but need not be' (2016: p. 145), expands on that potential for deceit, illuminating how voices can retain their expressive physicality even when disconnected from their actual physical origins. Even in recorded music, then, where voices are severed from their bodies of origin, those voices can nevertheless convey a convincing corporeality. Perhaps this is why, as Negus has noted, grainier voices have often been valued—on the side of both production and consumption—over technically correct ones (1992: p. 90), since they present the corporeality of the singer to the listener more emphatically, even across the dislocation of the record.

Though amenable to misuse and misdirection, the voice's power to specify an individual seems remarkable. But here we ought to heed Eidsheim's reminder that our voices are as constructed as our identities themselves (2019: p. 3). Eidsheim means more than to echo Connor's argument, quoted above, that the voice helps enact the self's becoming. Rather, she highlights that 'voice is always already produced through social relationships, within which it is heard and reproduced' (p. 27). While the physical organ of each of our voices may be, in a rather mundane way, categorically unique, the *sounds* of our voices, which bear the marks of those social values and styles, are not unique in the same way. In her book, Eidsheim applies this insight to race, arguing that enculturated attitudes about how, for instance, Black female voices 'should' sound, produces a 'figure of sound', a 'way of listening to things' (pp. 28-30; see also Eidsheim, 2015), through which we then interpret those voices, to the end that this figure of sound is further consolidated. But this figure of sound is not merely a perceptual schema: singers themselves—particularly under the influence of their teachers—learn and practise singing with constant implicit reference to these standards of how their voice 'should' sound (2019: p. 55). The upshot of this insight is that no singing voice expresses only itself, but rather is the product of a lifetime of learned behaviours which themselves draw from the well of cultural styles, along with the racialised—if not racist—values that mingle in it.

Numerous writers have highlighted this in analyses of singers who have, as those analyses argue, performed Blackness with their voices. Nell Edgar, for instance, notes how Adele's vocal performances, which have often been hailed as grainy shows of authenticity, constitute acts of 'vocal racial passing', a process

‘in which a singer identified with one race performs a vocal sound identified with another race’ (2014: p. 169). Similarly, Brooks has argued that Amy Winehouse’s singing was essentially a ‘blackface act’ incorporating ‘postmodern, cut, mix and cross-fade aesthetics’ (2010: p. 40), and her voice was therefore not the singular, *sui generis* force it was often received as.⁷ Of course, many listeners would still credit Adele’s and Winehouse’s voices as utterly unique, whether despite or because of the stylistic contexts highlighted from which those voices draw. Perhaps as importantly, many artists of whom such criticism might fairly be made would no doubt still insist that their voices are simply what they are. As such, it is important to credit the voice’s individual-indexing effects on listeners, as well as the belief of artists in the authenticity of those effects, while following scholars such as Eidsheim and Nell Edgar in deconstructing these effects as analysts.

2.1.3.4: Creativity

If artists’ identities are perceptible in their works, then we should address the process(es) of production, and interrogate the ‘trait’ putatively ‘behind’ it: creativity. The term itself is controversial, and many scholars have endeavoured

⁷ Tying in with such thinking is Morrison’s far-reaching work on what he has called ‘Blacksound’, which constitutes ‘a theory of historical embodiment to trace the ephemerality and materiality of the sounds produced by black bodies within the history of popular music in the United States’, a history stretching from ‘enslavement, through emancipation, and persisting into the structuring of our (post)modern economies of popular entertainment and identity’ (2017: p. 18). Through *Blacksound*, Morrison critiques the stereotypes of Blackness that were constructed through blackface and analogously exploitative practices, stereotypes whose performance by white people, both ‘spectacular and quotidian’, has served to exclude and subjugate actual Black people, to the end of (re)constituting both Blackness and whiteness (see also Morrison, 2019). See also Mann, 2008 for a similarly critical engagement of the specific question: ‘Why does country music sound white?’. Here, Mann argues that the sedimented idea of American country music as a white genre is a consequence of its own role in perpetuating ideologies of whiteness to a predominantly white audience, whether through its vocal mannerisms, instrumental styles, or thematic pre-occupations.

to unpack the word ideologically and recalibrate its meaning. Having historically denoted an inner characteristic of individuals, creativity's socially conditioned dimension in particular has recently received more attention. For example, Clarke et al. have suggested that creativity as 'an interactive process, the consequence of social circumstances and the material scaffolding of culture' (2010: p. 60; see also Sutherland & DeNora, 2012). Similarly, Burnard has advocated for 'characteriz[ing musical creativities] by their practice, each with its own orienting values of salient features', listing 'individual creativity' as but one among several suggested sub-types, including 'collaborative', 'communal', and 'empathic' forms (2012: pp. 15-16). Elsewhere, Frith has argued that the only universal features of the otherwise socio-culturally variable dynamic of creativity are 'problem solving' and 'pragmatic experimentation' (2012: p. 70; see also Hill, 2012: p. 88). In the same volume, Hargreaves et al. terminologically displace creativity altogether, preferring 'musical *imagination* as a broader term which encapsulates perception—the active interpretation and transformation of sound input—alongside performance and invention' (2012: p. 3).

Such thinking does not deny the role of individual imagination in artistic creation. Rather, it proposes that more agency can be traced in an artwork than the discrete intentions of its named artist alone. By shifting from viewing creativity in terms of 'the cognitive or intentionalist account of doing' (Ingold, 2014: p. 137) to understanding it as an interactively entangled, culturally situated activity, we can grasp more interesting incongruities in exactly whose identity musically materialises for a listener. If creation is not an act of pure individual volition, then who else's musical imaginations may have impinged on a result that bears the

artist's name? And indeed, how do specific discourses of creativity influence listeners' interpretations in the first place?

Staying with the production side of things for now, the matter of collaborative creativity has been addressed in a recent book, *Distributed Creativity: Collaboration and Improvisation in Contemporary Music* (2017). A useful chapter here is Toynbee's, which analyses the division of labour in popular music production and categorises the social forces that impinge on it. Toynbee here builds on earlier work in which, influenced by Bourdieu (see Bourdieu, 1993), he painted the socio-culturally demarcated creative scene of popular music as a circle with the artist/s at the centre, and along whose radius lie variably likely 'creative possibles' materialised in the form of 'musical voice[s]', such as certain instrumental sounds or formal patterns (2000: pp. 40-44; see also Welch, 2012). Innovation here occurs when such voices are subjected to 'translation and[/or] intensification' (2017: p. 44). Toynbee's work offers a detailed and intuitive system for conceptualising how individual artists interact with their cultural contexts to produce works of art, and achieves an enlightening balance of emphasis between the two. Complementing a framework like Toynbee's would be data regarding the actual moment of creation, something which Linson and Clarke address in their chapter on improvisation. Here, they outline a framework for understanding creative phenomena by drawing on ecological theory and 4E accounts of cognition, casting in-the-moment creation as enculturated, yet also situated physiologically, perceptually, and cognitively. While the data for discussing creation in such fine terms can be hard to capture,

the model nevertheless suggests how much there is to account for in reports of creative acts at the phenomenal level.

As Clarke and Doffman note in their introduction to *Distributed Creativity*, we might wonder how wide a frame to place collaborative creative acts in when analysing the agencies involved – for instance, ‘is it legitimate to think of a whole cultural tradition ... as some kind of “collaborator”?’ (p. 4). And what of those collaborations between the living and the dead? While Clarke and Doffman argue that such ‘collaborations’ lack a crucial reciprocity between ‘collaborators’, Stanyek and Piekut (2010) have overturned the everyday sense of reciprocity invoked here to compellingly argue the contrary, drawing on posthuman theories that decentre the human individual as the locus of agency. Among these is Actor-network-theory, which has argued that objects can also have agency insofar as they can ‘[make] others—humans or non-humans—do’ things (Latour, 2005: p. 78). Elsewhere, Barad has proposed the theory of ‘agential realism’, defining agency as ‘*an enactment, not something that someone or something has*’ (2007: p. 178). Such theories challenge our instincts regarding where the creative individual begins and ends, and some writers have wholly disavowed assumptions of a natural, demarcated corporeal form, arguing for the technological extension of the human body, as entailed by that technology’s emerging ubiquity (see Haraway’s ‘A Cyborg Manifesto’ in Haraway, 2017, and Braidotti, 2013).

Although we are now in quite rarefied theoretical air, these attitudes help to sharpen this project’s view of musical creation by eschewing discrete, autonomous creators in favour of a rich entanglement of agencies, including the

agencies of objects that can catalyse and restrict that creation. To whatever extent an artist's identity is heard in a musical work, all the animate and inanimate agencies that augment or smother that identity would, ideally, be accounted for if this project's aims were to be fully met.⁸ In practice, though, that ship sailed as soon as every work by every artist discussed in this project was completed. And sadly, neither I nor any scholars I know of were in the room—or, indeed, in the artist's head—when this happened. In any case, I have emphasised already that an artist's sonic identity is constructed by the listener with the materials presented to them, whether musical, paratextual, or epitextual. As such, I am most interested in what can be done with just those materials, rather than any special as-it-happened reports from the moment of their production. What the creativity-problematizing scholarship cited above does contribute to my project is a richer view of what creativity is, which will be essential when analysing the cultural narratives and everyday ideas about creativity that condition how popular music is actually received – that is, how a listener forms the artist's sonic identity with the materials at hand.

2.2: Ideologies of production and reception

To make sense of sonic identities—what they are, how they come to be, how a listener interacts with them—I first need to map the socio-cultural terrain they

⁸ Zbikowski's (2019) reflections on cognitive extension suggest what this might look like: he posits the clicktrack used by recording musicians as a tool of 'extended cognition' (pp. 34-37), and argues the following about the crucial mnemonic work done by instruments: 'Thanks to the countless hours musicians spend in practice, the instrument becomes a remarkable memory store, associated both with motor movements and specific sounds. As such, it can fully invade musical consciousness: for many musicians, to think of a musical passage is to think of a sequence of sounds given voice through specific instrumental means.' (p. 50).

occupy, and which, indeed, offers them forth in the first place. After all, in presenting the notion of sonic identities, I am making a broad assertion about how and why popular music listeners listen to popular music in the ways they do. So, how, and why? What ideologies underpin popular music culture; how is it produced and consumed; what do I mean by *it*?

I began this thesis talking about ‘popular music culture’ in sweeping terms. It’s time to be more specific, although, for the purposes of talking about sonic identities, I do indeed mean something general when I say popular music culture. Namely, I mean that musical culture whose production and consumption is, in principle at least, open to all. This is the musical culture we normally associate with the market, platinum-selling albums, number one singles, and so on – the culture whose music is called popular music precisely because it is popular (Burnett, 1996: p. 37). But it also encompasses what might be called ‘semipopular’ (Christgau, 2016: p. 8) or alternative/independent music, namely music (ostensibly) produced outside of the bounds of market hegemony and not necessarily with the express intention of reaching as many people as possible. Much of this we would consider musical expressions of subcultures, which, by definition, are by and for members of select social groups, and categorically *not* by and for all. But even this music, at least in recorded form, is more accessible to outsiders than it might want to be, even if other practices that define the subculture in question—participation in live shows or certain social spaces, for instance—remain exclusive. Indeed, what all forms of music that comprise popular music culture have in common is their reliance on the record as the primary medium. In this, popular music broadly differs from, say, jazz and

Western art music. Jazz is primarily a performance-oriented tradition, as Born notes, in which records are good for 'educating and socializing other musicians and generations' who will later refashion those record-transmitted pieces in improvisatory performance or create their own (2015: p. 144). So too is the Western art music tradition a performance-oriented tradition, one in which the score is the primary text, an object to which Frith directly compares the popular music record given that it similarly serves 'as a kind of register of what the music is *ideally*' (2002: p. 223).

I would argue that the sonic identities concept could nevertheless be applied to, say, jazz and Western art music traditions. The priority of the record, with its useful (albeit not total) fixity, in the tradition at hand is not a necessary precondition for the emergence of sonic identities in the given tradition. A listener making regular visits to see, say, the same symphony orchestra will likely develop a sonically-conditioned sense of 'who they are' – or perhaps, depending on their attitudes, who the conductor or star soloist is. And a jazz listener would, through extensive listening to, say, Miles Davis' music, no doubt develop a sonically-conditioned sense of 'who he is' despite having no opportunity to see him perform in person. And I am in any case not, when talking about popular music culture, talking about a fixed reality of our world, but rather a contingent system of cultural practice whose terms shift in step with how we—again, in theory *everyone*; this is *popular* music culture—differentially enact them. In other words, 'popular music culture' does not define the way certain kinds of music simply *are*, but rather denotes specific and ever-changing ways of living and thinking about certain kinds of music – about how it comes to be and what it's

for. Again, other traditions like jazz and Western art music could be described in similar terms, and there will always be some overlap between these systems. For the purposes of this study—of explicating what sonic identities are—I choose to fix my focus on popular music for a few specific reasons: because of its pervasiveness in the modern world; because of its openness (much of this music has been made by artists with such limited instrumental proficiency as to disbar them from the jazz or Western art music worlds – not that (m)any, quite rightly, would care); and because of its particular entanglements with identity, both as a theme and as an experience. An exploration of these entanglements is now due.

The modern global economy, under whose conditions the production, distribution, and consumption of popular music largely proceed, has nurtured an ideology of identity. This is not confined to the music industry alone: as Taylor has argued, the general entrenchment of neoliberal economics has amplified ‘discourses and practices of identity’, along with consumption practices that might aid the construction and expression of these identities (2016: pp. 66-67; see also Shankar et al., 2009). Moreover, the market has found ever more surreptitious ways to de-autonomise popular music production, and subject it to the strengthening logic of brand identity (Taylor, 2016: p. 55; see also Wheeler, 2013 for a telling insider exposition of this logic). In essence, this music, ostensibly the organic craft of everyday people, gets enveloped in the infrastructure of the for-profit music industry and subjected to the same economised, tried-and-tested production practices and marketing tactics—*this product is unique, don’t be without it!*—as any other commodity. This phenomenon is not new. Indeed, the market’s dilution of artistic authenticity via

the standardisation of musical material, and the reliance on novelty to mask this, was partly the basis of Adorno's (1938/1991) disdain for popular music. Many have criticised Adorno's pessimistic, mono-scopie view: the market's powers are not so complete, nor are musical audiences so easily managed and their tastes pre-empted (Toynbee, 2000: pp. 4-5). And as Dibben suggests:

One alternative to the Adornian approach is to recognise the role of the listener in the co-production of meaning. According to this approach, people in industrialised societies may not produce their own commodities or cultural products, but they may use the products of the culture industry to produce their own meanings. This approach differs from that outlined above in that it differentiates between "mass culture", the cultural products put out by industrial capitalist society, and conceived of as a dominant, homogenising force, and "popular culture" understood as the ways in which people use these products to create their own meanings which may evade or resist the dominant social order. (1999: p. 342)

Indeed, it is precisely this conception of popular (music) culture that I wish to invoke.

In any case, as Toynbee contends, popular music's ontology also arguably consists in the very characteristics Adorno derogates, such as 'its repetition and reflexive rhetoric' (2000: p. 6). In other words, Adorno was applying universalist principles, determined by his pre-occupation with the Western art music tradition, to a burgeoning musical culture better understood as an altogether different tradition with its own rules of engagement. From Adorno's perspective, repetition, reflexivity, and the standardisation of musical forms may well have marked popular music as lifeless, navel-gazing, even cannibalistic fare. But to its audience, these qualities were rather the conditions for new kinds of musical experiences defined by accessibility, intelligibility, and portability. As the world has become more populous, globalised, and socio-culturally and

economically interconnected, this culture has become more dominant and ubiquitous. Technological developments have spurred this on: music has never been more portable, accessible, and—certainly in terms of fidelity—intelligible as it is today.

Staying, for now, with Adorno's critical emphasis, it should be asked what ideas about a popular music artist's authorial agency might form the context of a listener's engagement with their music. Straw has argued that we are much more willing to impute this agency to popular music artists than artists working with other media (1999: p. 200). 'Willing' is indeed the operative word. We yearn to believe that our favoured artists are responsible for what they perform, because we deem this more admirable, more special. We are then disappointed if we suspect—or know—that this is not really the case; detractors of a given artist will often use this criticism to dismiss the artist as somehow fraudulent, and not worth the acclaim and attention invested in them. Graeber relates these pre-occupations, via Marilyn Strathern, to the deepest ideological current of Western society, which is:

defined above all by its individualism. We assume every individual has a kind of central, unique core that makes them who they are. Call it a self, a soul, a personality – whatever you call it, the assumption is always that no two are exactly the same, and this is what is really important about a person. It's thus we can talk about creativity as "self-expression," of "finding oneself," or of contexts in which one is more "oneself" than others. (2001: p. 39)

As such, we might equate the ideologically ideal state of authorship—that which we would most like to impute to the artist—with that attributed to 'the popular music auteur', whose fan- and critic-agreed characteristics Shuker defines as follows:

the ability ... to break new ground, innovating, crossing or blurring genre boundaries; the ability to perform their own “original” material, especially by writing their own songs; the exercising of a fair measure of control over various facets of the production process; and the holding of some sense of personal overarching vision of the music and its relation to the canon. (2001: p. 118)

Any inferences about an artist’s authorial agency are not, however, only the consequence of our ideological priorities. They are also interpretively convenient. If the artist named on a record—rather than, say, an imagined coterie of behind-the-scenes writers, players, and producers—can be held responsible for what is on it, then that record can be more easily parsed; there is less confusion about the origins and intentions of its messages. As Straw notes, this effect feeds back into our perception of the artist themselves: ‘the body of a performer’s work endows that performer’s personality with a unity, just as the presumption of that unity gives meaning and coherence to the body of work.’ (1999: p. 202).

But this is, of course, not an accident: the anchor of an artist’s authorial agency serves numerous marketing purposes, not only giving the music ‘distinctiveness’ but also providing a sense of narrative and historical continuity to the wider culture (Straw, 1999: p. 203). These thoughts return us to the idea of authenticity. Whether considering the creative self-expression of Graeber’s unique individuals, the originality of Shuker’s auteur, or the distinctive, unified, and unifying personhood of Straw’s authors, what matters is the common notion that artist’s works are somehow implicated in the artist’s unique existence in the world – that their name being attached to ‘their’ music is not somehow a lie. As Wheeler argues in her marketing manual *Designing Brand Identity*, authenticity is crucial to the successful development of brand identity:

In psychology, authenticity refers to self-knowledge and making decisions that are congruent with that self-knowledge. Organizations who know who they are, and what they stand for, start the identity process from a position of strength. They create brands that are sustainable and genuine. Brand expression must be appropriate to the organization's unique mission, history, culture, values and personality. (2013: p. 34)

Popular music artists, whose ability to reach listeners depends on their ability to cut through a saturated music market (whether they are interested in doing so or not is a different question), are effectively subject to the same standards as any other commodity on that market: a weak—because ostensibly inauthentic—brand will limit their reach.

Wheeler's precept is an example of what Taylor describes as the blurring, in the marketing world, of the boundaries between art and commerce under the aegis of creativity; 'creatives in advertising' are increasingly driven by 'an almost mystical belief in the significance of their work as creative people as being somehow remote from the world of selling and crass commercial culture' (2012: p. 244; see also Taylor, 2016 for a further discussion of Wheeler's guidelines). In this, too, we see the ideology of authenticity at work:⁹ this work is creative, i.e., true to and originating from the unique self of the individual; therefore, it is authentic; therefore, the market efficacy of this work is incidental to—or at least by no means contradicts—its 'true' value. In this way, and in this socio-cultural-economic context, notions of creativity and authenticity are closely interdependent; and in this way, ostensibly aesthetic and ostensibly economic values become functionally intertwined. All this has been observed in the popular

⁹ Indeed, as Taylor writes: 'In today's Western neoliberal capitalist culture, authenticity has become a kind of floating ideology that is used to animate a variety of other ideologies/discourses.' (2016: p. 90).

music industry quite clearly. As Negus reported in the 1990s, authenticity was, in the eyes of record label decision-makers, a crucial value for artists to be deemed to have if they wanted to be signed (1992: p. 69). Naturally, authenticity in this corporate context had a strong marketing spin: it was not about upholding ideals, but rather the artist being able to ‘live with their image and carry it convincingly in a range of settings’; just as essential was that the artist was ‘unique’ (p. 70). So too was the ‘originality and quality of the songs or material’ (p. 53). We have, in essence, a description of Shuker’s auteur.

These ideologies persist today, and their grip has been exacerbated by the explosion in the number of artists releasing music; competition, in effect, has never been fiercer. Uniqueness is valorised not just as a conceptual ideal, but a sonic one too. Théberge has rightly claimed that the unique, identifiable ‘sound’ has become integral to recorded popular music aesthetics (1997: p. 191), a development spurred on by the refinement and proliferation of electronic instrumentation, manipulable to the finest degree. In an ever fuller, more eclectic musical culture, especially one so oversaturated thanks to the expansion of the internet, distinction through novelty becomes increasingly crucial to sustaining a presence within that culture – and in the market which drives it.¹⁰ The priority of the recorded form in this culture allows for the assertion of precise sonic forms, ones ostensibly engraved within the record with fixed and measurable clarity. It is in this context that the significance of the findings from studies such as those by Gjerdingen and Perrott, Krumhansl, and Plazak and Huron becomes clear,

¹⁰ Indeed, as Rogers notes, this counts too at the level above individual artists; smaller labels in particular must establish themselves as ‘niche or alternative’ to generate a “signal” above the “noise” of the internet’ (2013: p. 147).

particular with regard to their emphases on the powers of timbre: the clarity and rapidity with which timbre communicates its identity to listeners makes it an invaluable tool for artists wishing to establish their distinction from their ‘competitors’.¹¹ But there are limits to the novelty admissible here. We can follow the sense of Adorno’s point about standardisation and novelty—popular musical forms are often reassuringly formulaic, with small variations serving to satisfy the listener’s desire for something new—without indulging its cynicism, and note that a degree of standardisation helps situate the music in a language listeners can already parse. This is a fine balance: a sonic identity can be best noticed by being distinctive, but best interpreted, and thus elaborated, by being intelligible.¹²

It is not just that music has been made a dependant of the market; the market gets something in return. Once again, it is the ideological cocktail of authorship-creativity-authenticity that does the work. Toynbee notes that, ‘while culture belongs to capitalism, there is also something antithetical to capitalism in it’ (2000: p. 2). Specifically, in his view, it is the ideology of the author that offers this antithesis; but then, ‘although presented as an affirmation of autonomy,

¹¹ It is nevertheless worth bearing in mind van Elferen’s point that:

timbre cannot be equated with identity and signification: distorted guitar sounds may be typical of metal, they are not in and of themselves *identical* with it, and sweeping string timbres may often be used in romantic comedies but do not in and of themselves *signify* Hollywood romance. (2017: p. 616)

In other words, while certain timbres may reliably denote the identities of certain forms or styles, their connotations will necessarily exceed these denotations, varying between and indeed within individual listeners. This is precisely that connotative excess which, when outlining the concept of sonic identity in Chapter 1, I attributed both to genre and to sonic identities themselves. As there, the lesson here is that this excess must be reckoned at the level of individual listeners.

¹² In interesting theory to apply to this field would be that of memetics, which interprets the propagation of thoughts and cultural ideas in Darwinian terms, and as analogous to genes (see Dawkins, 1979/1989; Dennett, 2017; Dissanayake, 2008). This approach promises a means of analysing how cultural objects like music compete in both the market and attention economies – see Jan, 2007 for an in-depth application to Western art music.

authorship also provides another way of valorizing capital' (pp. 29-30). Hesmondhalgh expands on this insight with regard to popular music specifically, describing 'music's own active role in fuelling capitalism's incorporation of autonomy':

The most prominent musical genres of the last century—jazz, rock, soul and hip-hop—have all been strongly tied up with romantic notions of personal autonomy. Rock in particular accompanied [certain] historical changes ... producing a culture that was centred on values of rebellious creativity, but that in retrospect, was assimilated very quickly to values of commercialism. (2008: p. 335)

Similarly, Cook argues that laws surrounding copyright, and indeed '[t]he whole idea of intellectual property', derive from 'the assumption that creativity is something rare and hence valuable' (2012: p. 458) – a core assumption that has underpinned everyday ideas about purely artistic creativity for centuries in the West. The point of all this is that concepts such as creativity, originality, authenticity, and authorship serve as meeting points between art and the market. They allow both to co-exist in a way that, all being well, can efface this very interdependency. Art can ostensibly retain its putative autonomy because autonomy is what the market is structured to sell – as inconspicuously as it can.

Of course, many listeners are acutely sensitive to art's entanglements with, and apparent submission to, the market. After all, is there any more cutting and well-worn denunciation than 'Sell-out!'? By the same token, it is important to account for the fact that authenticity still carries aesthetic weight as long as listeners credit it, no matter how painstaking and sales-oriented its planning and performance may actually have been in fact. I would here re-invoke Dikken's Adorno-tempering insight quoted above: the individual, unpredictable uses to

which listeners put music cannot be reduced to the plans its producers had for it. In this vein, Negus, discussing the ‘myth’ of Bruce Springsteen, argues that we miss the point when we condemn such narratives as artificial and transparent.

Such an approach:

suffers from a similar problem of exposing notions of authenticity as false; it does not ask *how* the myth relates to concrete experience of and dialogue between artists and audiences. ... [I]t is across ... “webs of beliefs and desires” (Rorty, 1991) that the “authentic” character of Springsteen is articulated; not as a false point of origin, nor a mobile sign without a referent; but as a relationship between people. (1992: p. 74).

This is precisely the understanding of authenticity as an aesthetic experience that I work with in this project. Negus’ point here also rightly emphasises that all interpretive moves have their discursive context: the music press (Adorno, 1989: p. 142), as well as everyday talk about music, helps set the terms for musical meaning, and indeed truth (DeNora, 2003: pp. 41-43).

Authenticity, creativity, originality – what ties these concepts together in their ideological forms is the theme of identity. Authenticity is about personal truth, creativity is the thing individuals do, and originality—analogue to uniqueness—is the measure of its value. These ideologies of individuation, laced as they are into popular music culture, are what give sense to sonic identities, structuring a listener’s interpretation of an artist in terms of the *who*-ness of that artist. In this context, an ostensibly neutral perceptual question—*who’s there?*—becomes one with far-reaching aesthetic implications.

2.3: On the record

At various points so far, I have repeated that the record is the primary medium of popular music, and that it is, as such, the focus of my study. Therefore, I would like to close this chapter with a few reflections on what the record is—and, more importantly, what it does—in relation to the concerns of this thesis.

Enlightening though they are, I want to sidestep direct discussions of the record in Benjaminian terms of aura (Benjamin, 1970; see also Gracyk, 2008 for a stimulating critique), and with them any value judgements regarding (in my case) popular-musical works decaying (or not) in some metaphysical sense due to their capture and reproduction on record. Such questions understandably seem relevant to, say, recordings of classical pieces, works that had existed between score and performance long before recording technologies arrived. But popular music, as the music of a wider popular culture, is, by contrast, native to the record; its forms and histories are rooted in the format. As such, I prefer to view popular music records as first-order phenomena, rather than some kind of echo of the real thing. In this, I follow Cox (who follows Deleuze and Guattari), who rejects views of art-as-representation:

A novel, film, painting, or sculpture, for example, does not represent actual objects, persons, or states of affairs, nor does it render the qualities of actual objects or portray the emotions of actual persons. Rather, it is a mechanism for contracting forces and preserving them in this contracted state. It detaches sensations from objects and subjects, presenting them as pure intensive forces that inhere in things but are not reducible to them ... If these affects and percepts weren't detachable from the particular characters, figures, or objects that express them ... then works of art would not affect us. They would be mere documents[.] (2018: pp. 38-39)

Certainly, unlike the art forms Cox lists, records are often understood as inserting yet another translational layer of representation between audience and the 'essence' of whatever is being expressed. But Cox's argument applies to representation as a rule, not just one putative layer of it. In any case, regardless of where we might want to draw our abstract ontological battle lines, I would certainly contend that we engage with popular music records as ends in themselves—as pure intensive forces, as Cox puts it—and are rarely concerned with any notion that they present their music incompletely.

Insofar as the record does, however, beget a different experience than, say, a live performance of the same music, it matters to ask what is different about these experiences. As Sterne notes, the interconnections of technologies with human habits must be understood in order to make sense of their meaning (Sterne, 2003: p. 8), a challenge particularly relevant to recorded popular music given how interwoven it has become with everyday life. And the impact of this development has indeed been significant. Clarke has associated it with the 'fundamental change in the ecology of music' initiated by recording technologies: they allow the encroachment of any music anywhere, as well as the use of any environmental sound in a piece of recorded music (2007: p. 68). Kassabian has homed in on the consequences of the 'ubiquitous listening' that characterises this new ecology, noting its strong affective element. In her view, the ubiquity of music 'modulates our attentional capacities, ... turns our affective relationships to categories of identity, ... [and] conditions our participation in fields of subjectivity' (2013: p. 18). The sociality of the 'diffus[ion of affect] across fields of distributed subjectivity' (p. 20) is also what enables recorded music to create for

us what Bull has called ‘warm’ private environments, spaces in which we ‘commune privately with the products of the culture industry’, a consequence of which is the perceived ‘chilliness’ of the wider urban environment (2000: p. 9). In these senses, recorded music can be understood as having created an unprecedented tension between listener subjection and autonomy. While we now cannot expect to move through the world without encountering unwilling music, along with all the affective currents and subjectivities it bears, we are nevertheless also able, now, to isolate ourselves and experience those currents and subjectivities selectively. As is the centre of Bull’s thesis, this tension is exacerbated by portable, headphone-based technologies, which permit the creation of warm private environments *within* chilly, public environments.

Both the delicacy of Kassabian’s language and the potential for nestedness highlighted by Bull suggest that this tension should not be understood as an either-or oscillation between private and public, here and elsewhere. Ruth Herbert’s work, in particular her book *Everyday Music Listening: Absorption, Dissociation and Trancing* (2011), illuminates how this tension is rather marked by the various modulations of consciousness that can occur as results of the varying types and degrees of music’s involvement in both our public and private everyday lives.¹³ Drawing on respondent data from these contexts, Herbert exemplifies the phenomenon she dubs ‘trancing’: ‘a process characterized by a decreased orientation to consensual reality, a decreased critical faculty, a selective internal or external focus, together with a changed

¹³ While its specific focus is different from mine, Herbert’s book can, in some ways, be considered a precursor to my own thesis. Not only do I share Herbert’s interest in the transformations of listener consciousness through everyday forms of musical experience, but I also rely on the same kind of qualitative data, and utilise similar forms of data collection, such as diaries.

sensory awareness and—potentially—a changed sense of self’ (2011: p. 5). While there may be different types of consciousness between which the listener moves, it is, as Herbert underlines, the ‘active process’ of trancing, rather than some ‘discrete state’ of trance, which characterises such experiences (p. 5) – that is, the movement itself. Herbert’s work also usefully highlights how trancing-induced modulations of consciousness—even those, as the above quote stresses, resulting in a changed sense of self—are not the sole preserve of extreme musical experiences; rather, they can already occur, and have their consequences, through more muted musical encounters. While the relevance of these insights is not limited to recorded music, they emphasise the sensitivity of consciousness to the new ecology of music that this medium has helped arrange.

Overall, this new ecology of music entails a few key consequences for this project, in that it has engendered the conditions for a different kind, if not greater extent, of listener identity construction through music. Firstly, the ubiquity of listening that Kassabian writes of has meant that recorded music, especially popular music, is simply more active in our everyday lives, and as such we are moulded by it more than ever before. Music can now impinge on almost any public moment of our day, exposing us to affects and subjectivities ostensibly detached from that moment. In this sense, insofar as ‘identity is the trace of affect’ (Kassabian, 2013: p. xxvii), we effectively exist in a public environment where recorded popular music is almost constantly modulating, however subtly or drastically, the nature of our identities. Secondly, the private retreat from this public environment involves an unprecedented personalisation of our sonic spaces. We can deliberately—if not wholly consciously—tailor these spaces

such that they are charged only with those affects and subjectivities that we wish to countenance, and all without another person, whether artist or fellow listener, needing physically to be present. In this way, we are constantly and actively forming and reforming our identities with recorded popular music, an endeavour whose significance is intensified by the musically unpredictable public world beyond our private spaces. Again, such endeavours, as acts of participation in popular music culture, are interactions with the music's named artist, whose sense is formed in confluence with the forming of our own identities through their music. The sonic identity of the artist is the concept I use to categorise all the effects of such interactions that lead back to that artist – that contribute to the unfolding sense of *them*.

2.4: Outro

Between Chapters 1 and 2, I have presented the idea of sonic identities, explained what they are, and justified their use as analytical concepts. To summarise:

An artist's sonic identity is the overall sense of who they are that a given listener has. This sense is developed over repeated interactions with the artist's works, and with any epitext and paratext that pertains to the artist in some way. The sonic identity is perceived only partially through a given encounter with any single one, or combination, of such texts. The exact nature of this sense—the form of the artist's sonic identity—depends no less on the listener than on the materials with which the listener works to create it. Indeed, the listener's own identity alters in dialogue with the artist's sonic identity, a reciprocity that can

manifest in various, and variously subtle/dramatic, ways. Meanwhile, the development of both sonic identities and listener identities through popular music listening is accommodated, and indeed actively facilitated, by numerous characteristics of popular music culture. Firstly, this culture has a deep-seated pre-occupation with individuality, exemplified by the enduring power of the interconnected ideologies of creativity, originality, and authenticity. These ideologies are valued by listeners and promoted by the music industry. Secondly, the priority of the record within popular music culture affords sonic identities a decisive fixity, as well as—both within a single artist's oeuvre and between those of multiple artists—exceedingly fine degrees of sonic distinction. Thirdly, the new ecology of music begotten by recording technologies has extended the reach of popular music into our lives—both in public and in private—and, by extension, into our identities. Once again, the reciprocity of identity constitution emphasised by this fact is essential to understanding how sonic identities emerge and exist.

The subsequent chapters of this thesis will explore different aspects of sonic identities. Chapter 3 presents an analysis of the sonic identity of American producer-singer-songwriter Rostam to illustrate how an existing sonic identity can exist for, and be perceived by, its listener (in this case, me). Chapters 4 and 5 focus on how sonic identities come into being by analysing a listening diary of my own, in which I report on my getting to know two artists previously unknown to me: country singer Loretta Lynn and singer-songwriter-rapper Janelle Monáe. Chapters 7-10 go beyond my own reports to analyse data collected from respondents. After a way-paving theoretical and methodological interlude in Chapter 6, Chapters 7 and 8 contain an analysis of interviews conducted with

respondents on the subject of their personal connections to popular artists of their choosing. Then Chapters 9 and 10 undertake an analysis of listening diaries, mostly from the same respondents, which record my respondents' own getting-to-know processes with artists with whom they were previously unfamiliar. These analyses are filtered primarily through the concept of autobiographical significance (Peck & Grealey, 2020), according to which an agent—in this context, a sonic identity—is said to be autobiographically significant for an individual if an identity of that individual has been inaugurated or altered by that agent, and has remained salient over time. Broadly speaking, the focus of these chapters shifts from the particular to the general: in Chapter 3, my priority is to highlight how certain sounds and tracks contribute to the form of a sonic identity; in Chapters 4 and 5, my priority is to combine analytically an awareness of the perceptual materials of music, paratext, and epitext with an awareness of the day-to-day life of a listener; in Chapters 7-10, my priority is both to complement the first two chapters while expanding the analytical frame to encompass the whole biographies of each respondent, and the role of their chosen artists within them. In doing so, I aim to show generally, if not comprehensively, the utility of the sonic identity as an analytical concept, and the real-life significance of what I am using that concept to describe.

3: Hearing Rostam in ‘Half-Light’

Please try your best but know
You’re never going to catch me

– Rostam, ‘Never Going To Catch Me’

As I have argued so far, sonic identities are not fixed concepts that contextualise listening. Rather, each is a perceptual-conceptual template that listeners embellish by engaging iteratively with the specific artist’s musical materials. In this, sonic identities function like any other kind of musical meaning, and the circumstances of each encounter with the same piece of music will alter, whether to a greater or lesser extent, that piece of music’s meaning. But sonic identities are not equal in proportion and scope to those other meanings. Rather, they serve as the notions within which all other musical meanings are corralled. To recapitulate this more technically, an artist’s sonic identity is the overarching sense of who they are that is attested to by a multi-medial network of signification, one involving not only music and lyrics, but album artwork, music videos, interviews, biographies, and the like. Nevertheless, I begin from the premise that the primary nodes in these networks remain ‘tracks’, a terminological commitment I borrow from Moore, who differentiates between ‘the “song” which requires a performance in order to be realised, [and] the “track” which is already its own performance’ (2010: p. 264). This distinction emphasises that the recorded form of popular music is highly stable, allowing it to serve as a definitive

reference point when establishing just what the artist in question is ‘about’.¹⁴ Tracks, then, ought to feature first when considering how listeners construe an artist’s sonic identity.

In this chapter, I will expand on what it looks like for an artist’s sonic identity to be perceived through encounters with their materials, and subsequently to become sedimented in the listener’s mind. The sonic identity in question is that of American singer-songwriter and producer Rostam, specifically as perceived through his track ‘Half-Light’, which was released as a single on 8th September 2017, a week ahead of Rostam’s debut solo album of the same name. In order to get my points across, I will be donning the garb of the analyst: Rostam’s sonic identity will be treated as a (generally) stable, inspectable object amenable to unnaturally extensive attention. By this I mean that I am not—for now, primarily—trying here to analyse the ‘real’, ‘everyday’ listening that has actually created and sustained Rostam’s sonic identity for me, but rather to amplify the effects of that listening in a more abstract space so as to illustrate better what is generally going on when an artist’s sonic identity is being perceived.

I will mostly talk about Rostam’s sonic identity in terms of the ecological theory of perception, understanding ‘Half-Light’ as a virtual environment in which aspects of Rostam’s sonic identity are specified to listeners via the affordances of musical invariants. I will compound this interpretation by exploring other

¹⁴ In my analysis, I treat the track as a fixed, ideal entity. Naturally, the various media through which tracks are made available can beget listening experiences that may differ radically in sonic terms. Nevertheless, I maintain that tracks have identifiable invariant properties that can only be modulated or distorted so much before an iteration of a track becomes precisely a modulation or distortion, rather than an iteration.

materials that fit into the network of Rostam's sonic identity, including the *Half-Light* album artwork and the track's music video.¹⁵ I will also acknowledge Rostam's previous musical activities, and discuss how, to my ears, certain aspects of 'Half-Light' enact a departure from his musical past, while others bridge the gap between this past and the 'present' represented by 'Half-Light'. As this suggests, and as discussed later, this will involve reference to the matters, much discussed in this thesis so far, of authenticity, originality, and creativity. For the purposes of this chapter, however, my handling of these will not be especially critical, nor does it need to be. After all, rather than an analysis of Rostam's sonic identity, this is really an analysis of my sense of that sonic identity.

If this does not already make it clear, I will emphasise now that this chapter is not about Rostam per se. I like his music, and would be happy to promote it, but I am not writing this chapter to canonise him, or to explicate what his music is 'really about' for the benefit of other listeners and/or scholars. Rather than simply interpret a single musician's work, I want to construct a vantage point from which to understand how artists propagate 'their' sound—in this case, 'Rostam-ness'—not only across their oeuvre, but within the wider culture of popular music, where these sounds must vie with each other for attention. This requires focusing on two aspects of an artist's sound: what materially *distinguishes* it from others, and what conceptually *defines* it. It is in the entanglement of these aspects that an artist's sonic identity materialises.

¹⁵ As noted, I would also include other nodes in this network, but here I will focus on the multi-modal, inter-medial sensory aspects of the sounds and images that might potentially combine with the act of listening itself.

3.1: Who's there? Getting to know the artist

3.1.1: Distinguishing (invariants)

What allows us to sonically distinguish one artist from another?

The principles of ecological psychology suggest how listeners might differentiate between ostensibly similar or standardised musical structures. As Clarke explains, the ecological view of perception argues that our environments are already highly structured (2005: pp. 17-18); we perceive invariant properties of these environments and interpret them in terms of what they afford us, that is, what actions they allow us to perform given the information they specify (2005: pp. 32-38; see also Windsor, 2004). Although the relation between perceiver and environment remains subjective and variable, the relative material fixity of our environments orients what can be done in and with them. The standards we use to formalise these perceptual interactions are learned through repetition: increased exposure to certain structures refines perceptual sensitivity to those structures, facilitating the apprehension of more nuanced affordances (2005: 21-3). In these terms, distinguishing an artist is a matter of perceiving that the invariant properties of the sonic environment are specifying *their* presence, rather than someone else's. We achieve this using perceptual skills honed through repeated engagement with the patterns of sound the artist has put to us in the past.

As Clarke argues, the specification of an artist's identity is no more 'abstract' than the specification of, say, a certain pitch played by a certain instrument; it simply takes longer to recognise the former (2005: p. 59).

Nevertheless, empirical studies have demonstrated the speed and depth of our recognition processes. As discussed in the previous chapter, Gjerdingen & Perrott (2008) and Krumhansl (2010) have shown that suitably enculturated listeners display an impressive ability to identify the genres, authors, and decades of release of tracks from extremely short excerpts. Additionally, Plazak & Huron (2011) have tentatively determined a rough order in which particular musical parameters or qualities are perceived in the first few seconds of audition, with genre being one of the quickest identifications that listeners made in their study, requiring just under half a second. As Gjerdingen and Perrott argue, timbre is the sonic quality that most enables these feats, as it ‘encompasses all the spectral and rapid time-domain variability in the acoustic signal’ (p. 98). The affordances of timbre can thus be read as quickly as they can be detected, unlike tempo, say, which requires multiple beats to iterate over time in order for it to be established. Ultimately, though, genre categorisations are relatively broad, afforded by a wide range of specifications. For a specific artist to be specified in a track requires a more finely-tuned—or more radical—sonic environment to be constructed, and a greater degree of perceptual refinement on the part of the listener.

3.1.2: Defining (affordances)

What information can we glean about an artist’s identity from their music?

In response to this question, Negus usefully points out a problem: the personae artists present in their tracks can often differ between these tracks, and indeed within narrative tracks that feature multiple characters (2010: p. 618). One

consequence of this is that, supposedly, artists rarely communicate their ‘true’ identity, but rather a confection that may or may not overlap with that identity. Moreover, it is not necessary that listeners apprehend this overlap—or lack of it—for them to engage with tracks on those tracks’ own terms, although such awareness will often inflect this engagement nevertheless (pp. 621-622). This distinction between persona and identity would seem potentially to restrict how much listeners can infer about an artist’s identity from their presented personae. But Negus’ concern is with resisting academic approaches that under-emphasise the creative agency of individual authors in favour of relational, situational understandings of creativity. He does this by exploring how those authors’ real agency might be fathomed in their tracks *accurately*, in order to establish factual truths about the real artist’s ‘presence’ in the track, facts which hypothetically could be verified by non-track sources. As my disclaimers in this chapter’s introduction aimed to emphasise, what I wish to explore here is instead how listeners can detect an artist’s presence and interpret their identity without worrying about verifying their conclusions as facts, and while still treating them as no less meaningful and valid than the ‘actual facts’ – whatever they may be.

This task can still proceed analytically, via the investigation of such personae as Negus’ ‘implied author ... narrator ... [and] characters’ (2010: p. 618) in tracks. To accomplish this, Moore’s work on personae can be fruitfully mixed with Auslander’s. Moore (2012) offers a comprehensive analytical framework for analysing personae within individual tracks, and locates the listener in an ecological relation with them: the configuration of the musical environment affords particular interpretations of the artist’s persona, in confluence with the

meanings offered in the lyrics. For Moore, the extent to which the artist is personally implicated in the track's narrative is determined by the lyrics (pp. 181-184), while the musical environment can range from having no effect on what the lyrics express to being actively antagonistic towards them (p. 191). The listener is afforded particular subject positions from which to engage with whatever configuration of narrative and environment is being presented (p. 184).

Auslander's work on musical personae can help to expand from Moore's track-centric analysis to a view of the artist at large. Auslander argues that musicians primarily perform their personae, rather than any particular work (2006: p. 101), and that the multiple personae that single musicians perform are contextualised by musical practices (p. 104). Crucially, Auslander points to higher 'meta-personae, which constitute the umbrella over the individual personae that emerge under different performative circumstances' (p. 116). Although Auslander writes of live contexts, the ideas he outlines can be transferred to tracks, which, if anything, should be understood as the more authoritative statements of an artist's persona, as argued earlier.

Combining Moore and Auslander, then, listeners engage in an ecological relation with individual tracks, in which the artist exhibits particular personae. These personae are framed by the artist's meta-persona, which itself still only emerges from the combined perceptions of the artist's various personae across various tracks; indeed, as Auslander notes, meta-personae are too voluminous and variegated to be wholly iterable in any single performance (2006: p. 116). This construction of meta-personae 'out of' personae might be conceived in the same vein as Gell's description of artists' oeuvres as 'spatio-temporal structures

of distributed objects' (1998: p. 222), whose parts (here, personae) can stand for the whole (here, the meta-persona). This is what I sought to emphasise at the very beginning of this thesis: that an artist's sonic identity is only ever partially iterable; that the whole is not a single entity so much as a reservoir of meaning on which the listener selectively draws when prompted by the terms of a given encounter with the artist. In pinning down this synecdochal relation between persona and meta-persona, I should re-emphasise their inter-medial composition. Not all pertinent materials are musical, and some, such as biographical writing, are not even aesthetic per se.

However, I need here to reset the analytical scene before going further. 'Persona' has come too far to the fore. After all, despite the inclusivity of Auslander's meta-personae, there remains a higher presumed category of total *identity* above it, an idealised sense of knowing the artist 'really', of them having some array of signatures that is reducible only to them and, most crucially, reducible all the way down to their actual personhood. The meta-persona itself and the personae it comprises themselves attest to this higher identity. Moore is right to note that the inauthenticity of popular music often derives from a perceived disparity between the performed persona and the 'known' identity of the performer (2012: p. 179); but the point I wish to make goes somewhere beyond this aesthetic concern with authenticity. No matter how inauthentic a piece of popular music seems, there always remains an authentically existing person behind it,¹⁶ whose association with that music pertains to the aesthetic

¹⁶ At least, this has been and remains the norm. Whatever the implications are for my argument of the growing number of nonhuman popular artists, the task of addressing them is beyond the scope of this thesis.

experience, at least so long as listeners believe that the named artist's agency was involved in the creative process.¹⁷ Moreover, authenticity as a measure of human character also applies to authentically existing people themselves, not just to their aesthetic personae, meaning that there is no fundamental barrier between identity and persona determined by the supposed relevance of authenticity to the latter but not the former. We can fairly talk of the recognisable and unique identities of people we know while acknowledging that these are functional performances of self-hood. But we do not instead call these performances 'personae', since, after all, we can do no better than them. To apply the truth-claim of the term 'identity' to these performances, then, better reflects that each such performance is indeed the real deal, rather than some inadequate precursor to it. This is not to deny that artists often present us with what are usefully termed personae, but rather that these are performances which are hierarchically subordinate to the no-better-than performances of identities. Furthermore, it is to acknowledge that Auslander's meta-personae specifically do not quite fill the conceptual space contained by an artist's name.

This is all to point to a question, central to musical listening, that exists apart from the question of authenticity, one which seems categorically prior to other perceptions of musical meaning: whose name goes with what I'm hearing?

¹⁷ As mentioned in the previous chapter, see Schlenker, 2012 for a complementary argument that the psychological experiences of self-presentation and self-expression are similar enough as to render the distinction between the former(-as-inauthentic) and the latter(-as-authentic) somewhat erroneous. In a similar vein, Harter notes that '[m]erely acting differently in different relational contexts does not necessarily constitute false self-behavior (although one may appear chameleonlike to others). False self-behavior must be accompanied by the phenomenological experience that one's actions and words lack authenticity' (2012: p. 88). These insights would surely offer productive starting points for psychological and/or ethnographic studies of artists' own experiences of their artistic (in)authenticity.

In this sense, the act of distinguishing identity is slightly more important to this chapter's argument than the act of defining it. Aesthetically, defining an artist as authentic matters, and to distinguish an artist is always also to define them, to some extent.¹⁸ But a legitimate academic interest in aesthetic authenticity and the performance of musical personae should not preclude attending to the first-order, yes-or-no experience of recognising an artist's identity in music, because there is always someone there.

3.2: 'Half-Light'

'Half-Light' can help illustrate the possibilities for sonic identity inference discussed so far. Generally, developing a sense of an artist's identity via repeated exposure to their output involves engagement with multiple tracks, so that sensitivity to invariants can increase, and their regularity be perceived and learned as markers of that artist's sound. Furthermore, depending on one's sensitivity when first encountering a track, the inferences made about the artist's identity will range from rudimentary to sophisticated. The task of trying to trace the increase in a listener's perceptual sensitivity to an artist's music—and the concomitant elaboration of the artist's sonic identity—from 'start' to 'finish' belongs to later chapters. For now, in my own case, I have become too familiar with 'Half-Light', and Rostam's work generally, to be able to hear this music as if for the first time.

¹⁸ Note the distinction here between authenticity as a trait pertinent to the aesthetic experience of popular music, and authenticity in the sense of something being what it seems, and thus affording accurate identification. The difference is between perceiving that Britney Spears means what she sings and perceiving that it is indeed Britney singing.

Nevertheless, I will try to suggest variably ‘sensitive’ and ‘insensitive’ interpretations, in order to give an analysis that properly follows the dynamics I have explored above. I will do this by interpreting the lyrics and unpacking some of the most prominent sonic features of ‘Half-Light’, along with reference to other works by Rostam, so as to better illuminate his para/epitextually reinforced sonic identity. I will expand from the material character of Rostam’s sounds ‘themselves’, in light of Moore’s point that the expressive salience of ‘the textures of recorded music’ can be weighed against a hypothetical standard texture (2010: p. 258). In this sense, my premise is that whatever distinguishes Rostam’s identity the most, defines it the most. The ‘Half-Light’ lyric music video and the *Half-Light* album artwork will offer paratextual colour to the analytical image. Partly to test my perceptual sensitivity to Rostam-ness in ‘Half-Light’, many points of my analysis are drawn from memories of his music, and later checked against further listenings. After all, this dialogue between recollection and repetition is the engine of interpretation.

3.2.1: The track

Within ‘Half-Light’, the detectable qualities of Rostam’s identity are semantically anchored by the lyrics (Rostam, 2017; see below). To speak via Moore, the lyrics of ‘Half-Light’ place Rostam as the protagonist, and offer the listener no reason to doubt the equivalence of this role with his real self (2012: p. 181): Rostam is addressing a romantic partner, reflecting on a night spent ambivalently together and his reluctant realisation that their ill-defined relationship will not continue. Except that it explores a past rather than contemporary event, ‘Half-Light’ fulfils

Moore's criteria for the standard orientation of a persona in a track: it is realistic and everyday, Rostam is personally involved, and he is ostensibly situated in the present (p. 183). Meanwhile, the listener is positioned as an observer (p. 185). Overall, the sonic 'environment is *active*', in that it 'supports the position of the persona, frequently through devices related to word-painting' (p. 191).

Somewhere in the half-light
I could feel it coming true
I know it and I knew it
But I did it just for you

Baby, are you getting cold?
My room is just down the hall
And if we stay the night
I promise not to call

But somewhere in the half-light
I could feel it coming back
I get it, there's no future
But can't see it through the cracks

Baby, is the door unlocked?
Is your bed getting cold?
I know if I stay the night
You'll ask me to go

Oh but somewhere in the half-light
I felt the morning coming through
I know and I knew it
But can't see it, I refuse

Baby, all the lights came up
What are you gonna do?
Baby, all the lights came up
What are you gonna do?

Baby, all the lights came up
What are you gonna do?
Baby, all the lights came up
What are you gonna do?
Baby, all the lights came up
What are you gonna do?

Baby, all the lights came up to illuminate the room
Blinded me, I shut my eyes to see an imprint there of you
I still think about it, but there was nothing I could do

(Outro sung by Kelly Zutrau):

Baby, all the lights came down and illuminated you
Blinded me, I shut my eyes to see an imprint left of you
Blinded me, I shut my eyes, and there was nothing I could do

Taken by themselves, what might we infer about Rostam from these words? His honest but vague exploration of his epiphany, and the strength of the statements he directs at his lover, suggest he is ardent, intuitive, and sincere in romance. However, there is sarcasm in his 'baby'-prefixed rhetorical questions, which helps belie the sense that he's a feckless love-fool (although this sarcasm might conversely be read as submissiveness, or even desperation). Meanwhile, as it unfolds in the lyrics, the track's title suggests that Rostam doesn't just associate his realisation with the half-light by dint of their mere coincidence, but that he sees some actual analogy, even causality, between these internal and external events. On the one hand, the new dawn may be a metaphor for a new epoch in his romantic life, while, on the other, the attenuation of the light might symbolise the diminished form of love that he must now relinquish, and, what's more, does so powerfully enough that it actually leads him to this realisation. This even suggests a capital-R Romantic sense of Rostam's personal imbrication with the world and its natural cycles. These, then, seem to be the main lyrical themes that orient the sonic specifications of Rostam's identity in 'Half-Light', and which reinforce, and are reinforced by, these specifications.

I suggest that Rostam's sonic identity is broadly defined in 'Half-Light' by the following qualities: amateurism; a pragmatism of expression (or

expressionism, as in a tendency to treat sound as a mutable, unrestricted means of direct expression); and what Moore calls '*authenticity of expression*', by which the artist themselves is authenticated, rather than their audience, or the musical tradition they manifest (2012: p. 269). To me, these interrelated qualities are general enough to be perceptible to first-time listeners, but, crucially, are also consolidated through further exposure, rather than undermined. They could also apply to a person's identity in non-musical ways, hence my terminological generality: they capture a metaphorical overlap that opens up both the music and the idea of Rostam's identity, conceived in the most general terms, to mutual semantic influence (Cook, 1998: pp. 69-70). Though general, these qualities are specified and given their conceptual hue by the particular aspects of the sonic environment that seem to present themselves most readily to the listener – certainly, in this case, to me. As such, the sonic features that stand out most to me, and thus which characterise Rostam-ness, are: the reverb that coats the sonic environment; the formal simplicity of the accompanying instrumental figures; the melodic and timbral behaviour of the guitar solo; and the manner of Rostam's vocal. These features announce Rostam not only by differing from a hypothetical standard form, but also by referring to other parts of his oeuvre. As I will argue, an important effect of these references is to suggest comparisons between the referenced musical past and the present that references it. A listener can use such comparisons to better orient their understanding of the artist's sonic identity.

Firstly, the reverberant quality of the track's environment. The track begins with a curious sound that immediately introduces this quality: a blooming, wobbly,

lightly shimmering resonance that builds in volume as it opens outwards from its muffled bass origins. It does not obviously specify any particular instrument, and forms a tonic (D Major) triad, layering an A3 and an F#4 atop the D3 in the bass. It lasts around seven seconds, suddenly dying away before the onset of Rostam's piano-accompanied vocal, and it sounds like it is happening underwater. Initially, this warm, diaphanous sound—perhaps this *is* the half-light?—might exude a drowsiness befitting the track's narrative setting. More elaborately, it might embody the good-will of the text's nevertheless torn, reluctant emotional stance, via the contrast between the mid-range major triad's soft warmth and the smothered shakiness of its attenuated transmission. Beyond the track itself, to a listener used to Rostam's work and the notion of him as an individual creator, such observations might afford an understanding of Rostam as an artist concerned with crafting original, timbrally complex sonic components that echo the thematic concepts of their track. Such an interpretation might matter to a listener as it affirms both the authenticity and the attempted directness of Rostam's expressive practices, inflecting his sonic identity. To a newer listener, this sound might simply project its physical qualities onto their author, rendering *him* warm and attenuated – which might be to say shy, for instance.

Panning out further, this sound asserts Rostam's identity against the wider background of popular music sound design by referencing the last album by indie band Vampire Weekend that featured Rostam as a band member, 2013's *Modern Vampires of the City*. The muffled, underwater quality of the opening sound in 'Half-Light' is a salient quality of some of *Modern Vampires*' tracks, most notably 'Hannah Hunt' and 'Obvious Bicycle'; in Gell's terms, this sound is a

‘retention’ from that point in Rostam’s oeuvre (1998: p. 235). Although, more generally, I think this opening sound typifies a broad concern with sonic *pleasantness* suggested in Vampire Weekend’s albums (all of which Rostam co-produced and co-wrote, except for 2019’s *Father of the Bride*), its specific underwater quality is pronounced on *Modern Vampires*.... The presence of this quality in his solo work, then, retrospectively clarifies for me Rostam’s presence—and influence—in the ostensibly collaborative sound environments of *Modern Vampires*..., allowing greater definition of his identity when re-engaging with that album. By re-materialising on ‘Half-Light’, this quality presents itself as a marker of *Rostam’s* sonic identity, rather than—or rather than only—Vampire Weekend’s.

The instrumental parts of ‘Half-Light’ are also wrapped in reverb, imbuing them with a quality similar to the opening sound. While it might suggest laziness or poor production, to my ears the reverberation of the piano and drum parts within the track bestows a homely, unmediated quality to the environment, supporting the track’s modest, personal tone, and, more literally, its domestic narrative setting. Panning out from the track again, this homeliness further supports the inference of Rostam’s amateurism, pragmatism, and authenticity of expression by presenting him as an artist working in his own space, on his own terms of production, if not actually alone. It could also ramify the specifications of past Vampire Weekend tracks discussed above, specifically, again, ‘Hannah Hunt’, which features a similarly reverberant piano figure. The echoing quality of the drum timbres in ‘Half-Light’ might specify *Modern Vampires*... more generally, recalling the effect produced on that album by a range of

unconventional miking setups, and manipulations of tape recordings of the drum parts, processes designed to imbue the sonic environment with ‘warmth’ (Micallef, 2014). Indeed—to make a passing epitextual observation—this notion was reinforced by a tweet I noticed from Rostam, in which he captioned the following picture with ‘this is how i mic drums’:



Figure 1: Rostam’s example of his drum-mic’ing setup. See <https://twitter.com/matsoR/status/1108116884535173122>

In other words, loosely—without the drums in question even in view—with lots of allowance for natural, space-imparted reverb. Overall, the general application of reverb to instrumental features identifies Rostam’s role in determining the sounds of *Modern Vampires...*, and thus reasserts these sounds as his own.

The voicings of the instrumental parts also seem expressively salient by deviating from a putative standard form. The piano accompaniment, for instance,

is immediately conspicuous, the only initial companion to Rostam's vocal. It pounds out a plain, on-the-beat IV-V-I-IV harmonic pattern, affirming generic conventions of balladeering pop piano accompaniment. But this figure is too plodding to be normal, wandering up and down the piano's register during the first verse in an almost ineloquent fashion. The drum track, which enters the texture after the penultimate line of the first verse, complements the piano here: the beat is extremely basic, a beginner's 4/4. This instrumental behaviour seems perhaps to signal an indulgent absent-mindedness and naivety on Rostam's part, while also suggesting limited instrumental ability and/or sense of how things 'ought to sound'.

But the deliberateness of the piano and drum figures might rather convey something more nuanced: an intentional departure from these standards of voicing. This perspective affords a multi-faceted understanding of Rostam's sonic identity that also complements the lyrical attitude of this track specifically. He trusts his lightly idiosyncratic instrumentation to support the text's meanings, and signals both his authenticity and pragmatism of expression by simultaneously specifying instrumental conventions and their transgression. But the accessible simplicity of these conventions still has its own effects: in the spirit of the homely, under-produced reverb of these instrumental parts, Rostam's drum and piano figures are couched in amateurish terms of musical communication that almost anyone could understand and employ themselves. Much like the earnest, bottom-line address of the lyrics, Rostam's music is communicating directly, in recognisable, explicable codes which nevertheless bear marks of his idiosyncratic modification – of his wish to speak *as himself* in

the message. Meanwhile, the irony of his rhetorical questions finds a match in the irony of transgressing conventions. Overall, while these materials could superficially characterise Rostam as a novice, they also afford a more generous view of him as an earnest individual concerned with openly engaging fundamental personal issues in fundamental yet personalised communicative terms.

The simplicity of the piano figure in 'Half-Light' is also a retention of a timbrally similar figure from 'Hannah Hunt'. However, in 'Hannah Hunt', the piano part is more figurally decorative, more precisely injected; more generally, Vampire Weekend keyboard parts are characterised by conspicuously ornate turns and Alberti bass-style figures, far removed from the plainness of 'Half-Light'. Similarly, the formal simplicity of its drum track, whose reverberation re-materialises the standard drum timbre of *Modern Vampires...*, is at odds with the relative formal complexity of drum figures from *Modern Vampires...* themselves, and indeed those of most Vampire Weekend tracks. This disparity could create a sense of Rostam's personal re-definition between *Modern Vampires...* and 'Half-Light': from background creative craftsman serving a larger ensemble to unabashed home-studio tinkerer, free now to indulge instincts and satisfy personal expressive prerogatives.¹⁹ In other words, the timbres of the piano and drums on 'Half-Light' could specify their roots in *Modern Vampires...* while their voicings specify a deviation from these roots, adding definition to Rostam's sonic identity by citing a pre-existing context while also highlighting the contrasts that

¹⁹ This impression is compounded by a YouTube video published on Rostam's channel, in which he explains aspects the recording of 'Half-Light', relaxing in a home studio surrounded by assorted instruments, some of which were used on the track (Rostam, 2018).

remain. Meanwhile, the qualities of both timbral warmth and formal simplicity consolidate an environment that supports what the track expresses lyrically, strengthening the sense of direct and earnest communication that also helps define that identity.

In the same vein, the guitar solo that follows the arrival of the track's full texture also affords a comparison with Rostam's Vampire Weekend past. The primary melodic event of the track, this part is thickly distorted and auto-harmonised to add a 3rd and a 5th to each note of the melody; to my ears, it does not clearly specify a guitar. The disorderly timbre created by these effects recalls a brief figure from the *Modern Vampires...* track 'Diane Young', but it otherwise rejects the sonic cleanliness that invariably characterises Vampire Weekend sound worlds. However, formally speaking, the turns and mordents that punctuate this melody do allude to Vampire Weekend's baroque affectations – precisely those affectations which the piano part lacked. In this way, the varying avowal and disavowal of Vampire Weekend-specifying sound types between the different instrumental parts of 'Half-Light'—the alternating specification of these stylistic markers and their transgression—again affords an overall sense of Rostam's expanded expressive autonomy here in his solo work, and thus strengthens the impression that he is now authentically and freely expressing himself alone. The simultaneous specification and re-configuration of Rostam's musical past again highlights how and where his expressive sensibility manifested itself in Vampire Weekend tracks, thus suggesting how inferences about his identity might now more confidently be made through that Vampire Weekend material.

As Frith has claimed, the voice in popular music ‘stands for the person more directly than any other musical device’ (1996b: p. 191). But Rostam’s vocal on ‘Half-Light’ does more than index his identity with its mere presence: it makes suggestions about who he is through its mannerisms. Generally, Rostam’s vocal displays an apparent minimum of exertion, and a commitment to the seemingly natural tendencies and states of his voice: the airy falsetto of the track’s higher melodic passages is unabashed, while at the lowest end of the range his crinkly vocal fry nearly banishes pitch altogether. It is almost as if the melody is pertinent only in terms of what it allows Rostam’s voice to be; any sense of technique is eschewed, and the ‘grain’ of Rostam’s voice seems to reign. Although this supposed naturalism is itself a technique, what this voice seems to specify is an exhausted body unregulated by external standards of expression. In terms of the track’s narrative, these specifications could support both the suggested setting of ‘morning after a restless night’ and the suggested tone of emotional candour between two individuals with no audience but each other. Panning out to the wider frame of Rostam’s identity, this vocal take ramifies his amateurism, pragmatism, and authenticity of expression: the rejection of technique is the amateur’s democratic prerogative, and it asserts the uniqueness of his voice and what it expresses; meanwhile, the vocal part’s acquiescence to the exhaustion of its issuing body relates the listener directly to Rostam’s particular materiality, the putative bedrock of his authentic existence. Alternatively, Rostam’s vocal approach could simply convey unseemly self-indulgence, or embarrassing ignorance of his limitations.

Let's continue this journey onward into the wider world of Rostam-ness opened up by 'Half-Light'. A crucial point about Rostam's voice is that listeners may not recognise it from Vampire Weekend tracks. It only occasionally appears in brief, supporting roles, most noticeably between 3:25 and 3:45 of 'Diplomat's Son' from 2010's *Contra*, and on 'Young Lion' from *Modern Vampires*.... Although these tracks do somewhat prefigure the tone of his 'Half-Light' vocal, Rostam's parts are perhaps too anonymised for 'Half-Light' to remind listeners of them. Instead, a more probable comparison might be between Rostam's voice and that of Ezra Koenig, the lead singer of Vampire Weekend. If, following Frith, voices definitively mark the identity and presence of their vocalisers, Koenig's and Rostam's vocal styles might synecdochally stand for the general aesthetic agendas of each, with the differences in these styles specifying the difference between these agendas. While Koenig's voice is similarly settled in its apparent comfort zone, and seemingly unfettered by technical concerns, he is more precise, measured, and stable than Rostam ever seems to attempt to be.

This comparison might reinforce a demarcation between Rostam's autonomous present and his collaborative past, and between the sonic looseness of the former and the order of the latter. A listener might associate Rostam's looseness with authenticity of expression, as if it betrays his hurry to express himself with whatever means can be immediately called upon, and then contrast it with the more obviously premeditated, perhaps comparatively inauthentic-because-intricate music of Vampire Weekend (although, again, this is only to humour one particular authenticity rubric for argument's sake). Listeners might also recall Rostam's collaborative album with singer Hamilton

Leithauser, *I Had A Dream That You Were Mine* (2016). Leithauser's vocal approach mirrors Rostam's better than Koenig's does, and on this album Rostam's voice is itself more prominent and active than it is across Vampire Weekend's discography. This harmony between Leithauser and Rostam might also suggest that Rostam is being truer here to his aesthetic principles than he had scope to be in Vampire Weekend, and that those principles are markedly freer than those which guide Koenig, and Vampire Weekend by extension. If the authenticity of the vocal in 'Half-Light' is granted in these terms, this attests to the personal authenticity of Rostam. Ultimately, ideas about Rostam's music become ideas about him.

3.2.2: Paratext

What, then, are the invariant properties of 'Half-Light'? Perhaps: an absence of technical precision and sonic clarity; a complementary concern for sonic warmth; reverberation, naivety, muddled and blended colours; timbral messiness in the service of direct expression. But how are these common characteristics and themes ramified by paratextual materials?

Half-Light's album artwork (see Figure 2) is the primary part of this material. After all, it is likely to be visible at some point to anyone listening to *Half-Light* either on a streaming service or a physical copy of the album. It might also easily be encountered by anyone paying attention to the album's promotion, or to music publications and social media channels that would reproduce the artwork. The image is a pixelated, close-up, partial shot of Rostam's face gazing into the camera. Rostam appears to wear a headband patterned with streaks of

white, red, blue, yellow, orange, and lilac, and there is a pinkish hue to the image overall. At the top right of the cover are three coloured squares, stacked blue-orange-yellow from bottom to top. These features of the image seem to symbolise the sonic qualities explored above: the general mix of colours matches the timbral variety; the pervasive hue and pixelation specify the same kind of fundamentally abnormal environment conjured by the reverb; the three squares suggest a distortion of the primary colours, as if Rostam's self-expression will proceed in basic but somehow transposed terms, complementing the basic but abstracted sonic elements of 'Half-Light' the track.

Notably, the only text on the image is Rostam's name written in Farsi, a clear reference and commitment to his Iranian heritage for those already aware of it, or for those who can read or recognise Farsi. This not only connects Rostam's identity to ideas about what Iranian-ness 'means'—however elaborate or simple—but also asserts the primacy of his identity over the album's themes: of Rostam over *Half-Light*. Rostam's name is in a thick white font, matching the white bordering of the image, features which Vampire Weekend's first three albums also bear (see Figures 3-5.). However, whereas the cover art for those Vampire Weekend albums hewed both to a single, key colour tone and sharp photographic realism, *Half-Light's* cover art defies both. These features thus specify the style of those Vampire Weekend albums' artworks, affording a contrast of their relative monochromy with the polychromy of *Half-Light*, and of *Half-Light's* distortedness with the crisp definition of those albums. As with the sounds of the track themselves, Rostam's past is referenced as it is transformed.

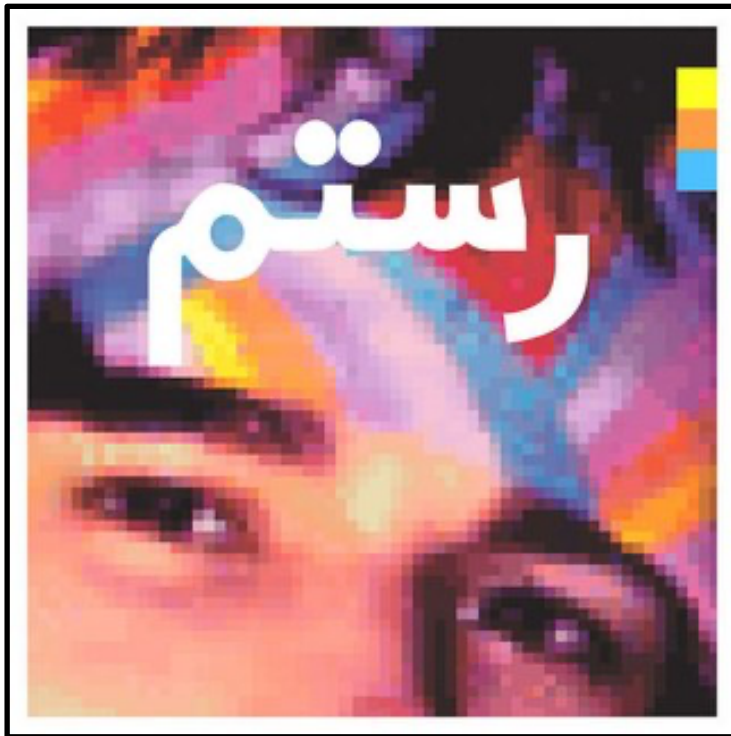


Figure 2: Cover art for Rostam's first album, *Half-Light* (Nonesuch Records, 2017). I have added the black border to illustrate the boundaries of the white perimeter.



Figure 3: Cover art for Vampire Weekend's first album, *Vampire Weekend* (XL, 2008). I have added a black border to illustrate the boundaries of the white perimeter.



Figure 4: Cover art for Vampire Weekend's second album, *Contra* (XL, 2010). I have added the black border to illustrate the boundaries of the white perimeter.



Figure 5: Cover art for Vampire Weekend's third album, *Modern Vampires of the City* (XL, 2013). I have added the black border to illustrate the boundaries of the white perimeter.

The music video available for 'Half-Light' (see Rostam, 2017) corroborates and extends these sympathies between sound and image. The video shows a white piano with two candles asymmetrically placed on top of it, in what appears to be a dimly lit room in someone's home, perhaps Rostam's (see Figure 6.). A double bass stands against the piano. Both this setting and the focus on acoustic instruments accentuate the hearty, homemade quality of the track discussed earlier. The room is faintly lit by the candles, which give off light of varying colours as the track progresses, although the range of colours is small, and evokes the same sense of basics-once-removed as the album artwork's colour scheme. The lyrics eschew the Vampire Weekend-indexing Futura font of the title information and album sleeve text. Instead, they appear as if handwritten, ramifying the amateurism specified by the music, and affording a comparison of this amateurism with the refined stylishness favoured by Vampire Weekend, much like the ambivalent sonic specifications of 'Half-Light' discussed above. The text is embodied by a beaming, blue-white light, both symbolising the title and offering a cross-modal analogy to the reverberation of the sonic environment. Meanwhile, the guitar solo is embodied on-screen by an ephemeral, refractive orange-gold line. This striking feature disrupts the softness of the scene, but also consolidates the visual style manifested in the album artwork by reaffirming bright and unstable colour elements within this environment. These properties of instability and brightness are invariant in the sonic environment of 'Half-Light', as I have already claimed, and the invariance of these properties in visual paratextual material reaffirms the impression of

Rostam as someone whose expressive strokes are broad and bold, warm and somewhat rash.

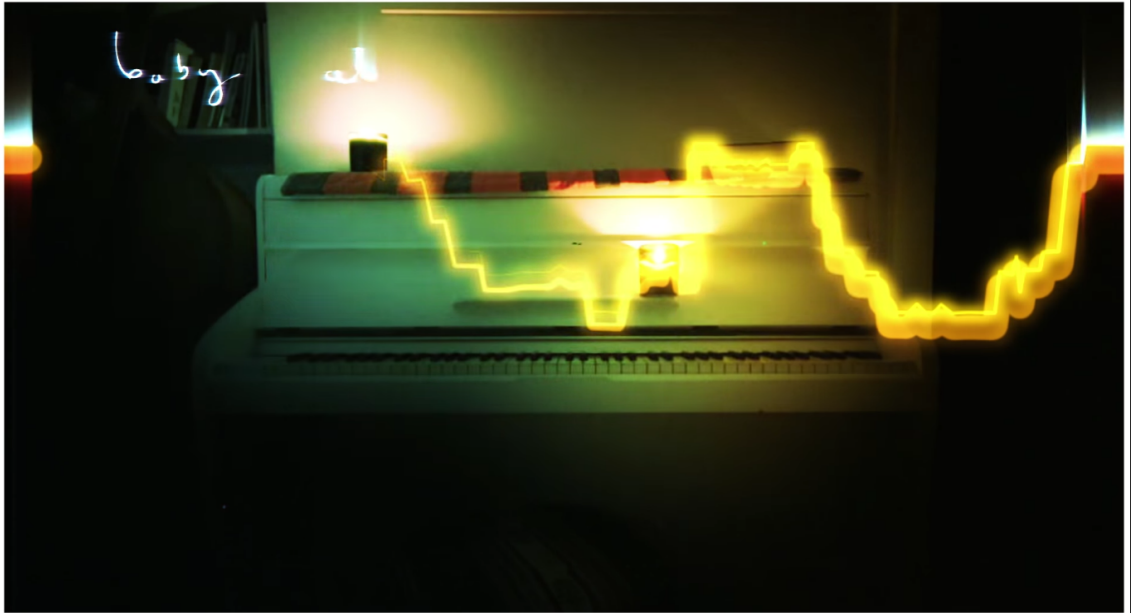


Figure 6: A still from 2:10 in the 'Half-Light' music video, illustrating the perspective of the fixed camera, the lyric font, and the luminous yellow-orange line mimicking the guitar solo.

3.3: In retrospect

Barring some minor edits, the text you have read so far in this chapter was written in the first half or so of 2019. Between then and now (I am writing this sentence on 29th November 2022 (11:10 am CET...)), I have been busy researching and writing the rest of this thesis, listening to rather little Rostam and Vampire Weekend in the meantime. Given that I was listening to rather a lot of both between 2017 and 2019—and given that it was Rostam and the idea of Rostam-ness that prompted this thesis in the first place—this drop-off might suggest that I can now no longer be trusted to discuss Rostam's music, and through it the idea of sonic identities, with much authority. In short, I must be rusty.

But to worry about rustiness would be to miss the point of what this chapter is trying to say. Again, my goal here is not to outline what Rostam-ness *really is* for the benefit of anyone interested in that particular idea, but rather to demonstrate what it looks like for an individual listener to infer an artist's sonic identity by interacting with the materials on offer. If anything, my present perspective—blurrier though you might say it now is, as far as insight into Rostam-ness is concerned—offers the chance to bring the analytical object of my 2019 writing some of the way back into the context of real-world listening. After all, most of us do not listen to all of our preferred artists all of the time, but rather chop and change according to the rhythms of satiation and the general vicissitudes of our lives. This long-term waxing and waning of our attention to artists plays an essential role in governing how their sonic identities continue to exist for us over time, whether time's passage sees these sonic identities somehow change or rather stay roughly the same. So, in order to shed some light on this, I will now return to Rostam's sonic identity and discuss what has changed—and, indeed, what has stayed the same—about my sense of it.

Both Rostam and Vampire Weekend have released new albums since I left off writing this chapter in mid-2019: Vampire Weekend's *Father of the Bride* (Columbia, 2019) and Rostam's *Changephobia* (Matsor Projects, 2021). To speak as a fan for a moment, I was especially excited about the release of the former, particularly given how I had amped up my commitment to Vampire Weekend's music in the time since 2013's *Modern Vampires of the City*. But perhaps, in the end, *Father of the Bride* came too late, or subtly moved a step too far away from the Rostam-involving sounds of old. I liked it well enough, but

something in them or me—or both—was different. Returning to that music now, and reflecting on how I received it then, I’m inclined to say that I can hear Rostam’s absence, as well as what I’m subsequently inclined to call his residue. I’m also aware that, having already written most of this chapter when *Father of the Bride* came out, I first heard it in the terms of what I’d just spent months thinking about: the question of Rostam’s sonic presence in ‘his’ musical environments. These pre-occupations no doubt conditioned how I heard the album. Rostam’s absence and residue were precisely what I was looking for – and expecting to find.

As I understand it—and as I remember understanding it in 2019—Ezra Koenig has always been the main songwriter in Vampire Weekend, and Rostam, although (so I gathered) an occasional song-writing contributor, was primarily a producer and instrumentalist. For the purposes of this chapter, it doesn’t matter whether or not this understanding was at all a reasonable or accurate reflection of all the agencies that did in fact contribute to the creation of Vampire Weekend’s first three albums. For better or worse, those were the assumptions I applied intuitively to their music, and, later, to the Rostam-less *Father of the Bride*.²⁰ These assumptions had already helped prime some of the perceptions rendered above as analytical points, particularly of the timbres—in my mind, primarily the business of the producer—that seemed to be shared between ‘Half-Light’ and certain Vampire Weekend tracks.

²⁰ Rostam is actually credited on two tracks: ‘Harmony Hall’ (as a co-producer), and ‘We Belong Together’ (as producer and co-writer).

Applied to *Father of the Bride*, in which both Rostam's absence and residue seemed to be specified, these assumptions found their apparent proof. The song-writing seemed much the same as on earlier Vampire Weekend albums, clearly marked by my pre-existing sense of Koenig-ness: melodically nimble, formally tight but not uptight, rhythmically adventurous, thematically earnest but never stern, outwardly 'brainy' but not snooty. This told me little about Rostam that I didn't already think I knew. The timbral profile of the music, meanwhile, did. While many sound-types—the instrumental 'underwater' effect during the intro of 'Big Blue', the happy application of varyingly dense layers of reverb—that I associate with Rostam were still here, along with a general Rostam-ish tendency to softly distort various sonic elements, *Father of the Bride*'s sound was simply incongruous with—or inadequate to—the sense of full-blown Rostam-ness that *Half-Light* had allowed me to develop. In fact, I had never much thought about Rostam or Rostam-ness at all until his departure from Vampire Weekend, and the release of *Half-Light*, prompted me to re-hear the earlier Vampire Weekend albums in those terms, particularly *Modern Vampires...*, to my ears their high-point not least because of the full flowering of Rostam-ness on it. As I heard it, Rostam had taken that fully-fledged Rostam-ness with him, leaving behind considerable traces of its influence that were nevertheless subdued, in the end, by Koenig-ness, as it elaborated itself in order to fill this space.²¹

²¹ All of this is no doubt deeply unfair to Ariel Rechtshaid, who co-produced *Modern Vampires of the City* and *Father of the Bride*, as well as some tracks on *Half-Light*. Indeed, particularly given the extent of his influence to which Rostam and Koenig attested around time *Modern Vampires...* was released, I am inclined to say it would be fairer to attribute a great deal of the credit for the above-mentioned 'full flowering of Rostam-ness' to Rechtshaid, and the apparent residual presence of Rostam-ness on *Father of the Bride* to his status (as far as production is concerned)

And *Changephobia*? By the time it arrived in the Summer of 2021, much had changed since 2019: the coronavirus pandemic was in its second year; I was deep into researching and writing the subsequent chapters of this thesis; and I had moved away from the UK and back to Berlin, Germany. As singles, I had already heard eventual album tracks ‘Unfold You’ (in late 2020) and ‘4Runner’ (earlier in 2021). The latter, which I rather liked, prompted me to return to the question of Rostam-ness: mentioning the track in a blog post—producing my own epitext—I saw fit to say only that ‘Rostam makes you wonder if all that was ever wrong with Coldplay was that they weren’t cute enough. And isn’t he cute?’. Flippant and a little patronising though this remark was, its connections to Coldplay and cuteness fixed something about Rostam-ness for me: it shares in all the yearning, reverberant, big-heartedness of (for instance) Coldplay, but realises it on a smaller, more intimate scale, without the stadium-ready bombast that can render those qualities unpleasantly overpowering. Through this observation, the sense I had of Rostam’s sonic identity via ‘Half-Light’ was further sedimented. His sound-worlds are peaceful, pliable, warm, idiosyncratic, and gently surreal; along with their direct, emotionally unguarded lyrics, they convey Rostam’s own peacefulness, emotional-ness, warmth, and individuality. This is my short-hand for Rostam-ness.

‘4Runner’ itself is perhaps the most poppy, single-oriented track on *Changephobia*, which overall oozes through the ears in a more leisurely fashion than this – and, to my ears, renders Rostam-ness a more coherent thing than its

as the common denominator between that album and its predecessor. In this, Rechtshaid has, I fear, fallen victim to the common, casual listening prejudice that attributes more importance and agency to the artists filling the scenes than to the producers behind them. Rostam, straddling both, got the best of both worlds.

Half-Light-iterated form. It centres on a consistent, modest piano-drums-guitars instrumental set-up, and is tied together by fluttery, agreeably casual, naturalistically reverb-laden saxophone interjections (such as those over the intros to ‘Unfold You’ and ‘Kinney’, or the outro to ‘Changephobia’). When following my ears with my casual listener hat on—that is, when not trying think critically as a musicologist—I have tended sometimes to gloss this stylistic coalescence in terms of musical maturation, and, rather dubiously indeed, related moralistic ideas of ‘good taste’ that prioritise the idea of perfect balance. In my defence, Rostam himself is partly to blame for this. Occasionally in the back of my mind when listening to *Changephobia* was the following Instagram post of his from 16th August 2018:



Figure 7: Rostam’s endorsement of the minimalist ideal. See https://www.instagram.com/p/BmhN_fMgNmA/ for the original post.

‘Clean lines’, ‘organic yet modern’, ‘soft, comfortable’, ‘minimalist but inviting’, and all notions rendered vividly in the image – these epitextual sentiments struck

me as the sentiments of an artist striving to express their musical vitality in a slightly more tidy and delicate fashion than he had on *Half-Light*. *Half-Light*, for its part, does indeed strike me as slightly off-balance, and always has. As already alluded to in my discussion of ‘Half-Light’, Rostam’s ardour is sometimes too rich even for my blood, and across *Half-Light*, his pragmatism of expression sometimes begets (pleasurable, interesting) music that is almost intoxicatingly eccentric and fluid: ‘Hold You (feat. Angel Deradoorian)’ and ‘When’ spring to mind.

Nowadays, I am occasionally prompted to think of this queasy excess when catching underground trains from U-Bahnhof Schlesisches Tor in Berlin. Some of Rostam’s other *Half-Light* music videos, such as those for the tracks ‘Gwan’ and ‘Bike Dream’, feature Rostam moving—walking, cycling—through various urban environments towards the camera, singing along with the track, looking rather bashful all the while. At various points in the video for ‘Bike Dream’ specifically, Rostam is to be seen sing-strolling along the platforms of U-Bahnhof Schlesisches Tor – see Figure 8 for an example. To be blunt, I find this music video style generally very corny. ‘Bike Dream’ itself, not so; but it is made so by the video. And I’m reminded of it whenever I catch a train there, often imagining how awkward it must have been for Rostam to film it in front of the waiting passengers, and for them to observe it. Overreactions though they no doubt are, each such cringe is a visceral reminder of the discomforts of Rostam’s *Half-Light* excesses. In this rather unlikely, coincidental way, Rostam-ness has become implicated in my day-to-day life, but such that aspects of it I find most distasteful are the ones most frequently emphasised.



Figure 8: A still from 1:36 of the music video to *Half-Light*'s 'Bike Dream'.

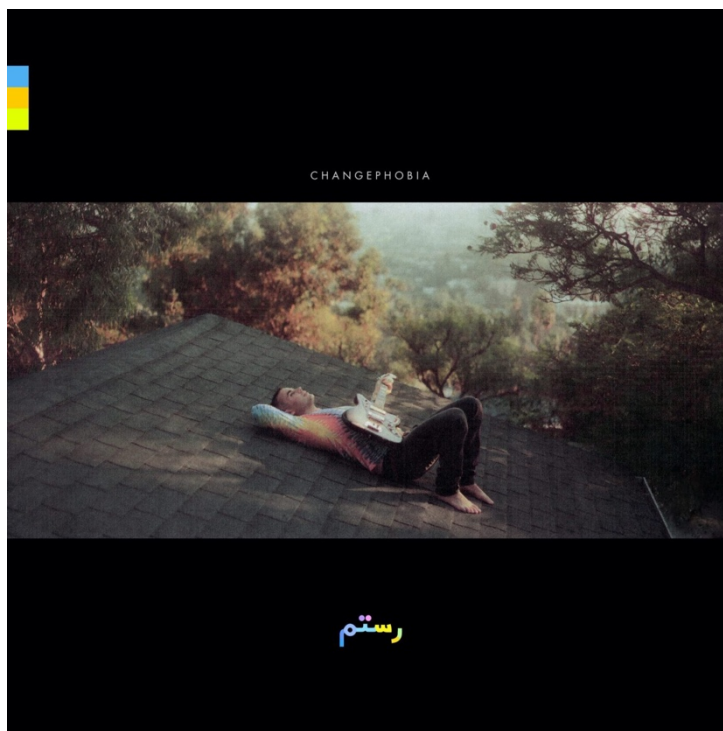


Figure 9: Cover art for Rostam's second solo album, *Changephobia* (Matsor Projects, 2021).

All this said, I do generally value the earnestness in Rostam-ness, at least at a certain dosage. And it is still there on *Changephobia*, only integrated now into a more consistent—and dare I say more elegant (clean-lined, organic-yet-

modern, soft, comfortable, minimalist-but-inviting...)—style, on whose back it never overbears. Perhaps the *Changephobia* cover art typifies this best (see Figure 9). In it, Rostam is very much cast as a day-dreaming man of feeling. But if *Half-Light*'s cover, utterly filled by Rostam's face, drowns the observer in the blur of Rostam's reality-adjacent subjectivity, *Changephobia* places both him and us in a recognisably real-world (yet still slightly distorted) scene, full of light, nature, and spatial depth. This time, his name and the album's are given equal billing. But the same tricoloured signature from *Half-Light*'s cover is still here, in the top left, as if to remind us of the prism through which he sees the world.

*

As I write, I have one particular figure from *Changephobia*'s 'Unfold You' floating around my head: the synthesised choral voices that glide through its outro, between around 3:00 and 3:25. You can hear these voices all over *Modern Vampires of the City*, or whooping in the background of his and Leithauser's '1959' from *I Had A Dream That You Were Mine*. Now *that*—if you ask me—is pure Rostam.

3.4: Conclusions

In this chapter, I have attempted to illustrate how the inference of an artist's sonic identity is afforded by the specifications of invariant properties within the sonic environments of their tracks. To speak in ecological terms of an artist's sonic identity as being specified in a track's environment requires identifying and

interpreting the invariant qualities of that track's music, qualities which, to be expressively salient, must deviate somehow from a hypothetical standard form. The sonic environment of 'Half-Light' is replete with properties that bear Rostam's signature and thus specify his identity within that environment. Both the 'Half-Light' lyric video and the *Half-Light* album artwork offer visual environments whose invariants correspond cross-modally to those of the track. By iterating these invariants, both the track and its related paratextual and epitextual materials afford the identification of Rostam by these invariants, and as someone with an expressive profile characterised by them. To interpret what these invariants afford within specific tracks is to interpret the artist's sonic identity itself, since engagement with specific tracks and their meanings is the primary process in determining who Rostam is for his listener. That is to say that the material invariants of an artist's sonic style become conceptually invariant properties of their identity. Viewing his oeuvre through 'Half-Light' specifically, the invariant materials of Rostam's style might be said to be: proudly simple instrumental figures; baroque ornamentation; a speech-ified singing style; warmth and reverberation; and bold, wayward timbral colours. Viewed through 'Half-Light', these invariants seem to paint Rostam as a person as warm, modest but confident, curious, in tune with himself, eager to express himself, and eccentric enough to instinctively do this eccentrically.

As my retrospective extension to this chapter aimed to show, an interpretation of an artist's sonic identity through one track, no matter how extensive, will only ever be a partial, constricted view of a whole, one whose sense will necessarily change over time as both the listener and the artist's

oeuvre change. In the wider view, it seems the various significations of ‘Half-Light’ alone become implicated in, and dependent on, the significations of everything else in Rostam’s oeuvre. But then, this is not quite accurate either. Again, the whole of an artist’s oeuvre and the whole of their sonic identity are not specified in every perception of every partial scrap of that oeuvre. A given part of that oeuvre—like an individual track—might specify certain tracks that deal in, for instance, similar timbres or themes, while being too far removed from tracks from other parts of the artist’s oeuvre for the listener to perceive the latter as having been specified by the former. Broadly speaking, we might say that the potential breadth of the view onto a whole oeuvre through a given track that is available to a listener will depend on that listener’s perceptual sensitivity, which will largely be a consequence of their familiarity with that whole oeuvre. But it will also depend on their level of attention in that encounter, their pre-occupations, their mood – any other factor that might generally impinge on a musical listening experience. I spent most of this chapter in an objective analytical mode, or at least tried to. The sharp turn into my own subjective world as a listener—in which we will also spend most of Chapters 4 and 5—was intended to illustrate how these factors tie into the analytical observations I had so far been making.

Of course, the summaries I have offered of the invariants of Rostam’s sonic identity might easily seem definitive of many other artists. However, considering the scope and unevenness of most people’s listening habits, it seems natural that particular qualities should become tightly tied to the sonic identity of a particular artist for whom a listener has a strong liking, even if an imagined omniscient listener might be able tie these qualities to any number of

artists. This multi-applicability points, in any case, to an eternal issue with writing about music. The interpretations that I have offered are merely textual summaries of the affordances of a network of sonic, visual, and audio-visual materials that testify, at their widest scope, to Rostam's sonic identity. They are also snapshots from a familiarised perspective that condense conclusions that have been arrived at through extensive repetition. As such, they cannot truly illuminate how my sense of Rostam's identity has developed as my familiarity with his music has increased. Not only would these materials need to be heard and seen—repeatedly—for all shades of meaning to emerge, but the full interplay between the nodes in the network of Rostam's (and anyone else's) sonic identity would also have to be grasped in order for his unique sonic identity to be totally understood. As I have stressed, however, this kind of totality—the kind that analysis strives for—does not correspond to the partiality and contingency of each discrete act of listening. Nor does it reflect the partiality and contingency of a given listener's proclivity for a given artist's music.²² Nevertheless, such can be the specificity of sounds in recorded music that they can already offer enough perceptual data to conjure a distinct conceptual form of a sonic identity. It is not enough to read about them: they must be heard to be believed.

²² I, for instance, haven't brought into this discussion Rostam's early album *LP* (XL, 2009) as part of electro-pop duo Discovery. I have only listened to it once or twice, and I don't much care for it; as such, it has little to do with my sense of Rostam's sonic identity.

4: Sonic identities *in vivo*: a listening diary

Whoa!
Another day
I take your pain away

– Janelle Monáe, 'Tightrope (feat. Big Boi)'

Having treated my already-existing impression of Rostam's sonic identity as an analytical object in the previous chapter, I will here address a different, dynamic aspect of sonic identities, namely their emergence. How to track this emergence poses a problem: to reflect on the emergence process of an already-emerged (though always still emergent) sonic identity (such as Rostam's, for instance) would place impossibly extreme demands on the accuracy, detail, and comprehensiveness of memory. To overcome this, I decided to choose two artists of whom I had almost no knowledge and to record the cumulative effects of a daily listening diet on my familiarisation with each of them. I considered the shreds of awareness required to judge these artists as viable options in the first place to be acceptably small marks on otherwise blank slates. The artists I chose were Janelle Monáe and Loretta Lynn. My rationale for choosing these artists was relatively pliable, but I was keen to choose a female artist for better gender balance, and determined to choose an artist who represented a musical tradition that was somewhat alien to me. This latter priority led me to Lynn, a *grande dame* of American country music. Meanwhile, I felt I knew Monáe as an artist situated somewhere in the wide world of popular music which I considered home terrain.

I felt sufficiently curious to explore both these artists' music, and followed my intuition in selecting them.

My approach both to the listening and the writing of the diary was similarly intuitive. Rather than scheduling dedicated listening sessions of fixed duration, I tried to incorporate the listening into my usual listening habits. Rather than listening to a fixed amount of music per day, I prioritised what felt natural, such as an album at a time, for instance, or whatever spanned the duration of an accompanying activity of moderate length, such as cooking dinner. I began the diary on 3rd February 2020 and finished on 1st May 2020. Occasionally I missed days, either for one or both artists, and eventually omitted weekends. I ended the diary once I felt that a firm understanding of both artists had sedimented. I approached each artist's oeuvre unsystematically, and engaged with paratextual and epitextual materials where I felt inclined to do so, rather than forcing a begrudgingly unnatural exploration of these materials. This flexibility served my wish to approximate as natural a listening process as possible: this was not an exercise in musical analysis, but in collecting evidence of everyday musical experience, whose analysis in terms of sonic identity development would come later. My approach to recording my experience in the diary was similarly unsystematic. I allowed myself to write whatever seemed an appropriate amount, on whatever seemed relevant aspects of the experience, on any given day. In this, I aimed for a naturalism that could reflect the effects of, for instance, my variations in mood, attention, and preoccupation from day to day (or track to track). I tried to maintain a specific focus on the emergence of Lynn's and Mon  e's sonic identities, aiming always to relate any reaction to the music to that

concern; however, many comments didn't pertain to sonic identities per se, and rather recorded more general aspects of the experience. Nevertheless, I felt these helped to form a more complete picture of my overall experience, in which lay implicit lessons about the sonic identities' emergence that could be inferred later on.

What follows is a selective, lightly narrativised adaptation of the original diary document, which came out at around 30,000 words long. The diary is written in the present tense. Actual excerpts from the diary text appear in blue, while subsequently added connecting and paraphrasing text appears in black. For the sake of fluency, I have also tidied up the original diary text and corrected blatant typographical errors, except where I felt they contributed to the narrative's effect.

4.1: The listening diary

3.2.2020

I'm sat in a café, excited to begin. I album-centrally defer Janelle's 2007 EP and played her debut LP, 2010's *The ArchAndroid*, primed to notice my noticing. I enjoy the varied flow of the album's first 'Suite', particularly the James-Brownian 'Tightrope'—it's great, incidentally—much-lauded at the Pop Personae conference I attended the week before. Discussions there of Janelle's androidism also echo in the reverse effects ('Androidy!' I'm sure) of 'Neon Gumbo' and the vocoder effect of 'Mushrooms and Roses'. Notably, the music lights up a constellation of other artists: something to the sound makes me think

of Kamasi Washington; her weird English pronunciation on 'Faster' reminds me of Nicki Minaj; and 'Mushrooms and Roses' seems to cite Prince's 'Purple Rain' and the psychedelic Beatles. It's an auspicious start: the androidy 'gimmicks' don't seem tacky, the songs are too full and coherent ... I trust her to give us a good time.

Loretta's made to wait.

4.2.2020

I'm caffeinating in the library while continuing with *The ArchAndroid*. The constellation expands: the ripping guitar of 'Neon Valley Street' cites Funkadelic's *Maggot Brain*, 'Make The Bus' evokes Outkast and Bowie, 'Say You'll Go' balladeers like Stevie Wonder then quotes 'Clair de Lune', the orchestra in 'BaBopByeYa' strikes the tone of Joni Mitchell's 'Comes Love', and the 'Tightrope' video sees Janelle borrowing James Brown's shuffle too.

I turn to Loretta, shuffling Spotify's 'This is Loretta Lynn' playlist. I've been listening to some Patsy Cline recently, and vaguely categorise Loretta as *less nerdy than Cline* – gutsy, naughtier, as 'Your Squaw Is On The Warpath' seems to suggest.

5.2.2020

I'm enjoying a beer while I cook after a long but fulfilling day. I begin Janelle's second LP, 2013's *The Electric Lady*. The same Kamasi Washington-style

soundscape that undergirded *The ArchAndroid*—an ethereally choralised texture—stands out on ‘Suite IV Overture’ and ‘Q.U.E.E.N’, as does the André 3000-ness of her raps on ‘Electric Lady’ and ‘Ghetto Woman’.

After dinner, I move to Loretta’s earliest album available on Spotify, 1965’s *Blue Kentucky Girl*, while I read. Strikes me as ‘classically’ Country... nothing too radical (based on what little I know). The album’s ‘12 2-minute songs’ format sparks me thinking about the theme of authenticity and the industrial production of such music. She seems to have the character to make this all seem like the genuine outpouring of a real love-lorn figure, and I guess that’s also part of the tradition, or reflective of its favourite themes?

6.2.2020

I’m up earlyish, studying German and playing Janelle’s latest, 2018’s *Dirty Computer*. After a few tracks, I note that the ethereal, Kamasi chorus-style stuff has disappeared here. This album is actually much worse so far than the others, or just much tamer. Later, cooking dinner, I warm a little to ‘I Like That’ – nice and trappy, one of the better tracks.

7.2.2020

Listening to Loretta’s *I Like ‘Em Country* (1966), I delight in her pronunciations—sick and tarr’d, tearing/tarring, hurtin’ for certain—but am amused-aghast at a spoken word bit at the end of ‘Dear Uncle Sam’, replete with last-post bugling.

Afterwards, listening to Janelle's 2008 EP *Metropolis: The Chase Suite*, I feel curious to know what the relative critical reception was/is of her works. *Dirty Computer* strikes me as flattest, but feel like it was best received. Indeed, it's generally been well reviewed; I note that my go-to critic, Robert Christgau, rates *Dirty Computer* best (Christgau, n.d.[b]) – something to think about...

9.2.2020

Coaching to Cambridge through Storm Ciara, I shuffle (for convenience) Janelle and almost wish I hadn't heard so much about Afrofuturism re: her as I couldn't think of much else.

Shuffling Loretta, I note she gets a lot out of dead phrases/lines, e.g. on 'There Goes My Everything'. But, feeling musically disoriented, I fret over my task. *Going to be weird and naïve trying to say what sets her apart against a tradition I have no aural knowledge of, really. Are her piano figures distinctive or just standard, e.g.?* Thematically, meanwhile, it's just so aggressively about being jilted.

10.2.2020

I'm marching cheerily through Cambridge, shuffling Loretta and admiring her voice again. 'I Still Miss Someone' a really brilliant track, vocally at least. She really sinks so much into the lines, and always—it seems—the right amount.

11.2.2020

Listening to Loretta's *Fist City* (1968), 'I've Got Texas In My Heart' gets me googling her origins. **Nope, Kentucky**. I'm aware she's done some writing, but has she written all of this? I decline to check just now.

12.2.2020

Sat in Hertford MCR feeling a little frazzled, but it's sunny and all's vaguely well. I play Janelle's *Dirty Computer*, of which I note that there is maybe something warmer/less contrived than her Android stuff, as Christgau noted – like her rap on 'Crazy, Classic, Life', which is generally just less forced or more enervated, but in a way that works. The funk is coming through a bit better now.

Afterwards, I enjoy Loretta's *Love Is The Foundation* (1973), which is a little more grandiose now, instrumentally and tonally. The title track is quite moving though, despite its grandeur. I hope she's writing these, they'd make her a very touched person. I decide it's been one of the better albums on the whole.

13.2.2020

I decide that Janelle's well-enjoyed 'Oh Maker' really sounded like it could have been by someone else, and if she hadn't already established eccentricity, it would have been very incongruous.

14.2.2020

Playing Loretta and Conway Twitty's *Louisiana Woman, Mississippi Man* (1973), I wonder who wrote these? They are similar in style and vein to Loretta's own – assuming she's written most of what I've so far heard. Then I brood again on how, sonically, I still don't know if anything is particularly signifying, either re: her identity meanings or just generally (in the sense of against the hypothetical standard texture). To me, it just sounds like the standard texture all the time, because I'm such a newbie.

Afterwards, *The Electric Lady*'s 'Ghetto Woman'—pure Stevie Wonder, or rather, cyborg Stevie—strikes me as clumsy... thematically, and perhaps even patronising to its subject. But 'What an Experience' makes me feel good. Very sweet and good-natured, earnest.

15.2.2020

I'm on a train, tired, storm-battered, and queasy, shuffling Janelle. I decide I really like her voice, and don't find it 'thin' as Xgau [Christgau] does. I get what he means I think: she spreads herself quite thin, and she comes across as being very accomplished at various styles. But accomplished she indeed seems, and it has the effects. I note too that it's weird I like her theatricality since I often don't like that in music, and then wrestle with 'Make The Bus', which I decide I don't like, except for that weird Petshop Boys-esque phrase. In fact, I think I do like it a little.

Later, wandering London and shuffling Loretta, I start to worry about how I really feel about the various types of vexed woman she plays; e.g. 'Fist City' is quite comical, but should I really jeer?

16.2.2020

At the moment, the things I'm associating with Janelle are that choral background vibe, those ripping guitar solos, her weirdly attitude rapping style.

18.2.2020

Listening to *The ArchAndroid* while I work, I feel everything's sinking in now. Feel like I know her. I reflect on what that means. Generally there's a vivid and varied eclecticism running through all this, anchored around this space-agey, android vibe, and that's what's unifying everything. But what else is it saying to me, especially in context of the Afrofuturism references from the Bayreuth Pop Personae conference? I guess that's partially primed me to bolster those futuristic themes, and more subtly (and insidiously?) led me to focus on the genealogical links she makes to her 'predecessors' (Stevie Wonder, James Brown, Prince, Funkadelic, etc.). What does the spaceyness itself even convey? It's nerdy, and goofy but in a totally self-assured way. She's still way cooler than you.

19.2.2020

Sick at home, I've room to ruminate. As *The Electric Lady* plays, I'm thinking about what sounds I'd identify Janelle by... Atm at least it's not single timbres, but more *arrangements and tactics of timbre* and orchestration. Her voice I recognise now, and would know it, but it's relatively anonymous also, perhaps because of her eclecticism.

Loretta and Conway's *United Talent* (1976) leaves me uncomfortably snooty. 'The Letter'? I just cannot take such things seriously. It's important to account for that. And then 'God Bless America Again', my oh my. Conway is really something...

20.2.2020

Sat cheerily in a café, I play Loretta and Conway's *Two's A Party*, whose cover shows them *snuggled by the fire together*. I guiltily acknowledge the *tone of irony throughout the Loretta listening on which I've relied to save musically boring stretches*. I come to feel it's weird just how ephemerally this is Country, based on my previous understanding. More groovy and bluesy. I think of modern Country, the kind you hear on radio in the US, real D-list Country, and it seems 'purer' than this somehow, much goofier; much less mainstream I guess; some of the songs here feel like they break out of Country constraints and could fit on normal pop charts (or could have at the time). I'm transfixed by the closing 'If I Ever Had To Say Goodbye To You': more Ashford and Simpson shit, and it's great. Although it lacks the high melodrama of A&S. This is the archetype of the

duet: the torpid crooners backed by a thousand violins and a very trebly piano, singing real nonsense at each other. Ooooh Conway doesn't quite manage to land on the major third at the end and it sounds quite eerie.

21.2.2020

I'm toasting good news in the college bar while shuffling Janelle, and [feel like](#) there's a sense of her voice being a pliable and fluent but ultimately disjointed (influenced by Christgau here probably, dammit) tool that actually, by being so, adds to the cyborgism and the expressiveness of that weird, eclectic, additive soundworld.

24.2.2020

Let's go for a bit more Janelle, in the form of *Dirty Computer*.

This really grows on me. Is more accessible than the earlier stuff for sure.

25.2.2020

I'm cooking dinner with my girlfriend and my housemate, while playing (*Loretta Lynn*) *Sings Patsy Cline's Favourites* (1992). We're all enjoying it; my housemate is tickled by the music, but doesn't hear it as country. I'm prompted to acknowledge [that this Loretta journey has shown me the breadth of the genre beyond the cliché of yawning pedal steel and banjos](#), although [this album really drives the point home that Patsy \(at least, but presumably early Country, or](#)

Country from early on) was more than just adjacent to the pop balladeering of the 50s-60s. Maybe it's the songs are just better? But these are really quite nice. In particular, Loretta sings 'Why Can't He Be You' REALLY well, that peaking note before the end of the verse/chorus is A+.

26.2.2020

I'm in high spirits, impressed by the essay I'm marking. Shuffling Janelle, and struck by how I really love 'What an Experience'. I also really like 'Say You'll Go' (I think it is?) with the Debussy bit at the end. I know I say this every time, but I just really like it. The Debussy is so well integrated, really makes the whole track feel like a natural phenomenon in this weird cyber world she's creating.

27.2.2020

Slept in a little, feeling nice and well-rested after a pleasant evening. The time's come to summarise where this process has led me so far. I shuffle Janelle while piecing her together.

I think the Pop Personae conference did a lot to prime me to think within this Afro-futurist frame, or rather, the frame of whatever Afro-futurism seemed to instinctively mean to me: a specifically African-American formulation of science-fiction themes (in this case, the android/cyborg theme being the most prominent element of that) and corresponding aesthetic devices (the massively eclectic stylistic array that also swings seemingly between futuristic sounds like theremin-esque sounds and organ tones, and more old-fashioned ones like the orchestral

backing, which itself creates this overall sense of a cyberpunk kind of vibe, like the video game series *Bioshock* almost: the 1950s in an android future). All that is then part of a wider sense of Black pride and affirmation—not to mention actual striving for and engaging with Black suffering and the quest for racial justice in her metaphorically cyborgised America—and in Janelle’s case also queer pride, which ... seems to complement the eclecticism and cyborgian themes, thinking specifically even of Haraway in whose work such boundaries aren’t even overcome as much as utterly dissolved and even ignored altogether. Partly, again, primed by the references to her at the conference, I was quietly, instantly struck by apparent references to other figures/groups within the history of Black popular music, many of whom could also be said to embody/have embodied something at least akin to an Afro-futurist aesthetic in some cases: e.g., Prince, Stevie Wonder, James Brown, Funkadelic, André 3000, not to mention guest slots and associations with Solange, Erykah Badu, etc. Given her eclecticism and also her vocal variability and flexibility, a great deal of her effect seems to be her synthesis of all these allusions and traditions in a somewhat hectic and actually somehow synthetic way (which suits the cyborgian themes, I suppose). Her voice is so adept at all sorts of styles and manners of delivery, but Christgau’s point about it being thin sort of hangs in my mind, and sometimes it does strike me how relatively grainless it seems. Again, this suits the cyborg theme in a way I like, and her ‘shameless’ (not that there should be any shame at all!!!) synthesising seems coherent under the banner of these themes. The grain actually seems to emerge more on *Dirty Computer*, where she distances herself from the narrative edge of these themes, her alter egos etc., and goes a

bit more mainstream. Definitive sounds? Her voice that is rarely ‘just’ ‘her’ voice; in the earlier music, the lush orchestral backing and those weird warbly choral vocals – this really is the main thing, particularly in her earlier music, I really think I would recognise that quite firmly and easily; those Funkadelic guitar rips that occasionally crop up; it’s hard to say what else, from memory. Again, eclecticism and allusion are her bread and butter, although it’s all within this (admittedly quite broad) template of Afro-futurism and Black popular musics of a funky persuasion. I guess I don’t know of any other artist (female, at least) who does a similarly quirky but thickly embellished and poppy/songy style in the same vein. Bruno Mars, e.g., in his more affected poses has something in common, but only very little. What are her vocal modes? The croony, well-controlled but also semi-operatic singing of the likes of ‘BaBopByeYa’; the André 3000-esque rapid rap; the more drawly, Kendrick Lamar-adjacent (I’m sure other comparisons are more apt) rap; the smooth, polished James Brown playing of ‘Tightrope’ and such; the true opera of ‘Cybertronic Purgatory’; the huskiness of *Dirty Computer*; the cute neo-soul (if that’s what you call it) of ‘Lettin’ Go’; her spoken word, theatrical form. Each song has something like its own, to be fair. Favourite tracks? Off the top of my head: ‘Tightrope’; ‘Say You’ll Go’; ‘Oh Maker’; ‘Dirty Computer’; ‘Dance Apocalyptic’; ‘Mushrooms and Roses’. Paratext? The ‘Tightrope’ video rams the James Brown point home super firmly, and the specific pleasure in watching her (or him) do the Brown shuffle is extreme, and does so much to anchor the joy of that track. The tuxedo thing doesn’t do too much to excite me. The *Dirty Computer* album art seems to always make me think of FKA Twigs, which is a whole different reference. The album art for *ArchAndroid* is quite lovely, and

really seems Pharaonic in a way totally in keeping with this sense of time-spanning Afro-futurism; *Electric Lady*, too, drives home this 50s vibe, Jailhouse Rock style, and the many Janelles emphasises the android thing. The EP album art is a bit crass and crappy imo, and looks like the artwork for a pre-big record deal (was it?) EP, tbh. 'Lettin' Go' is something else entirely, a whole other vein/tradition. It's interesting how starkly that contrasts with what comes later, even though there's a lot in common.

Will now put on the next Loretta while I do her write-up; 1993's *Honky Tonk Angels* with Tammy Wynette and Dolly Parton. Just had lunch. A bit eager to get this done before this meeting.

Where to begin with Loretta? Or where to end? I know very little to nothing about Country; my stereotypical idea of the genre came from being in Florida as a kid and hearing that real corny, C-grade radio Country that Dad loved, and I hated at the time. I know some Dolly, I know some Willie Nelson and Patsy Cline, some Dixie Chicks, and those I like, and I have an increasing curiosity about it as a haven for great song-writing and the sort of authentic *Weltanschauung* that's associated with folk. There's also an ironic pleasure in the goofiness of it, as it appears to me as an outsider. I'm cautious about that, but also feel it's something natural enough to revel in (if cautiously); when listening to Loretta (or Merle Haggard, or whoever) from the '60s-'80s, the historical distance and the concurrent amusement that can be derived is no different from eye-rolling a little at the new romantics or at hair metal or at hippie rock or whatever. But Loretta in

all this? There's something kind of archetypical about her in my mind, although that's probably inevitable given I'm more or less coming at the whole genre/tradition fresh. She typifies in my mind this sort of vexed woman who swings both ways: from God-fearing, man-loving, heart-broken housewife to free-wheeling, bunny-boiling, harlot-thumping femme fatale. Also, I'd loosely contrasted her voice to Dolly's at the start; listening now to *Honky Tonk Angels*, Dolly's much more melodramatic and husky; Loretta, kind of like Janelle actually, can swing from one affect to the other, all along the backbone of a pretty archetypical voice. She bypasses the slight nerdiness of Patsy, and while she can and does do it sometimes, she generally stays a bit back from Dolly's super-chick croakiness. I have a vague memory also of having glanced at/through some Christgau reviews—there he is again—where he applauds the feminist staunchness of her character in the better songs. I also think she writes/wrote a lot of them, which I've yet to investigate, but adds to my esteem for her. All in all I think she's a great singer, as demonstrated on the high note in 'Why Can't He Be You' for instance. Her instrumental sound varies, but generally stuck to a light enough, middle of the road Country vibe whose main expressive tools were pedal steel and the occasional warbling backing vocals. Sometimes there were bluesy tinges, which earlier on were quite tokenistic and bad, but have gotten a little better over time. There have also been some rockier attempts, which seem to fit in with their times as semi-crossover attempts, perhaps. The thing with Conway is also fascinating: he has merits, but seems increasingly like a bit of a goof or patsy (hehe) compared to Loretta and her consummate craft. Maybe also there's a gender stereotyping thing going on (a bad one) whereby it's weirder (to me) for

him (a man) to be goofy and soppy, but normal for her (as a woman). I hope not, but it seems it could be so. But yes, the sense is that things lose a real bit of grit with Conway, especially in the '80s when one can imagine their moment had passed and they were grasping more for it (I should check if this is how it was). But in terms of what defines her, at least in my own very narrow circle: it lacks the roughness and specific guitar-centrism of Willie Nelson, and as noted on Loretta's own Patsy covers album, the Patsy tracks are often more in the mode of a Cole Porter kind of thing (without the jazziness, true), rather than the specific jauntiness of my idea of Country (better typified by something like 'Walkin' After Midnight', with its loopy pedal steel). And Johnny Cash is something more rock 'n' roll entirely, as are Lucinda Williams and the Dixie Chicks even, although the latter are also prone to this more popped up folksiness of the '00s. Dolly too, vocals aside, is something poppier and larger than Loretta. So in this context, Loretta really does seem to typify a key note of the Country tradition, although again, I'm sure this is oriented by my utter non-knowledge of the wider tradition. She also has what seem characteristic vocal things she does like the 'tarr'd' for 'tired', which seem a little deliberately egged, and infrequent enough to strike one as (deliciously!) affected. Why delicious? Part of the goofiness again, this aggressive assertion of one's home-down southern American credentials. And paratext/epitext? Well, I recall the *Squaw on the Warpath* album art, which is simplistic but also suggests her as in the same commercialised tradition of other '60s pop artists who would be placed in similarly cringy poses/looks (although I'm sure they weren't seen as such at the time). There's also her weirdly posing by a tree on (I think) *Love Is The Foundation*. And then there's the real desperate

fireside pose with Conway, just utter dross in the most delectable way. But there's a real self-assurance in that that I like, like her and Conway are both riders on the storm of fragile success. I also love her smirk on the *Honky Tonk Angels* cover, and also the mock-earnestness of her *The Gospel Spirit* pose, her looking to the sky. Her little interview about Patsy was also curious too, it sounded somehow affected but also so earnest and sincere in terms of her feelings and recollections about Patsy. Can't think of any clear tracks that are my faves (have heard so many now), but 'Hey Loretta' really stands out, and the final track of that '80s album with Conway, but that's more of a joke thing.

28.2.2020

Listening to Loretta's *Still Country* (2000)—interesting claim for her to (have to?) make!—I sense again the need to emphasise and unpack how this very exercise, and Loretta's prominence resulting from it, has fully forged my whole overall idea of what's definitively Country.

Shuffling Janelle later, feeling a bit stressed and coffeeish on a coach, I think how I'm so prone to making links between her and other artists that I almost forget that maybe it's just her sometimes (at least to me). Listening to 'Many Moons', thinking, 'is that CeeLo? André 3000? Who?'. Maybe it's just her filling in the gaps. I get defensive. Is there something (sinister) encouraging me to emphasise such allusions on her part? Am I trying to deny her some sort of creativity or originality? I don't think so. I'm quite keen to view her as the maverick she's loved by so many for being; people with whom I'm eager to agree really

like and respect her. And besides, I do anyway. I like her interweaving of apparent references and amusingly blatant stylistic lifts; the coherent original aesthetic is her precise eclecticism.

29.2.2020

I'm settling down to read while spinning Loretta's *Van Lear Rose* (2004)... This album is almost 40 minutes long! What's more, it's quite a rocky setup, big thumping drums. I like this, quite punchy/sassy... Yeah, this all feels very stately and unrestrained, like she can do exactly what she likes now. Bloody hell, 'Portland Oregon' (with Jack White, to be fair), starts like a Godspeed You! Black Emperor track... love it though. This is great, but I maybe say that because it sounds more in keeping with this 'authentic' songmongering of other stately songspinnners like Dylan, Young, etc. Sensing a more-than-incidental touch of White, I investigate. Lo and behold, Wikipedia says the whole album was produced by Jack White. Successful, and critically acclaimed, 'the most successful crossover album of Lynn's 60-year career'. Very interesting. Some backstory too: 'The title refers to Lynn's origins as the daughter of a miner working the Van Lear coal mines.' Moreover, she wrote all these songs/with some contribution on one or two tracks by White, e.g. 'Little Red Shoes'. I like this album!

3.3.2020

Relaxed, working post-lunch and shuffling Janelle. I sense how subtly but clearly different *Dirty Computer* seems to the previous albums. Indeed, am I starting to

prefer *Dirty Computer* to the others? Why? Did I just only have so much patience with the more OTT cyborg stuff (since it is still present in *Dirty Computer*)? Is it Christgau's creeping influence? Is it just more digestible as an album than the others, which are long(er) and (more) divergent? Some mix of the above – at least. 'I Like That' (which is great) arrives, and reminds me of Kanye (of the *The Life of Pablo* (2016) period, I'd say) and *Blond*-era Frank Ocean: that kind of washed-out gospel sound and a fat bassy beat. Really like this track. Her voice is doing something different here. Something's very lightly manipulated about it when singing, either by her and/or technologically.

5.3.2020

'Story of My Life' (I think) off Van Lear Rose is an interesting overview of, well, Loretta's life. Husband for 48 years (at the time), six kids, being cheated from pay/riches (I think?). A good 'source' for the average listener like me. She sounds like a real journeywoman.

9.3.2020

Shuffling Janelle while working, I notice these guitar rips are way more common than I'd realised; they're everywhere!

Later, shuffling Loretta, I'm impressed again by 'Why Can't He Be You' – her leans into the high note across the 17 are terrific. I note that Jack White is very dominant on the Van Lear Rose stuff, not too surprisingly. But then, all she needs is something to sing on top of...

11.3.2020

I return to Loretta's *Love is the Foundation* on a whim, because I remember it being decent. As it plays, I acknowledge that I do like this period. She seems strong and free, the songs are solid-to-memorable; she just feels like a self-sustained artist. Especially because, now, her song-writing credentials are always at the back of my mind. I wonder if she did write all of this?... **NO! She only wrote 'Five Fingers Left'**... Even 'Hey Loretta' wasn't written by her... But it seems these songs were all written for her/this album. I'm almost embarrassed by how long I've assumed she'd written most of what I've heard.

13.3.2020

Another day, another flurry of coronavirus anxiety; although actually it's been a pretty nice/chill day, and sunny. What will be, will be... I'll shuffle Loretta while rounding up where I'm at with her.

Just now becoming conscious that my first instinct when trying to characterise her is to situate her somewhere along a kind of spectrum of autonomy within her world of creation, that is, Nashville Country: was she more or less creating 'her own music', or was she nearer to being a kind of vessel for that machine, if perhaps only at some point or another? Right now, taking a sort of view from nowhere, I'm inclined to view her as a relatively free figure, free to write and create, and not too trammelled by those forces; that said, there is that line in 'My Life Story' about the money disappearing that seemed to hint at her getting a bit shafted. But overall, she just seems so indomitable, durable, and consistent

throughout all her phases, whether she's singing her own stuff or someone else's, whether she's carrying Conway or being buoyed by Jack White. I like the spectrum she covers of feminine perspectives: she's funny when she's being bawdy, and moving when she's been hurt; she's defensive of her man, and she's defensive of her family against him; (the rule of three says I should posit another dichotomy; is this me totally manufacturing an idea about her? Damn right, probably); she's paranoid and irritable ('Five Fingers Left', one of her own, incidentally (I think); perhaps even a reference to that money trouble...?), and charitable and spiritual (I like that rhyme! Maybe I could write Country songs...). Musically, she's becoming a bit more distinctive. Her voice is distinguishable from the hyper-warble of Dolly, and the something-else of Tammy, not to mention the gutsy perfect object of Patsy. It's such an instrument too, which is belied somewhat, particularly early on, by the flutteriness of her vibrato; but again, c.f. Dolly, that's pure effect, and the feel underneath everything is usually fantastic. Some of her vocal moments are sublime. Instrumentally, there's this middle-of-the-road Country, a sort of logical '50s conclusion of the earlier basic sound of Hank Williams maybe (who I was listening to earlier today): simple shuffling percussion, the occasional backing choir thing (of Jordanaires style if not vintage), pedal steel, sometimes a little plucky guitar, some plinky plonk piano, etc. But yes, she seems perfectly at the centre of the machine, right on the nose of the archetype, as the Conway stuff maybe suggests. Will listen more to the music around her because I'm genuinely curious to get an idea, plus I enjoy it. I guess it's less scruffy and rocky than the outlaw Country of Nelson, Haggard, etc. and also the reverent semi-rock of Johnny Cash. Thinking of paratext too,

I've just thought really what it is about her album art. She was/is clearly a good-looking woman, but she was never classically beautiful: the nose too strong, the top teeth too present. The various cover art shots of her seem to support perfectly—in different ways depending on each one; and in some (or all, to some extent) she's clearly meant to just be sexy (*Squaw on the Warpath*, etc.)—this idea of a woman who, in the misogynistic world of (southern) 20th-century America, was supposed to be a woman to be desired, but also a woman to be believably jilted. Interesting to consider in terms of the overlap of her and, say, Parton, who's a classic bombshell (famously), on one side, and Cline, who doesn't seem to lend herself to that kind of view (not 'typically sexy', at least by 'today's standards', etc.). Perhaps, terribly, this seems to add some grain to Loretta's vibe of being self-sufficient and her own songwriter, etc.; consider the active fuss made about the fact Dolly's the killer songwriter as well as having the looks and voice. Also, having thought about her in this way, I had the instant thought that the more recent album cover from *Full Circle* and *Van Lear Rose* of her in that dress has a Miss Havisham vibe. This was unfair, ridiculous, instinctive, and irrelevant... Besides, I think it's actually somehow a tangential part of the Country aesthetic? Anyway. I should, and would like to, read a biography of her, and maybe watch some live performances. I bet they're killer. Going back to write about my relation to her, and playing some *Van Lear Rose*. So, what's my sense of my personal relation to her? There's a consciousness of her eminence, and a sense that I want to respect that; but only because she's worth it as an artist, and seems like a likeable, admirable, and respectable person, both artistically and personally, and that too within a demographic I

wouldn't expect to have loads in common with (octogenarian Kentuckians). I wouldn't respect Conway in the same way. But there's also a dangerous instinct to view certain Countryisms—particularly many of Conway's, who, after all, I first knew of as a joke in school—as just downright goofy and funny. Again, though, that's due to American spoofs of Country as much as anything. And when she does them, I like it, partly because it's sparing, but also because it's proud. I don't really know what of her and her music I take into myself. I like the emphasis on 'solid song-writing', that speaks to the teenage canonist in me, but also the person who appreciates the Christgauian (and of course that of others) insistence that a good 4x4 song can still be sublime; not that tons of hers necessarily are. I also kind of respect the going with the flow from Nashville to Jack White, and finding expressive brilliance in all, although I'm aware she may not have necessarily had lots of agency in these moves. I also just love the American vibe, always have, and perhaps always will. She seems to embody the most American vibe of all—Country—in a way that isn't stolid or somehow reprehensible, whether aesthetically or politically. She's a woman of the old school; she's an underdog herself, she's no brawling alkie like those Country bros. I like the fact that liking her means I can say I like Country, or rather, more specifically, that I can say I like Loretta Lynn, but didn't Conway drag her down, etc. Adds to my omnivorous aspirations, but also seems like the first step in filling the gap in my knowledge of a music that, after all, is one of the largest markets in the industry. That's the crux of it, I think, for now.

OK, now onto Janelle. Starting with 'I Like That' because I saw something about it sometime recently and missed it.

My understanding of Janelle remains the same, I think, as it was last time I summarised. I guess I've reflected a little more often on her malleability as a singer, songwriter, artist, etc., and how I admire the thinness of that in a way, as if it's committed to a higher ideal of pan-expressionism (within her pansexual Afrofuturist space, if that's how I might glibly summarise it), although I'm sure she and many others—and indeed myself for the most part; I mustn't let Christgau's comment get too into my head (or can I? What difference does it make?)—listen to her in, say, Sinatra mode and think it's on a par with the real thing, as it were. But yeah, I like the greediness of doing it all, even if I don't always enjoy the excesses for themselves; like 'BaBopByeYa', which I've gone a little cold on. I just like that she did it. Sonically/instrumentally, I feel like I've noticed those little guitar rips more frequently in more songs, and made the connection between those warbly, radio-muffled choir backings from the earlier albums and this early Disney soundtrack vibe, which seems to suggest something else quite specific in terms of her retroism that's already clearish to gather from the album art of the EP and the first two: the deco font, the red curtain, the haircuts, the jailhouse rock, the Cindi schtick, etc. It's like nostalgia for a future past, a same-world-but-one; but why? Is that epoch inherently romantic for her? Perhaps that's it. I feel that too, to an extent, although not always along her lines; sometimes it feels/sounds a bit tacky. Although she never communicates purely through that; there's still more affinity with later styles, musically speaking, and again, once we

get to *Dirty Computer* it's a whole different game anyway (sort of), in which the more modernity-friendly elements from that earlier '50s cyborg future sound are transferred into a contemporary pop-oriented sound. Maybe it's just that retro thing that was kind of in ten years ago, with the Paloma Faiths and Imelda Mays of the world ascending, and which I never enjoyed – maybe that's why I resent it slightly. But yes, what Janelle makes with it is often just too beautiful, like on 'Say You'll Go'. I think the '50's link is fertile because it's not super clear why it's that epoch, or maybe it is clear, just not to me. Post-war capitalist excess? The shiny sheen of it? Something like that. And now on *Dirty Computer* it's like she's just arrived at the place she was heading for, or that future has just seemed less and less tenable (understandable given the political upheavals of the last 5 years). But I trust her wholly as an artist. She's way too interesting and excessive to lose sight of now; so what if you don't like one song? There'll always be at least ten others that are barely anything like it. I still pin down this weird echoey choir thing as something I can only think of her via, though. I keep meaning to watch that Glastonbury Festival performance my girlfriend Steffi was watching on the coach back from Bayreuth. And I'd like to see her new movie – and her old one/s. And watch some interviews, actually, I'm curious to know how she comes across. I'd like to hear her talking about her creative process. So, what's my relation to her? I still, again, feel that distance of not sharing (what seem to be) these key social identity categories of being a woman, being queer, being Black (in no particular order), and so much of her art speaks to the experiences involved with sharing in those identities—if it's not fundamentally about that—but then again, not as 'forcefully' or 'unapologetically' as others; I can't at all imagine her actively

denying anyone (or me at least; why? Because I'm a 'nice guy'?...) from her fanship. It just feels like she's for everyone, because she's making an explicitly futuristic space on the one hand, predicated on that space being a better world, but also because she's just nice, she's sweet, she's kind, she's an optimist, etc. But then again, she also spits bars in that tough guy voice about the ghetto and female empowerment; but it still just seems like an aesthetic expression which you're welcome to observe, enjoy, and empathise with if you can, whether or not you are yourself being explicitly addressed; in that sense, I'm reminded of what Xgau said about Kenny's *To Pimp a Butterfly* (2015): 'it addresses African-Americans straight up and leaves the rest of the hip-hop audience to listen in if it wants' (Christgau, n.d.[a]). Seems congruous with her widely spread eccentricity, although I'd have to think about which is the chicken and which the egg, or indeed, about whether that's even relevant. But overall, I just admire and respect her a lot, and have this explicit sense that I'd be nervous to meet her and anxious to be liked: essentially, that she's a classic pop star, someone to be properly idolised. A real legend, essentially. So I feel like my own sense of self is accommodated in her music because it's directly inclusive and expansive, and these are qualities that I value and would want to champion for their own sake.

17.3.2020

Back home, and pushing against anxieties over the seemingly imminent lockdown, I re-run *Dirty Computer*. Ah, I REALLY like 'I Like That'. I like how she repurposes that muffled-radio choir sound from the early days into a completely

different aesthetic; it sounds totally unrelated in this new context, partially because of the wider song style, which is unprecedented on her early stuff.

18.3.2020

Incidentally, got my Loretta biography *Coal Miner's Daughter* delivered, picked it up from college today. The blurb is incredible. 'Married at thirteen, left home at fourteen, mother of four by 18, grandmother at 28...'. What a start...

20.3.2020

Shuffling Janelle again, I revel again in 'What an Experience', and sense that it seems of a piece with 'I Like That', similarly ardent and coy somehow.

24.3.2020

Giving Janelle's EP another run, I muse idly on some apparent narrative links—her cyborg serial number on the cover is 57821, the same number with the song on *ArchAndroid* and referenced on the medievaly sounding one ('57821'); is Violet Stars also Cindi?—but don't care much to follow these threads.

26.3.2020

Lovely day. Got up earlier enough and did some exercise, not too strenuous but feel good. Still not 10am. Sat in the sunny kitchen... Will start by shuffling that Loretta hits album from yesterday, *Honky Tonk Girl: The Loretta Lynn Collection* (1994). Oh yes, the souped up schmaltz of 'I Lie' is the kind of thing I can get

behind, where the only thing signalling it's Country is the odd waft of steel. And here's 'Love Is The Foundation', one of my favourites.

Will switch to Janelle now. Kind of don't want to, feeling a bit Country on this sunny day after lugging trees around in the garden... But will whack on *Dirty Computer*. Yeah 'Django Jane' is big. Kind of reminds me of Kanye as much as anyone else when she raps. It's direct and not super slick, but just slick enough, which somehow makes it pop a bit more. Love the bass (and everything else) on 'I Like That'.

27.3.2020

Later in the day, around 17:30. Sat in the kitchen after the walk, will shuffle Janelle while reading *David Copperfield* (finished the Loretta book). 'Say You'll Go' into 'Oh Maker', great stuff. Two of my favourites and also two tracks I associate instinctively, I now feel inclined to realise. Perhaps because they're both vulnerable romance songs. And the 'ba ba ba ba ba ba ba ba ba ba' thing in 'Tightrope' really is one of my favourite little musical motifs atm.

30.3.2020

Grey day, feeling a bit exhausted and loath to do these various email jobs... Will do some listening in the meantime, to zone out from the kitchen as much as anything else. Will start with Janelle's *Dirty Computer*, which will hopefully beguile me into a new mood. Actually, not really enticed by that. Let's do *ArchAndroid*. I can forgive that its excesses and potential annoyances better than

Dirty Computer, I feel. Well, the 'Tightrope' beat is just delicious, and 'Oh Maker' is fantastic. Said it before, I'll say it again. Also totally out of any space where I'm inclined to 'link' it stylistically to any other artist etc., unlike, say, 'Tightrope', whose brilliance seems heavily dependent on the legacy of James Brown.

31.3.2020

It's a nice day today. Just got back from my walk, got the kitchen to myself, shuffling Janelle on the stereo. Yes, 'What An Experience'. Great track. Seems like a sort of strand of hope through the quarantine haha. Which is obviously very goofy, and too grandiose. But the song also has this tone of goodwill that makes it alright to say things like that. Plus, I like that little reggaeish break towards the end too, and goodwill is a quality I've often associated with reggae.

Time for Loretta. I think I'll go with that fruitful greatest hits album. OH God, 'State of our Union' is unforgiveable...

2.4.2020

Feeling good. Got up earlyish, did my rowing, then got the news my rent has indeed been waived/tenancy cancelled. That's a nice £2000+ I wasn't sure I was going to ever see. Let's finish off Janelle's *Electric Lady* (second suite). Yes, 'WHAT AN eXPERIENCE. Love this track every time. Love the opening couplet. In a way, the putative thinness of her voice comes through on this track. Not actually a particularly 'strong' or expressive vocalisation. The reggae bit verges

on corny but it's really well integrated. She does that pretty well, just roping in the right amount of a certain style or trope.

7.4.2020

The ambience of the pandemic feels overwhelming. Nerves are tight, I [had some weird nightmares about Jens Lekman, of all people](#)—a should-be good angel of mine—and even Boris Johnson's in intensive care, a development that inspires little sympathy but some bewilderment. [Janelle is the good angel I need this day.](#)

10.4.2020

Really, 'I Like That' is [perfect](#).

14.4.2020

Feeling a bit zapped and grumpy, but sure my mood will change; it's only a mild funk out of nothing after all. But, ah, I [never get tired of 'What An Experience', never not in the mood. Great, great song.](#)

16.4.2020

[Am going to run through that Loretta album of Cline covers. Sat outside in the garden, and it's absolutely gorgeous. Yep, love this record. Again, I think maybe the songs are just better than a lot of the fare on her records? I think I've said before, but maybe that '50s era that Cline represents is more associated in my mind with 'pure song-writing', in an almost Tin Pan Alley sense. And Cline has a](#)

heavy mystique. And again, 'Why Can't He Be You' is absolutely terrific. Love her rise up to the higher register before the end of the verses, on the 17.

Ok, let's just keep shuffling Janelle. Damn the Clair de Lune bit in 'Say You'll Go' hits so hard, every time. Well-earned.

17.4.2020

Less sunny today, but a nice day. Feeling good after a pleasant evening last night, and a moderately productive day so far... Will start by rerunning that Loretta Patsy album from yesterday cus I love it. 'Why Can't He Be You?' in my top five for sure. Masterpiece. Makes Doo, her storied late husband, seem a tougher, sadder figure in her life than before, even though it's not really her song.

Will shuffle some Janelle now. After a good chain of tracks, it's notable suddenly how love-centric her whole oeuvre is. ALSO important how humorous she is, which suddenly seems striking and obvious – of course it is. But always good and a relief when there's so much fantastical conceptualising. Wow, her rap on 'Django Jane' is really fantastic, so good. For all my early doubts, I'm such a *Dirty Computer* convert. And now 'What An Experience'? Ambassador, you're spoiling us.

She's so great.

20.4.2022

Shuffling Loretta's *Who Was That Stranger?* (1988), and hearing her funky pronunciations again—hours as 'arrs', e.g.—and thinking of the fuss she made of it in her book; is she really such a hillbilly, by Country standards?

23.4.2020

Will do some summaries now. Currently sat outside in more gorgeous weather, feeling a bit tired and irritated, but ready to do the bare minimum for today. Will start with Janelle; shuffling her in the meantime.

I think my love for Janelle has grown, and I've really gotten more on her level to some degree. Distinctive to me is still her fluidity, and I've never been able to shake the Christgau accusation of her having a thin voice, which I increasingly hear the more I listen. There's often not much more behind it than what's required to fulfil the style that's being pursued in any given song, even if that style and song is distinctive in other ways. She's just a very fine singer. Her voice itself is very pleasant, though, and when she does sink into the personal end of it (e.g. on *Dirty Computer* a lot), it's really quite arresting sometimes. But she fits into all her vocal clothes so well. She's certainly expressive in a more standardised way anyhow. What seems most characteristic? I still think of those big Funkadelic guitar rips, which have receded across her output, I think. I still think of that grandiose space choir thing across the pre-*Dirty Computer* stuff too, although I think it's most prominent on *ArchAndroid*. Most distinctive is the eclecticism that's united under her project, which seems mostly romantic and political above all

else. She's super goofy, again in the Funkadelic tradition, but in a personable way. She seems like a real good egg, both in what she says and how she says it. She leans into her edge more on *Dirty Computer*, but that just sounds like a kind of self-protecting maturity as well as a delicious aesthetic move (thinking e.g. of 'Django Jane'). It's quite a gap between the albums, actually, or between *Electric Lady* and *Dirty Computer*, like 5 years. And in that time I feel like the cachet of the '50s shtick decisively disappeared, thank God. She's major non-mainstream; I don't think anything she's done is out and out mainstream. *Dirty Computer* feels like a kind of move towards the mainstream of the non-mainstream. Who she is: a really energetic and/or clear-sighted creative person, very sensitive but also strong, and really just into life, wants to improve it. My favourite tracks are the brilliant 'What An Experience' (now playing), 'I Like That' (which I'm going to put on), 'Dirty Computer' ('I'll love you when there's space and time'), 'Tightrope' still, 'Oh Maker', 'Say You'll Go'. All specifically moving love songs (of one type or another), excluding 'Tightrope', whose appeal is totally different, and is more representative of the self-belief that she promotes. I like the different shades they all add to her romantic character, and they're all just beautiful anyway. The Clair De Lune inclusion in 'Say You'll Go' is genius. One of the key things about her, as I've said, is the seemingly conscious-because-obvious references to a host of other artists who might be associated as innovators/geniuses of Black popular music, from Prince to Stevie to Funkadelic to JB. These seems to coalesce a few central details about her: she's turning a particular tradition inside out and milking it for all she can, although not at all cynically; she and it embodies a radical (enough) desire for personal fulfilment

and freedom—through love and political justice—that goes into a psychedelic, dare I say Afrofuturist space; all of this is very exciting, and she does it all in delightful earnest.

OK, that was crap – really not feeling it today... Now for Loretta. Will shuffle her too in the meantime. Actually fuck this. I'm in a foul mood and can't think properly. Will do Loretta's tomorrow.

Hmm, 'One's On The Way' actually helping my mood. No, come on, grow up. Let's summarise dearest Loretta, after all she's done.

I'm pro Loretta big time. I really like her sort of all-purposes, all-matters career, the bounce between gospel and corny romance with the dread Conway. I still definitely view her with a bit of generic, if not ironic, distance. Some of her music I do just really like, but I can't profess to have fully infiltrated the Country spirit and claimed it for myself (yet?). Realistically it's something for certain moods and contexts. I was 'hoping' that I would resonate with this idea that these old Country songs are little songcraft gems, moving in their artful simplicity, etc. etc. etc., and there certainly has been much of that. But I think the materials are often too plain to excite me greatly – it's not simplicity per se, it's, for instance, a relative lack of volume, groove, and so on. I enjoy the sounds of Country, but only to a point, and they are relatively limited. She does seem definitive of the genre for me, though. She's done the old-timey and the gospel, she's done the soupy '80s stuff, she's done the arty rock crossover, and threaded them all together with her

authority and longevity, which are well-earned/assigned. She's got so much personality. Theatrical, yes, but not melodramatic as, e.g., Dolly often is (in both good and bad ways), or at least not as melodramatic. Her voice can do all sorts, but it never strays out of orbit, held by her natural gravity and un-feigned/-strained pathos. She just sounds so natural, all the time. That book was a hoot as well. It was pretty sharply written, and evoked such a character, although presumably it's greatly a publicity coup. Still, it was confessional and idiosyncratic, so I'm sure there's a lot of truth to it. I guess the fact she's always been this hillbilly naïf (by her own admission) who didn't even start 'properly' singing until a few years before she made it big adds to this idea of an unfettered authentic Country voice, and in a way I like to buy into that. I think the authenticity of that story matches the authenticity of the music: sheened, manufactured, working under and around an idea of American-family Country life haunted by sex, lies, booze, and God, and gunning all the time for some story that references one or other of them. There is no Country genre without accepting and endorsing that kind of ideology, I think, without entertaining it as a listener at least: and given her family life, her upbringing, and so on, she can and does embody it all. I guess my personal relation to her is quite distant. I enjoy saying I've been listening to her; I guess it makes me feel like I seem omnivorous and catholic, a bit curious, onto something everyone else (outside of America I guess) is missing. She comes across as a good sort. I like her little interview snippets, I like her Jack White collab—that seems to signify a lot of goodwill to do that, although I guess he was hot shit and she was not exactly relevant at that time, I can imagine—I like her talking about Patsy, I like her carrying Conway through all that shit. My favourite songs: 'Why

Can't He Be You?', 'Hey Loretta', 'Love is the Foundation', 'Barroom Habits', 'Portland Oregon', 'Mrs Leroy Brown', 'If You've Got leaving On Your Mind', etc. It's hard to differentiate, there's so many tracks.

28.4.2020

The rest of it leaves me coldish, but the end of 'We Were Rock and Roll' is fantastic. Janelle has some passages of just perfect music.

1.5.2020

Well, this could be the last time I do a 'scheduled' Janelle entry. Let's go for her early EP. 'Violet Stars' a really sharp song. Like the funny 'product of metal' bit, her squeals, generally characterful. Cuts through the relative thinness (although not *actual* thinness) of the production... Her voice is actually really strong here.

Okeydokey, let's blast one last **Loretta**. Let's make it a classic. Um. HUH, well, there's a two-week old live album *Loretta in Concert* on Spotify. Let's do that...

Such a great performer!

5: Sonic identities *in vitro*: substantiating the diary

You don't see no city when you look at me
'Cause country's all I am
I love a-running barefooted through the old cornfields
And I love that country ham
Well, you say I'm a-made just to fit your plans
But does a barnyard shovel fit your hands?
If your eyes are on me
You're lookin' at country

– Loretta Lynn, 'You're Lookin' at Country'

While the foregoing exercise was intended to give some impression of how sonic identities can emerge and develop in conversation with a listener's own self-identity, the following exploration of the analytical processes and principles behind its design will elaborate that impression into a more robust analytical product. My first concern, however, is to address potential misgivings regarding the exercise's methodology—and indeed, as it went on, that of Chapter 3 before it—specifically its fundamental reliance on my own, almost exclusively private experiences.

5.1: Methodology

5.1.1: Auto-analysis

The validity of incorporating the self into research on socio-cultural phenomena has been discussed at length within and around the field of autoethnography,

whose practitioners promote various approaches to such research. Anderson, for instance, has advocated for '*analytic autoethnography*': 'ethnographic work in which the researcher is (1) a full member in the research group or setting, (2) visible as such a member in the researcher's published texts, and (3) committed to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena' (Anderson, 2006: p. 375). This framework is offered as a middle-ground between traditional sociological research practices and more radical, less systematic approaches, like that of Ellis and Bochner, who promote the 'story told' of their narrative autoethnographic techniques over the 'story analyzed' of Anderson's approach (Ellis & Bochner, 2006: p. 440). The aim here is 'evocation' (p. 435), that is, the very 'communication' (p. 439) of experience to the reader, rather than its objectified exhibition before them. Meanwhile, the generalisability treasured by traditional social science can survive since, while '[o]ur lives are particular, ... they also are typical and generalizable, since we all participate in a limited number of cultures and institutions' (Ellis & Bochner, 2000: p. 751).

This stronger interpretation of autoethnography's potential rests on postmodern understandings of truth, which, in undermining the presumed epistemological priority of Anderson's systematic position, afford scholarly legitimacy to non-systematic (e.g., narrative) forms of sociological research. More specifically, it is enabled by a more fundamental rejection of the researcher's self-effacement not just as a goal but even as a *possibility* of research. Hayano (1979: p. 102) rightly warns against the 'overobjectivity' of extreme scholarly distance, since, as Ellis and Bochner note, '[t]he investigator

[will] always be implicated in the product. So why not observe the observer, focus on turning our observations back on ourselves? And why not write more directly, from the source of your own experience? Narratively. Poetically. Evocatively' (2000: p. 747).

In my own study, this evocative mindset better respected the enacted nature of the consciousness I was studying (Varela, et al., 1991/2016: p. 9). The insight uniting these two theoretical strands here is that there are no objective articles of consciousness hidden off-stage in our inner 'Cartesian Theatre' (Dennett, 1991), ready to be uncovered and verified once and for all via objective processes, but rather just the dynamism of their reconstitution in the enaction of consciousness. In other words, to reflect on the apparent contents of consciousness is already, necessarily, to re-enact and modify them; likewise—or rather, therefore—'the meaning of prenarrative experience is constituted in its narrative expression' (Ellis & Bochner, 2000: p. 745). As a general rule for qualitative research of any kind, it may seem judicious to resist, as Atkinson encourages us to do, the urge to over-eagerly over-value '[a]utobiographical accounts and self-revelations', which 'are as conventional and as artful as any other mode of representation' (Atkinson, 1997: p. 341). But Atkinson's fear that a reliance on narrative can '[start] to transcend the realm of analytic methodology and [become] a surrogate form of liberal humanism and a romantic celebration of the individual subject' (p. 335) misses a weightier point made by consciousness scholars about the nature of introspection and subjects' reports of their experiences. As Dennett insists, subjects' reports about their experiences are the best available data on '*what the subject believes to be true about his or*

her conscious experience' (Dennett, 2003: p. 20, his italics; see also Jack & Roepstorff, 2003). In qualitative research, such data is, usually, exactly what researchers wish to obtain. Atkinson is right to promote a critical attitude, but what should be critiqued is not *whether* a report is true in some objective sense, but rather *why* the subject *holds it to be true*, an inquiry that can itself be supported by further reports from the subject themselves (Dennett, 2003: p. 22).

As long as narrative forms of research don't actually obscure where they performatively translate the research data that underpin it—including performatively departing from the data altogether (Walford, 2004: p. 411)—I concur with Ellis and Bochner that there is both legitimacy and unique potential in autoethnographic methods, up to and including the evocative forms they champion. More pointedly, an 'auto' methodology like my listening diary is particularly appropriate given the focus of this thesis on sonic identities, which are, after all, 'auto' phenomena. They exist in and for a given listener, and depend uniquely on that listener's perceptual and self-forming histories and sensitivities. Moreover, it is a key premise of this thesis that sonic identities are ubiquitous among popular music listeners (myself included), and can be freely 'created' by approaching new artists, as I eventually did in my diary. This meant that this project was not compelled to rely on scarce, privileged informants for its sociological insights, and in light of that, it seemed fruitful to take advantage of the complete overlap between myself as researcher and myself as subject – one to which I have unique access. As Le Guin (2004) and Ouzounian (2006) have convincingly demonstrated, if musicology wants to learn about such auto-phenomena as, say, the factors constraining autonomous, maximally attentive

music listening and its description (as in Le Guin's case), or the embodied experience of sound's spatiality (as in Ouzounian's case)—or the phenomenology of the emergence of sonic identities—it is perhaps optimally productive for the musicologist concerned to direct their interest and expertise towards the individual realm that they can most readily and adequately explore: their own.²³ At the very least, it seems wasteful to discount it.

5.1.2: Analytical priorities

The evocative, narrative form of the previous chapter sought to communicate the phenomenology of developing new sonic identities through everyday listening, a phenomenology embedded in the flow of everyday life. But what aspects of this phenomenology were the desired data? Given the necessarily socio-cultural character of sonic identities, my aim was not to hunt in the experience of each artist's music their sonic identity's 'givenness' (Zahavi, 2019: p. 10) down to the granularity of 'the eidetic reduction' (Gallagher, 2012: p. 49) – that is, the 'essence of the phenomenon' that can be found 'within the transcendently reduced sphere of consciousness'. Rather, it was to grasp the emergence of these identities within the 'natural attitude', those prejudices which characterise our everyday being in the world (Zahavi, 2019: p. 35). In other words, the natural attitude itself was the object of study. As Merleau-Ponty notes, phenomenology shouldn't aim to do away with the natural attitude altogether, but rather to '[place] in abeyance the assertions arising out of the natural attitude, the better to

²³ For a recent (non-academic) book-length work that productively places the author's own self, autobiography, and deeply personal experiences with popular music at its heart, see Rogers, 2022.

understand them' (1945/2005: p. vii), and this is what I attempted to do. That said, while I didn't necessarily seek to analyse the very mechanisms of musical experience at the most philosophically heightened pitch (for such exercises, see Clarke, 2011, and 2019; Clifton, 1983), these mechanisms were also obviously relevant. I considered it my task to investigate the situated mediation and construction of sonic identities, which are concerns of the natural attitude, while also accounting for the roles played by the mechanisms of consciousness in circumscribing this mediation and construction. This primarily entailed a reflexive attention to the hows and whys of the creation of meaning as it occurred within my listening experiences, and to the socio-culturally conditioned '*structures of experience*' (Berger, 2008: p. 69) that constituted my natural attitude and afforded those meanings in the first place (McClary, 2002: p. 22).

Lastly, this emphasis on connecting with the socio-cultural context of the activity, not to mention my invocation of autoethnography, obliges me to clarify what this context—the 'ethnos'—is supposed to be. I won't, or can't, be too specific about this. The main reason for this is that my choice of two generically divergent artists in Monáe and Lynn ostensibly split me between two genre cultures, and in doing so, precluded a reliance on the more clearly bounded discourses of these genre cultures to adequately explain the trajectory of my familiarisation with each artist. In other words, I wasn't trying to study the being or even the becoming of a Lynn or Monáe fan, for instance, or to offer an etic analysis of the country genre culture at large. Instead, I wanted to exploit precisely those divergences, both between Lynn and Monáe and between them and me. I did this partly in order to analyse the dynamics of reaching into a

relatively alien genre culture, particularly in Lynn's case. But more broadly, I wanted to analyse the privileged condition of being an anglophone listener used to the immediate and extensive access to any music of interest enabled by digital media, whose affinities therefore can be distributed with particular ease across multiple genre cultures. It is this condition of unanchored, mobile listenership—a privileged form of listenership that is nevertheless as specific as any other—that served as the frame for the exercise, and whose discourses were invoked and addressed in my analysis.

5.1.3: Principles of analysis

My approach to analysing the data was mainly guided by the principles of thematic analysis put forward by Braun and Clarke (2008). These principles allowed me to sort the entire diary into thematic groups and sub-groups designed to track the different patterns of interpretation that fuelled the familiarisation process with each artist. Where relevant, these themes also aimed to cut below the surface level of my statements in order to categorise them according to their implicit meanings and preoccupations (Braun & Clarke, 2008: p. 84), as judged in light of the exercise's conditioning focus on the emergence of sonic identity. I was most concerned with establishing the fluctuating fate of themes—which of them emerged first, which of them lost relevance over time, etc.—and which themes proved most prominent overall across the diary period, as well as where, when, and how these two factors interacted in the most salient themes.

While I had initially been inclined to follow the principles of grounded theory to allow a theory of the meanings of my listening experiences to emerge

as atheoretically as possible (Robson & McCartan, 2016: p. 146; p. 150), this principle clashed with the deliberate and specific theoretical frame of my project, namely: how did my listening experiences foster the emergence of sonic identities? What I sought from my data was precisely the interpretation that best explained this particular aspect of my listening experiences, rather than the entirety of those experiences themselves. As such, the more theoretically interchangeable (Braun & Clarke, 2008: p. 81) techniques of thematic analysis were preferred. Indeed, the initial writing of the diary itself was more akin to an exercise in grounded theory, insofar as I often tried to document the overall listening experience while still focusing on those aspects of it that specifically pertained to sonic identity development, analogous to the simultaneity of data collection and analysis valued in grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000: p. 515). As I have already argued, this constant reflexivity was both a precondition and an advantage of the exercise's auto-ness.

The rogue element in the process of interpreting and stratifying themes was the inescapable influence of my own memory of the experiences represented in the diary data. Since my memory couldn't help but serve as a mediator between the past me writing the diary and the contemporary me analysing it, I felt not only permitted but obliged to judge the relevance of statements and their corresponding themes against my memories of the experience in question, as well as against my retrospective intuitions about what had been, and what had remained, important about it. This naturally would not have been so if I were analysing someone else's data.

I say ‘obliged’ because to ignore the protests, reservations, and affirmations of my memory would have been to wantonly foreclose another valuable dimension of the exercise’s auto-ness. On the one hand, it could be said that allowing my memory to potentially undermine the recorded data constituted a bias towards the analytical present, a bias which might, in turn, be said to undermine the supposed present focus on the *process* of sonic identities’ emergence. But a definitively important aspect of this process is where it ends up, and as such, it would have been irresponsible to discount the interjections of my own memory regarding that very question. Indeed, I would argue more generally that neither the written record of an experience nor my memory of it has any clear epistemological priority over the other. Just as my written records of my experiences necessarily communicate only a heavily reduced, snap-interpretation of something ephemeral, so too do my memories lack any authoritative, re-discoverable trace of them, given the innate constructiveness of memory from start to finish (Michaelian, 2011; 2016; see also Sutton, 2009). The key epistemological advantage of the diary data over my memory of its collection is specificity; that is, these data signalled *what* to cross-reference with memory, and therefore I took my cues from that data at all times. So long as one is sincere in one’s motives when indulging the interjections of memory in such research, such mnemonic cross-referencing can and should be viewed as simply another legitimate technique of interpretation, and, what’s more, a uniquely privileged one that helps to cement my analysis more firmly in the personal world under investigation.

5.2: Results of the analysis

5.2.1: Heuristics

When first re-reading the diary, it became clear that the most productive understanding of how Lynn's and Monáe's sonic identities emerged must account for the handful of heuristics that appeared to have been the engines of my interpretations. These heuristics, which played varying prominent roles, served as pre-mapped byways of interpretation that I intuitively followed in order to navigate each artist's sonic identity as it unfolded before me. In other words, they were the processes which elaborated the first-order meanings represented by the identified themes into second-order meanings about the artist as an abstractable identity. This is a distinction akin to that which Juslin and Vjästfäll have made in their BRECVEMA work, where they advocate not for (only) studying which or what kind of emotions music induces—or, indeed, whether it does so at all—but rather for identifying and analysing the underlying mechanisms behind these emotional responses, such as they may be (Juslin & Vjästfäll, 2008). The heuristics, in this context, are the underlying mechanisms of interest: they are the processes that produced the statements that I, as the analyst, was later able to catalogue according to the themes they seemed to express. These heuristics, in all their dynamism, are more important to my analysis than those themes because they indicate the shared socio-cultural rules of interpretation that the listener in question operates with. Meanwhile, the themes alone, although they of course reflect the interests of the listener in question, do not necessarily begin to explain how and why they have these

interests in the first place, or how and why that listener navigates the music in question with regard to those interests. While these heuristics were mostly identified before the thematic analysis took place, I kept them precisely because they corresponded well with the results of that analysis. Not only because they emerged before the themes themselves, but also because I want to emphasise their importance over that of the themes themselves, I will introduce them first. These analytical tools will also be integral to the analyses of later chapters.

The heuristics are outlined below, in descending order of prevalence (measured in terms of the number statements, across both Lynn and Monée entries, which invoked them), and are stylised in italics to differentiate them from the thematic categories that come later:

Other artists: this heuristic triangulated my understanding of Lynn and Monée via pre-existing understandings of other artists who were somehow implicated in their music. It has two sub-dynamics:

- the ubiquitous ***associative*** dynamic, whereby I was reminded of another artist's music by the artist at hand;
- the rarer ***collaborative*** dynamic, whereby the other artist was actually present on the track at hand as a collaborator.

Key tracks/albums/moments: this heuristic amplified the role of prominent albums, tracks, and moments—including those most and least favoured—and the meanings or values they seemed to foreground in generating my understanding of each artist.

Genres and traditions: this heuristic anchored my understanding of Lynn and Monée in my pre-existing notions about the genre(s) and/or tradition(s) they invoked or exemplified.

Critical concepts: this heuristic rooted my understanding of Lynn and Monée in pre-given critical frameworks or concepts that were prompted either by the music itself or by paratextual and epitextual materials – such as, in my case, the reviews of critic Robert Christgau.

Fortuitous thoughts: this heuristic granted a consistent generative power to one-off thoughts that seemed particularly serendipitous and apposite.

Personal hang-ups: this heuristic curtailed my understanding of Lynn and Monée according to my own prejudices, the influence of which I explicitly felt and acknowledged – and often found to be regrettable. This excludes the less visible and more general operations of my personal tastes across the diary.

(Re)purposing the music: this heuristic reoriented my understanding of Lynn and Monée by uncovering new purposes that each artist's music—and my allegiance to it—could serve in the context of my own self-perception/-construction, and, conversely, by emphasising the specific qualities that afforded these uses.

Eras: This heuristic enabled inferences about Lynn and Monáe via a perceived historical logic in the way sections of their outputs seemed to group together.

5.2.2: Thematic categories

Having informally re-acquainted myself with the diary, I then performed the thematic analysis to better illuminate and organise the data. This analysis produced 15 thematic categories, which are outlined below, also in descending order of their prevalence across entries for both artists:

Listening circumstances: this theme encompasses all statements that record the circumstances of listening on any given day. It is important to note that I recorded these circumstances as a matter of routine, and in many, if not most, cases, they had no obviously significant impact on the listening experience and, consequently, my understanding of the artists.

(Dis)liking, or valenced experience: this theme encompasses all statements that reflect on experiences of liking or disliking the music at hand, or generally any point where the valence of the experience is what seems most important (rather than, e.g., the interpretation that may go with it).

Context of wider musical culture: this theme encompasses all statements that relate the artist to their surrounding musical culture as I perceived it, such as

references to specific genres, or associations of their music with that of other artists.

Listening strategies: this theme encompasses all statements that reflect on my approaches towards the process of listening and their effects, such as what I listened to and why, or differences in this process between artists.

Expressive agenda/profile: this theme encompasses all statements that acknowledge the artist's overall expressive agenda or profile, such as interpretive comments regarding musical or lyrical material, or identifications of stylistic tendencies.

Paratext and epitext: this theme encompasses all statements reflecting on the artist's identity that were motivated by extra-musical materials, discourses, concepts, etc. — ranging from music videos to comments made in conversation — that explicitly pertained to the artist.

Critical engagement: this theme encompasses all statements that explicitly engage with the musical experience in a critical fashion, such as value judgements or analytical comments regarding structure or form. These are to be distinguished from **(dis)liking** statements by their presumed objectivity; value judgements in this category were concerned with whether the music was altogether good or bad, for instance, rather than with the possibly unrelated question of whether I happened to like it or not.

Voice: this theme encompasses all statements that engage with the artist's voice, such as those classifying the qualities of the voice, or those filtering the artist through discourses or concepts that conditioned my thinking about singing and the voice.

Oeuvre-eye view: this theme encompasses all statements in which the music is interpreted in terms of its place in the wider oeuvre of the artist.

Attention and memory: this theme encompasses all statements that reflect on the impact of memory and different attentional states on my listening experience generally, or acknowledge their effects on the development of the sonic identities more specifically.

Reflections on musical creation: this theme encompasses all statements that specifically address the processes of artistic creation, or posit the artist explicitly in terms of their role as a producer of art.

Idiosyncrasies: this theme encompasses all statements that reflect on the impact of my personality and personal dispositions on the listening process—such as instances where my pre-existing tastes came to bear on the experience—or particular ways the music was drawn into my personal life.

Personal qualities of the artist: this theme encompasses all statements that identify or reflect on the perceived non-musical characteristics of the artist.

Interpersonal dynamics: this theme encompasses all statements that posit the artist as a person with whom some kind of relation is being figured out, such as expressions of (dis)like for aspects of their personality, or expressions of respect or admiration.

Metacomments: this theme encompasses all statements that step outside of the exercise to achieve a more reflexive outlook on it.

This catalogue of varyingly prevalent thematic categories helped to indicate what my interpretive priorities were, but did not alone explain each sonic identity's emergence. Rather, it seemed necessary to ask what meaningful processes these themes emerged through, and the answer lay in the heuristics I had already identified. By connecting the key themes to the heuristics through which they operated, I could move past the passivity of my thematic catalogue to grasp the active dynamics of what might helpfully be understood as my 'distributed cognitive ecologies': 'the multidimensional contexts in which we remember, feel, think, sense, communicate, imagine, and act, often collaboratively, on the fly, and in rich ongoing interaction with our environments' (Tribble & Sutton, 2011: p. 94). Clarifying the interactivity between me and my cultural environment in this way helped to link the exercise to a more generalisable domain of shared cultural values and experiences by spotlighting the inescapably definitive influence of my enculturation on each sonic identity's emergence. By understanding the dynamism between themes and heuristics, the emergence of the sonic identities could not only be traced, but also explained.

5.2.3: Summaries

After completing my thematic analysis, as well as returning to the three in-diary ‘round-ups’ performed on 27.2.2020, 13.3.2020, and 23.4.2020 to informally reassess the changes in salience of the main thematic categories across the diary, I reduced the essential elements of the emergence of each artist’s sonic identity to a series of bullet points. With these summaries as a guide, I returned to my thematic catalogue and collated excerpts that chronologically exemplified the operation of the most salient heuristics and the inauguration, consolidation, and—in some cases—decline of the most salient themes, thus producing a précis of the diary that embodied the processes of sonic identity emergence I had identified in the diary overall. I then edited and, using the connecting and paraphrasing text formatted in black, scaffolded these excerpts to produce the more coherent narrative of these processes found in Chapter 4. As mentioned, these analytical routines were tempered at all times by my memories and intuitions regarding what had counted.

Below, in order to illustrate the dynamism between themes and heuristics—and to account for the last step in my analytical process—I have reformulated and expanded these bullet points in terms of the key combinations of themes and heuristics that informed the narrative offered in the previous chapter. These summaries aim to offer a condensed overview of the emergence of each artist’s sonic identity—as understood from the present perspective, i.e., the time of writing at the very end of this process—to support Chapter 4’s narrative.

5.2.3.1: Loretta Lynn

Context of wider musical culture: *Genres and traditions*; *Other artists*: My understanding of Lynn's sonic identity relied most heavily on the ongoing elaboration of her as an archetype of, as I perceived it, an industrialised, mainstream strand of the country music *genre* or *tradition*. The musical worlds she inhabited seemed to reaffirm my ideas of what the sonic traits of mainstream country music are, rather than distinguish themselves as especially idiosyncratic in any way. In that sense, the main question to explore with Lynn was not 'what is signified to me about the artist by their idiosyncratic deviations from a standard or unmarked sonic texture?' (as it was with Rostam, for example, or would be regarding another artist working in a style or tradition that I felt I had a better prior understanding of), but rather, 'what do my arbitrary and possibly presumptuous preconceptions about country do to my understanding of Lynn, and vice versa, if all I hear when I hear Lynn is 'country'?' Of some help in navigating this were references to *other artists* from the country tradition with whom I was vaguely familiar, most notably Patsy Cline and Dolly Parton.

Personal qualities of the artist: *Genres and traditions*: Given my equation of Lynn with the country *genre* or *tradition*, my assessments of her personal qualities were mostly filtered through my assumptions about what country music asked of her, and what she offered it. She certainly seemed up to the genre's requirements, being very convincing in all the typical (I assumed) roles, from the God-fearing evangelical to the honky-tonk woman and everything in between. In turn, through the somewhat naïve, often melodramatic force of her brilliant voice,

Lynn seemed to attain a strong personal authenticity that fleshed out the implied authenticity to 'real American life' that seemed latent in the country tradition. Overall, I came to perceive her as a strong, sincere, light-hearted, romantically wilful, pious (half the time) person. However, I remain(ed) suspicious that these were simply the characteristics that the country tradition expects women ideally to have, and that it was precisely Lynn's successful performance of these implicitly prioritised traits that made her the First Lady of country to my ears.

Voice: *Critical concepts*: In the course of evaluating her artistic merits, I developed a significant respect for Lynn as a 'Great Singer'. This appellation bore the authority of a ***critical concept*** and denoted a perceived canonical category of artists whose vaguely sensed criteria framed how I viewed her as a vocalist: as someone capable of conferring aesthetic power on materials that perhaps, by themselves, might have been quite banal.

Reflections on musical creation: *Critical concepts*: I continually navigated between Lynn's ostensibly industrialised Nashville-ness and competing perceptions of her as an authentic and autonomous figure, working through the ***critical concept*** of creative autonomy to generate ideas about my stance towards her. This tension was predominantly maintained by my long-lasting assumption that Lynn had written most, if not all, of the songs I was hearing, which turned out to be inaccurate. That realisation further emphasised the importance of her singing in my overall understanding, although I nevertheless

also admired her for the many songs she did write or co-write, particularly most of those on the album *Van Lear Rose*.

(Dis)liking, or valenced experience: *Key albums/tracks/moments*: While it took some time for favourites to emerge, given the large volume of Lynn's music that I listened to, my understanding of her sonic identity became reliant on those ***key albums, tracks, and moments*** that eventually did assert themselves, partly as a reaction against this high volume. Most prominent among these was Lynn's cover of the Patsy Cline single 'Why Can't He Be You'; Lynn's high note pivoting into the refrain remains my favourite moment in her oeuvre. Other noteworthy favourites are *Love Is The Foundation*, which seemed the most artful of the Nashville-machine albums, and *Van Lear Rose*, whose alt-rock crossover appeal both excited and impressed me. Likewise, there were significant non-favourites, including lots of her work with Conway Twitty, which to me seemed to indulge the less artful instincts of the country tradition (although their duet 'If I Ever Had To Say Goodbye To You' became a treasured oddity for precisely that reason).

Idiosyncrasies: *Personal hang-ups; (Re)purposing the music*: A subtle but powerful influence on my engagement with Lynn was a regrettable ***personal hang-up***: the mild ironic discomfort I felt regarding country music in general, something which occasionally prompted feelings of derision, as was perhaps most obvious in my assessments of her work with Conway Twitty. Conversely—indeed, ironically—I also endorsed the feeling that my liking for and moderate

knowledge of Lynn's music reflected well on me, as it seemed to reinforce a preferred understanding of myself as an omnivorous and open-minded listener.

Interpersonal dynamics: My sense of connection to Lynn became one of detached reverence, due partly to the ironic distance that I failed wholly to remove, and partly to my respect for her eminence within the tradition which she, for me, embodied.

Paratext and epitext: Lynn's book *Coal Miner's Daughter* typified (and, for PR/canonising purposes, was made to typify, I think) a rags-to-riches country bumpkin narrative which struck me as so deliberate, lived-in, and fertile as an expressive foundation that I happily endorsed it. The book became something of a guide for parsing the music and negotiating other autobiographical information, despite its apparent dubiousness as a historical source.

5.2.3.2: Janelle Monáe

Paratext and epitext; *Critical concepts*: A prominent epitextual influence which unexpectedly asserted itself before I even began the diary was the Pop Personae conference at the University of Bayreuth, which I'd attended the week before. There, Monáe was a popular subject of discussion, and was memorably analysed by Aisha Durham through the lens of Afrofuturism in particular. I likely relied on what I felt I understood of the ***critical concept*** of Afrofuturism because it seemed a conveniently handed-down framework, having already been so interestingly and convincingly applied to Monáe. But it nevertheless did seem

conspicuously and consistently to come to the fore in her music, based on my preliminary acquaintance with Afrofuturist ideas.

Expressive agenda/profile: *Other artists; Genres and traditions; Critical concepts:* From the start of the diary phase, I was mostly occupied with fully understanding Monáe's distinctive expressive agenda/profile. This ever-refining synthesis of observations into a coherent impression relied on extensively associating her music with that of *other artists*, placing her within a perceived *tradition*, and reading her—inexpertly—through pre-given *critical concepts*, namely Afrofuturism, as mentioned above, and, to a lesser extent, queerness. Notably, the artists who were referenced in her music were specifically African-American pop artists past and present, some of whom could also be said to have invoked Afrofuturism in their music to some degree or another – or so I thought, at least. All this had the broad effect of positing Monáe as a kind of successor to, or inheritor of, a loosely connected tradition of experimental African-American pop music, one who was reformulating all the elements of this tradition and putting them to the service of her own specific, post-human—cyborg imagery is central and consistent in her output—Afrofuturist, and emergently pan-sexual vision. The commingling of these various half-borrowed parts, and the general eclecticism that this suggested on her part, came to be the main characteristics of her sonic identity. In no particular order of prominence—some of these were recurring associations, while others were references specific to certain tracks or moments—the main referenced artists were: James Brown, Prince, George Clinton/Funkadelic, Kamasi Washington, André 3000, Kanye West, Frank

Ocean, and Stevie Wonder. Washington, for instance, was inextricably associated with the choral textures that seemed fundamental to Monáe's earlier work; the similarly characteristic ripping guitar solos laced through many of her songs loudly echoed Funkadelic and, to a lesser extent, Prince; and James Brown was, albeit implicitly, almost the main presence in the much-loved 'Tightrope', to my ears.

(Dis)liking, or valenced experience: *Key albums/tracks/moments*: From the start, I identified **key tracks** and **albums** of Monáe's as my favourites (and least favourites) with more ease than with Lynn. This was because Monáe's music seemed more accessible to me than Lynn's, invoking as it did various musical styles and traditions that I felt better acquainted with than country music, such as mainstream/alt pop, soul, funk, and R&B. However, while *The ArchAndroid* and tracks like 'Tightrope', 'Oh Maker', and 'Say You'll Go' were consistently treasured from the early days, other favourites took longer to really settle in, such as 'What an Experience'. The most significant development in this regard was my about-face regarding *Dirty Computer*, my eventual preference for which helped symbolise both what I valued and what I sometimes disliked about Monáe overall: on the one hand the characteristic playful energy and eccentricity that was humanised on *Dirty Computer*—an idea absorbed semi-consciously from Robert Christgau's review (Christgau, n.d.[b])—and, on the other hand, the corniness that occasionally tainted the theatricality of her preceding work. This about-face was spearheaded by the extreme fondness I began to develop in March for 'I Like That', which became my favourite of all her tracks.

Oeuvre-eye view: *Eras*: I used the *eras* heuristic to project an intelligible sense of progress onto Monée's output, specifically to bolster my impression of *Dirty Computer* as somewhat detached from the rest of her oeuvre, insofar as it seemed to make a move towards a sharper and slightly more mainstream aesthetic. This helped rationalise my sense of her artistic development as well as my preferences for different parts of this oeuvre.

Voice: *Critical concepts*: Monée's voice was a conspicuous element of her music, but I interpreted it differently to Lynn's. Janelle did not quite make the 'Great Singer' cut; despite having a very fine, agile, and versatile voice, the early-encountered comment about its 'thinness' from Christgau's aforementioned review stuck with me, and seemed accurate at every turn: there was always, or at least usually, something slightly performative and incomplete about the various stylistic turns of her voice. But I became quite fond of this quality, as it seemed to affirm things I valued in her agenda: her endlessly imaginative and energetic creativity; her unfettered expressive shape-shifting (at the service of her tradition-reformulating, better-future-via-the-past mission); and her core interest in inclusivity.

Personal qualities of the artist: *Fortuitous thoughts*: Given the greater accessibility of Monée's music, it felt quite natural to infer her personality from it: to view her as an individual against an implicit background whose sonic identity could be traced as such. I eventually arrived at some meaningful conclusions

about who she was via a few *fortuitous thoughts* that memorably manifested the essence of these inferences, such as 3.2.2020's 'I trust her to give us a good time', or 23.4.2020's 'She seems like a real good egg, both in what she says and how she says it'. I ended up being very fond of her, seeing her as someone with whom you were always welcome, on whom you could rely for a good time, and who was ready and able to be serious without yielding the joy, or the hope for joy, that seemed a key principle of everything she was doing.

Interpersonal dynamics: *(Re)purposing the music*: My presumed understanding of Monáe's personality afforded a re-assessment of my own self, in the context of my growing sense of allegiance not just to her music but to her as a person. This involved appraising both aspects of my self-identity that seemed addressed by her music, and how my reflexive understanding of these aspects changed in light of their entanglement with Monáe's music and my thoughts and feelings about it. Most notably, my allegiance to her music affirmed a preferred understanding of myself as someone sympathetic both to the optimism and inclusivity of her politics and to the exuberant, fun-oriented premises of her art.

5.3: Conclusions

In this chapter, I have attempted to do three things: affirm the potential of the listening diary exercise; outline the analytical methodology used to analyse it; and summarise the key findings of this analysis. I began by using arguments from the field of autoethnography to insist on the general potential of 'auto'-

methodologies to help explain socio-cultural phenomena, as well as their appropriateness to the expressly 'auto' phenomenon of sonic identities more specifically. My own listening diary exercise gave me, as the analyst, uniquely intimate access to the phenomenology of the processes I wanted to study. Meanwhile, the performative form in which I presented my analysis communicated these processes, I hope, in an informatively evocative way, and is at no kind of epistemological disadvantage to more systematic approaches I might have taken.

While I prioritise this performative presentation of my findings, it nevertheless derived from a more conventional thematic analysis of my data. This analysis divided the diary text into fifteen thematic categories that indicated which ideas and concerns were most active in developing my understanding of each artist's sonic identity. However, a more illuminating finding was the handful of key heuristics whose operation invoked the key themes. While such heuristics will always be specific to the individual who utilises them, I would contend that the idea of heuristics is generally advantageous to understanding the emergence of sonic identities, as they supersede the passivity of thematic catalogues to ground the analysis in the active dynamics of the individual's distributed cognitive ecologies, thus helping to trace the mutual co-constitution of individuals by cultures and cultures by individuals that underpins the development of sonic identities. I would also suggest that many of the specific heuristics identified here, such as ***other artists***, ***key albums/tracks/moments***, and ***genres and traditions***, could indeed be generalisable to other individuals embedded in similar cultural worlds as me, allowing for the differences between everyone's

use of them. Having outlined my themes and heuristics, I was then able to summarise the processes most essential to the emergence of Lynn's and Monée's sonic identities. These summaries have hopefully served to capture the generality of the processes which, in the previous chapter, were traced in all their singularity.

Writing in January 2021, it's almost a year since I first approached Lynn and Monée's music. Naturally, that music has receded in my life somewhat since the diary period, during which, admittedly, I often yearned to listen to altogether different music anyhow. But my feeling of connection to both remains much as it was in May 2020. I have occasionally let their respective playlists play, or sought out specific songs, but they are neither in the standby squad of my favourite artists nor destined for eventual abandonment. Instead, both have simply settled into comfortable dormancy, into the fabric of my life.

When conducting the listening diary experiment, it became clear not only how complex the emergence of a sonic identity can be, but also just how entangled this emergence is with the individuality of the listener. This is not surprising; indeed, it is a key premise of this thesis. But by bringing into focus the emergence of Lynn's and Monée's sonic identities, processes which would normally proceed unnoticed for the most part, I was able to appreciate more fully the subtle ways in which my tastes, the accidents of my education, my conceits and self-conceptions—not to mention the fluctuations of mood and circumstance—biased my interpretations at every point. No matter how much I might have liked to think that my listening attitude could be relatively catholic and even-handed—not only as a musicologist but also as the listener I have

described myself as in this chapter: preoccupied with omnivorousness, digitally enabled, and anglophonically privileged—that presumption of neutrality was of course only another specific and contingent perspective. Instead of following some supposedly universal terms of neutral engagement, this perspective found substitutes for these terms in my own decidedly particular values, values which were exercised in accordance with my own wobbly understanding of who I was and who I wanted to be.

I feel ambiguously proud and protective of Lynn and Monáe, and, in the context of my self-involved reasons for selecting those artists in the first place, those feelings also extend to myself. Recently, while curating a playlist for some friends, it occurred to me to evangelise on behalf of Lynn and Monáe – after a pandemic’s companionship, they’d earned it! I instinctively included Lynn’s ‘Why Can’t He Be You’. I felt confident that Lynn’s track would be recognised and respected as the Great Song I deemed it to be, and was ready to defy anyone inclined to tease her, as I revealingly assumed some might. But I worried, while nervously breezing through my favourite Monáe tracks, that hers perhaps individually lacked the persuasiveness that I believed her oeuvre had overall, once you really got to know her as I felt I had. Not even my beloved ‘I Like That’ seemed to cut through. Of course, as well as being a chance to innocently share some music that I treasured, the occasion was also an opportunity to invite complements on my tastes and curatorial skills. I secretly hoped I would be credited for knowing a Great Song when I heard one, as well as for seeming comfortable in the relatively alien—to our ears, I presumed—world of country music. Meanwhile, although at first I nurtured a sense of concerned

disappointment that nothing by Monáe had made the cut—perhaps she wasn't all I thought she was?—my disappointment became a rather patronising feeling of vindication, as I decided I'd spared Monáe, whose work was so varied and daring, from being hastily misjudged on the basis of a fleeting encounter with just one track. And if I'd spared myself in the process, all the better...

So I found myself pleased that I was able to assimilate these two worthy artists into my own musical world, but also, having done so, compelled to defend them against various criticisms that might come their way. But such defences would be mounted not least to defend myself by association. Most cravenly, I can sometimes catch myself pre-emptively recoiling before hypothetical criticisms of my reasons for selecting Lynn and Monáe in the first place. *Why presume to strive for the supposed mastery of some kind of omnivorous listenership? Because you're a pop music scholar with a Spotify subscription? And why presume that you can really understand the different experiences that you say are central to Lynn's and Monáe's art, but which have nothing to do with you, never mind reduce them to little more than curios for the sake of a self-centred academic study?* Whatever else I might say to such challenges, I find myself, with what feels like damningly characteristic complacency, taking recourse to the inalienable fact that I do just like their music very much. *Or so you've perhaps convinced yourself to think, so that you can congratulate yourself for having succeeded...* Well, either way: it seems impossible to liberate, once and for all, my appreciation for Lynn's and Monáe's music from the influence of my most fundamental ideas and anxieties about why I ought to appreciate music and how I'm able to do so. But likewise, these ideas and anxieties were—indeed still are—

themselves reformed and refined in the wake of the ongoing process of encounter, and it is the very 'I' that asks why and how which is transformed in turn.

6: An interlude on the autobiographical significance of sonic identities

Life is short, art is long
Every day is a song

- Michael Hurley, The Unholy Modal Rounders, and Jeffrey Frederick & The Clamtones, 'Midnight in Paris'

So far, I've done two things with the idea of sonic identity. First, I contrived a snapshot. I took my grasp of Rostam's sonic identity 'as it was' and tried to make clear as many details of it as I could. Second, I observed a process. I took two artists, Loretta Lynn and Janelle Monáe, whose sonic identities were unconstructed in my mind, and interpreted what happened as I got to know them. What connects these exercises is one consequence of their intense me-ness, namely a close focus on my perceptions of sonic meaning. After all, I'm a musicologist wrapped up in the task of writing a thesis to satisfy my own expectations of myself as a musicologist, as well as those of my supervisors, my examiners-to-be, and so on. In this context at least, my analysis-minded musicologist identity has been dominant while I have examined and constructed the sonic identities of those three artists. No problem. The sonic comes first in sonic identity, and my own perceptions of those artists' sounds were the only ones I could directly experience. In any case, activating my musicologist identity to write the previous chapters also allowed that very identity to be analysed too.

Since the listener's own identities govern who the artist becomes in their mind, that was also essential to achieving my analytical aims.

But whatever is worth saying about sonic identities barely even begins with one musicologist's self-observations. What the subsequent chapters will do is examine the stories of other sonic identities in other lives. These stories are told in two forms. First, I examine in-depth interviews with ten respondents, each of whom was asked to discuss their personal connection to an artist or group whose music is, or has been, important to them. Second, I examine listening diaries created by nine respondents, six of whom also participated in interviews. Like my own diary, these diaries depict each respondent's experience of getting to know a hitherto unknown artist and their music.

These exercises add new dimensions to the sonic identities concept. As I have said, this concept turns on a reciprocity between listener and artist. The artist provides the materials in which their identity is perceived, but the listener's own self-identity affects this perception, and is in turn changed by it, and so on. Each chapter so far has given a different weighting to each side of this reciprocal relationship. The chapter on Rostam homed in on the perceptual details of one sonic identity, and, in doing so, emphasised the artist. The chapters on Lynn and Monée maintained this focus on perception, but also panned out somewhat to capture some of the day-to-day listener identity dynamics accompanying the emergence of Lynn's and Monée's sonic identities, placing a more equal emphasis on artist and listener. Here, the listener's side of the bargain is the priority.

In the interviews, I pan out to survey life stories more broadly; here, perceptions of the relevant artist's sonic identity are important only when they are appealed to by my respondents as they tell these stories. Meanwhile, in my analyses of the respondent listening diaries, I focus primarily on the respondents' self-identities themselves, and how these are implicated in the emergence of the chosen artist's sonic identity. Of course, I did at points reflect on my own listening diary from that angle. Likewise, my respondents did talk a great deal about the music 'itself', and this is respected in my analyses. This is just a perspective shift. My analysis of my own diary talked about my own self-identity insofar as it was relevant to how Lynn's and Monáe's sonic identities emerged. In the coming chapters, I talk about the 'form' or 'content' of a chosen artist's sonic identity only insofar as I can say something about the given respondent's self-identity by doing so. With these analyses, I can hopefully make it clearer how and why sonic identities can become so enmeshed in listeners' self-identities and lives.

Both exercises will also add variety. In the previous chapter, I emphasised the importance of heuristics of varying sorts in steering how a given listener constructs a given artist's sonic identity. I also emphasised that my analysis of myself as an individual enabled, rather than hindered, an analysis of the cultural contexts in which I exist(ed), that is, which gave me my heuristics and in which I put them to work. By adding other people to the mix, all with contrasting life stories and self-identities, I am able to say more about how different people exist differently as listeners within these contexts, as well as where, when, and why these contexts are or are not shared. Many heuristics are carried over from my self-analysis; many are shared between the respondents; and many are new. In

each case, it is the given respondent's life story and self-identity that indicates why a given heuristic had come to be used, and which make sense of the idiosyncratic results of that use.

Of course, samples of ten and nine are not statistically representative of anything, and my priority is not to generalise about any imagined socio-cultural universals of sonic identity creation, although I will offer some general suggestions in that vein. Rather, it is to create high-definition, biography-supported profiles of every respondent, with their understanding of their chosen artist's sonic identity at the heart of each. Recalling the points of the auto-ethnographers cited in the previous chapter, this detailed focus on individuals aims to evoke the reality of sonic identities' roles in listeners' lives, so as to afford insights beyond those drawn from my own analysis.

Before presenting both analyses in the next few chapters, I will here talk through the ideas that have moulded my approach, and then outline my methodologies for designing and executing both parts of the study.

6.1: The ideas

So far, 'identity' has been my terminological darling. I have talked not just about the sonic identity constructed 'for' or 'of' an artist by a listener, but also about the reconstitutions of that listener's own identities that take place at the same time. Here, 'autobiography' takes up the baton, although 'identity' still matters insofar as it is tightly connected to it.

As McAdams has it: 'The *self* is many things, but *identity* is a life story' (McAdams, 2003: p. 187; italics original). His uses of 'self' and 'identity' are not

my own, so I will re-route through a different term I have already centred: Giddens' 'self-identity', which describes '*the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography*' (Giddens, 1991: p. 53; italics original). As per identity theory, on which I have so far based my thinking, discrete identities—my identity as a musicologist, yours as an Enya fan, etc.—act through an individual in that individual's here-and-now (Burke & Stets, 2009: p. 8). That same individual's self-identity is the summary they make of who they are overall in that here-and-now, based on the story of their life as understood by them, up till then. So, to re-jig McAdams' epigram: identities are many things, but the self-identity is a life story. That is, an autobiography.

Following Fivush and Haden (2003: p. viii), what such stories connect the self to is memory. To articulate a version of your autobiography in a given here-and-now—such as that of the interviews I conducted—you need to engage with your autobiographical memories. In the broadest sense, Brewer 'define[s] autobiographical memory as memory for information related to the self' (Brewer, 1986: p. 26). For Nelson and Fivush, an individual autobiographical memory is an 'explicit memory for specific points in the past, recalled from the unique perspective of the self in relation to others' (2004: p. 488). Yet more elaborately, Williams and Conway propose that an individual's autobiographical memory as a faculty:

is made up of their *episodic memory*, memory for specific episodes of their lives, and their conceptual, generic, and schematic knowledge of their personal history: their *autobiographical knowledge*. In a typical act of remembering, these two types are brought together and a specific memory from one's life is recalled. These autobiographical memories are the content of the self. They locate us in sociohistorical time, they locate us in our societies and in our social groups, they define the self. (2009: p. 33; italics original).

They go on to describe 'Self-defining memories': notably strong memories, often entangled with others, that can often anchor the self during 'times of crisis or uncertainty' (Williams & Conway, 2009: p. 44). This form of autobiographical memory is prominent throughout my results. While this is perhaps unsurprising given my line of inquiry, it will be interesting to see how respondents' self-defining memories are linked to specific identities within their overall self, and how their chosen artists are implicated in those identities. As Belfi et al. (2016) have shown, music-evoked autobiographical memories (MEAMS) seem to be particularly vivid. The wider scholarship on MEAMs (see Janata et al., 2006; Platz et al., 2015) will also help in explaining the nature of music's role in such memories.

Relatedly, there will be much talk of the 'self-defining period' (Loveday et al., 2020: p. 1969). This is something of a successor to the 'reminiscence bump', which describes the people's tendency to recall better, and more fondly, memories from between ages 10 and 30 (Rubin et al., 1998: p. 3; see also Krumhansl & Zupnick, 2013, where this concept fuels an analysis of musical preferences). To explain this effect, many have appealed to the fact that your sense of self usually forms and settles during this youth phase, memories from which provide, therefore, the mnemonic foundations of the self (Williams & Conway, 2009: p. 49; see also Munawar et al., 2018: p. 26; Rathbone et al., 2017: p. 147). In other words, memories from your youth disproportionately tend to be self-defining ones.

However, Rathbone et al. argue that reminiscence bumps can manifest 'at any point where one generates a new self image' (Rathbone et al., 2008: p.

1412). This is something we all seem to do in our youths, but it can also happen later in life should circumstances necessitate it. It is in light of this that Loveday et al. have coined the term 'self-defining period'. This still tends to apply to the same youth phase as the reminiscence bump, but cleaves in principle to what Loveday et al. deem 'the main theoretical aspect of memories from the SP, which is their enduring relation to self across the lifespan' (2020: p. 1969). Their re-appraisal usefully pins down what catalyses reminiscence bump dynamics, namely the transformation of the self. Given that such transformations are central to the coming analysis, I will follow this terminological-conceptual turn in what follows.

Istvandity has recently introduced the similarly helpful idea of the 'lifetime soundtrack'. She uses this term to describe:

a metaphorical collection of music that relates in unique and personal ways to a person's autobiographical memories. ... It encompasses music that reminds one of a range of personal experiences, potentially provoking both pleasant and unpleasant emotions. In this way, one's soundtrack is *not* a "greatest hits" collection, though in moments of reflection it could be used for this purpose. Rather, the lifetime soundtrack is a personal aural record of life, a stream that somewhat equitably collects musical memories with the passing of time. (2019: p. 7)

This concept frames much of what I want to discuss in this chapter. In particular, it foregrounds the functions of music as an autobiographical-narrative tool, but also, somewhat conversely, the agency of music itself to act *against* the wishes of an individual and settle into their lives unwelcomed. The coming studies mostly deal with music that is actively treasured, for sure. But even in these instances, it is interesting to see how such music can nevertheless mix in with memories of less-than-positive events, and be used to narrate those very events.

The concept that anchors the coming analyses is that of *autobiographical significance*. This concept, introduced by Peck and Grealey (2020), offers a stance from which to consider the importance to an individual of an experience and its constituent factors. In short, such an experience or constituent factor is autobiographically significant if the identity or identities that were inaugurated or meaningfully affected by it have remained salient over time. Here's a made-up example of what I mean.

I'm an old man now. When I was a teenager, I heard Chuck Berry's 'Maybellene' on the radio. I was astonished, and bought the record as soon as I could. I listened to it obsessively, and tried to learn everything I could about Berry and the kind of music he was playing. I bought a guitar and taught myself to play it. I devoted to it every spare hour. I joined a band, we played five nights a week, whenever we could, wherever; I met my wife at one of our shows. The band didn't make it, but I got a job at the local music centre teaching guitar, and did that for forty years. I even taught our children to play. Every day since 1955 has revolved around my guitar and the music I make with it. If I stick around long enough, I'll teach the grandkids too.

In this rather pointed example, we would say that the initial experience of hearing 'Maybellene' was maximally autobiographically significant. This is because it inaugurated a set of identities—guitarist, rock 'n' roll fan, band-member—that were highly salient for this imagined respondent. That means they were very likely to be activated in any given situation. What's more, those identities have

not only persisted throughout his long life, but also facilitated the inauguration and maintenance of other salient identities, such as guitar teacher, husband, father, and, if he's lucky, grandfather. Whenever this man has reflected on his overall self-identity, most of the many things that he was at any given time had derived in some meaningful way from that original experience of hearing 'Maybellene'. That experience—and the music at its centre—has set the tone for his life in every way. In the story of his life (an admittedly rather extreme example), that's where it all really begins.

Reading lives in terms of autobiographical significance allows the materials of discrete experiences to be analysed in the context of how individuals conceive of their identities, self-identities, and autobiographies. As such, I think it is an excellent way of parsing the importance of an artist and their music in a listener's life. Two questions need to be answered, however.

First, how do we know whether an identity has remained salient? The answer is that the respondent can tell us, in one form or another. To recall a statement from the previous chapter, 'the meaning of prenarrative experience is constituted in its narrative expression' (Ellis & Bochner, 2000: p. 745). To recall another, such a narrative is the best data we have on '*what the [narrator] believes to be true about his or her conscious experience*' (Dennett, 2003: p. 20; his italics). It is the analyst's job to interpret the significance of *how* a narrative is told as much as the 'facts' narrated. When doing so, it is important to understand that our memories are 'transient constructions and although they may to some degree accurately represent the past they are time-compressed and contain many details that are inferred, consciously and non-consciously, at the time of their

construction' (Conway & Loveday, 2015: p. 579). As Sutton notes via Halbwachs—in keeping with his concept of distributed cognitive ecologies, cited in the previous chapter—this construction is always a socially entangled exercise:

In remembering and reconstructing the past, we normally draw not just on such episodic fragments as we hold on our own but also on the vast and uneven resources of our multiple social groups, material symbols, and social practices with which we have surrounded ourselves. ... I do have my own unique memories, as a result of my idiosyncratic history, but this is just a contingent fact about the complexity of the particular intersection of social groups and influences at which they lie ([Halbwachs] 1980, pp. 44-49). (Sutton, 2009: pp. 224-225)

This also goes for the stories we use such memories to tell. These are, to quote McAdams et al., 'psychosocial constructions that aim to spell out personal truths: narrative explanations for life in time that are believable, followable, and even compelling' (1997: p. 679). This sociality has implications for the entirety of the following analysis. Most notably, it bears on my discussions of the socio-cultural bases of the heuristics employed by my respondents; of the more obviously social matter of friends, lovers, and family members who feature in their autobiographies; and, of course, of their felt connections to the artists themselves as people conveying meaning into their socio-cultural worlds.

Second, how can we reasonably compare the autobiographical significance of experiences/etc. between respondents? This is trickier. We suggested the following rule of thumb when presenting the concept:

Since we equate autobiographical significance with enduring identity salience, this would require some measurement of identity *durability*, that is, its resistance to dissolution. We might then compare an older respondent whose relevant identity has endured a few mild crises with a younger respondent whose relevant identity has survived multiple and intense crises,

and say that the autobiographical significance of the originary experience of each is similar. (Peck & Grealey, 2020: p. 10).

Once again, it is for the analyst to decide how to correctly interpret the reports of multiple respondents in reference to each other. This will always be difficult, and it is necessary to at least acknowledge that.

6.2: Methodology

6.2.1: The interviews

I elected to gather my data through interviews with my respondents. I felt this was the best way to give them the chance to elaborate on their cases both at length and with a measure of spontaneity, compared to the other obvious option of written questionnaires. Moreover, I wanted to be able to connect personally with them to some degree, however slight, so that I could feel as confident as possible of having understood them as well as I could. Naturally, the interview is no ‘opportunity for an authentic gaze into the soul of another’ (Silverman, 2000: pp. 822-823), but rather a ‘negotiated text’ laid down by interviewer and interviewee (Fontana & Frey, 2000: p. 646). Since my respondents’ terms of negotiation—their ways of forming their life narratives—were themselves a part of what I wanted to analyse, so much the better.

I recruited my respondents by sending out an email via various graduate and undergraduate student mailing lists at the University of Oxford. Respondents were invited ‘to be interviewed on their personal connection to the music of an artist of their choosing, and on their understanding of this artist’s identity in

relation to their own sense of self.’ Anyone interested was asked to contact me via email, whereupon they would receive a link to a short questionnaire in which respondents were asked to provide their name, age, nationality, and occupation. They were then asked ‘to think of a popular artist who you feel is [or once was] significant to you on a personal level, someone you could discuss in terms of your thoughts about their music and identity, and how these have been meaningful for you.’ This was to be followed by a brief overview of how their chosen artist and their music played a role in their life and sense of self/identity, as well as how music generally played such a role. Lastly, they were asked to list 2-3 tracks by the artist that they would be happy to listen to and discuss in the interview.

It is important to note that I allowed respondents to suggest groups instead of solo artists, should they wish. I did not and do not think that ‘sonic identity’ as a concept can only be relevant to discussions of solo artists, i.e., cases where an individual person’s identity corresponds entirely with the source of the music. Indeed, I thought it imperative to see what happened to that concept when applied to instances of collaborative creation.

Fifteen people responded expressing an interest in being interviewed. Of these, I selected ten. Although my sample of respondents wasn’t intended to be statistically representative, I prioritised achieving as even a gender split as I could (4 eventual interviewees were women, and 6 were men). Beyond that, I aimed to achieve as broad an age range as possible. My youngest respondent was 22 and my oldest was 74, although a majority of respondents were in their twenties.

The interviews themselves followed a stable series of questions designed to invite as much detail from the respondents as possible. Each interview was split in half. The first half featured ‘just’ talk, while the second used the tracks proposed by the respondents as stimuli. Here, we would listen to each track together, and then I would ask a series of questions, repeated for each track, about what had happened to/for the respondent as we did so. By doing this, I hoped to access the ‘freshest’ possible feedback from my respondents, not only regarding the meaning they perceived ‘in’ the music but also the content of the memories and associations ‘around’ it. The length of these interviews ranged from 90 minutes to 150 minutes.

I aimed to keep proceedings relaxed, and the overall tone of the interviews as conversational as possible. As such, I sometimes interspersed the set questions with spontaneous ones if a particular comment from a given respondent invited it. Similarly, I deemed it unnecessary to ensure that each question was asked exactly as it was written, although I tried to keep them as near to their written form as possible. I had intended to conduct the interviews in person, but the COVID-19 pandemic put paid to that. Instead, they took place over video calls. While this was less than ideal, it didn’t seem to meaningfully diminish the ‘quality’ of the data in the end. The interview plan was as follows:

Part 1:

1. Who?

- a.** How does music play into your own sense of self or identity? Please answer in reference to:

- i. music generally;
 - ii. the specific artist you've selected.
- b. If I asked someone close to you to characterise your personality, what do you think they'd say?
 - i. What would **you** say?

2. How?

- a. What features do you pay attention to when you're listening to music? Please answer in reference to:
 - i. music generally;
 - ii. the music of the specific artist you've selected.
- b. Please talk a little about the situations in which you normally listen to your selected artist's music, and the ways you've listened to it (e.g., on vinyl, MP3, in concert, etc.).
 - i. Do you have any important memories of having listened to this artist, such as a particular concert, or hearing one of their songs at an important moment in your life?

3. What?

- a. What is it about this artist that sets them apart from others?
- b. Other than their music, what else has affected the way you understand this artist, and your sense of who they are?
 - i. Compared to the music itself, how important are these things to your impression of the artist and who they are?

4. Why?

- a. Why does the artist you've selected and their music matter to you?

- b.** Stepping back from your specific case, do you think it's important or worthwhile for music and popular artists to have significance for listeners beyond just 'the music itself'?
 - i.** If so, why/if not, why not?
- 5.** Is there anything else you'd like to say in light of what we've been discussing?

Part 2: Listening exercise (Question series repeated for each track)

1. What leaps out to you about the way the music sounds; what seems central to your experience of the music? Please be as descriptive as possible of the relevant musical/lyrical features and their effects.
2. How do you feel towards the artist when hearing this particular song, and why do you feel this way?
 - a. Does any biographical/wider information about the artist seem relevant when hearing this track?
3. Are any autobiographical memories triggered by hearing this music? If so, would you mind expanding on those memories, and on how the music triggers/inflects these memories?
4. Are any other people called to mind when listening to this track?
 - a. What is their relation to you?
 - b. Why are they called to mind by this track?
 - c. What about the track does this?
5. Having discussed these tracks individually, which of them would you say best captures or represents the 'essence' of the artist? (**Conditional**

question: *If more than 2 tracks have been studied, I will also ask which is the least 'essential'*

a. What about this track makes it more 'essential' than the other/s?

b. **Conditional sub-question:** *What about this track makes it less 'essential' than the others?*

6. Which of these tracks is your favourite, and why?

7. Would you say that any of these tracks is your favourite track by this artist overall?

a. If you left out your favourite track/s by this artist when selecting tracks for this interview, why was that?

(Now that we've finished both parts of this interview process, what are your thoughts on the themes of this study, and the study itself?)

As can be seen, my questions prioritised a handful of prior interests. I wanted to know who my respondents understood themselves to be, and how their chosen artists fit into that understanding, as well as into their social lives. I wanted to know about important phases or events in their lives to which their chosen artists had some kind of connection. I wanted to know how they listened to music, particularly that of their chosen artists. I wanted to know how much influence paratextual and epitextual materials of any kind wielded in their knowledge of their chosen artists. And I wanted to know what they liked about their chosen artists, and why. I tried to allow some interpretive variability between respondents by asking potentially repetitive and open-ended formulations of 'big picture' questions, e.g. 'What is it about this artist that sets them apart from

others?’ and ‘Why does the artist you’ve selected and their music matter to you?’ (see Hays & Minichiello, 2005: p. 440). I believe these threads weave into a pretty detailed tapestry.

To analyse the data gathered, I employed the same thematic analysis techniques used in the previous chapter. I tried to identify the main themes that emerged across the interviews, as well as, more importantly, any heuristics that seemed to have been operating either during the interview or in any past experiences the respondents reported, in light of the conclusions of the previous chapter’s analysis. Where appropriate, themes and heuristics were carried over from that analysis into this one.

Each interview was manually transcribed, which reinforced my familiarity and understanding of the dataset. I then coded these transcripts on a line-by-line basis to categorise discrete statements in terms of the (sub-)themes they expressed. To ease both navigation and interpretation, I then colour-coded these sub-themes into broader thematic categories. I then transferred each transcript’s theme ‘list’ into a master table, which let me inspect the similarities and differences between each respondent’s report. Finally, based on that inspection, I highlighted the most relevant thematic categories, ordering some into groupings based on conceptual harmony (for instance, the thematic categories ‘Artist’s personal qualities’, ‘Reflections on musical creation’, and ‘Expressive profile’ are grouped under ‘The artist and their work’, which in turn serves as the heading for section 7.2.3 in the following chapter).

6.2.2: The listening diaries

My own experience with the listening diary process left me confident in its potential. Of course, there are potential pitfalls to entrusting such a task to others who, kind volunteers as they are, have better things to do, and less of a stake in the exercise's success than I do. As Robson and McCartan note, chief amongst these pitfalls are 'sample bias, changed behaviour and sample attrition (i.e. participants dropping out of the research)' (2016: p. 273). While sample attrition proved a small problem (one respondent fell out of contact and never submitted their diary), sample bias was in itself not a concern (I am trying to promote a type of analysis, not present a comprehensive one), and changed behaviour was itself something that could be analysed. In any case, Lamont and Webb's (2010) profitable use of diary methods in their study of short- and long-term favourite pieces reassured me of their efficacy.

I recruited respondents for the listening diaries via the same emailing process I used for the interviewees. The recruitment email invited contact from respondents interested in 'keeping a diary to track their experience of listening to a new artist, across the span of a month.' As with the interviews, anyone interested was to contact me to receive the questionnaire link. Along with the same personal information of name, age, nationality, and occupation, respondents were asked to briefly state the kind of music they normally listen to, how many hours a week they roughly spend listening to music, what formal music education they have had (if any), and how music generally plays a role in their sense of self/identity. They were then asked to suggest 2-3 unfamiliar artists who

they might be interested in basing their diary on. As with the interviews, respondents were explicitly free to nominate either solo artists or groups.

Eleven people expressed an interest in participating in the listening diary exercise, eight of whom also wished to be interviewed. Respondents had been encouraged to participate in both exercises, since I was more interested in richer individual accounts from a smaller group of respondents than poorer accounts from a bigger one. This concern outweighed others already mentioned, namely those of achieving an even gender split and wide age range. Nevertheless, I was happy to end up with five women and five men, with an age range of 22 to 58.

Once each respondent was recruited, I provided them with the following information and instructions:

The purpose of this listening diary is to track your **familiarisation** with the artist you've chosen, **and to record your idea of 'who the artist is' as it develops day by day**. You are asked to keep this diary for around a month, although you are free to continue after that point, should you wish. You are also free to withdraw from the project at any time.

Below is a checklist of general instructions to follow while completing this diary. However, above all, please approach this activity in a way that is natural for you in terms of your normal listening habits.

- **Please begin your diary by summarising your overall idea of 'who the artist is' before you start listening to them.** This can be as brief or extensive as seems natural to you.

- You are free to do as much daily listening as feels comfortable for you. While you are encouraged to listen as much as you can, there is no 'obligation' to listen for X minutes a day, for instance, or to X number of tracks.
- Please record **anything at all** that seems relevant to your experience of the music, whether that is aspects of the sounds, thoughts about the artist, wandering/daydream thoughts, emotions, etc.
- You are free to write as much or as little as seems natural to you. Any method of writing is acceptable. **What is important is that you feel your words convey your listening experience.**
- You are free to listen to your chosen artist's music in any order that suits you (e.g., you are not obliged to listen to their discography in chronological order).
- You are free to listen in any situation (e.g., as 'dedicated listening', when working, while exercising, etc.), in any format (e.g., CD, vinyl, streaming, etc.). **However, you are asked to note this in each diary entry, and, if relevant, to report any reflections on how your situation influenced your listening experience.**
- You are free to complete your diary entries at any time during or after your daily listening. **However, you are asked to note this in each diary entry, and, if relevant, to report any reflections on how this has affected your entry.**
- Should you wish to, you are encouraged to, e.g., read about your selected artist, watch their music videos or live performances, or films/TV shows

about them, etc., **and record in your diary how these have affected your idea of ‘who the artist is’.**

- You are encouraged to keep your diary in a digital format, such as a word document. However, if this is difficult or disruptive, you are welcome to keep a physical diary instead, if you would be happy to send this to me by mail upon completion.
- There is no penalty for ‘missing’ days. It is OK if it is sometimes impossible or disruptive for you to make an entry. However, **if you are comfortable in doing so**, you are asked to note the reason why an entry wasn’t made (e.g., too busy, not in the mood, forgot, etc.).

As these instructions make clear, I was most eager that my respondents bent the exercise to their own habits, rather than vice versa, even if this meant them producing a more sporadic and inconsistent dataset than that which a more rigid regime might have yielded. Again, this is because the respondents themselves were the objects of study in this case. As such, any so-called erraticism in their responses, even omissions, was something for me to work with rather than rue.

I made clear to the respondents that they were welcome to contact me at any time with any queries, and that I would contact them once or twice over the course of the exercise to see how they were getting on. As Robson and McCartan recommend, I also introduced a ‘second data collection method’ as a way of shoring up the data in the diaries themselves (2016: p. 274). This came in the form of a summary questionnaire sent to each respondent once their diary was completed. The questions were as follows:

1. Please summarise your overall idea of ‘who the artist is’ now, and highlight what has contributed to this (e.g., musical features, things you’ve read about them, etc.).
2. What are the most essential musical characteristics of your artist, and which of their tracks best encapsulates them?
3. Which of your artist’s tracks are your favourite, and why?
4. How, if at all, do you feel you personally relate to the artist now?

This questionnaire essentially asked the respondent to perform a very brief version of my own analysis. Either their questionnaire reports would correspond neatly with what their diaries themselves said, implicitly or explicitly, to me as the analyst, or they wouldn’t. Either way, these questionnaires would prompt reflections on the in/congruity between their intro/retrospective overviews of the whole experience and the episodic here-and-nows of the diary entries themselves. In any case, two analysts are better than one.

As with the interviews and my own listening diary, I performed a thematic analysis on each listening diary, dividing up the texts into discrete segments that expressed a theme. Then I again colour-coded these themes into broader thematic categories and created a master table of all the diaries for ease of navigation and analysis. I aimed to strike a balance between, on the one hand, creating new themes and thematic categories where the data demanded it, and, on the other, labelling statements with pre-existing themes and thematic categories where this seemed justifiable. Since the diaries were much smaller texts than the interview transcripts—some were particularly economical—I was

able to perceive the key trends in each case with relative ease, although I 'verified' these perceptions using my thematic analysis table.

The concept of autobiographical significance also guides my analysis here, but I should clarify how it is to be understood when applied to data like this. As I hope is clear, the assignation of autobiographical significance to a given experience (or constituent factor thereof) depends on our ability to judge whether the salience of affected or inaugurated identities has endured over time. This is straightforward in the interview analyses for two reasons. Firstly, respondents are talking about artists who have been in their lives for at least a few years – decades, in some cases. Secondly, it is a given that those artists do or did matter in some way to the respondents discussing them. In other words, it is a given that they and their music are already autobiographically significant. The purpose of my analysis is to say why, and to what extent.

The listening diaries don't lend themselves to the concept so readily. Firstly, the chosen artists are unknown to the respondents – that is the whole point. So, at most, we only have a short time period across which to measure the endurance of identity salience: that between the beginning of a given diary and the submission of its summary questionnaire. Secondly, it is in any case not a given that the chosen artists will come to matter to the respondents in the way that those of the interviewees do. Indeed, there is more than a little ambivalence, indeed antipathy, to be read in them.

These are not the obstacles they seem, but rather opportunities to apply the concept of autobiographical significance at different scales of time and to differently valenced musical experiences. After all, significance doesn't

necessarily entail a positive kind of mattering. The experience of learning that you loathe an artist, or even that you are indifferent to them, can affect your self-identity just like that of learning that you adore and treasure them. My analysis will suggest how these neutral or negative kinds of mattering can differ on an individual scale, both in degree and kind.

As for the endurance problem, we must think of the listening diaries as micro counterparts to the macro interviews. How do perceived meanings and senses of identification change in real time, day to day, and how does the respondent's own reflexive understanding of these things change along with them? What seems crucial one day and is forgotten the next? What seems of middling importance until it is emphasised in the summary questionnaire? What twists of circumstance come into play in all of this?

Moreover, we can also look forward instead of backward, and hazard some speculation. How do the respondents expect to connect with the chosen artist going forward, if at all? What does that mean for their self-identities? What would it look like for these artists to remain autobiographically significant, or to cease to be? Even if we cannot know for sure right now, sketching this out can at least illustrate the uses of the concept.

6.3: Before we begin

In both of the following analyses, I seek to strike a balance between individual specificity and cross-respondent generalisability. I believe there are lessons about both the idiosyncrasies of these listener-artist connections and the common identity forms, cultural values, experiences, etc. that enable us to place

ourselves and our musical experiences as participants in a shared musical culture, however loosely knit. As such, I have attempted to relate the expression of each theme from each participant to the unique details of that respondent's self-identity and autobiography, while also connecting these details back to the shared socio-cultural context in which they took form.

7: Ten interviews

Worlds are turning and we're just hanging on
Facing our fear and standing out there alone
A yearning, yeah, and it's real to me
There must be someone who's feeling for me

– Whitney Houston, 'Higher Love'

Having explained what was of interest to me during the planning and running of the empirical exercises whose data fuel the following chapters, we can now turn, first, to my interview respondents' rich accounts of how their selected artists and their music had become entwined with their own lives and self-identities.

7.1: Respondent profiles

To contextualise the following discussion, here are some brief profiles of my respondents, each of whom has been given a pseudonym. I have also listed the artists each chose to talk about. For now, these present three bits of information about each respondent:

- how music generally plays a role in their sense of self/identity (as per question 1.a.i. of Part 1);
- how they characterised their personalities (as per questions 1.b. and 1.b.i. of Part 1);
- what features they pay attention to when listening to music generally (as per question 2.a.i. of Part 1).

The age quoted for each respondent corresponds to their age at the time they were interviewed (interviews took place between April and September 2020).

7.1.1: Richard

Richard, a 74-year-old retired British paediatrician completing a DPhil at the University of Oxford, chose to speak about Jamaican Reggae legend Bob Marley. He affirmed that music was part of his identity, and that ‘there’s music that means a tremendous lot’ to him. He characterised himself as ‘questioning’, ‘apparently rather reserved’, and ‘always interested in the background of things’. When listening, he finds important ‘the tune and the emotions which the tune produces’, as well as ‘quality’ of ‘reproduction’ and ‘playing’. Although he disavowed any expertise on the latter, he knows it when he hears it. He described his tastes as ‘fairly catholic’, although he doesn’t ‘keep up to date with most modern trends’.

7.1.2: Will

Will, a 23-year-old British student (History) at the University of Oxford, chose to speak about Scottish indie-pop band Belle and Sebastian. He described listening to music ‘passively basically whenever I can’, and is an enthusiastic musician, playing jazz saxophone, piano, and church organ (he also mentioned a recent foray into synthesisers). He characterised himself as ‘pensive’, a ‘person of extremes’, someone with ‘eccentricities’ who is prone to changing their mind. When listening, he is drawn to ‘weird’ or conspicuous instrumental sounds as a

rule, while brass and strings have a particular resonance with him. Lyrics are decidedly secondary until later, if ever. He described himself as 'musically curious'.

7.1.3: Daniel

Daniel, a 29-year-old American DPhil student (History) at the University of Oxford, chose to speak about American rapper billy woods. He said that music listening was 'a central part of my day-to-day life', and that sharing musical tastes, activities, and discoveries with friends 'defined' 'a lot of growing up' for him. He still values the search for new music, although it is mostly a lone activity now, and he plays less and goes to fewer gigs than he used to. He characterised himself as 'very anxious' but also 'adventurous', as 'pessimistic' and 'dark' ('unnecessarily so'), and as having a 'good sense of humour'. When listening, he is interested in the 'overall tone' or 'sound', tending more 'ambient' than the more 'technical music' he used to prefer. While he used to be 'obsessed with live performance', he is now more interested in the artistry of production.

7.1.4: Clara

Clara, a 22-year-old British undergraduate student (History) at the University of Oxford, chose to speak about American singer-songwriter Sufjan Stevens. For Clara, music connects her to past phases of her life and senses of her self. She also turns to songs to 'get through difficult phases of life', and for motivation. She noted that she has been told she is 'too nice', and imagined someone close to

her would say she is 'determined'. She characterised herself as 'enthusiastic', someone who 'like[s] to be busy' and is 'sometimes easily distracted'. She noted that lyrics are 'often quite important' when listening, as are 'rhythm' and 'tone'. Ultimately, though, it depends on her mood, and she has tailored different playlists to different purposes (e.g., exercise, contemplation).

7.1.5: Diana

Diana, a 32-year-old Malaysian DPhil student (History) at the University of Oxford, chose to speak about Scottish singer-songwriter Annie Lennox. Diana said music was 'almost like an extension of myself and of my everyday', both as a 'representation of me as a person and ... how I identify myself', and as a 'background' to her everyday activities. She imagined someone close to her would say she is 'reflective', 'quiet', 'sensitive', 'reliable', 'emotional', and an 'introvert', all of which she endorsed, characterising herself further as 'kind', 'forgiving', and 'patient', adding that she often perceived the world as 'hostile'. When listening, she said she is drawn to and values certain 'tone[s] of voice' above all, and 'ambiguous' 'not particularly gendered' ones in particular. Relatedly, she is usually interested in lyrics, and 'really like[s]' piano, violin, and 'grand music' such as orchestral works. She said she likes a 'quite a broad range of music' overall.

7.1.6: Rachel

Rachel, a 40-year-old British teacher, chose to speak about English rock band Radiohead, and in particular band-members Thom Yorke and Jonny Greenwood. 'Massively so', was how she answered the question 'How does music play into your own sense of self or identity?', explaining that lots of her 'formative ideas about culture probably came through exposure to popular music', and that music, particularly going out to hear it, had been the basis of her adolescent social life. She imagined someone close to her would describe her as 'creative', 'slightly eccentric', someone who 'tries to do right thing'. She described herself as 'stuck at being about 17', prone to 'tangent[ial]' thinking, and said she herself characterises her personality 'as the stuff that I like'. She emphasised that the experience of listening to music for her is 'like a film' with 'definite images', something she attributes to the childhood influence of MTV.

7.1.7: Joana

Joana, a 25-year-old Portuguese MPhil student in Politics (Political Theory) at the University of Oxford, chose to speak about English rock band Pink Floyd. She said music had, in her youth, 'had a very strong impact on my self and in my identity' by offering 'a place to go, and to feel understood'. Nowadays, she said 'music can still move me very strongly but it's become less of an identity thing', having previously been 'snobbish' about how and to whom people should listen. She imagined someone close to her would describe her as 'loud, maybe', 'caring', an 'active listener', and humorous, before characterising herself as

‘loud’, concerned with ‘the meanings of things’, and prone both to introversion and extroversion. When listening, she first attends to ‘melody and rhythm’. Lyrics are most important, but they usually take ‘a few more listens’ to settle. For her, ‘music really has so much more power beyond being something nice to listen to or something that gets you through the workout or whatever’.

7.1.8: Andy

Andy, a 58-year-old British charity project coordinator, chose to speak about English rock band The Rolling Stones, and Mick Jagger specifically. In his youth, music had determined the ‘subcultural group you were in’, and he can now ‘identify pretty much all my life with certain bands or songs’. For several years, he has been learning saxophone and playing in an Afrobeat band, which is ‘pretty central to my life’. A recovering alcoholic, this new activity was enabled by, and ‘very heavily linked’ to, his recovery. He imagined someone close to him would say he’s ‘outgoing’, ‘secretive’, ‘committed to certain things’, and *hopefully* ‘kind’, ‘generous’, ‘funny’, and ‘thoughtful’. He himself ‘would like to think’ he’s ‘humane and compassionate’. He added that he has ‘high expectations of myself’, and that he is ‘addictive’, ‘hedonist[ic]’, ‘not always comfortable with who I am’, and ‘all or nothing’. Nowadays, he attends more to what the instruments are doing when listening to music. But in his youth, ‘the whole thing was overall’, and music’s ‘impact’, ‘power’, and ‘image’ was what mattered. He is also ‘very conscious of the emotions that some music produces in me’.

7.1.9: Yasir

Yasir, a 38-year-old Pakistani professional studying part-time at the University of Oxford, chose to speak about American singer Whitney Houston. Music played a 'very seminal role' in his adolescence. Growing up in New York in the '90s, 'the age of music-meets-choreography', he came to value music as a 'comprehensive experience' that could take you to 'a different level of existence'. Over time, this conception of musical experience become consciously 'mystic', and he connects it to his general ongoing 'spiritual awakening'. He has 'often been called an old soul, ... an old man stuck inside a young person's body', which he endorsed, and associated this again with his overall spiritual outlook of trying to find 'way of being at one with the universe'. When listening, he mainly focuses on the vocal delivery, and how it coheres with the musical arrangement and the message of the song.

7.1.10: Oliver

Oliver, a 26-year-old American MSt student (Musicology) at the University of Oxford, chose to speak about Puerto Rican rapper Bad Bunny. Music has long been central to his sense of self. He 'was fairly certain from a young age that I'd have some sort of musical career', and has since been an active musician, as both a student and a professional, before recently turning to musicology. He imagined someone close to him would say 'I value my relationships quite a lot', and that he maintains them 'through humour' but can also 'get serious a little bit too fast', adding that he doesn't 'love surfacey conversations'. He connected this

with his tendency to ‘work out what’s happening in [my ‘inner life’ ...] right out in front of me’. Asked to characterise his own personality, he endorsed the above, saying his view of himself is ‘wrapped up’ in what he thinks others think of him. When listening, he attends first to ‘melody and line’, and, as a trained singer, to ‘how people use their voices’.

7.2: Interview analysis

The thematic groupings around which this analysis is structured serve simply to do just that: each section houses statements that expressed one or more themes that seemed related to each other on a higher level of generality, and were thus grouped together. For instance, statements that were originally coded under ‘personal qualities of the artist’ and ‘reflections on musical creation’ (to refer to two we have already encountered in Chapter 5, section 5.2.2) are here grouped under ‘The artist and their work’. In the end, given what might be called the holism of my approach, there is no neat, necessary division between these groupings that needs protecting, and some examples crop up outside of the ‘home’ grouping of the themes they were initially coded under. A given statement might appear in a certain grouping rather than its ‘own’ in this way because I deemed it to be ‘really’ about that grouping, or because I wished to emphasise one aspect of that statement over another. Such decisions, of course, were my own interpretive moves. Others might have been made. Ultimately, the thematic analysis I performed on this dataset was intended to help me navigate it; it was not itself the final analytical product. Of greater interest to me than which themes emerged is how and why they did so. In the context of this project, this specifically

means explaining which heuristics were in operation at those moments, and what the autobiographical context of those operations was. As in Chapter 5, those heuristics will appear in ***bold italics***. For efficiency's sake, I have selected examples for each point that struck me as particularly informative²⁴ while referencing, where relevant, those that have had to be omitted.

7.2.1: Music, listener identity, and autobiographical connections

To start, I will discuss how some respondents explicitly linked their affinity for their chosen artist's music to their own sense of self, both 'then' and 'now', and to certain phases and specific events in their lives. Partly due to my line of questioning, everyone had something to say about this. For instance, Daniel's connection to Billy Woods and his music only emerged a couple of years prior to our interview. It is not implicated in a self-defining period per se: Woods is not backdropping a period of self-definition so much as fortifying certain parts of Daniel's existing self-identity in a time of need. While living and studying in the UK, it is Daniel's identity as an American that Woods' music helps affirm, albeit in ways particular to Daniel's own understanding of that identity and its place in the social space he is currently in:

Hip-hop tends to come back into my diet when I'm not in the United States, because it's sort of an attachment to home ... being outside of America, all the windows into American culture I have kind of suck, it's like McDonalds, Hollywood movies, whatever political nightmare we've done that day. So having a piece of America that I think is cool [laughs] around, a piece of

²⁴ I emphasise, though, that there are, and could be, no *uninformative* examples. However the respondent says it is, that is *how it is*, and *how it is* is what is of interest. If this is expressed abstrusely, or seemingly simplistically, then that is itself something to be interpreted. In this context, there could only be failed *analyses*, and more or less obvious ones.

America that I appreciate and feel like is unique around, makes me feel good.

In this case, woods' sonic identity attains definition partially through the **life relevance** heuristic: his music resonates because its meanings apply to the present circumstances of Daniel's life, implicating themselves in what it means to Daniel to be away from his home country. In particular, woods' evocations of America are valued precisely for their unforgiving cynicism. Also at work is the **prior thematic affinity** heuristic: woods' music arrives ready to overlap thematically with Daniel's research on 'a lot of the bleaker aspects of the Cold War, a lot of African decolonisation and counter-insurgency'. In Daniel's eyes, woods' work is actively 'about third world issues, it's about government conspiracy theories and the alphabet soup of the American government and its interaction with the poor', themes that Daniel unified with his oft-used **fortuitous thought** of 'downtroddenness'.

woods' attention to America's downtrodden leads him to discomfiting transgressions, such as his taking the perspective of a just-captured Saddam Hussein on 'Spongebob'. This is 'universally challenging' in a way that Daniel, a self-proclaimed pessimist in his line of work, can appreciate: 'it's the kind of thing that might even make tankies a little uncomfortable, which makes me enjoy it even more'. But it is also evoking a potent symbol of the youth self-defining period of the '9/11 generation' to which Daniel belongs, into whose 'consciousness' Saddam Hussein is 'burned'. In a similar vein, Daniel elsewhere compared the thematically similar track 'Spiderhole' to his 'parents' Vietnam music'. Here, Daniel is using the **historical logic** heuristic to parse woods' music:

the music evokes and thus attaches itself to a historical period that already has useable meanings for Daniel. In this case, it is a period that has made Daniel who he is as an American.

At the time of interview, then, woods' music was autobiographically significant for Daniel in two key ways. Firstly, it was affirming his American identity by offering an American perspective on America that was digestibly critical for Daniel, sometimes using particularly strong imagery from the self-defining period of Daniel's own youth to do so. Secondly, it was affirming Daniel's scholar identity by chiming thematically and tonally with the very research that Daniel had left America to do, indeed offering 'a quite educated perspective on a lot of these darker edges of the stuff' Daniel is looking at. That overlap afforded Daniel both 'egois[m]'—'I can say "oh yeah this is correct" [chuckling]'—and gratification, since 'there's precious little on the sort of content he's talking about, or on what I study in particular, and so to see acknowledgement of it anywhere is great', especially in hip-hop. woods' continued autobiographical significance may depend on many things. To name a few: the continued relevance to Daniel of his American identity; the continued overlap between woods' themes and Daniel's research; and the wider importance of this woods-inflected phase of Daniel's life in his life story going forward.

Joana's case, by contrast, pertains to a past phase of her life. Pink Floyd's prominence in her life now has waned, although she still treasures them, and the ways their music mattered to her suggest why. She described discovering them, aged 17, via their album *The Wall* (1979), which she 'would listen to ... over and over and get up in the middle of the night and just not know what to do with myself

because it was so good'. Such 'peak' experiences as this one can have strong effects on how the music in question can become narratively contextualised, often being 'ascribed causal significance for various after-effects' (Whaley et al., 2009: p. 460; see also Lamont, 2011: p. 243). They can also lead to the listener feeling more empowered and motivated to tackle issues in their lives, and optimistic about doing so (Schäfer et al., 2014: pp. 540-541). Joana's response illustrates this.

This experience was Joana's first time listening through an entire album, necessitated by *The Wall's* song-to-song narrative; this then became part of her ideas about how one ought to listen to music. So, by way of both the music's power and form, Pink Floyd intensified the 'snobbish' meanings in her music listener identity. But Pink Floyd also mattered because of the **life relevance** they had for Joana. As she recounts, at that time, she 'felt alone in some way'. She'd 'moved to the UK for an international boarding school when I was 16,' and 'those songs spoke a lot to me in a time in which I was learning to make friends, ... in this new environment with people from all over the world'. Joana says her snobbishness 'was very reductive in some ways', and that she is now much more 'open-minded' since she 'grew up and became more confident'. But even though Pink Floyd had bolstered the snobbishness, they didn't cede autobiographical significance during that identity transformation, since becoming more open-minded doesn't entail abandoning what little you may have already accepted. Moreover, the emotional and intellectual support that Pink Floyd afforded Joana during this self-defining period ensured their autobiographical significance, insofar as Joana now remains broadly identifiable with herself then.

Exercising the ***associations and episodic memories*** heuristic—using particularly relevant or potent associations or memories as the basis for interpretation—Joana recounted two episodic memories from this end-of-school era that show the strength of Pink Floyd’s influence on her at that time. The first is of a tattoo of a flying pig she spontaneously had done towards the end of her school years. This was because ‘in the “Pigs on the Wing” song [(Pt. 2)], they say “every dog needs a home to bury its bones” ... And I was like “Oh my god, I’ve found a home!” and also a flying pig was kind of fun so who cares’:

I went with one of my best friends at the time, ... so the memory of just going there, something very spontaneous, and suddenly having the, feeling really happy about it ..., it’s something I’m definitely emotionally attached to and I remember that day, and that was one of the last two days of classes, ... the memory of those last days really connects me to this song.

Just days after this, before her graduation, came another memorable valedictory gesture, as Joana recounts:

I didn’t change my shoes very often, so my shoes had lots of holes in them, and like, they were terrible shoes and they needed to be replaced. So I decided to do a Viking funeral for the shoes, so I got a friend of mine to build a little ... raft ... and so we all drank a bit and like had a toast, and I was playing “Don’t You Forget About Me” [laughs] and “Mother” from *The Wall*, and “Outside The Wall”, and “Pigs on the Wing” [(Pt. 2)]. And yeah we all kind of sat there and I lit my shoe on fire and then it literally went a bit further and then it crashed on a rock ... I think the Viking funeral was a lot like, saying goodbye to in some ways the child I was ... And that was a really hard goodbye, because that was a wonderful place.

Both these memories, in all their episodic detail, help fix Pink Floyd as a core element of Joana’s adolescent self-defining period. The tattoo, spontaneous as it was, could have taken another subject and still been similarly emblematic of this precious, formative time in Joana’s life. But Pink Floyd’s general importance

to Joana, and the specific harmony of her own feelings with the sentiments of **key track** ‘Pigs on the Wing (Pt. 2)’, offered the readiest option. Likewise, the funeral would likely still have been memorable and bittersweet with other or no music, but it matters in retrospect that Pink Floyd set the scene and seemed the fitting choice to do so. Both these memories are now directly accessible through ‘Pigs on the Wing (Pt. 2)’. The tattoo, meanwhile, will likely be with Joana for the rest of her life; indeed, she wants to have it refreshed. It is hard to think of many stronger emblems of something’s autobiographical significance than that. What’s more, its permanence increases Pink Floyd’s chances of remaining autobiographically significant to Joana despite the passing of ‘their’ era, insofar as a part of them will, literally, always be with her. Meanwhile, the band’s implication in the richly symbolic, downright cinematic shoe funeral—the recollection of which brought Joana palpable glee—affords them some of the indelibility of that event itself. Again, however Joana may change going forward, Pink Floyd are likely to maintain their autobiographical significance for as long as she continues to connect her contemporary self-identity with the person she was—and was self-consciously becoming—during the era whose final acts are so vividly and fondly recalled.

Diana traced her affinity for Annie Lennox from her adolescent self-defining period to the present:

[She’s] linked to my past, my identity and my experiences. ... I feel like she’s been a bit of a constant and I’m almost surprised at how constant she’s been. Like I’m listening to her today and I’m 32, and I’ve been listening to her since I was, what, 15.

Of Lennox's role in her adolescent self-defining period, Diana, implementing the **associations and episodic memories** heuristic, recalls a cloud memory of 'sitting in my room with my CD player and my headphones ... I didn't have many CDs and [Lennox's 1995 album *Medusa*] was one that I did have, and I've listened to it a lot'. This was when Diana was coming to terms with her 'growing personality, sexuality, identity', a time to which *Medusa* was the 'soundtrack'.

Key track 'Downtown Lights' in particular:

really connected with me. ... I grew up in the suburbs, and there was something about downtown, about the city centre representing something really exciting, and that was something that I wanted to connect to ... wanting to have that excitement, but being also really nostalgic about it as well, it's a very strange feeling ... feeling a bit, you know, teenage angst as usual, or feeling a bit lost and a bit isolated ... listening to it on repeat, and indulging myself then and feeling, and craving that comfort and literally what she's saying of "it's going to be alright" ... I was realising I was gay, and ... she's very much part of the LGBT community so ... maybe there is an aspect of that as well: comfort from someone who was very involved in the LGBT community to someone who was just coming out, that it's gonna be OK.

The ability of 'Downtown Lights' to conjure this recurring scene from Diana's adolescent self-defining period is key to its autobiographical significance, and emblematic of the autobiographical significance of *Medusa* and Lennox more generally. This music, and by extension Lennox herself, responded to tensions central to Diana's self-identity formation at the time: the yearning for adult independence and its attendant thrills, and the need to feel secure in a sexual identity she knew might not be warmly welcomed into the world. In this instance, we see a confluence of the **key album**, **life relevance**, and **(re)purposing the music** heuristics: Diana intentionally turned to *Medusa* specifically for assistance in managing the self-identity upheavals she was experiencing at the time. In this way, Lennox was enabling what Krueger calls 'musically scaffolded emotional

offloading', a process through which Diana was able to delegate her emotional management to Lennox's music (Krueger, 2019: p. 60). Nowadays, by helping Diana access these memories with such clarity, Lennox helps Diana not just to identify the origins of her contemporaneous self-identity, but also, to some extent, re-experience them.

Indeed, for Diana, the very act of remembering is a conscious source of pleasure, and something she associates with her self-identity in broader ways:

I'm a historian by training so a lot of my mind is really in the past, and so it's actually quite nice to be like "oh I really fancy revisiting that moment in my life" and so I'll put that on and go back to that moment. ... I can listen to these songs, revisit that past or revisit that memory, but from a safe present. ... I don't have to go through those emotions again but I can still enjoy them almost voyeuristically but with the aid of music.

Elaborating on her use of the term 'indulgence', Diana affirmed her tendency to 'meditat[e] on certain thoughts and feelings and emotions', since it's better 'to understand them and approach them in a different way'. By inclining her towards spending time in her memories, this meditative tendency helps to bolster the autobiographical significance of Lennox's music insofar as it is involved in these memories; for these reasons, the **associations and episodic memories** heuristic is particularly important to Diana. When those memories themselves pertain to the formation of her self-identity, as the cloud memories of *Medusa* listening do, they reinforce the connection between Lennox's music and Diana's self-identity as a concept, and thereby reinforce the music's autobiographical significance. Furthermore, by affording this meditative exercise in the first place, Lennox's music garners, or at least retains, autobiographical significance insofar

as that exercise is an expression of the meditative tendencies so characteristic of Diana.

Many respondents could point to social relationships which had been affected by the artist's music, or with which that music had become associated – instances of what should be considered the ***social relationships*** heuristic. I consider these relationships autobiographical matters insofar as these other people are 'characters' in the respondents' life stories. For instance, Rachel, also exercising the ***associations and episodic memories*** heuristic, connected Radiohead's ***key track*** 'Airbag', one of her chosen tracks, with her previous boyfriend from her early university years, which the song more generally evokes for her. In her words, it was 'that sort of thing where you have your first boyfriend or first girlfriend, and music I think is a big part of those experiences'. Indeed, it's partly the novelty of self-defining periods that makes the music (among other things) from them stick, and 'first partner' is usually quite a big first, even compared to others from one's generally quite definitive university years. But even though she likes 'Airbag', Rachel remarked that it sounds 'dated'. While she based this on its musical qualities, there is perhaps also a sense in which the track's association with that ex-boyfriend, seemingly remembered fondly, marks it as irrevocably of the particular past he was relevant in. It is autobiographically significant insofar as Rachel identifies with that past, but limitedly so insofar as that is where it remains, along with her identity as his girlfriend.

A more contemporary social link for Rachel is that between Radiohead and her older sister. Rachel's sister influenced her listening already in their childhood and adolescence, as is not atypical. This influence persists, in both

active and passive ways. For instance, Rachel referenced two *fortuitous thoughts* relating to her sister. Not only did her sister give her the handy term ‘post-Radiohead’ to describe ‘the later stuff’, but she also supported Rachel’s theory that ‘everybody needs like a Radiohead relationship romantically’ (involving ‘the kind of “hmm”, appreciative’ listening shared with the partner) by having one herself, just like Rachel did. Ultimately, as Rachel put it so well, her sister ‘gets it’, ‘it’ being not just the music but the very notion of Radiohead being so important. That all these meanings are reaffirmed by someone so close only makes that affirmation more intense. Insofar as Rachel’s sister identity is both life-long and continually salient, the music of Radiohead, so bound up in that identity, remains autobiographically significant.

Each respondent’s ways of hearing and listening to their artist’s music, as well as their specific interpretations of it, indicate something about the autobiographical significance of that music to them. These might reflect the respondent’s interests, priorities, proficiencies, or, indeed, seem themselves to condition those things. Yasir, for instance, praised his selected tracks insofar as they afforded ‘an overall comprehensive experience’ that was ‘uplifting’, applying those terms both to Houston’s ‘Greatest Love Of All’ and ‘When You Believe’. These terms are at the heart of his ideas of what music is and should be. In his own words, ‘music ought to be experiential’. He traces this concern back to the comprehensiveness enacted by the music-and-choreography combinations of the stars of his ‘90s New York childhood, such as Janet Jackson, Paula Abdul, and Houston herself. As I noted in his profile, Yasir framed his life story in terms of an ongoing ‘spiritual awakening’, whose priorities might be summarised as

becoming 'one with the universe' and uncovering 'deeper psycho-social experience[s]'. At least some of Houston's music already afforded these experiences in Yasir's youth, and may even have prompted him to be aware of, and open to, them in the first place.

After moving back to Pakistan as a teenager, he discovered the music of Lata Mangeshkar, in which he sensed lay yet greater possibilities of such experiences, and Houston et al. diminished in importance thereafter. Nevertheless, Houston's music remains autobiographically significant to Yasir, not only because it can still formally support that experiential listening, but also because Yasir can hear spirituality as a theme in it; it is the ***prior thematic affinity*** between Houston's music and his own concerns that fuels the creation of meaning in Houston's sonic identity. These interpretations are strengthened by his epitextual knowledge of her own religious background. Of the ***key track*** 'Higher Love', ostensibly about romantic love, Yasir asserted that 'she's singing about a higher love, ... the love for God ... the relationship with the divine'. He added that 'a true Whitney fan' would understand this, suggesting that this spiritual through-line is definitive of her music. It is this close harmony between expressive and interpretive priorities, both of which are perceived as being fundamentally spiritual, which keeps Houston's music autobiographically significant to Yasir, whose concern with the spiritual has only grown throughout his life. In his youth, Houston's music already defined if not engendered his musical concern with the comprehensive and spiritual, connecting his listener identity to his overarching identity as a spiritual person. With that identity more

salient than ever, Yasir can still hear in Houston's music what needs to be heard for that music to keep mattering.

Some respondents also talked about their own musician identities, and how these identities came to bear on their understandings of their chosen artists and their music. As I noted in his profile, Andy's saxophonist identity, inaugurated in his middle-age, is now one of his most salient identities. For Andy, this identity's emergence is a key part of the story of his recovery from alcoholism, which itself has been a major factor in his autobiography more broadly:

I've been clean and sober 15 years now, and I think that has given me the freedom, it's given me the economic freedom because, you know, saxophones are expensive, lessons are expensive, it's given me time ... I wouldn't have practised before, I wouldn't have driven to somewhere because I'd have needed a drink, so I wouldn't have done it.

Andy remarked on how his growing musicianship had altered his ways of hearing music generally, and that of the Stones specifically:

Certainly since becoming a musician, I listen to music differently ... I think in the early days I listened to what the whole thing was overall and that kind of impact of it and the power of it ... But now, the way I listen to music, I would certainly say I am listening to where the saxophone stabs are coming in or what the bass is doing.

Andy still talked about the Stones' music in terms of 'overalls', such as the emotions it induced and the genre significations it emanated. Indeed, he remarked that 'familiarity means I just listen to it as a whole'. But his growing instrumental proficiency has afforded the employment of what might be termed the **formal analysis** heuristic, by which meaning is generated through the conscious focus on the music's materials – rather than, say, on its effects on oneself as a listener. Andy's newfound tendency to identify the instrumental

forces and formal constituents of music was on display as we listened to his selected tracks. So too was the pleasure he derived from analysing the music this way – or perhaps the pleasure already in the music, which this manner of analysis helped him to express. Of **key track** ‘You Can’t Always Get What You Want’, for instance, he said:

it’s got the most incredible build-up. Starting off, and then with the choir coming in, and then the amazing French horn coming in, and the guitar and the piano ... it just builds up from that quite slow, melodic song to right at the end where you’ve got the piano, kind of crazy honky tonk piano and the choir singing ... I love it, it’s got loads of space in it, and I think over the years as I understand music more, space is as important as notes.

Again, no matter whether Andy’s new analytical vocabulary is itself revealing new pleasures in the music or enabling a clearer expression of the pleasures that were always there—and I think it is doing both—what is noteworthy here is that the Stones’ music is amenable to this new way of listening in the first place. Having originally prized the holistic impact of their music, Andy is now able to enjoy—and/or enjoy talking about—the intricacies that contributed to that impact. By accommodating this new way of listening, one so firmly rooted in Andy’s new and highly salient musician identity, the Stones’ music retains autobiographical significance for Andy. In general, both the proof and the explanation of the Stones’ considerable autobiographical significance lies in this ability of theirs to remain important to Andy through the tumults of alcoholism and recovery.

Each respondent had their own mixture of listening strategies, in terms of both how and why they listened to their artist’s music. These strategies can also indicate how each respondent has, whether intentionally or intuitively, **(re)purposed the music** of their artist to support the day-to-day maintenance of

their self-identities, thus nurturing the artist's autobiographical significance. Rachel does, of course, listen to and value lots of other music, but Radiohead's pre-eminence in her mind is strikingly clear:

they've become a kind of myth in my head now, so I just have a kind of whole imaginative world that I occupy where I'm like "yeah, Thom Yorke might be thinking this today", and it's really, it's utterly ridiculous, so I have to kind of limit my exposure to it so I don't go on about it with people too much [laughs].

For Rachel, then, her connection to Radiohead is an almost embarrassingly intense and private matter. The upshot is that Radiohead are able comprehensively to cater to her self-exploratory needs, not least as a function of their expressive variety:

I'll tend not to need to listen to anything else ... there's different albums that sort of take you to different places as it were. ... I have quite a limited thing, and I'm often using it to like explore similar sort of feelings maybe?

Given how strong Radiohead's influence has been on Rachel's ideas about popular culture, and given how much these ideas influence her self-identity—'I'd characterise myself as the stuff that I like'—Radiohead have, to some extent, perhaps actually set the very terms of Rachel's 'limited thing', forming the question to which they are themselves the answer. She uses their music to explore her feelings precisely because that music has been so involved in her becoming who she is. The depth and intensity of this connection is a testament to the autobiographical significance Radiohead bear for Rachel, and suggest that this significance will remain robust.

Rachel's preferred context for listening to music, and Radiohead in particular, is also noteworthy:

normally I listen to it in a car, I would say, but I normally listen to most music in the car, ... and I sort of go through different albums, yeah, depending on what mood I'm in. So I might spend like 18 months listening to a particular series of tracks, and that will be repeated.

As Rachel notes here, this approach to listening seems to accommodate extensively repetitive listening. You put a CD in and don't think to take it out for... who knows how long? But this doesn't necessarily make the car a place for backgrounded, uncommitted listening. Indeed:

it's like a ritual [chuckles] that I sort of have ... if I go off on a holiday, and it's a long drive ... I'll try and listen to an album in its whole entirety to see the difference in where the progression is, or what the argument is across the piece.

Nor is it a wholly private one. Talking of the Thom Yorke solo **key track** 'Last Flowers', Rachel related:

I make my husband sing it because he doesn't like singing, and like [laughs] we're in the car driving, I'll be like "put on that one" and he doesn't like the sound of his voice, but I think he sings this one really really well.

Clearly, the car's affordances as a listening environment have helped Radiohead to continue mattering to Rachel. It is entered every day, for journeys both mundane and exciting. It is immersive and private, but also shareable. And it is low-effort, especially if the music in question can bear extensive repetition, as Radiohead does for Rachel. The car, then, keeps Radiohead's music in Rachel's consciousness from day to day, offering ample time for its meanings to be mined. This also allows Radiohead's music both to better attain **life relevance** and undergo the operations of the **social relationships** heuristic, insofar as it can more easily implicate itself in both those days' events and her relationships with

the people close enough to occasionally warrant the passenger seat. Insofar as Rachel's car is a setting where she can activate various identities—from wife to music listener, and no doubt much else in-between—Radiohead can retain their autobiographical significance to whatever extent they can persist in that setting.

For all that she adores Radiohead, though, Rachel has little appetite for the concert experience:

I have been to see them live, but I don't think I could go to see them live, because [laughs] it's too much of a thing [laughs] ... it just wouldn't live up to the layers of stuff going on in my head ... they've entered into some kind of weird meanings for me, ... they can't now exist in the real thing.

That's one listening strategy out the window, then. Radiohead are perhaps the victims of their own success here, at least as far as autobiographical significance is concerned: there will likely be no 'that unforgettable Radiohead gig'-style event changing Rachel's life. That said, the very fact that Rachel's sense of connection to Radiohead's music is so committed and idiosyncratic as to preclude this suggests that they are too big to fail. Radiohead's music and its meanings are fully hers, in that they enjoy a self-sustaining existence within her mental world. Those meanings can affect her self-identity more powerfully and consistently from within that mental world than without; from here, they are even more amenable to being **(re)purposed**, and even more likely to achieve **life relevance**. Their autobiographical significance is arguably better sustained this way after all.

Some respondents also noted the impact of particular listening circumstances that meaningfully inflected how they received their artist's music. While 'listening strategies' denotes deliberate and autonomous approaches to

music listening, 'listening circumstances' denotes listening settings and contexts whose character was beyond the respondent's control. As we have seen, Richard naturally associates Bob Marley's music with his own time in Jamaica in the 1970s. Richard emphasised how pervasive Marley's music was there at the time, not to mention everywhere else thereafter:

He was playing regularly live on the radio so I would hear that. Obviously in Jamaica you heard him frequently at parties, heard recordings of him. And his music is so widely diffused worldwide that you know, you're travelling somewhere and you hear one of his songs, and that brings back memories again.

Like the everpresence the car allows Radiohead to have in Rachel's case, Marley's (rather more transcendent) ubiquity will permit his music to achieve *life relevance* more frequently, insofar as it might suddenly insert itself anywhere, anytime. More specifically, the ubiquity of Marley's music in Jamaica in the 1970s will have strengthened the association between artist and place through sheer repetition if nothing else, and in doing so increased the prominence of Marley in the *associations and episodic memories* Richard has of that time. Add to this the prevalence of Marley's music outside of Jamaica since then—Marley is surely one of the most well-loved and recognisable popular musicians of the last fifty years—and you have a recipe for the frequent rehearsal and re-contextualisation of those memories. This will have sustained Marley's autobiographical significance for Richard by re-presenting his past self-identity to him, a self-identity formed against the back-drop of Marley's music. This also asserts a continuity between that self-identity and his contemporary self-identity. In other words, the musical back-drop of that self-defining period was never fully taken

down. Marley's music remains autobiographically significant by this means insofar as Richard can accept that continuity, i.e., still identify with who he was then.

For Richard, however, Marley's music is by no means a relic, signifying only what it once was. As we listened to the **key track** 'No Woman, No Cry' together, Richard was 'astonish[ed]' by two new associations:

One is the "everything's going to be alright", which is exactly the slogan at the beginning of the epidemic in Italy [where Richard lives], which is "Tutto andrà bene", and also it's actually a quotation from the mystic Lady Julian of Norwich that "all shall be well". So yet another association brought along by Coronavirus [both chuckle]. And the other one which cropped up is, I'm actually trying to write a thesis at the moment, and one of the major themes of the thesis is friendship. So I was therefore wondering if I should use it as a titling for one of the chapters of the thesis.

This is a striking example of **life relevance**; of 'strong' circumstances—in this case, the Coronavirus pandemic—embellishing the richness of a song already rich in meaning for Richard, after more than forty years with 'No Woman, No Cry'. While the reference to Julian of Norwich's different phrasing of the same sentiment might have occurred to Richard in other circumstances, it seems actually to have been prompted here by the arguably more radical translational epiphany that connected the sentiment to its Italian rendering. By activating these associations, 'No Woman, No Cry' is working on at least two salient identities of Richard's. First, it activates his scholar identity, whose activities occupy his post-retirement day-to-day and will proceed to **(re)purpose the music** to its needs. Second, it activates his Italian resident identity, also likely be salient in that day-to-day and certainly in such a time of national crisis as the early days of the pandemic, through which Italy, one of the first European countries to be hit by

Coronavirus, suffered significantly. By doing this, ‘No Woman, No Cry’ has no doubt increased its autobiographical significance for Richard. Its central mantra will be both associated with a key phrase of one of the most tumultuous events of all our lives and enshrined in Richard’s own work.

7.2.2: Empathy and affective responses

Many respondents described feeling empathically linked to the artist in some way, whether by identifying with something the artist expressed or feeling something toward the artist as a person. Oliver described both. Regarding Bad Bunny’s **key track** ‘RLNDT’, he said ‘I feel empathy and sympathy in the sense that I really do relate to a lot of the questions that occur to him through the song and that crisis of identity’, reminding me that Bad Bunny ‘kind of came to me in a time when that was the kind of stuff I was experiencing’. Again, Oliver’s identity shift revolved mainly around his turn away from his choral background, hitherto so definitive for him, towards a new, eventually academic focus on the Urbano Latino genre generally and Bad Bunny specifically, Bad Bunny having been the artist most influential in this transformation.²⁵ That Oliver is able so strongly to empathise with Bad Bunny’s own feelings on the very issue of self-definition—through the enaction of the **interpersonal identification** heuristic, whereby interpretation prioritises the meanings emphasised by that process of identification—helps explain why Bad Bunny’s music has been so autobiographically significant in his recent self-defining period. That empathy

²⁵ Oliver’s identity crisis would seem to match Erikson’s original use of the term, insofar as Oliver ‘perceives a conflict between the social materials he can use in his life and his particular ability or desire to use them’ (Sennett, 1970/2021: p. 17).

didn't just provide the succour that was needed in the moment, but also a more general assurance that this new cultural world was one where a crisis of identity could be understood at all – that this music could be **(re)purposed** at such a time.

Oliver described feeling 'grateful' for this, and gratitude was expressed more pointedly regarding another **key track**, 'Caro', and in particular its music video, in which Bad Bunny has his nails painted before transforming into a woman. Oliver describes this track as 'a generic trap song' whose 'themes are very very hip-hop in this self-aggrandising and street braggadocio type of way'. But 'when I first saw the video, and saw that he meant to apply that idea to, ... you know, gender non-conforming people, and women and different kinds of women', he was 'overwhelmed', 'grateful to see something like this, [from] an artist like him', and even 'shed a tear'. Using the **genre/tradition** heuristic, Oliver described this affirmation as doubly meaningful against the backdrop of the Urbano Latino genre, with its 'very narrow definition of what a man is', and whose normalcy is evoked by the music before being contradicted visually. Oliver's gratitude stemmed partly from the hope that his students, whose role in his self-transformation had been pivotal, could learn from Bad Bunny's example:

I've really struggled with ... coming out as bisexual to them, because there's a whole cultural thing there and I just didn't know how it was gonna be received ... [and] they don't think they know anyone who's queer. ... [T]he fact that there are videos out there, made by powerful people ... [is] comfortable to me, that the cultural work of making that move happen isn't all on me.

Oliver's self-identity is based on connecting with the socio-cultural space that Bad Bunny represents. This space's population is represented by the students,

for whom he feels much affection, who revealed it to him. In this way, the **social relationships** heuristic also operates on Bad Bunny's music and contributes to the interpretation of his sonic identity.

As with 'RLNDT', Oliver's gratitude here shows why Bad Bunny's music is autobiographically significant to him. It reconciles core parts of himself—his queerness and his identity as an Urbano Latino listener—that were ostensibly not so compatible. Meanwhile, it safeguards against rejection by the people—his students—to whom he plans to return, and whose rejection would be so painful. In short, the music allows these salient identities—queer person, Urbano Latino listener, teacher and friend to his students—to coexist.

Some respondents talked about more abstracted senses of empathy, that is, feelings of being reflected by or resonating with the music 'itself', rather than the artist 'themselves'. Will spoke at length in such terms about his chosen Belle and Sebastian tracks. The **key track** 'Get Me Away From Here, I'm Dying', whose lyrics relate the protagonist's yearning to escape their circumstances to a more fulfilling life, prompted the exercise of the **associations and episodic memories** heuristic in the form a cloud memory of his undergraduate years, during which it had reflected his own malaise:

I had a job when I was an undergrad at a clothes shop ... and my social life suffered as a consequence. And because I lived really, really far away from town as well, ... I had to get a bus to and from work, and to and from university campus, which ended up being a nightmare, and the flat was bloody awful, and I also remember being on that bus on my own, feeling just like completely defeated, and then like getting to that small tenement and staring out ... into the grey rain, and like there wasn't a student for another two miles around where I was, and they were all down the club and I had to go to work at 6 for a stock take the next morning and I was like "this is absolute shit" [both chuckle]. So yeah, "get me away from here, I'm dying" was how I felt around that time and I listened to this album a lot around that time.

What was this harmony between the track's message and Will's circumstances doing for him here? Thinking of Van den Tol and Edwards' (2013) rationales for listening to sad music when sad, the track was, in a sense, acting as a virtual friend to Will (p. 453), and/or reminding him of his 'common humanity' to the effect that he could alter his outlook on his situation and feel less alone in it (p. 451; see also Ter Bogt et al., 2017; Sloboda et al., 2009: p. 435). Musically, the track is, arguably, quite cheery, and so perhaps afforded Will some genuine positivity, or at least lend him some of the irony of its own formal juxtaposition. In any case, by establishing a resonance at that time between itself and Will's circumstances—by inviting the application of the **life relevance** heuristic—the track has earned autobiographical significance. At the time, Will was dissatisfied with who he was insofar as he was dissatisfied with the things he had to do. His shop worker identity was disproportionately salient to the value he placed in it and the affirmation it could give him; in other words, it was much more active than he wanted it to be. Meanwhile, the inverse was true of his student identity. This imbalance left Will dissatisfied with his total self, as perceived within the story of how his life was going and ought to go – again, this is what I've been calling self-identity. The solidarity offered by the track, however bitter, signalled to Will that he wasn't alone in having his problems, and, what's more, that they weren't unsolvable, since the protagonist of the song seems to have succeeded in attaining the song-writerly success they sing of wanting. By allowing Will at least to reconcile himself somewhat with the imbalance of his identities, even if he could not redress it for now, 'Get Me Away...' arguably helped stabilise his self-identity, and in doing so became autobiographical significant. It will likely

remain so for as long as Will still stands by what he learned about how he did not want to live—that is, who he did not want to be—and for as long as it continues to evoke the days when it helped him endure that.

The more solemn **key track** ‘I Fought In A War’ is also rich in autobiographical associations for Will, having been a go-to after he broke up with the girlfriend he discovered the band with. For Will, this song seems:

designed ... for the listener to reflect on or empathise with ... if it was just explicitly the artist or artists giving their own exact experience, it can be difficult ... this is an almost romantic figure, you know like building a kind of archetypal character, ... this metaphor of the soldier who waits and hopes I guess, and that pensive, passive person. ... [T]he character in this who’s waiting, you know, sending a letter, hoping, not even knowing but hoping that it’s received, not really hoping for anything to tangibly happen, but just sitting there ruminating, kind of doing nothing. ... I can’t help but try and see myself in the character, I guess my inability to act, and being too patient maybe. But I can’t help that.

The track’s ability to invite Will’s **interpersonal identification** with this archetype is what made it signify during his teenage breakup. In not only speaking to the circumstances of that breakup, but the very personality traits—pensiveness, inaction—at the core of his self, the track signifies well beyond just those circumstances. This contrasts with the more upbeat ‘Another Sunny Day’, which Will says ‘feels more personal to me, maybe just because it’s more specific ... he’s singing about something or a thing that did happen, which does change the way I perceive it a little bit’. In other words, the anecdotal specificity of ‘Another Sunny Day’ precludes the stronger, deeper identification afforded by ‘I Fought In A War’. Instead, ‘Another Sunny Day’ evokes ‘a nice sunny day, pastoral idyll kind of thing’ that Will can sometimes (weather permitting) overlay onto his surroundings, or else daydream into.

For as long as ‘I Fought In A War’ remains a place where Will can continually go to hear core aspects of himself reflected, it will likely remain autobiographically significant for him. ‘Another Sunny Day’, meanwhile, is more constrained in this regard by the specificity of the artist’s own presence within it. Will did note that the track ‘very strongly evoked’ ‘long summer days [in his youth] when I would leave [home in suburbia for the countryside] in the morning and just not come back until after dark’, sojourns in which he took comfort in the ‘little English gardens and the flowers and the village green and the Victorian post box and the cricket match on the green and stuff like that because where I lived wasn’t like that’. The continued autobiographical significance of ‘Another Sunny Day’ will depend on how much those ***associations and episodic memories*** remain relevant to his self-identity, or to what extent the track’s relatively narrow evocations can connect to other important places, events, people, and so on, in his life going forward.

Some respondents discussed affective responses towards their artist’s music that differed from the empathetic dynamics discussed above, insofar as these responses did not refer to feeling with the music, or, more pertinently, the artist themselves. (This is why I didn’t expressly ask about such responses, although I would if I had my time again). Some of these were subtle physiological reactions—Will described his heart rate quickening when listening to ‘I Fought In A War’, for instance—while others were explicitly emotional. While these didn’t ostensibly refer to the artist, they can nevertheless be read in terms of the autobiographical significance of that artist and their music to the respondent in question, as I will discuss.

Andy mentioned the importance of emotions on numerous occasions. One of his main ideas about music is that it ‘has to create emotion’ – ‘emotionless music, I’ve got not time for it’. Later, when asked why The Rolling Stones/Mick Jagger and their music matter to him, he responded that ‘they’re still important now because the songs make, they ... create an emotion in me, yeah, for good or for bad’. This is not an uncommon value, but in Andy’s case we might trace it back to his youth when, as already mentioned, music’s ‘overall’ effect, its ‘power’ and ‘impact’, was what he prized.

During the listening exercise, Andy elaborated on the Stones’ pre-eminence in this regard. After hearing the **key track** ‘You Can’t Always Get What You Want’, he said there are:

maybe three or four songs which, for some reason, when I listen to them, they just almost make me want to, you know, I can feel kind of that constriction of my throat, like I’m gonna burst into tears. ‘Cos of the lyrics, it’s just something to do with the way the music’s put together, or the chord changes, I don’t know what it is, but that’s one of the songs that does that to me. And you know, it doesn’t make me feel really sad, but it just makes, there’s a huge emotional response to it.

‘Shine A Light’ was in the same bracket: ‘again it is one of those songs that makes me [makes staggered cough] “My God”. ... And I don’t know why that is, it just does!’. Andy’s use of the **mystery** heuristic, by which the listener embraces incomprehension as a valid response, serves here as perhaps the ultimate affirmation of the emotional impact of ‘Shine A Light’ by elevating this impact beyond understanding. These **key tracks**, then, are in a very exclusive club whose members maximally fulfil music’s chief promise, as per Andy’s emotion-oriented values regarding what music *ought* to do, by producing an emotion so intense as to be ambivalently valenced (neither obviously sad or

happy, but rather somehow both – and more),²⁶ somewhat paralysing, and inexplicable. (It is telling that this music still evades explanation despite Andy's increasingly analytical way of listening in recent years – the mystery persists, confirming that that core promise of music will be kept.) While this club's membership might number more than the three or four Andy alludes to—he also names Sinéad O'Connor's 'Black Boys On Mopeds' as another member—it speaks to the centrality of the Stones in his life that their music constitutes roughly half of it. Insofar as the Stones, now as in his youth, can still incite such emotions, and quite uniquely at that, they ensure their continued autobiographical significance to Andy by affirming a continuity of his emotional propensities and aesthetic values across his life.

7.2.3: The artist and their work

This section focuses on statements regarding the respondents' chosen artists 'themselves'. This covers three main things: statements about the artists' qualities or perceived values as people; statements about the artists' creative processes; and statements about the artists' expressive profiles and/or agendas.

Andy spoke at some depth about the personal qualities of Mick Jagger when explaining what had first drawn him to The Rolling Stones as a child:

I suppose for me it was the kind of androgyny maybe of Mick Jagger, the badness of him, ... he just seemed, you know, an alien creature almost. You know, incredibly good-looking man, but kind of really ugly as well. And the way he moved.

²⁶ The concept of '*Moving sadness*' proposed by Eerola et al. (2016) perhaps applies here to describe what appears to be 'an intense [kind of] experience that involves feelings of sadness and being moved, liking, and perceived sadness' (p. 7).

Jagger's androgyny, badness, and alienness all distinguished him from Andy's 'old-fashioned kind of rural upbringing', and so posited him and the Stones as means to escape from that. Indeed, Jagger's presentation—'Jagger is just sex on a stick really, as my wife once referred to him' (a *fortuitous thought* indeed)—aroused a furtive sexual attraction in Andy while also helping him to process that feeling:

I was a 13-, 14-year-old boy, confused about my own sexuality, and so it was kind of permission-giving ... to pierce my ears, to have long hair, all those things, without, you know, being, in the words of what it would've been in my school, being a poof. And you'd get your head kicked in for being a poof in 1975. Anyway, so I think it allowed me to experiment internally with the idea of like "oh maybe I do find him attractive, and that's alright" ... so it was really important for my burgeoning sexuality.

In this context, key aspects of Jagger's presentation were being *(re)purposed* to mediate between the feelings they aroused within Andy and the social world that condemned them. This is also perhaps one of the earliest instances, if not the earliest, of Andy's professed fascination with the 'image' of artists, something which is key to his appreciation of music.

The *fortuitous thought* of 'badness' was a recurring term in the interview. It encapsulates the 'rebellious', 'subcultural', 'anomic' deviancy that Andy perceived in both the Stones themselves and their music, and which has anchored his understanding of both. As a child, he interpreted this kind of badness as, well, a good thing. Crucially, he still does, even though he connects his own 'badness' with the alcoholism from which he is recovering. As Andy noted, the socio-cultural attitudes of his youth cast his own homoerotic urges and Jagger's androgyny as inherently deviant too, and thus parts of this over-arching 'badness'. Andy says it is the Stones themselves, by being 'badly-behaved', who

‘carr[y] my bad side for me really’. Indeed, what matters most, perhaps, is that all these qualities of Jagger and the Stones have endured in Andy’s eyes when he takes an *oeuvre-eye view*. This consistency—‘they’re still rebellious you know?’—and their general musical ‘longevity’, are themselves things he values, and which set Jagger and the Stones apart. They continue to be autobiographically significant to Andy because he has been able to retain ‘badness’ as a valuable meaning in his self-identity since it first emerged in his youth. Insofar as this was precisely at Jagger’s and the Stones’ prompting, and insofar as it is precisely they who carry that torch for him now, that significance is considerable.

Many respondents made comments regarding their chosen artists’ creative processes. These comments often reveal something of the respondents’ attitudes regarding what matters in the creation of popular music, by which, in turn, a clearer view can be gained on why their artists matter to them. Does it matter if the artist writes their own songs, for instance? Opinions differed, but why, and to what end? Clara, when asked what sets Sufjan Stevens apart from other artists, first answered: ‘I think he does write his songs, so I think that’s quite special’. Given the interest with which Clara discussed the links between Stevens’ expressive agenda and his own life, this statement can be taken as more decided than its opening ‘I think’ suggests. In the context of the question I asked, Clara is casting the songwriter status itself, which emerges here as a distinct *critical concept*, as inherently special, and not just Stevens himself. Indeed, Stevens earns a measure of his specialness for Clara precisely by warranting that status and thus harmonising with the values of her listener

identity. For Clara—as for many people inclined to impute specialness to the songwriter status—the very fact of this inherent specialness is its own reward. It can burnish whatever effects the music may have on her self-identity by giving her another reason to feel good about being amenable to those effects, and indeed just for listening to it at all. Even if only in a small way, this specialness will augment whatever autobiographical significance Stevens has had for Clara, and will continue to do so for as long as Clara cares about it.

Yasir, meanwhile, engaged this ***critical concept*** more cautiously, responding more equivocally when I asked whether it mattered to what extent Whitney Houston was involved in the writing and production of her music:

I don't think it would make a difference, but I mean clearly it hasn't because I don't know ... But I do know for a fact that some of my favourite singers have been songwriters as well, for example Mariah Carey writes a lot of her own songs, Christina Aguilera writes a lot of her own songs, Adele, so there is precedent ... suffice to say that the more deeply involved you are in the writing and or production process, the more it shows, I think, in the final product as well.

Yasir's emphasis on the final product recalls his preoccupation with music affording a 'comprehensive experience'. In other words, it is the listener and their experience of the music that matter most, more than the artist's personal eminence. Indeed, Yasir is elsewhere keen to stress the importance of good collaborators, such as Carey herself, and producers, such as Walter Afanasieff. Of course, one factor of the comprehensive experience could indeed be the perception or intuition of the singer's authorial agency in the music. But for Yasir, at least, the assignation of creative agency seems itself to be a function of the comprehensiveness of the experience achieved, rather than the other way around. Perhaps what nudges Yasir into attributing likely authorship to Houston

is the ***other artists*** heuristic, which he employs to make sense of his own perception via the following syllogism: these other artists are known songwriters; Houston's music is similar to theirs (in effect, etc.); ergo, Houston is herself (probably) a songwriter. Ultimately, however, we see here the matter of authorship being subordinated to the prominent transcendental values in Yasir's listener identity, which themselves are conditioned by his more salient overarching identity as a spiritual person. Whether Houston was or was not involved in the writing of her music is not, therefore, likely to affect her autobiographical significance to Yasir. That will continue to depend primarily on that music's ability to affirm his spiritual identity, which, along with what he knows about similar artists, will suggest but not confirm her authorship as a side-effect.

The G-word itself came up, albeit less frequently than you might expect. Joana, talking about 'The Trial', said Pink Floyd are 'geniuses I guess, I mean that's a vague like, "wow!", how can someone be, how can a group of people be this good? And how can you accomplish this so well?'. Certainly, this is an iteration of the ***critical concept*** heuristic, 'genius' being among the most discursively potent and flexible of such concepts. But what is the term helping Joana say about Pink Floyd's autobiographical significance? Well, as her rhetorical questions suggest, 'genius' is here used effectively to end analysis, if perhaps only via its abandonment. The term's job is to adequately summarise the magnitude of Pink Floyd's ungraspably large effect on her. In this way, the assignation of genius here is, by proxy, a declaration of autobiographical significance.

When asked what sets Radiohead, singer Thom Yorke, and guitarist Jonny Greenwood apart from others, Rachel used the term 'genius' to a similar end:

they're geniuses [laughs]. So I think Jonny Greenwood is this insanely talented person who can play all these different instruments and can compose amazing [film] scores and he's obsessed by Penderecki, and his own symphonies and stuff are quite interesting. And, yeah, the bloke's clearly a genius of a staggering proportion. As well the fact that he didn't go to university and he went to Oxford Brookes [University] and did music technology ... Thom Yorke's different. I think really, he's quite interesting to watch because I think he's really difficult and really irritating, and his lyrics can really annoy me but they're also quite interesting.

As in Joana's case, 'genius' here serves as the culmination of Rachel's appraisal of both Greenwood's and Yorke's personal eminences, discrete ideas which, nevertheless, are never far from the overarching context of Radiohead. In Rachel's case, we also see how different conceptions of 'genius' cater to different parts of Rachel's self-identity. Greenwood is the modest, down-to-earth polymath steeped in the fundamentals of his craft, while Yorke is the challenging, erratic, downright irritating prophet whose revelations don't always deliver the promised epiphanies. Rachel's perception of Yorke's genius harmonises with the frankness with which she assesses music: she knows what she likes and doesn't like, and prior allegiances do not much affect her judgements. These values in her listener identity permit, and perhaps require, 'genius' to admit failure as well as success. Meanwhile, Rachel's perception of Greenwood's genius affirms her salient 'culture consumer' identity insofar as it turns on his polymathy. Greenwood succeeds throughout the sprawling cultural space in which Rachel defines herself, one which contains film, film music, and classical music, along with music like Radiohead's own. Initially, then, the superlative aspect of 'genius'

serves as a symbol of the extent Yorke's and Greenwood's autobiographical significance. Beyond that, and in a more individualised way, the varied forms 'genius' can otherwise take for Rachel allow her to contextualise that significance with nuance – a nuance required by the elaborate meanings within her salient culture consumer identity.

Both directly and indirectly, many respondents elaborated on their perception of their artist's expressive profile/agenda, that is, what they think the artists expresses in their art, whether they seem to intend to or not. These perceptions illuminate each respondent's own receptive stance towards the artist, as well as the identities, and their constituent meanings, which have conditioned that stance. For Richard, taking the *oeuvre-eye view*, Bob Marley is set apart by 'comprehensiveness, and also his originality. ... And his universal appeal. I think there are very few parts of the world which his music hasn't reached.' This is perhaps despite Marley's lyrics, which Richard finds 'very very interesting', being in 'a sort of patois', meaning 'they're not always obvious, *easy* to understand'. Penetrating these lyrics is perhaps made easier by how 'very closely linked to the music' they are. But it also helps, at least in Richard's case, that 'Marley's particular philosophy'—'He was a Rasta, a Rastafari'—'drew on a lot of Christian elements'. These elements, given Christianity's prevalence worldwide, further open the door of understanding to those without knowledge of Rastafarianism or the Jamaica of which Marley sang, its 'politics' and 'the people he lived with'.

As we have already seen, Richard's own time living in Jamaica during Marley's heyday is richly evoked by and closely associated with Marley's music,

and has afforded him a more intimate and first-hand understanding of the Jamaica-specific meanings in Marley's music than that available to someone who has never been there. But it is the 'breadth' of meaning afforded by Marley's 'permeation into non-conventional religious approaches' that is so 'very interesting' to Richard, and which make the music matter beyond its more circumstantial power to evoke a treasured period of his life. Asked about Marley's most and least representative tracks of the **key tracks** he had chosen to discuss, he identified 'No Woman No Cry' as the most representative, because it 'combines [Marley's] philosophy with his command of music, his ability to sing, his biographical story'. Meanwhile, he resisted identifying a least essential track, suggesting that while "The Cornerstone" [which bases its lyric on passages from the New Testament] is much less well-known than the other two ... it's a very important aspect of his work', which overall is 'remarkable for its variety, its ... lack of repetition'.

The autobiographical significance of Marley's music to Richard depends on this religious-philosophical breadth or variety. Richard himself is a Christian, but:

in a very, I hope, a very open way ... when I did my gap year I went to India and stayed with people who were very convinced that Christianity had to take into account other religions in a very open way, and I think that's a philosophy that I've gone through life with. So, I practise as a Christian, but I'm very interested in if people have other approaches to religion, or indeed none, and understanding where that fits in to the whole package of things.

As I have already noted, Richard was, at the time of the interview, writing a thesis on the interaction of three British missionaries with Gandhi's nationalist movement, which Richard says 'helps [me] to understand more the experience I

had when I was in India'. This interconnecting of religious philosophies is something with which Richard has been closely concerned for most of his adult life. Insofar as Marley's music successfully articulates such an interconnected religious philosophy, one grounded in Rastafarianism as well as Richard's own Christianity, it triggers the creation of meaning in terms of the **prior thematic affinity** heuristic, by which those interests and values that appear already to be shared by artist and listener become emphasised within the artist's sonic identity. In other words, Marley's music has remained autobiographically significant to Richard because prominent meanings within it activate Richard's own salient religious identity in order for them to be interpreted by him.

7.2.4: Paratext, epitext, and the wider context of culture

Inevitably, and not surprisingly, neither the artists nor their music were understood in isolation from the wider world beyond their music. Indeed, respondents talked at length—sometimes prompted, sometimes not—about the contextual meanings that contributed to their interpretations. For instance, Clara talked at length about her qualified interest in Sufjan Stevens' personal life:

I've read his wiki page, and that seemed interesting. I think a lot of that was more me trying to fill in the gaps in his songs, like he'd allude to stuff in his life and I'd be like "oh I wonder where that's come from" so I just went and looked it up.

This gap-filling approach, which still prioritises the songs themselves as information sources, has sometimes been thwarted. After we listened to **key track** 'Casimir Pulaski Day', Clara said:

the wiki or something I looked up says that it is about his girlfriend who died ... as for the rest of the story, the rest of the information, it just doesn't seem to be there. ... [I]t really frustrated me in the beginning, like I wanted to know the story.

Clara doesn't mind too much, happy to 'think it's more about the sentiment that comes from it rather than the actual sequence of events'.

A more pressing frustration, though, arises regarding another **key track**, 'The Predatory Wasp of the Palisades Is Out to Get Us!'. This is one of Stevens' most famous tracks, and many of his fans believe it hints at or confirms his homosexuality or bisexuality, a matter Stevens hasn't publicly clarified. This suspicion is often read together with, or indeed against, the Christian themes that also abound in his oeuvre. As Clara noted, 'there's literally a Facebook page called "Is this Sufjan Stevens song gay or about God?"'. Clara, a bisexual Christian who has devoted much thought to reconciling those parts of herself, is particularly interested in this question, which has developed into a **critical concept** and become a key heuristic in her understanding of Stevens' work. Accordingly, she has sought clarification on the background to 'The Predatory Wasp...':

I've ... seen some theories that the wasp along the length of his arm, the wasp that keeps appearing in the song, is a sort of reminder of reality? Some people said it represents the church. ... [W]hen he gets too close to this thing, a danger appears on his arm, or a warning.

As before, however, nothing concrete. And, as before, Clara is alright with that:

I don't think anyone actually knows whether he's gay or not, like you can't really conclude it based on the song. And part of me did want to know that for quite a long time just because representation is nice, yeah. But I've kind of accepted now, ... it's not your business ... sometimes it's really nice to listen to an artist unambiguously sing about same-sex love ... I quite like

Haley Kiyoko because she makes quite open defiant songs about liking girls [chuckles] ... so I quite like mixing up the ambiguous songs with songs like that ... to deal with sometimes that feeling of a little bit of frustration.

This operation of the *other artists* heuristic expresses a pragmatism that underlies Clara's listening. She likes to apply dedicated music to dedicated purposes, and if Stevens himself can't satisfy a certain need, she will simply turn to someone else. That said...:

a kind of counterargument is that he shouldn't have to declare really what the other gender person is in any kind of love song ... in a way he's almost doing something better by normalising it by *not* making a point of it being same sex. ... I think Sufjan's version is more for when, again for more quiet and reflective times, not feeling as defiant, it's nice just to have a love song that doesn't overly emphasise the genders of the people involved.

Stevens' ambiguity, then, has uses after all.

The autobiographical significance of Stevens' music for Clara has much to do with the epitextual uncertainty regarding his sexuality, and with her limited success in clarifying it. Her own bisexuality and Christianity are central to her self-identity, but she '[hasn't] really found a resolution' as to how they can co-exist. While knowing for sure whether Stevens' struggles were the same might have helped somehow to mediate such a resolution, the denial of this knowledge has afforded, if not necessitated, a different perspective, one which values the ambiguity itself, rather than its demystification. In her words, 'I've just sort of let it lie for now, and I listen to his music when I want to reflect on that'. After all, there is likely no easy solution to Clara's quandary. But Stevens' music both offers and represents a contemplative space in which to work it out in her own time. That music will likely remain autobiographically significant for as long as it

can do this, for as long as those identities remain salient for Clara, and for as long as the tension between them persists.

Some respondents also discussed how their understanding of their artists' musical-cultural contexts influenced their overall understandings of those artists. The idiosyncrasies of how each respondent conceived of that context help to explain the autobiographical significance of the artist as a figure in that context. Exercising the **genre/tradition** heuristic, Daniel connected his affinity with billy woods to his pre-existing interest in 'this underground hip-hop scene that I was into in high school and then college':

Him being associated with that whole crowd that I used to really like, being a successor to that whole crowd of New York nerdier hip-hop, that really appeals to me ... I remember not being completely on board with the first album I heard of his, and ... it grew on me. And I don't think I would've been open to repeated listens had it not had that association with the scene.

Daniel is quite a critical listener, who isn't shy to dismiss music that doesn't chime with him. woods' association with the scene mentioned is perhaps what gave him a foot in Daniel's door at all. Why that scene afforded woods a second chance—that is, what Daniel values in it—helps to explain woods' autobiographical significance to Daniel. Above all, it is its members' experimental daring:

There's a lot of times they'll make experimental mistakes, but you see where they're going with it, and you enjoy the concept even if it doesn't quite make it there. Whereas if something is really really sort of perfectly produced and pristine, you know, designed by committee, I tend to be less forgiving of whatever things I don't like about it.

To Daniel, woods 'really perfectly walks that line between experimental and enjoyable', at least in his earlier work, and so represents the culmination of that scene by rendering its merits not just theoretically or symbolically worthwhile but

pleasurable too.²⁷ Crucially, there are other aspects of hip-hop's experimental or non-mainstream offshoots that Daniel does disdain, as he invoked the **other artists** heuristic to explain. For instance:

there's a lot of hip-hop albums which do this, "we're gonna do the extreme hip-hop guy persona for the whole album", you know like ... Danny Brown? ... And he has *Atrocity Exhibition* [(2016)] which is him going completely overboard of the hip-hop persona and I'm just, ... I'm hitting the "I get it" button, I get it ... that's actually how I felt about [experimental hip-hop group] Death Grips too, it's like "OK, I get it", you know?

woods, for the most part, avoids this, instead adopting a more cynical, 'detached' stance in his various personae, which include 'dictatorial agent of oppression', 'transnational criminal', and 'vagrant'. As such, woods offers the best of both worlds: experimental flair minus the irritating conceits that sometimes go with it. He both 'borrows' autobiographical significance from the scene Daniel connects him with, insofar as that scene mattered and still matters to his once-and-still salient hip-hop listener identity, and helps to maintain the autobiographical significance of that scene itself, insofar as he, as a kind of 'successor' to it, proves to Daniel its continued aesthetic relevance to his hip-hop listener identity. That identity is, in turn, a key sub-identity of his overall music listener identity, which itself is a key sub-identity of his overall self-identity.

²⁷ I would suggest that Daniel's perception of experimentalism corresponds somewhat with Chmiel and Schubert's postulated variable of 'unusualness': they suggest that unusualness is a preference-determining collative variable distinct from other key such variables like 'exposure', 'familiarity', and 'complexity' (2019: pp. 438-439).

7.2.5: The voice

As has been noted elsewhere in this thesis, an artist's voice can be a particularly powerful way of presenting their self-ness to listeners. Some respondents, though not all, did indeed talk of the influence of their chosen artist's voice on their listenership, and of the importance of voices more generally in how they listened to popular music. Diana described herself as a 'quiet' and 'calm person', which is reflected in her musical preferences. She avoids concerts because of the crowds, preferring the 'private concert' created by her noise-cancelling headphones—an affirmation of the positive effects both of personal listening technologies and self-selected music (Krause et al., 2015: pp. 166-167)—and likes music 'that's not too loud. Like I don't really like rock music for example, if it's too loud if it's, it jars my ears a bit, I wouldn't like it.' Above all:

what draws me to music is essentially voices, in particular mezzo-soprano voices ... [and] male-female voices kind of together. ... It's almost like an ambiguous voice that I like, it's not particularly gendered in a way. ... [I]f it's too high-pitched then my ear starts to hurt a little bit, you know, it feels very mechanical when it arrives to my ear.

That Lennox's own contralto falls squarely within this vocal Goldilocks zone, itself an extension of Diana's overall preference for quietude, helps explain her resonance with Diana. But Diana's attraction to voices is 'also [a matter of] appreciation for the power that these voices have. ... I am tone deaf, I can't sing, so I really have deep appreciation for people who can sing ... [and] Annie Lennox I feel has a really amazing range with her voice'. Lennox's voice in this sense communicates through an inversion of Van Leeuwen's idea of '*experiential meaning potential* ... a knowledge of what it is we would physically have to *do to*

produce this kind of pattern with our voice' (1999: p. 94; his italics). In this way, meaning is created through a kind of misfiring of the ***interpersonal identification*** heuristic. It is the impossibility of exact identification that signifies; it is precisely Diana's lack of knowledge—whether conceptual or corporeal—of how she would produce the same sounds as Lennox that gives Lennox's voice its power.

The communicative power of Lennox's voice, and particularly its range, became apparent in our discussion of ***key track*** 'No More I Love Yous'. Central to Diana's experience of this track is:

[Lennox's] voice throughout the song. There's something quite otherworldly for me, and somehow transports me to that world ... There's also different voices in the song, and so I think those voices are quite key. And it's a little bit creepy as well, when there's like laughter in the background, and sort of again, this otherworldliness.

Though unsure whether these other voices are actually Lennox's, 'in my mind they're all her, but they're just almost like different personalities of her'. In any case, this track is also laden with personal meaning for Diana. As with the other ***key track*** 'Downtown Lights', 'No More I Love Yous' sparks ***associations and episodic memories*** for Diana, harking back to that adolescent cloud memory phase of listening to the ***key album*** *Medusa* alone in her bedroom, at a time when it had particular ***life relevance***. 'No More I Love Yous' specifically is:

cautionary ... it's like things can get very realistic very quickly ... if you're a dreamer then realism will come in ... if you're feeling good there's always something on the other side waiting for you ... things change, people change, feelings change, situations change. ... [W]hen she says "monsters", I think of that being internal rather than something external.

The caution expressed by the song, not least by the interplay of different voices and the creepy otherworldliness they exude, relates to Diana's professed introversion, particularly her tendency to 'see the world as being a little ... hostile'. Indeed, the specific meanings of caution are in a sense *(re)purposed* to rationalise these aspects of Diana's personality for her, and perhaps even were instrumental in securing them during the vulnerable self-defining period of her adolescence.

The power of Lennox's voice to Diana's 'tone deaf' ears posits that vocal power, and Lennox herself, as special, awesome forces, capable of conveying messages from beyond Diana's own purview as a non-singer. Meanwhile, Lennox's vocal flexibility enables her to express these messages in dramatic ways, evoking meanings of creepiness and otherworldliness, for instance. And then the intimacy of the voice, likely amplified by the 'private concert' mode of listening preferred by Diana, enables Diana to be 'there with [Lennox] in that sense. ... [I]t's the voice that takes me there.' Clearly, then, Lennox's voice is key to the autobiographical significance of her music for Diana. It is integral to how her music communicates messages to Diana that both chime with and reinforce Diana's ideas and feelings about the world. Moreover, Lennox's voice has helped win the music's very right to do this by cohering with Diana's particular preferences regarding voices in general, which themselves derive from deeper-lying aspects of her personality, as discussed. Indeed, given Lennox's prominence in Diana's adolescent self-defining period, she might even have had a significant role in establishing those preferences. Insofar as those preferences and personality traits endure, Lennox's music would retain its autobiographical

significance. Likewise, insofar as Diana keeps listening to Lennox's music, it would likely reinforce those very preferences and traits.

Some respondents highlighted the voice as something that set their artist apart from others, when asked. After highlighting his songwriter status and his 'unusual' subject matter, Clara said of Sufjan Stevens: 'I think his voice sounds quite unique.' Earlier, exercising the **formal analysis** heuristic, she had explained:

I also like his voice, the delivery ... some of the lyrics can be quite hard-hitting, but he sings them very matter-of-factly, or it's something to do with the tone and the intonation that makes it seem not overly dramatic. ... [H]is voice just sounds very different, I really like the sound of Sufjan's voice in particular, it's part of what draws me to his songs.

What matters is not just the unique sound of Stevens' voice but also the way it interacts with the words of his songs. Here, the raw fact of the voice collides with formal expectations. Stevens subverts these expectations—to Clara's ears at least—precisely by letting his voice be its matter-of-fact self, instead of making it chase the drama latent in his lyrics. This helps Stevens' music to support the reflective listening for which Clara favours it, as discussed earlier. Such a style transmits lyrical information clearly and doesn't disrupt the listener's attention to that information with dynamic or timbral fluctuations. Rather, the listener must enter Stevens' space of quietude in order to access the softer vocal attributes that he does introduce. This reflective space is where the music works on Clara's identity, and as such, Stevens' voice contributes to that music's autobiographical significance by helping Clara to settle there as a listener.

Stevens' voice also helps to unify an otherwise varied output. As Clara remarked when describing the different sounds of Stevens' albums *Illinois* (2005) and *Carrie & Lowell* (2015)—taking the *oeuvre-eye view*—‘I feel like you could listen to a song like “Chicago” [from *Illinois*] and listen to “John My Beloved” [from *Carrie & Lowell*] and not realise they were from the same person if it wasn't for the voice.’ This is the function of his voice's uniqueness: to distinguish Stevens from the implicit background of other music, different parts of which might initially seem like natural homes for his different, diverse tracks. Interestingly, this background isn't just made up of music by other artists, but also music from different periods of Stevens' own career. Here, Clara is working with the *eras* heuristic, whereby perceived chronological divisions in the artist's output are acknowledged and thematised as a way of comprehending the artist's overall story. The distinctiveness of Stevens' voice, and its function as a conspicuous common denominator of otherwise diverse works, encourages this interpretive move, and also re-asserts itself through it.

I would suggest that this distinctiveness is the main way Stevens' voice achieves his music's autobiographical significance for Clara. It is not just unique enough to be recognisable; it is so distinctive that it thematises the very idea of being unique. Uniqueness—whether manifested by Stevens through his voice, the ‘unusual things’ he ‘touches on’, or something else—becomes an idea that explains why Stevens matters, compared to artists with a ‘similar sound’ who ‘[have]n't quite had the same resonance’. Again, this is a matter of listener-artist reciprocity, not of the artist dominating the listener's attention, and, as we have seen, Clara's own self-identity makes her particularly receptive to Stevens' work.

But any acknowledgement of Stevens' uniqueness in turn reaffirms the bespokeness of this listener-artist connection, which is both a basis for and effect of the artist's autobiographical significance for the listener. As such, Stevens' voice helps him be autobiographically significant for Clara insofar as it asserts his uniqueness, and with it the bespokeness of his connection to Clara.

7.2.6: (Dis)liking and valenced experience

Last, but certainly not least, I want to talk about respondents' comments on liking, enjoying, and even loving—or not—the music of their artist. Such matters are almost too obviously crucial to how each respondent connects to their artist. However, the nuances of why one track stands above the rest, or why another is marred by a certain element, and so on, are key to understanding how the operations of the *(dis)liking* heuristic produces meaning and begets autobiographical significance.

Oliver invoked the *mystery* heuristic when making an interesting observation about his own liking for Bad Bunny's *key track* 'Mia':

I've also had like a weird relationship with this song because I think it was one of the first ones where I was like, I just like can't help but like this. ... I'm not sure what he's saying much of the time, like, I know more now, but even knowing that I was like, "this song in many ways, at least on paper, this is not me, but I can't help but love this song", it was really addictive.

This surprised surrender to ostensibly incompatible music is an important theme in the story of Oliver's self-identity transformation away from 'choral/classical person' to 'Urbano Latino person'. His reflexivity in this regard—his own analysis of this experience as it unfolded—is perhaps not just a consequence of that

experience's abruptness, nor just a reflection of the general reflexivity that often begets and motivates identity transformations, although it is indeed both these things. It is also an expression of the musicologist identity that has arguably overtaken his previously dominant musician identity in terms of overall salience to his self-identity. ('I just couldn't help but like it ... there was something, ooh, *ineffable*, to use an Oxford word [laughs]'.) Indeed, insofar as he engages with Bad Bunny's music primarily through his musicologist identity, the priorities of that identity arguably condition how Oliver perceives his own liking for that music. I think this is subtly implied in his naming of 'Caro', not 'Mia', as his favourite Bad Bunny track:

I really appreciate ["Mia" and "RLNDT"] as songs ... they're unique in some ways, but like, exploration of identity and dancing your face off are not new themes in pop music. I really love how "Caro" takes something that we think we know, ... pumping up your self-image in public as a hip-hop or hip-hop adjacent artist, and then completely subverts that in the name of something much bigger, or at least something I value, and because of that video I have come to believe that he values as well.

As Oliver himself says here, and as we saw earlier, his affection for 'Caro' mostly hinges on its affirmations of certain of his own identities and values, affirmations which, as we have seen, he found particularly moving. But Oliver has now subsumed those affirmations into a musicological project. That project advances precisely insofar as **key track** 'Caro' can be said to matter in a musicological sense. Feeding back the other way, 'Caro' perhaps matters more as music precisely insofar as Oliver's musicological identity can put it to use.

Because Oliver deems 'Caro' a more socio-culturally complex piece than 'Mia', it seems the more appropriate nominee for 'favourite track' than the ineffably hedonic 'Mia' because it is all the more musicologically ponderable for

that complexity. Given that 'Mia' is 'probably the one that I listen to the most', Oliver remarked that 'it's funny that ... that's the one I find least indicative of who I think [Bad Bunny] is'. Oliver's interest in who Bad Bunny is lies at the heart of his academic work on Bad Bunny, work which then informs that understanding. Insofar as 'Caro' is a more fertile analytical object in that context, it earns greater esteem. That is, so long as it, too, still delivers the goods:

I wrote 6000 words about it a year after I'd been listening to it a lot, and I still like it. That was what was cool about writing that paper, I've listened to this song thousands of times in the last month and it's still good.

The importance, then, of a track's sheer hedonic value shouldn't be underestimated. If that value had diminished, perhaps Oliver would have nominated 'Mia' instead. But since they remain similarly valuable in that sense, 'Caro' clinches victory by dint of its greater musicological value, which grows out of the same things that made 'Caro' so personally meaningful for Oliver. What we see here, then, is Oliver's particularly salient musicologist identity setting the terms of favouritism *because* it is salient. While 'musicologist' as an identity is perhaps particularly significant in this regard, in that it explicitly concerns itself with understanding music, this suggests a broader correspondence between identity salience and musical liking: the music that coheres with the meanings of the most salient identity will be favoured. This, in turn, renders that music more autobiographically significant for as long as that salience endures.

Many respondents resisted my request that they identify favourite tracks, at least initially. The answer was usually some variation on the same thing. Richard, for instance, 'wouldn't even say [he] had a favourite ... it's a question of

choosing the right song for the right moment', while for Oliver, 'it kind of comes down to, like, what do you need in a certain moment'. In other words, it is a matter of identifying which track is most suited to achieving *life relevance* in a given moment, or most amenable to being *(re)purposed*. Yasir gave a helpful breakdown of how his chosen tracks fulfilled different needs at different times:

I don't know if I could pinpoint a favourite ... it depends largely on mood ... "Greatest Love Of All", I'd probably listen to that song when I'm really down and upset about the way things are going, and the world today, maybe. But then I probably wanna listen to "When You Believe" when I myself am feeling upset about ... something very very intimate, very personal, something deep down in my heart. And "Higher Love" is something that I could just be like, you know, F- the world, I just wanna be all about God right now [laughs], transcend boundaries.

In each hypothetical case, each Houston track, with its particular meanings, is working on a different identity. 'Greatest Love Of All' supports his 'socially conscious person' identity, and 'Higher Love' his 'spiritual person' identity. 'When You Believe', meanwhile, could support a variety of identities which might be active in emotionally charged contexts, such as a family-member, friend, or lover identity, or indeed the identities already mentioned. In the same way, and for the same reasons, these varied favourites can become 'temporally distributed' too, serving to mark different times in Yasir's life when these different identities, and their needs, were more relevant than others (Janssen et al., 2007).

Despite their resistance, some respondents did nevertheless give answers more like what I had expected. Rachel, for instance, said:

my favourites come and go, but at the moment, I think "Last Flowers", ... there's a quality to his voice and the lyrics together that can't be predicted by what's on the paper ... you get some films that are like "there's something in that videotape that goes beyond something that can be replicated easily" ... his vocal on that particular track is particularly beautiful and sad and kind

of vulnerable, and that's him at his best, 'cos he's not being an annoying, moaning person, so when he accesses something real I'm like "no, OK, so you are actually a human being".

Given that I have just emphasised the contextual contingency of favouritism, it is salutary that Rachel here foregrounds more general evaluative standards. First, she applies the **other art** heuristic to the question, framing the effect of the music in terms of an effect she's previously experienced through film. As I have already noted, and as we will see more of in Chapter 9, the **other art/ist(s)** heuristics are very active in Rachel's engagement with music. This is characteristic of her, given how salient her cultural consumer identity is. Second, she frames 'Last Flowers' as a normative example of what she likes most about Radiohead's/Thom Yorke's music, casting it, in other words, as a successful iteration of what that music ought to be. Her own ideas about that normativity have formed over a long time and are likely to be quite stable meanings within her Radiohead listener identity. When a track like 'Last Flowers' manifests these norms, this identity is strongly affirmed because its steadiest values are vindicated. By inviting the activity, and affording the affirmation, of these two salient and interconnected identities, 'Last Flowers' achieves autobiographical significance. The assignation of 'favourite' to such a track is an expression of that significance.

But there are also autobiographically contextual reasons why it has the effects it does, involving the application of the **social relationships** heuristic:

My mother-in-law died not that long ago, in March, and on the way up to, yeah, we would listen to this a lot when we were travelling in the car, and it reminds me of that time in a weird way, ... when [Yorke] talks about "last flowers before the hospital", and is it like visiting somebody that's sick, I don't know? So it's kind of tied up with quite good memories, like having a nice

time and being on holiday and hanging out, but also sad stuff, and I think the song is, again it's that nice mix of optimistic and painful at the same time, which I always like in their work.

Here we see the interaction of the general and the contextual. 'Last Flowers' has attained **life relevance**, attaching itself to a momentous and emotionally fraught event in which numerous of Rachel's salient identities—daughter-in-law and wife, most obviously—will have been activated in tandem with her Radiohead/Thom Yorke listener identity, whose ideas about what is normatively good in this music are once again appealed to and affirmed in the statement quoted above. The harmony between the normatively exemplary 'Last Flowers' and an event of this significance is a powerful proof of its worth, and surely amplifies its effects. Insofar as the passing of Rachel's mother-in-law continues to be perceived as a significant event in Rachel's life story, one that affected and/or affirmed those salient family identities, 'Last Flowers' will be autobiographically significant to whatever extent it can remain associated with it. Given that its meanings harmonised so neatly with that event, and in doing so vindicated her stable values of what is normatively good in Radiohead's/Yorke's music, this association is likely both to persist and be identified with in the future.

Lastly, I want to highlight a tendency on the part of several respondents to respond to ostensibly formal-analytical questions with the language of (dis)liking. This is not necessarily surprising, and I will say more about this in the discussion. But for now, I will emphasise again that both **formal analysis** and **(dis)liking** are heuristics used interchangeably by different respondents at different times to meet the demands of their experiences – and my questions about them. Each of these approaches is a culturally learned stance towards

interpretable material that provides values, vocabularies, and interpretive structures that we can import into our interpretations. Of course, each respondent's ways of using these heuristics can tell us something about them and the way their chosen artist's music matters in their life.

Clara, Rachel, Andy, and Joana all mixed in '(dis)liking' responses to 'formal analysis' questions like 'What features do you pay attention to when you're listening to music?' (Part 1, Q. 2.a.i.) or 'What leaps out to you about the way the music sounds; what seems central to your experience of the music?' (Part 2, Q. 1.). But Daniel was the respondent most prone to this substitution. Almost all of his answers to such questions were framed in '(dis)liking' language, either exclusively or eventually. This was his answer to 2.a.i.:

Back when I was younger I really liked technical music, ... like hard bop jazz ..., technical death metal or something like that. And now I prefer ... stuff that's more interested in its overall sound than in the showing off ... that's something I like about Billy Woods a lot actually, because he really walks that balance between technical ability and an overall tone.

I have already alluded to Daniel being firm and frank in his tastes, but here it is clear just how active the **(dis)liking** heuristic is in his navigation of music. Any recourse to **formal analysis** serves only to explain **(dis)liking**, and this is in any case optional. Indeed, Daniel turned to the **mystery** heuristic's embrace of incomprehension to emphasise his allegiance: 'I don't think I know enough to really describe what I like, I just know when I like something'. This is the only question he needs to answer, and it is not quite the same as 'is this good?' because it prioritises him and his needs as the listener over the music's own, putatively universal value.

I do not mean to say that Daniel is a rudderless hedonist chasing his impulses. Indeed, there is a moralistic edge to his use of phrases like ‘showing off’. Rather, I mean that the meanings in Daniel’s listener identity are dominated by the importance of liking. This is a matter of considered aesthetic, and again moral, principle: ‘I think enjoyment of art should be pretty, extremely individualised’, he said, before referencing Roland Barthes’ ‘death of the author’ argument for support (see Barthes, 1977). woods affirms these meanings by selectively undermining ostensibly normative standards of fluency and virtuosity in favour of achieving the coherent sound Daniel prefers, and by producing music that is simply pleasurable as a result. This even allows a particularly nuanced enaction of the *(dis)liking* heuristic, namely pleasure in the denial of pleasure:

I think there’s times when he just goes ahead and does a really boring, straightforward line, just because it fits the sound, it fits the feeling. And then there’s other times when he does show his chops. Some of my favourite songs are the ones where they actually do the beat switch in a really interesting way, that may not be fun to listen to the first time, it may be kind of jarring.

Daniel’s preference for the experimental—his patience for which, as noted earlier, is by no means infinite—sometimes allows him to move past his initial disliking of what he hears. woods, in this manner, can have it two ways. He can align with Daniel’s preferences by eschewing gratuitous indulgence; and that denial can then, where necessary, gloss over his failures to please. For woods to maintain his autobiographical significance for Daniel, he must still continue to please, since for Daniel enjoyment is paramount. As long as woods continues to appeal both to Daniel’s preferences and their underlying values—and for as long

as those remain Daniel's preferences and values—then woods will remain on firm ground.

These interviews, with all their depth and variety, exemplify the sheer extent of the value an artist can have for a given listener. They also illustrate the specificity of the connection between artist and listener in these instances: why the artist is valuable for one listener may not be why they are valuable for another, because this value necessarily depends on how the artist's works intersect with each listener's unique self-identity and autobiography. Whatever meanings the artist can contribute to the listener's development and management of these self-identities and autobiographies, these are the meanings that come to seem most prominent in the artist's sonic identity for that listener.

8: Reflections on the interviews

You gon' have to prove it's me in them pictures

— billy woods, 'Fnu Lnu'

In the same spirit as previous work (Peck & Grealey, 2020), I have tried in the preceding chapter to analyse identity, autobiographical memory, and music as connected phenomena. Understanding how these phenomena connect focuses the question of how sonic identities form, change, and endure. As I hope I have shown, the idea of autobiographical significance can prompt enlightening answers to that question. Each respondent could tell of numerous ways in which their artist's music had interacted, to some degree or another, with one or other of their identities, with consequences for their overall self-identities, both 'then' and 'now'. The sum totals of what that music's meanings were at any given moment of access—all of which flowed into the artist's sonic identity itself—became agents in their autobiographies. The autobiographical significance of each sonic identity to its respondent could be gauged in how each respondent recalled and narrativised their encounters with these agents, and how they appraised them in the abstract, accounting for the retrospective, up-till-now view. If the respondent's encounters with their artist's music have altered or inaugurated identities that have, over some stretch of time, remained salient within the respondent's overall self-identity, then that music, and that artist's sonic identity, has been autobiographically significant. In such a case, the agency of the artist's sonic identity can be clearly traced and strongly felt.

The examples analysed in Chapter 7 are necessarily idiosyncratic and incomprehensive, in both their content and dynamics. Nevertheless, there is much to conclude about how sonic identities exist that extends beyond the peculiarities of each example. By relating these conclusions to the wider scholarship informing this project, their utility will become clearer.

As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, sonic identities are the result, or perhaps rather a form, of an empathic relation between listener and music, and the artist by extension. While the word ‘extension’ seems not to respect the immediacy of those instances where artist and music are felt to be one and the same, it is precisely the ‘extended and distributed’ nature of consciousness that permits such experience (Clarke, 2019: p. 71). We are never closed off from the world we help constitute, and nor are artists—whose music can often seem detached from them as we listen to it—shut off from us. This is, again, key to the idea of sonic identity. As Clarke has noted, music is particularly good at fostering intersubjectivity (Clarke, 2019: p. 88), and popular music culture’s explicit emphasis on the person of the artist themselves, reinforced by myriad paratextual and epitextual materials, makes it natural for us to thematise this intersubjectivity within our own lives and the stories thereof. In other words, the importance of the person of the artist, and the idea of connecting to them, is baked into popular music culture.

In my interview data, listener-artist intersubjectivity appeared in various forms, as I remarked upon throughout the analysis. Sometimes this was expressed in common-ground terms, like Daniel’s identification with Billy Woods’ cynicism or Richard’s with Bob Marley’s spiritual acumen. Other times its basis

was more physical than conceptual, as with the awe Diana felt for the unknowability of Annie Lennox's vocal prowess or the inexplicable but physiologically intense emotions that 'You Can't Always Get What You Want' and 'Shine A Light' triggered in Andy. Some of these examples specifically invoke the person of the artist itself at the moment of listening, while in others—such as Andy's—the person of the artist is invoked after the fact – in expressions of gratitude, for instance. But whatever the basis of these intersubjective connections, however intelligible, and however obviously present the person of the artist is within them, it matters that those connections were endorsed and contextualised as parts of these respondents' self-identities in a conversation framed by the artist themselves – i.e., not 'just the music'. That is to say that the person of the artist was a natural, admissible part of the discussion of how the respondents connected to the music discussed – even for 'death of the author'-endorsing Daniel.

I emphasise this to make the following point: although intersubjective listening does not necessarily involve connecting to the person of the artist specifically, the more diffuse, variably accessible, multiplicitous idea of the artist is a consistently effective way of herding the meanings and values of such connections. That idea is what I am calling sonic identity; its potential in this theoretical context is to mediate between the general, non-dualistic intersubjectivity of consciousness and the specific, subject-object, listener-artist dualism reified in popular music culture. If the term seems to reinforce such dualism—despite my efforts to complicate it—this is only to reflect that culture's own ideological concern with identity.

To better explain how and why my respondents' connections to their chosen artists came to be, I need to involve the extensive literature on tastes and preferences. As Lamont and Loveday have noted, 'preferences' best denote our situational responses to specific music, and 'tastes' the more general codes that tend to govern these response (Lamont & Loveday, 2020: p. 2). Both concepts are relevant.

There are various overlapping—if not harmonious—views on how to explain the development of tastes and preferences. Exposure and complexity often feature, as in Berlyne's influential inverted-U theory of liking, which proposes that the enjoyment of a stimulus increases until a threshold of 'satiation'—whose location depends on stimulus complexity—after which enjoyment decreases (Schellenberg et al., 2008: p. 221). As Chmiel and Schubert (2017: p. 887) write, in this framework, the preference felt for a stimulus at any moment depends on '*psychophysical variables*' ('such as brightness or loudness' – think Diana's aversion to the latter), '*ecological variables*' ('associations and meanings' brought to bear – think Yasir's decidedly spiritual interpretations), and '*collative variables*' (properties contingently evaluated by the respondent, such as 'surprisingness, uncertainty, interestingness and ambiguity' – think Daniel's respect, if not unqualified predilection, for experimentalism). As Hargreaves and North point out, such collative variables depend on 'prototypes that are individually and culturally specific' (2010: p. 526). Crucially, however, as Greasley and Lamont (2013: p. 24) note, listeners tend to sense and manage exposure so as to avoid total satiation. This implicates other factors, such as varying attention between listening situations or individual differences between

listeners, and suggests that preference can fluctuate in phases rather than peak and fall once and for all.

Another obviously relevant dimension is added by arguments relating tastes and preferences to the self. North and Hargreaves, in a trio of studies, have connected preferences to various 'lifestyle correlates' (2007a, 2007b, 2007c), ranging from political beliefs to the use of leisure time. Vella et al., meanwhile, have explored the correlations between Big Five personality traits and musical preferences (see also Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2007; Zweigenhaft, 2008), noting, however, that how music is used forms an important, missing piece of this picture (2017: p. 339). Schaefer and Sedlmeier's study on that topic concluded that '[t]he more people make use of their music, the more they will love it' (2009: p. 292). More specifically, they argued that the most important functions of music are 'its capability to express [a listener's] identity and their values and its ability to bring people together' (2009: p. 292; see Bakagiannis & Tarrant, 2006 for research on the latter).

As others have noted, the utility of correlating certain personality traits with certain aspects or styles of music is limited, due to the unfixed meanings and definitions of styles (Dunn et al., 2012: p. 414; Greasley et al., 2013: p. 411), and the contextual effects of social pressure on a listener that might skew their response (Greasley et al., 2013: pp. 416-418). Indeed, as Rentfrow and Gosling have argued, listeners, conditioned as they are by their social contexts, 'have an intuitive understanding of'—or rather, '[l]ay theories about'—'the links between music preferences and personality', making such pressures a real and prominent factor (2006: p. 241). Lamenting these difficulties, Greasley et al. note how 'any

comprehensive explanation of why an individual likes a specific piece of music must break down that piece into its various components to discover exactly *what* is preferred and why' (italics original), a task not much engaged in the scholarship (2013: p. 419; see also Rentfrow et al., 2011: p. 1141 for a similar critique).

In the previous chapter, this is a task I have tried to engage, insofar as it forms one facet of the overall question of how listeners incorporate sonic identities into their lives. Recalling the heterophenomenological arguments advanced at various points throughout this thesis, the non-systematic ways my respondents implicitly and explicitly characterise themselves can be as revealing as an analysis using, say, the Big Five theory of personality traits. Likewise, the ways that respondents contextualised their tastes and preferences within their autobiographies is as revealing an expression of the whats and whys of Greasley et al. as would be a systematic, real-time cataloguing of all the psychophysical, ecological, and collative variables that might be at play in a given situation. My interview respondents' reports allow me to account for the differing meanings imputed to genres by different listeners, or the effects of social pressures on non-private evaluations of music, because they offer the background information on each respondent's self and life story that explains the origins of those meanings and pressures.

What people like and why, as the authors cited above have argued in various ways, will depend on many factors operating on different planes of situatedness and abstraction. Moreover, evaluative responses may vary between in-the-moment reports and reflective ones. But neither is a better or purer reflection of the respondent's 'true' tastes and preferences than the other.

Rather, each allows us to consider those tastes and preferences acting at different scales. In the most general sense, in-the-moment evaluative reports may reveal how the music interacts with specific sub-identities, while reflective ones may reveal how it interacts with the overarching, autobiography-driving self-identity. Clara's Christian and queer identities, for instance, were activated in the minutes we listened to Sufjan Stevens' music; meanwhile, Richard's reflections on his spiritual curiosity—which could be, and were, connected closely to Marley and his music—pertained to most of his long lifespan. Even so, we can still access one scale through the other: the situational activation of Clara's Christian and queer identities implies the overarching negotiations, discussed by her, between those identities within her overall self-identity, while 'Cornerstone', when we listened to it, activated Richard's spiritual identity via the specifically Christian meanings in that identity. Hargreaves et al. have rightly argued that 'any explanation of taste and preference must take into account' the individual, the features of the music, and the listening context (2016: p. 303; see also Hargreaves et al., 2005 on the 'reciprocal feedback model': p. 6). But it is the first of these, the individual, that is the nexus of this particular matter. By prioritising the interdependent phenomena of autobiography and self-identity in analysis, the their-ness of each respondent's tastes and preferences, we can best discern the 'complex interaction' of 'personality, family background ... the culture and the history of that culture in which our lives are situated, the daily experiences that shape our moods, and many other things' which 'shape[s] our musical tastes and preferences' (Garrido & Davidson, 2019: p. 4).

To talk of autobiographies and lifespans raises the question of how tastes and preferences change (or don't) over time. A guiding assertion in scholarship on this matter came from Holbrook and Schindler, who suggested that we stick by preferred 'styles' from late adolescence/early adulthood (1989: p. 119; see also Schindler & Holbrook, 2003: p. 279); this, indeed, is the thrust of the reminiscence bump/self-defining period research that I have drawn upon already. Hemming has disputed the prescriptive strength of this claim (2013: p. 302), suggesting instead that the 'relationship between individual biographies and preferences' should be empirically investigated, while others have sought to nuance it. Hargreaves et al., for instance, argue that it is 'our notion of what constitutes "music"' that sediments during youth, rather than preferences for particular styles or pieces per se; as they neatly put it, 'today's music will always be evaluated by yesterday's criteria' (2016: p. 309). Meanwhile, Bonneville-Roussy et al. have argued that preferences can and do change, for instance along with changes in personality and physiology (2013: pp. 714-715). They further identified 'age trends' that reflect how listener preferences change with age (2013: p. 713; for further work connecting these trends to other factors—such as social norms and the perceived character of musical features themselves—see Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2017; Bonneville-Roussy & Rust, 2018; Bonneville-Roussy & Eerola, 2018). What perhaps most distinguishes adolescent/young adult listeners from older ones is the greater reliance younger listeners place on music to help them form their identities (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2013: p. 714).

Here, we are back in the territory of the self-defining period. This is where identity and, specifically, the idea of autobiographical significance help. To understand how an individual's preference criteria emerged and became sedimented, you have to understand how they became who they were at the time of that emergence/sedimentation; and to understand why those criteria endure, you have to understand to what extent the individual has remained the same person. This, again, is the pivot of autobiographical significance: it ascribes autobiography-writing agency to music (in this case) that has affected identities in ways that have endured over time, across the lifespan.

Lamont notes Bonneville-Roussy's finding, in her 2014 thesis, that 'listeners' preferences for styles were significantly related to their preferences for exemplar tracks', a finding which, as Lamont rightly points out, invokes the psychology of 'personal connections with music' (2019: p. 253). That is precisely what I have studied in the previous chapter. 'Exemplar' does not always mean 'favourite', but favourites are the exemplars with the strongest personal connections to their listeners. How favourites 'behave' over time also varies. Lamont and Webb distinguish between short- and long-term favourites, concluding that short-term preferences 'reflect listening habits which may or may not correspond to long-term preferences', while '[l]onger-term preferences are more clearly shown to be strongly influenced by positive emotional and personal circumstances as well as by repetition, choice, and positive effects on mood' (2010: p. 235). Such circumstances, repetitions, choices, and effects are the stuff of our life stories; in this way, long-term favourites are often very autobiographically significant.

Yasir's answer to my question about which Houston song was his favourite helps illustrate the definitive role of identity in this matter, and also reflects the non-destabilising variability of how favourites are related to and deployed. Recall his reluctance to identify a single, all-time favourite Houston track, highlighting instead the ways in which each chosen song resonated with different circumstances – and different identities. In other words, the contingency of favourites correlates with the contingency of the relevant identity's activation and salience. A more salient identity is more likely to be activated across all situations, and thus afford the corresponding tracks more opportunities to be played. If that identity's salience endures, then its autobiographical significance increases, as does that of the corresponding track. But life is long, and people are multifaceted, and so, as Yasir's example suggests, there may be several enduringly salient identities being differentially supported by several tracks by a given beloved artist. Over time, that salience may decline, or the connection between track and identity might be severed. In this light, it is easy to understand why the question 'Which of your three chosen tracks is your favourite, and why?' is difficult to answer.

Before relating this study to MEAM literature, I want to echo Lamont's remark that one of music's peculiarities compared to 'other kinds of artistic or social phenomena is that much of its power can be evoked without needing reference to the actual stimulus itself, thereby emphasizing the importance of imagination' (Lamont, 2019: p. 261). She rightly notes that 'direct auditory experience' is consequential, and indeed necessary at early and late ages (2019: p. 262). But simply to talk about music without its stimulus, as my respondents

and I did for the first half of each interview, is to engage its real agency. While MEAM scholarship, sensibly and for the reasons of experimental accuracy, focuses on memories directly evoked by the presence of music, it seems fruitful here to talk of stimulus-free autobiographical memories as also being music-evoked. That is to say that I will relate the relevant ideas from MEAM scholarship to my whole dataset, not just the ‘listening exercise’ comments, where music was directly engaged and discussed.

As Janata et al. argue, ‘positively valenced experiences are recalled more readily than negative experiences’ (2006: p. 847; see also Belfi et al., 2016). Naturally, my study focused expressly on artists with whom the respondents had a personal connection (i.e., almost necessarily a positive one), so you would expect the memories evoked therein to be predominantly positive. But, as I have argued, each interview was essentially a partial autobiography, and no such story is all sunshine. Andy’s connection to Jagger and the Stones was bound up with his alcoholism and recovery; Clara’s connection to Sufjan Stevens with her ongoing working-out of her Christian and queer identities; Joana’s to Pink Floyd with the acute need to find a home. What is more relevant here, given my study’s autobiographical focus and the reflective nature of its data, is the valence of the *experience* of remembering, rather than of the memory per se (although these things are never independent). In Peck & Grealey (2020), we suggested a link between this and ‘the success of the identity impacted by that experience’ (p. 9); in other words, the remembering experience will be positively valenced if the identity/identities impacted by that experience has/have remained salient since then – if they have endured. By extension, the music related to (if not involved

in) that experience—and the memory of it—will be valued partly according to whether the relevant identity/identities has/have remained salient.

Rachel, for instance, enjoyed recalling her youth and student years, and Radiohead's role in them, because she remembers them as culturally rich phases during which she became the person that she happily remains, one whose cultural consumer identity is highly salient. More ambiguously, Belle and Sebastian were bound up in memories of sad times for Will, such as his overworked student years and his breakups. But the music expressed then, and still now expresses, aspects of selves with which he still identifies: the person who deserved better than his undergrad drudgery (and not the drudgery itself); the person whose sometimes ruinous pensiveness also had—and still has—its rewards. As such, Will's recollections of these times seemed fundamentally positive, marked, mostly, by his relief at having gotten away relatively unscathed. This would explain much of the often-cited happy-sadness of nostalgic experiences (Barrett et al., 2010: p. 400): we are sad about the experience, but happy to have overcome it, perhaps autobiographically contextualising it as a 'redemption sequence' (McAdams et al., 1997: p. 685). Conversely, of course, we might happily recall an experience, but rue its later autobiographical negation, whatever form that might take; you might bask in the joyous memory of your graduation day, for instance, only later to be overcome by bitterness that you were never able to find a job in the profession you trained for.

This entails a crucial caveat to the positive-remembering/identity-salience formula above: if the enduring identity is not autobiographically endorsed by the individual, then recollections associated with it are unlikely to be positively

valenced, even though identity-forming experiences and any agents within them would qualify as autobiographically significant. After all, many people live whole lives defined by careers—and the corresponding role identities—they hate, for instance, or by highly salient identities born of destructive, pervasive behaviours. What might Andy's report have been like if his once-dominant 'active alcoholic' identity had not been long since transfigured into his still-salient 'recovering alcoholic' identity? On my respondents' behalf, I am happy that such dynamics were mostly absent from my dataset.²⁸ Nevertheless, a fuller understanding of how sonic identities emerge in dialogue with a listener's own identities would factor in reports from respondents in the midst of identity crises, perhaps longstanding ones. Given that music listening is mainly a voluntary activity, would music mostly feature in such autobiographies as a positive force, providing affirmation in an otherwise disaffirming life? Or would music, in such disaffirming lives, mostly serve to mark the autobiographically significant experiences which have formed those lives in such a way that valued identities are rarely activated, while disvalued ones are highly salient? I would imagine the former, but only further research will tell. Indeed, it is also easy to imagine that respondents would be reluctant to acknowledge or discuss any identity-autobiography crises they may be experiencing; such research would need to be ready to pre-empt that reluctance.

For now, back to autobiographical significance, which I have also related to enduring identity salience, and by extension to the value of the resources (in

²⁸ I might cite again the tension between Clara's Christian and queer identities, but this was a tension she professed to being able to manage and reconcile.

this case, the artist's music and, by extension, their sonic identity) involved in experiences relevant to those identities. In Peck & Grealey (2020), where we proposed the concept, we gathered questionnaire and interview data on 'a musical experience from your youth that you found particularly meaningful to your personal identity, sense of self, or understanding of "who you were" at that time' (p. 3). We acknowledged two limitations of our results (p. 10): our respondents had mostly talked about experiences that had impacted specifically *musical* identities; and the definition of a 'meaningful musical experience' had remained general, with little differentiation of how relatively impactful the music was in each. In this study, I have tried to take a broader, self-identity- and autobiography-encompassing view, and, in doing so, better grasp why and to what extent the music itself made those experiences matter. billy woods' music, for instance, certainly mattered to Daniel's specific music listener identity. But it also mattered a great deal to his American and scholar identities during his time studying outside of the U.S.: to adapt Istvandy's terminology, I might say that such phases are made up of 'cloud experiences'. The meanings in woods' sonic identity mattered because they supported those central meanings in Daniel's American identity that are predicated on ambivalence, even dissent, towards America's benevolent self-image – meanings partially motivated and informed by his research. woods could support all these things at once: his transgressiveness made him an outlier, and thus special and necessary to those cloud experiences of 'being an American studying Cold War history abroad'.

This study is not just about autobiographical significance, though, but rather what autobiographical significance tells us about the emergence and

make-up of sonic identities. In the wake of my analysis, my assertion is this: *the most prominent meanings in an artist's sonic identity will be those that are most autobiographically significant, i.e., those meanings which most impacted the listener's most enduringly salient identities*. Spirituality and the potential for transcendent, comprehensive experiences are what define Whitney Houston for Yasir because these meanings populate his most salient identities; he views himself above all as 'a spiritual person', one who seeks such experiences. As we saw, Houston's music not only affords those experiences, but also, in Yasir's youth, whet his appetite for them in the first place. Of course, we can read this the other way, if that is the goal: by asking directly what meanings form an artist's sonic identity for a given listener, we can already start to glean how and why that sonic identity has been autobiographically significant for them.

Lastly, a few reflections on methodology and avenues for further research. My emphasis on autobiographical significance has firmly and deliberately prioritised the respondent's self-identity at the time of interviewing, with the goal of analysing precisely that self-identity as read by the respondent against their past experiences. I have embraced 'active interviewing', and with it the fact that 'one cannot expect answers on one occasion to replicate those on another because they emerge from different circumstances of production' (Greasley et al., 2013: p. 407). Given that fact, it would be fascinating to see longitudinal studies conducting similar interviews with the same respondents at multiple points across their lives, to see what conclusions might be drawn from comparing the values, terms, hopes, and regrets expressed in each interview.

Relatedly, the idea of autobiographical significance invites the comparison between the reports of people of different ages. If autobiographical significance relates to identity salience over time, how can we compare the autobiographically significant experiences of a 20-year-old to those of a 90-year-old? As we remarked in Peck & Grealey (2020), such comparisons would require a measure of ‘identity *durability*, that is, its resistance to dissolution’ (p. 10; italics original). We further suggested that we could ‘compare an older respondent whose relevant identity has endured a few mild crises with a younger respondent whose relevant identity has survived multiple and intense crises, and say that the autobiographical significance of the originary experience of each is similar’. Another layer is added by moving this idea away from the singular experiences we analysed in that study to the over-arching view of the previous chapter: I want to know how autobiographically significant a sonic identity is overall, not just how autobiographically significant one music-inflected experience was. Here we need also to think not just about listener identity durability, but also what could be called sonic identity durability, that is, the artist’s resistance to irrelevance. Does that relevance depend on the survival of one particular listener identity, or can the artist rely on their resonance with more general, salient meanings in the listener’s overall person identity, for instance?

To bring this back to inter-age comparisons, I will rework the formula above: a sonic identity that has remained relevant to an older listener whose identities have remained relatively stable, and a sonic identity that has remained relevant to a younger listener whose identities have undergone much change, can be said to be autobiographically significant to a similar degree (though not

necessarily in the same way or for the same reasons, of course). Following the methodology employed in this chapter, I would advocate for reading this relative intensity in the way that each respondent narrates the relevant experiences in the context of their own lives, while accounting for narrative style. Is the respondent understated or extravagant in their telling? Does other contextual information that they proffer help make sense of this style? My data affords some speculative comparisons of this nature. For instance, Jagger and the Stones are very autobiographically significant to Andy because they have remained relevant to him despite the total transformation—from ‘active’ alcoholic to ‘recovering’ alcoholic—of a salient identity with which they once resonated. Meanwhile, Bad Bunny wholly inaugurated what are now Oliver’s most salient identities; despite Oliver’s relative youth, I would say that Bad Bunny is similarly autobiographically significant to Oliver to how autobiographically significant Jagger and the Stones are to Andy. But this example is only tentative, and the question merits further attention. Moreover, my narrative approach of interpretation could no doubt be supplemented by more systematic methods.

Finally, and indeed on that note, my eventual interpretations of my interview data have been deliberately discursive, and not the result of statistical processes applied to my initial thematic analyses. It would certainly be worth conducting interviews similar to the ones here, ideally with a much larger, more representative pool of respondents, and analysing them statistically to ascertain any trends in what kind of themes correlate most to the autobiographical significance of a sonic identity.

9: Nine listening diaries

I'm tryin' to tell you somethin' 'bout my life
Maybe give me insight between black and white
And the best thing you ever done for me
Is to help me take my life less seriously
It's only life after all, yeah

– The Indigo Girls, 'Closer to Fine'

As I mentioned earlier, my respondents' listening diaries are more manageable datasets than the interviews. As such, I have chosen to provide something like a comprehensive overview of four respondents' cases here, followed by a theme-led, interwoven analysis of the remaining respondents' diaries. Unfortunately, I lost touch with Clara, the intended 10th respondent, before she could return her diary. Similarly, I never received Joana's summary questionnaire. Nevertheless, the data gathered has much to say. As for my analysis of it, I have isolated the main trends of each respondent's familiarisation with their chosen artist's sonic identity and elaborated on them in terms of autobiographical significance.

9.1: Four reports

9.1.1: Joana

Joana, the 25-year-old Political Theory student from Portugal who was interviewed on Pink Floyd, chose to listen to Canadian singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell for her diary, which ran from 4.7.2020 to 9.8.2020. She came to the task with little but an epitextual reference to work with:

The first time I ever came across Joni Mitchell was, regrettably or maybe not, through the film *Love Actually*. When the Emma Thompson character tries to hide her grief over the knowledge that her partner is cheating on her, she plays the Joni Mitchell song “Both Sides[, Now]”.

Based on this, and the album art spied in the scene:

[Mitchell] seems like a thoughtful and deep writer and singer, probably also from the somewhat husky voice and the lyrics. ... I would think that most of her songs are somewhat slow, that their lyrics may address heartbreak, or maybe even some of the life experiences of specifically women.

As she commenced listening on day 1, Joana was surprised by the ‘country’ and ‘surfer vibes’ of, respectively, ‘You Turn Me On, I’m A Radio’ and ‘California’, and already sensed an overarching theme in ‘this notion of repetition and multidimensionality of life [that] seem[s] to appear in these songs’. She was also struck by Mitchell’s ‘beautiful voice’. Then, ‘[l]ater that night I was feeling sad about something happening in my life and I listened to [“Both Sides, Now”] on repeat ... just feeling the song around me and letting its general feeling envelop me. I cried.’ Here, Joana is **(re)purposing the music** to meet her emotional needs in this moment, a strong way of engaging with Mitchell’s music so early on. Although Joana was guarded as to the cause(s) of her sadness, her repetitive use of Mitchell’s music, so impactful here as to move her to tears, accentuates certain already-gleaned meanings within Mitchell’s sonic identity: she’s deep, she’s about emotional pain, about repetition.

Day 3 saw further praise for Mitchell’s ‘amazing’, ‘beautiful voice’, along with further triangulations of her style via **other artists** and **genres/traditions** as Joana linked the ‘super cool ... surfer vibes in some songs’ to The Beach Boys and Pixies, the latter of whom ‘have a great emotional significance’ for Joana.

Successfully pulling off these vibes on tracks like ‘California’ wins Mitchell approval, while her sparking of those positive inter-generic and -artist references primes her to potentially share in that emotional significance by association. On day 8, Joana’s perception of the repetition-multidimensionality meta-theme was epitextually confirmed via the Wikipedia page for the album *Both Sides Now* (2000):

In it, co-producer Larry Klein says that the album as a whole is meant to go through emotions of optimism, disillusion, despair, ... this is a cycle which is meant to repeat itself – something which I had gathered from the song “Both Sides, Now” itself.

She then remarked on how the thematic, stylistic, and authorial variety of that album is held together by ‘Mitchell’s voice [which] sustains each song almost on its own.’ On this album’s scale, at least, a clear sonic identity is starting to emerge, one comprising those early-reckoned meanings of emotional exploration and repetition and given consistent form by Mitchell’s voice.

Day 9 brought more affirmative **other artist** triangulations, this time via the treasured Pink Floyd: ‘it was endearing to hear some of their tones here’. Joana then watched a 2013 interview with Mitchell, where Mitchell’s declaration that dissatisfaction with her old art drives her on cast her as ‘a funny person, very decisive and opinionated which is refreshing to see.’ Joana further noted Mitchell’s disdain for fame, frustration with her ‘confessional artist’ tag, and feeling of being misunderstood. On day 10:

I was going through something difficult, and when emotions associated with it came up, I listened to “Both Sides, Now” on repeat ... I also wonder if watching that interview in which Mitchell says ... that only “Both Sides, Now” still stands up to her standards kind of reinforced my own appreciation for it and my desire to listen to the kind of stuff which she later felt proud of.

As before, the **key track** of 'Both Sides, Now' is **(re)purposed**, on repeat, to meet emotional needs. Thanks to her latest research, Joana gets the added reward of knowing her **key track** comes with the artist's own approval; that this matters to Joana in this way suggests the esteem she already holds Mitchell in. On day 11, *Both Sides Now*—specifically its jazziness—prompted more reflections on Mitchell's expressive profile: 'I cannot believe this is the same person who did *Blue* [(1971)]. What an eclectic artist'. This thought is perhaps the conclusion of Joana's **genre/tradition** triangulations, one also epitextually primed not just by the creative restlessness professed in Mitchell's interview but also a friend's insistence, on day 5, that she's 'innovative'.

The rest of the diary period was marked by Mitchell's music having **life relevance** for Joana: its meanings cohered with the meanings of events in her life. On day 14, she 'listened to *Blue*, particularly "All I Want" and "California" while I was about to read my results from my MPhil. It was a very joyful experience'. On day 17, Joana was more in need of comfort, and once more **(re)purposed the music**:

I'm moving out of Oxford by the end of the week, and I think the stress of packing and leaving has made me want to listen to things I already know instead of explore ... It's actually really nice to have started a playlist with my favourites ['so far "Both Sides, Now", "For Free", "The Circle Game", "All I Want", "California" and "Comes Love"'] ... it feels natural and comfortable.

On day 18, these emotions intensified:

[U]neasy and sad because of leaving Oxford so soon, so I listened to "Both Sides, Now" a few times and then "The Circle Game" for a while. I really like how both these songs are about the continuity of life, repetition, and how that leads to both understanding and misunderstanding.

Here followed a week of silence, as Joana moved back from Oxford to Portugal. After this, Mitchell's music continued to interact with Joana's emotional states in the wake of upsetting events. On day 25, Joana 'was feeling a bit sensitive and sad about a breakup and so it felt comforting, though maybe a bit sad also, to return to' 'Both Sides, Now' and 'The Circle Game'. Then, for the next 'few days I kept singing "The Circle Game" and "Both Sides, Now" to myself, this circular nature of things was in my mind and so were these songs (though I didn't actually listen to them)'. And on day 31, 'something happened which made me really sad, so I listened to "Both Sides, Now" on repeat, and fell asleep to it.' Joana reported almost no listening for the next few days, before her final entry, on day 37: 'At night, I was crying again about a breakup and so I just kept listening to "Both Sides, Now" on repeat.'

Joana didn't submit a summary questionnaire, but the main elements of her diary seem clear. Joana's first impressions of Mitchell, beginning already with her musical cameo in *Love Actually*, were gradually reinforced through a combination of Joana's track-level interpretations (parsing the overarching theme of 'repetition' or the 'circular nature of things'), her filtering of Mitchell through certain **genres/traditions** (surf rock, country) and **other artists** she values (The Beach Boys, Pixies, Pink Floyd), and epitextual materials (the interview, her friend's talk). Most important was the **life relevance** Mitchell's music took on in the wake of several emotion-stirring events in Joana's life during this period, particularly her break-up and her move away from Oxford, as well as other unspecified occurrences perhaps related to them. Often the emotions

engendered by these events prompted Joana to *(re)purpose the music* to the end of managing those emotions in one way or another.

The ‘deep writer and singer’ whose ‘lyrics may address heartbreak, or maybe even some of the life experiences of specifically women’, and whose grand theme is the navigation of change and repetition, became exactly what Joana needed at that time, or at least exactly what fit. Even general elements of the *Love Actually* scene first referenced came to be mirrored in Joana’s own life. The aptness of Mitchell’s music at this time helped those meanings settle in as the core constituents of Mitchell’s sonic identity, of which Mitchell’s voice was the primary marker. By accompanying Joana as she let go of her salient student and partner identities—if not actually psychologically aiding her in doing so—Mitchell has attained a measure of autobiographical significance. I can imagine this significance persisting insofar as the dissolution of those identities remains important throughout Joana’s life, and insofar as Mitchell remains associated with that dissolution.

9.1.2: Nathaniel

Nathaniel, a 30-year-old music lecturer from the U.K., chose to listen to English singer-songwriter David Bowie for his diary, which ran from 12.5.2020 to 18.6.2020. First, an introduction. Nathaniel normally listens to ‘almost all kinds’ of music, but mainly ‘classical, contemporary jazz, some electronic music, and hip-hop’. Regarding how music plays a role in his life and sense of self/identity, he acknowledged that ‘[s]tudying music is my work, so I spend a lot of timing thinking about the nature of musical experience and the roles music plays in

culture and society.’ He avowed the importance of his profession to his self-identity, and imagined that his classical listening habits invited certain assumptions from others about that self-identity. He also claimed not to identify with ‘the personas of pop artists’ while listening to them, seeking rather to engage ‘artists with identities very different from mine, as a way of thinking about the different perspective on the world that their work explores.’

Nathaniel began on day 1 by admitting a ‘pretty strong general impression about David Bowie, partly because of all the publicity following his death’ in 2016, despite ‘[n]ever actually getting round to listening to much of his music’: ‘that he was shape-shifting and invented personas that maybe he hid behind.’ One epitextual datum: ‘one thing that stuck with me was a conversation I had with a barber after Bowie died, who said she thought he was sinister.’

True to his musicologist identity, Nathaniel proceeded methodically, hearing through the music to reach wider conclusions. On day 1, shuffling Bowie on Spotify, he identified ‘two kinds of songs: energetic fairly generic pop/rock tracks, and more experimental ones’, hearing Bowie ‘as a very complicated version of a typical energetic rock frontman, with something a bit pained or uncertain showing through’. On day 2—now listening chronologically to Bowie’s albums—he interpreted the Bowie of *David Bowie* (1967) ‘as a raconteur telling ballads about characters from uneventful post-war middle-class life, basically about how mundane but also how fraught and strange that life was’. Here, Nathaniel complement’s day 1’s **genre/tradition** computations with the use of the **historical logic** heuristic, using early Bowie’s historical context to rationalise his expressive profile as ‘essentially jolly pop songs of the era, but with something

intentionally peculiar or off about much of the lyrics ... which made the jolliness of the songs potentially a bit creepy'. On day 3, via the **other artists** heuristic, Nathaniel then sensed a possible tendency to try 'to jump on successful bandwagons', after hearing snatches of Bob Dylan, The Clash, and Elvis Presley. Unsure if this was intentional, he was 'undecided' as to whether he liked it.

By day 4, via 'All the Madmen' (1970), Nathaniel had resolved that Bowie was usually 'playing a character' rather than presenting 'himself', the persona Nathaniel was seeking. Then day 5's 'Oh! You Pretty Things' lyric 'the nightmares came today, and it looks as though they're here to stay', and the 'resignation' Bowie sings it with, 'sure[d] up [*sic*]' Nathaniel's image of Bowie as not the 'gloriously tortured soul I associate with other contemporary rock, but as someone who feels like he doesn't fit in in a more subtle way.' Here, a **key lyric** has helped recalibrate the workings of the **genre/tradition** heuristic informing Nathaniel's interpretation.

Epitext here began to inform more of Nathaniel's thoughts. On day 7, he acknowledged Bowie's 'shape-shift[ing]' via **other artists** as 'something I'd heard about him before, which this listening is emphasizing rather than making me think for the first time'. On day 8, a conversation with a friend who cast Bowie as being 'about the liberation of identity' enabled Nathaniel to socially assert his own notion that 'there seems to be something unsettled about Bowie's many sides', which 'helped to sure up [*sic*] my sense of who Bowie was'.

Then, on day 14, Nathaniel researched Bowie's Ziggy Stardust character. He noted that its backstory was 'invented in hindsight by Bowie and his fans', and pondered U2 singer Bono's quoted reaction that 'Bowie [as Ziggy] seemed

like a character “fallen from space”. Being ‘aware that this is all part of the relentless Bowie mythology’, Nathaniel was ‘ambivalent about wholeheartedly embracing the character’. Although its ‘insincerity doesn’t look good’, Nathaniel also allowed that Bowie’s claim to be ‘gay/bisexual’, which he ‘later admitted ... wasn’t really true’, was potentially meaningful in ‘an age when homosexuality had only just been technically legalized, by an Act that still significantly discriminated against homosexuality’. Nathaniel approaches both points with scholarly circumspection, first referencing the **critical concept** of artist mythologies to temper his interpretation, before granting Bowie’s gay/bisexual posturing enough **historical logic** to render it palatable. Watching footage of Bowie performing as Ziggy, Nathaniel could:

see exactly why Bono might have had (or said that he had) the reaction he did: strikingly tall and upright, strikingly pale, and extraordinarily dressed ... But I can also see why the barber told me she thought Bowie was creepy. The impression I got even more [is that] Bowie’s persona ... (at least his Ziggy Stardust stage persona) ... was pointedly a persona for whom there was no convenient label or category. And I can see that all the fashion for all things space/aliens in the late 1960s/early ’70s was a very convenient vehicle for creating that persona.

Here, one paratext (the footage) reinforces an epitext (his barber’s comment), confirming what a **fortuitous thought** the latter was. The **historical logic** heuristic then works to explain Bowie’s approach: the symbology of his time accommodated what he wanted to express. Lastly, Nathaniel praised ‘Rock ’n’ Roll Suicide’ (1972) after listening with the lyrics, demonstrating how the conclusions of his paratextual and epitextual encounters—regarding both Bowie’s aesthetic creepiness and his humanism—fed back into his listening experience:

This song, in the context of the reading I'd done, really emphasized the sense of Bowie as someone trying to reach out to people struggling with who they were ... Although there's also this sense, as in other songs, that Bowie himself isn't exactly OK, and that you wouldn't exactly be comforted if you took his "hand".

But further reading on day 15 about a statutory rape allegation against Bowie countered Nathaniel's interpretive generosity:

[F]rom what I know of 1970s pop/rock culture I definitely shouldn't be surprised. But I definitely am surprised, which probably says something about the image of Bowie that I was beginning to internalize (the classic image of him being a bit of a moral cultural and intellectual hero, ... and [who] therefore was less likely to do this kind of thing).

Here, the artist mythologies **critical concept**—referenced by 'the classic image'—is invoked as the fallacy undermined by research. This move, strengthened by the ethical seriousness of the charge against Bowie, vindicates Nathaniel's musicologist identity. Meanwhile, with his allusion to his knowledge of the **genre/tradition** of '1970s pop/rock culture', Nathaniel reclaims for himself the possibility that he *could* have known about Bowie's alleged conduct, thus reasserting his musicological agency in navigating the problem. As he remarked on day 18 after an academic presentation on Bowie, 'I think I'm more wary than I realized at the start of falling in line with hagiography.'

Nathaniel began trying to synthesise his interpretation of Bowie's persona(e), the diffuseness of which remained a constant theme. On day 20, *Diamond Dogs*' (1974) album cover emphasised the 'other worldly, androgynous/gender fluid, and ... highly sexual' side of Bowie (or his 'favoured type of persona'), a side which unified 'quite a few of his otherwise very different songs' (and recalled once more the hairdresser's 'creepy' comment). But on day

22, the ‘completely different’ ‘funk/RnB’ sound of *Young Americans* (1975) affirmed the ‘musical “chameleon”’ label often given to Bowie (another **critical concept**), its ‘switched persona’ contrasting to the ‘gaunt, creepy but highly sexualized figure’ Nathaniel had encountered so far – a contrast backed up by the lyrics. Nevertheless, Nathaniel remarked on day 23 that *Young Americans* seemed ‘much less as an expression of *him* compared with some of his earlier stuff’, acknowledging ‘funk’s identity as an African-American genre’—Bowie’s use of which entailing ‘at least a degree of appropriation’—as a possible reason. Here, Nathaniel’s musicologist identity is again active, as he uses both the **genre/tradition** and **critical concept** (the concept in question being cultural appropriation) heuristics to disqualify the meanings of *Young Americans* from being authentically ‘*him*’.

Station to Station (1976)—in Nathaniel’s words, a turn back to the earlier ‘Bowie template ... glam/art rock with strange lyrics’ (day 25)—prompted much reflection. Its track ‘TVC 15’, a ‘twistedly humorous take on ... the TV as a kind of machine-subject in everyone’s life’, reintroduced the ‘Bowie the cultural commentator’ (day 27) encountered earlier in the diary. On day 28, Nathaniel heard in *Station to Station* some *Young Americans*-esque funk elements after all, asserting ‘more of a continuous musical identity’. Then, on day 29, the track ‘Wild is the Wind’, on which Bowie’s voice was ‘much softer, higher and sweeter’ than elsewhere, made Nathaniel remark how ‘how many pop stars trade on having a single recognizable voice, whereas Bowie traded on having multiple.’ Then some reading on Bowie’s ‘Thin White Duke’ persona, ‘someone who claimed to be

romantic while feeling nothing at all', re-contextualised the song as 'dark and creepy' in its intense performance of romance.

The **critical concept** of Bowie's chameleon label began to stick. On day 30, Nathaniel was 'struck' by the 'overtly experimental' *Low* (1977), particularly its second side, leaving him with a 'sense of Bowie shifting and developing very quickly as an artist.' On day 31, after reading about Brian Eno's involvement in the album, Nathaniel pondered a nagging 'quandary' about Bowie's 'switching styles with the times':

was he setting trends or was he imitating them, and if imitating them, was he doing it in a mercantile way or was it just because he was so immersed and engaged in what was alive around him? ... Listening to this album and this song ["Subterraneans"], on top of the reading, gave me a really clear answer for the first time: he was both progressive and imitative, and his imitativeness was definitely of the second kind. (Pretty difficult to accuse him of being mercantile given how much side 2 of this album, as far as I know, was so much beyond what sold well at least in US and UK pop culture at this time!).

Once again, Nathaniel's musicologist identity is active, drawing on his **genre/tradition** knowledge to impute **historical logic**—or rather a lack of it—to Bowie's shifts, thus sparing him the mercantile charge. The same went for 'Neukoelln' from *Heroes* (1976), another of Bowie's 'Berlin' albums with Eno:

it struck me just how insanely different this is from so much of the mainstream pop/rock end of the Bowie spectrum. Clearly Eno may be responsible for much of it, but this doesn't change the fact that it exists as a product of "Bowie". The musical chameleon image rings even more true with these Berlin albums.

In his summary questionnaire, Nathaniel said his 'overall sense of Bowie corresponds to ideas I'd heard about him before listening, and which the listening really confirmed: Bowie is a "chameleon", ... both pre-empting and imitating all

sorts of mainstream and non-mainstream pop'. This changeability mapped onto 'shifts between performance personas and identities'. '[C]ommon characteristics' amongst these were 'being outside or alienated', non-heteronormative sexuality, and the overt, 'troubled and melancholy' performativity of Bowie's personae. 'Bowie himself' was lost in these, although '[c]learly there is someone continuous and different beneath ... who aspired to be both a rock star and a social/cultural commentator', but who never 'manifested', except maybe in Bowie's earliest work. Defining Bowie musically were 'eclecticism between various '70s pop tropes', with a 'hard/glam rock thread' usually present (as in the track 'Suffragette City') 'despite the big swerves into funk and ambient/electronic'. Likewise his 'eclectic voice', with three 'types': 'the high, strained, slightly crazed voice; the low, rich lover's voice; and the demotic cockney one. "Heroes" moves from the second to the first.' Nathaniel's favoured tracks were 'Space Oddity', 'Five Years', and 'Ashes to Ashes', which he felt:

express very truthfully a feeling about life which I like to indulge in. Hard to articulate exactly what this is, but the closest I can get is that these songs are about how we strive in a world that is simultaneously disorientating/oppressive, banal, and extraordinary/miraculous.

How Nathaniel felt he personally related to Bowie was particularly interesting. He isn't prone to such connections to artists, but said this was fitting in Bowie's case given 'how distant and alien-like' his personae are. But precisely this distance fostered a sense that Bowie, perhaps due to his outsider-ness, was 'speaking specifically' to Nathaniel—as a 'conscience' or 'voice in your head'—thus forging, unusually, a personal connection after all.

Nathaniel's familiarisation with Bowie's sonic identity was governed above all by his musicologist identity. He approached the task much like I have mine throughout this thesis, primarily treating Bowie's sonic identity as an analytical problem to solve. He invoked his knowledge of relevant **genres/traditions** to contextualise Bowie's releases, often imputing **historical logic** to them as a result. And he mobilised various **critical concepts**—artist mythologies, Bowie-as-chameleon, cultural appropriation—that might most readily present themselves to someone used to studying music academically. The ideas of Bowie's mythology and Bowie-as-chameleon in particular were prompted by epitextual and paratextual engagements both prior to and during the diary process. Both ideas were useful forces to push against, providing musicological challenges to Nathaniel (*are you sure you want to endorse us?*) and thereby structure and sense to his ever-refining sensitivity to Bowie's sonic identity. Similarly, his hairdresser's epitextual assertion of Bowie's sinisterness—or creepiness, as Nathaniel later phrased it—came to seem a **fortuitous thought** once Nathaniel started perceiving this himself in Bowie.

Overall, getting to know Bowie's sonic identity appears to have rendered Bowie's music somewhat autobiographically significant to Nathaniel. Firstly, he seemed to enjoy much of the music, resonating with its themes and connecting to the artist in a manner conspicuously rare for Nathaniel. More abstractly, the process enabled Nathaniel to self-consciously engage his salient musicologist identity in conversation with Bowie's music, thereby linking that music, and Bowie's sonic identity, to Nathaniel's own understanding of his self-identity. Moreover, given Bowie's prominence, Nathaniel will no doubt encounter Bowie's

music again beyond his own listening, in both casual and professional contexts. As such, he will be prompted to repeat and elaborate on that conversation in the future.

9.1.3: Diana

Diana, the 32-year-old History DPhil student from Malaysia who was interviewed about Annie Lennox, chose to listen to U.S. folk-rock group Indigo Girls. Her diary ran from 12.5.2020 to 15.6.2020.

Before starting on day 1, Diana worked with some prior epitextual knowledge and the *interpersonal identification* heuristic to establish a starting point, professing to ‘identify with them on some level – being a lesbian myself, I’ve felt an affinity with them. I know they’re associated with the LGBT political and social movement, and are regarded as lesbian icons. This always resonated with me.’ As with Lennox, then, the Indigo Girls’ socio-political stances, with which Diana identified, predisposed her towards them, while also amplifying the specific meanings on which Diana’s identification depended.

Diana was particularly alert to the music’s impact on her affective states and day-to-day circumstances. On day 3, a series of tracks took her through numerous such states:

“Bombshells of my daily fears explode” – makes me think of the anxiety I feel at times. ... I’m surprised how calming I find the songs and how they complement my work or to-dos. There’s an urgency in the song “This Train Revised” – makes me a little anxious. Impending. But then the next song comes up—“Starkville”—it feels calmer.

Similarly, Diana was also alert to the ***associations and episodic memories*** that the music prompted, as on day 4:

I like the line “It’s only life after all” [from “Closer to Fine”] – reminiscent of old travels. I guess with the lockdown, I’ve been drifting to past trips. This song makes me think of aimless wanderings. It’s been years since I’ve been, but this song really makes me think of Montreal.

On day 6, these tendencies of the Indigo Girls—to interact with Diana’s affective state, to inflect her daily life, and to prompt reflection—combined:

I’m particularly looking forward to putting on Indigo Girls while I clean – as opposed to while I work which is what I mainly did this week. I’ve realised how much I like their soothing voice and how their words strike me from time to time. But listening to this music has made me feel a little morose about the future – or maybe it’s this lockdown, I’m not sure.

What these various ways of experiencing the Indigo Girls’ music have in common is their inward orientation. As Diana discussed in her interview, she is quiet and reflective by nature, and this inwardness is an enaction of that nature. Much as Diana’s earlier ***interpersonal identification*** prefigured specific meanings as prominent in the Indigo Girls’ sonic identity, so do these inward-oriented ways of listening afford more prominence to whatever meanings Diana can relate to her inner life – its past, present, or future.

By day 7—coincidentally the day of one of her interviews—Diana was ***(re)purposing the music***, ‘[s]till in this questioning mood about the future about choices. Keep thinking of some of the lyrics I’m listening to, almost wondering if they can give me some clues!’. She also linked the calming effect of Indigo Girls’ music to her own personality, and to ***associations and episodic memories*** of the past which birthed it:

There's something calming and quiet about the violin [on "Share The Moon"]. I see myself as a quiet person and the other day my partner Amanda²⁹ remarked how quiet I was in my thoughts ... some of the songs of Indigo Girls really reflect this aspect. Today we talked a little about this too in the interview ... That meditative calm I need ... to function, to filter out the noise. Which makes me think of my childhood in the suburbs of Kuala Lumpur.

At the base level, 'calmness' and 'quiet' are themselves the meanings that are settling here as parts of the Indigo Girls' sonic identity. By enabling Diana to reaffirm these traits as traits of hers—something the self-consciousness of the diary perhaps also encourages—the Indigo Girls' music connects to Diana's own self-identity.

Day 9 saw another extended reflection on the music's fit with Diana's daily circumstances, affective state, self-identity, and values:

[L]istening to "Crazy Games." Feels light – as light as this gorgeous day. ... "Watershed" makes me think of the choices I've made in my life. Looking back and realising I'm pretty content with where I am at the moment. I've been enjoying how reflective these songs are and how calm they generally feel. It does feel like they're fighting for a cause – I guess it's because I know a little about their background but there is something in their music that feels righteous.

Here, the Indigo Girls' music spawns more specific meanings within Diana's calm, quiet, reflective space than just those qualities themselves. That space, combined with the message of 'Watershed', affords Diana the experience of contentment with her life thus far, as well as the consolidation of her epitextually primed impression of righteousness in the Indigo Girls' music. Soon, the music had fully embedded into Diana's mental world, arguably affording a more

²⁹ I have also provided Diana's partner with a pseudonym here.

extensive harmony between its meanings and her own thoughts. As she recounted on day 12:

All of yesterday evening I had IG in my head again ... no specific song – a combination of all their songs almost ... and then generic IG voices and guitar strings. ... I seem to be turning the lyrics from “Least Complicated” – the words “clean slated” come up and up. [Eid, t]he end of the fasting month [tomorrow] comes to mind – literally, a cleanse. Also, I’ve been recently struggling with the upcoming submission date of my thesis – it’s been such a long journey and there’s something cleansing about ending – starting afresh. ...

This morning I started work with silence ... – just had my IG internalised playlist.

Here, the deep-rootedness of the music in Diana’s mind helps its meanings have **life relevance** for Diana. The circumstances described, both relevant to salient identities (academic and religious), accentuate the importance to Diana of the meanings that cohere with them. The internalisation of the Indigo Girls’ music even extended to dreams, as Diana reported on day 16, prompting a first-thing craving and further reflection on her life:

Woke up wanting to listen to “Galileo” so I’ve just put it up. I like the beginning about daily fears and having roots in her youth. That reminds me of therapy and what I’ve learnt about why I have certain reactions or feelings – very much because of what happened when I was younger. ... I wonder which mental pathways I’m forging in these lockdown days. I know I’ve been more reflective and thoughtful than usual – which I suppose is natural. “How long until my soul gets it right?”

As Diana notes herself, the isolation and monotony of life under lockdown induced an even greater degree of reflectiveness than was characteristic for her. Nevertheless, it is significant that the Indigo Girls have become implicated in such willed, active reflection—they suffice as reflective fuel, and do not instead sedate or pacify her, for instance—even when the actual stimulus of their music is

absent. The meanings constituting their sonic identity have become portable, and thus more prone to mean something to Diana, as her allusion to the lessons of her therapy attests – another enactment of the **associations and episodic memories** heuristic. And how better to sum it all up than with a **key lyric** – ‘How long until my soul gets it right?’?

Day 18 brought more dream reports, this time with enough remembered to interpret:

I was driving (or rather being driven) to a concert of theirs which was outside in a desert somewhere. I wonder what that means – something empty and infinite but with something comforting at the end of it? Perhaps. I didn’t feel unsafe in the dream and there was a certain level of comfort too.

Here, the mysterious comfort of the dream reinforces the perception of comfort in Indigo Girls’ music. Given Diana’s preference for inner quiet and balance, this developing meaning of comfort in the Indigo Girls’ sonic identity garners them trust, further listening, and, with that, the continued potential to develop autobiographical significance.

Towards the end of Diana’s diary, she became saddened and frustrated by contemporary global events, and her reflections were somewhat more urgent, as on day 20 (Figure 10, an image from *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), is part of Diana’s entry for this day):

I put on “Trouble” ... indeed, as I write this there are protests in the US, black people getting killed for no real reason. “All the gays will pay again” – a lyric in the song. That’s something. Often, LGBTQ people are targeted as scapegoats for governments ... Makes me rather sad ... it’s really rather difficult to just live. ... Sometimes I wonder if I’m doing enough and if just being who I am and fighting for my little corner is enough.

“Country radio” has just come on. ... “You can’t go back to the ways of the past” – I’m often revisiting the past and it’s true I have to remember that I

can't really go back. I'm learning to appreciate those moments instead of longing to go back.

Here, as the music gains *life relevance*, it amplifies the relevant meanings and compounds their effect on Diana. Characteristically prone to seek lessons in music, and already trusting the Indigo Girls, Diana *(re)purposes the music* to once more reappraise her own behaviours and place in the world. As Diana's use of pictures throughout her diary suggests, she readily connects such thoughts to other concepts, people, places, even other cultural materials. In this case, it is *The Wizard of Oz* (1939; see Figure 10), with its own emphasis on self-discovery and return – although for Diana here, it is the acknowledgement of the impossibility of return that constitutes self-discovery.



Figure 10: A screenshot from the film *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). This was included by Diana to accompany the comment quoted above from day 20's entry.

Over the last days of her diary, Diana struggled with low moods. After a phase of limited or no listening between days 23-27, she returned on day 28 to reflect on her feelings. Feeling paralysed by the news of the day, she once more entered a dialogue with the Indigo Girls' lyrics, this time from 'Least Complicated': "You just stick the right formula in – a solution for every fool" seems apt. ... I think I need to refocus my energy, as selfish as that might sound. "What makes me think I can start clean-slated?". Listening to 'Look Long' ("Everyone I know

can sense Armageddon” – these foreboding days”), Diana noted how their voices seemed ‘more mature – more experienced and wise when their earlier songs seemed more angry’. Moreover: ‘It’s special to see the trajectory of their long careers and musical path – to see that they’ve achieved wisdom ... “These aren’t the best of times, and they’re not the worst.” Balanced.’ It is interesting how, with the benefit by now of an *oeuvre-eye view*, Diana perceives in their music the attainment of wisdom over time: much the same process that she herself seems occupied with.

On day 29, Diana’s last listening day, she sharpened her self-analysis amidst a depression exacerbated by attendant shame (‘perhaps I am just spoilt’), using a *key track* both as teacher and comforter:

I put on “Closer to Fine” – it calms me and puts me in a tranquil place. “To seek solace in possibly a friend.” “It’s only life after all.”

This song really speaks to me.

As so often throughout Diana’s diary phase, the Indigo Girls’ music serves to return Diana to her preferred equilibrium. In that space, lyrics make a greater impact.

In her summary questionnaire, Diana said the Indigo Girls ‘symbolise what they stand for’: ‘gay artists, living in the US, being politically active’. She deemed their most essential musical characteristics ‘their voices and use of guitar’, noting also the ‘quite unique’, ‘detailed and full’ ‘poetry’ of their lyrics and the music’s ‘ethereal quality’. Diana offered the track ‘Virginia Woolf’ as representative, and also named it as a favourite along with ‘Closer to Fine’, ‘Least Complicated’, ‘Galileo’, and ‘Heartache for Everyone’, which she liked for ‘the lyrics, music and

literary and historical references'. As to how, if it all, she personally related to the Indigo Girls now, Diana professed to liking them 'very much', knowing them 'better', and 'identify[ing] with their music and what they stand for' – '[e]specially being gay, I feel close to them and proud of their work too. Their down to earth music makes me feel connected to them and grounds me too.'

Diana's familiarisation with the Indigo Girls' sonic identity was defined, above all, by her characteristically reflective engagement with their music. This reflectiveness was accommodated, if not initiated, by that music's own soothing, calming qualities. Diana identifies as a quiet, reflective person, and the Indigo Girls connected to Diana by enabling her to enact those aspects of herself. Consequently, those quiet meanings in the Indigo Girls music became central to their sonic identity for Diana. The connection strengthened through the **life relevance** of more specific meanings in the Indigo Girls music, such as themes of self-understanding and political sentiments, as well as her **interpersonal identification**, as a lesbian, with the Indigo Girls as outspokenly lesbian artists. As Diana mentioned in relation to Annie Lennox, these kinds of thematic and interpersonal identifications are explicitly important to her when engaging with artists and their music. These identifications were often results of Diana **(re)purposing the music** to self-learning and therapeutic ends. This itself was often prompted by her day-to-day circumstances, to which she was sensitively attuned, lending the music further **life relevance** and allowing life and music to share meanings. Diana pinned down **key tracks** and **lyrics**—notably 'Least Complicated' and its 'what makes me think I can start clean-slated?'—that communicated the relevant meanings pointedly. Overall, the strong basis for

affinity, along with Diana's characteristic tendency to reflect deeply and self-referentially on artistic meanings, enabled the Indigo Girls to become autobiographically significant to Diana. It is easy to imagine this significance persisting, particularly given how the Indigo Girls were able to remain in her mind in the absence of their actual music as a stimulus.

9.1.4: Daniel

Daniel, the 29-year-old DPhil History student from the U.S. who was interviewed about billy woods, chose to listen to British composer and ambient music pioneer Brian Eno for his diary, which ran from 4.7.2020 to 29.7.2020. On day 1, Daniel premised Eno's sonic identity on what he knew about Eno's status within his **genre/tradition**: 'very influential. The name really resonates. I think he is from the '70s British experimental scene ... does/did ambient electronic music?'. This left Daniel 'nervous ... I still don't really like electronics-forward music'. Already, Daniel's characteristic interest in the artist's cultural context has forewarned his (also characteristically) sensitive palate. He suspects Eno's sonic identity might consist of meanings he **dislikes**.

Nevertheless, Daniel 'loved tracks one through five' of *(No Pussyfooting)* (1973; with Robert Fripp), and even 'look[ed] forward to revisiting' it – a telling measure of Daniel's **(dis)liking**. Less so "'Swastika Girls" I or II', however, the first of which was 'annoying' and 'obnoxious', leaving Daniel wondering 'how [the album] was received when it first came out.' Here the **genre/tradition** and **(dis)liking** heuristics re-combine; this time, the stark like-dislike swing sends Daniel looking for rationalisations in the reception history. But Daniel remains in

charge. This is curiosity, not interpretive disempowerment—about elaborating his own response, not correcting it—and his dislike is a matter of irritation, not upset.

This pattern continued. Day 3's *Here Come The Warm Jets* (1974) mixed agreeable ambient pieces with 'more straightforward rock tracks [that] were sometimes boring to the point of being annoying'; Daniel guessed he would not 'be revisiting this record'. Day 4's *Taking Tiger Mountain (By Strategy)* (1974) was 'filled with a bunch of interesting failures'—a **critical concept** favoured by Daniel; recall his respect for woods and co.'s bold experimentalism—but was not liked. On day 5, the track 'Ambient 1 (Music for Airports)' left Daniel unpleasantly surprised and 'bugged'. Again, he wondered 'how it was received when it was first released, how innovative it was' in its day.

But day 7's *Nerve Net* (1992) came out on top:

I really liked it! My immediate vibe from it was like from *Ghost in the Shell*, like a sci-fi cityscape pulsating with light and structured movement, like a world of crazy hacking and conspiracies in the gray areas of global society. As it went on, there were a couple of tracks I thought were a little annoying ... But all in all, each piece really had its own identity while still all falling together as a coherent whole. ...

I am going to listen to this one again eventually.

Via *Nerve Net*, Eno's sonic identity now included signifiers that Daniel already appreciated: sci-fi, and the underworldisms he also relished in woods' music. Additionally, *Nerve Net* triggers another favoured **critical concept** that Daniel asserted regarding woods, one which here ratifies Daniel's hedonic response: the artwork as a coherent whole. Despite some irritation, *Nerve Net* will get that second chance, winning Eno some grace.

Not for long. Day 8's *The Shutov Assembly* (1992) was also praised for its 'sci-fi vibe', plus its 'darker overall tone', another general preference of Daniel's, but it nevertheless 'reinforced my existing prejudice towards ambient, noise, drone, lowercase ... I really really like elements of these things in more compositional (?) or conventional music, but I am not really into it by itself.' By day 10—'missed a day yesterday ... a nice break to be honest'—Daniel already felt 'past what [he] would consider to be "familiar"' with Eno, and his mind was made up: 'I appreciate his work, but I am not a fan and probably won't listen to much after this project is over.'

These comments express the crucial fact emerging here: Eno's sonic identity cannot affirm, never mind modify, Daniel's preferences and values as a listener. As such, being hit-and-(mostly)-miss has become Eno's definitive characteristic, traceable, via the operation of various heuristics, from on-the-ground experience (*liking* some tracks but *disliking* most), through reflections on that experience's cognitive-ecological context (Eno's practice as too reliant on *generic/traditional* techniques disfavoured by Daniel), to Daniel's overall stance (*I respect it, but it's not for me*).

Indeed, whom is it for? Taking a wider view while listening to *Mixing Colours* (2020; with Roger Eno), Daniel found himself wondering:

What do Eno fans get out of this? Do they really treat it as "ambient", as something to fit a mood of a particular activity that they don't actually have to listen to not unlike muzak, or do they enjoy it as music?

Once again, Daniel's ambivalence has him trying to empathise with a different reception history than his own. This act functions both as a way to understand

the unenjoyed music—and his unenjoyment of it—but also as a rhetorical expression of his distaste for it. Day 11's *Music for Films* (1978) saw Daniel reach for a **critical concept** to help that expression, one he would later mention in his interview:

Video game critic Tim Rogers talks about having an “I get it button” in video games. It would be like a button you can hit to skip over sections of the game you understand but are struggling with ... I would have been slamming it repeatedly after the first ten seconds of the second track.

Continuing on day 12, all Daniel had to say was: ‘Just slamming that “I get it button”.’ In this moment, tedium crystallises as a meaning in Eno's sonic identity.

The pendulum swung again on day 17 with *Apollo: Atmospheres and Soundtracks* (1993; with Daniel Lanois and Roger Eno):

I enjoyed it quite a bit. ... It really does sound like a sort of sci-fi moonscape. ... This sounded to me like what I would have optimistically guessed Eno sounded like ... I think I will listen to it again more carefully one day. This and “Nerve Net” are my favorites so far.

Acknowledging the bitterness of thwarted hopes affirms the values that gave rise to them, but also affirms Eno for fulfilling them at least once. And, once more, there's that non-negligible assurance: Daniel will listen again.

On day 18, listening to the ‘frustrating’, ‘obnoxious’ *Before and After The Science* (1977)—‘I won't be listening to it again’—Daniel lamented the influence of the diary process:

I don't even listen to my favorite bands every day ... the daily listening does a disservice to my enjoyment of Eno, to be honest ... and if I wasn't on a quest to listen to all the albums ... I would already have re-listened to “Nerve Net” or [(No Pussyfooting)].

Perhaps prompted by this reflection, Daniel returned on day 19 to *Nerve Net*. He ‘really enjoyed the sci-fi feeling... Tracks I didn’t like the first time around bugged me even more this time though.’

And that was that. Day 20’s *Discreet Music* (1975) again saw Daniel ‘just slamming that “I get it button”’, and most of the remaining days were missed, ‘in part because I am pretty sick of listening to Eno’, as he reported on day 25. Nevertheless, listening on day 26 to *Another Day on Earth* (2005), which he ‘didn’t like’, he conceded:

there were some really great ideas in it. I like that about Eno. He seems very consistent in his commitment to doing whatever it is he wants to do. There was one track which was stunningly 3-dimensional sounding. I didn’t enjoy it but I thought it was impressive.

Here, as in his interview, Daniel’s respect for single-minded experimentalism offsets somewhat his displeasure. This bolsters Daniel’s understanding of himself as not just a fair-minded listener—for whom the question of musical pleasure has certain moral undertones—but also a perspicacious one, able to rationalise, critique, and therefore trust his own hedonic responses. But Daniel further pruned his praise with a final critique: why a photo of a Chinese supermarket as the cover art? ‘Is it suggesting that, in an album called “Another Day on Earth”, this is how the unwashed masses live, how the nonwestern majority lives?’. Fresh from researching ‘the Sinophobia which defines contemporary politics’, Daniel balked at Eno’s brand of ‘Sinophilia’, to him ‘only barely separated from Sinophobia’.

In his summary questionnaire, Daniel measuredly cited Eno’s credentials as a stylistic—and possibly technical—pioneer as definitive of ‘who the artist is’.

Eno's music evidenced two tendencies: a focus on building textures that allow him to 'experiment with minimal changes in the sound of the piece'; and 'creating things which naturally work in the background and are understated'. Though interested in the former, Daniel appreciated the balance that Eno occasionally struck. He highlighted *Nerve Net*, *Neroli*, and *Apollo...* as favourites, thanks to their 'sci-fi ambience with varying degrees of musicality'. Daniel defined his feelings towards Eno as 'grudging respect'. He 'kn[e]w enough about his sound to guess where he has had influence on other artists', but remained 'prejudice[d]', seeing Eno as 'new age-curious boomer-type with a fetish for Asia and a self-indulgent approach to his art as a kind of "artiste".'

Daniel's interpretation of Eno's sonic identity was run, above all, through the **(dis)liking** heuristic. Daniel, a listener well-attuned to his preferences, was prompted by his hedonic reactions to consider the underlying reasons for each. Then other heuristics were activated, most notably **genre/tradition**—*does this manifest a musical style I already dislike? Can I forgive its indulgences as generic-historically valuable? Could the reception history contextualise my (dis)like?*—but also **critical concepts** like the "'I get it" button' and **prior thematic affinities** like Daniel's academic interest in Chinese history, politics, and culture (with Eno's own perceived mishandling of these counting against him). The albums Daniel did like served as **key albums** that anchored his conception of Eno's expressive profile as a kind of thesis-antithesis-synthesis, 'with "Nerve Net" being the most "musical" and "Neroli" the least and "Apollo" kind of right in the middle of what I like'. That Daniel's evaluative judgements of Eno's music were the premises of his interpretation of Eno's sonic identity—rather than

the results—demonstrates his assuredness in his own preferences. Perceiving that sonic identity affords Daniel both affirmation, by prompting him to exercise his judicious listener identity, and clarity, by prompting him to retrace the lines of his deeply held preferences – and prejudices. Eno’s music can be autobiographically significant to Daniel in these ways, but his distaste for it will likely limit such interactions.

9.2: Convergences and divergences

In the interests of drawing some inter-respondent comparisons, I will now follow the lead of the main themes that emerged across the remaining diaries, rather than the individual stories of those diaries themselves.

All respondents reported experiences of **(dis)liking** the music of their chosen artist that helped define their familiarisation with that music. We’ve already seen examples of this in Diana’s, Nathaniel’s, Joana’s, and Daniel’s reports. Simone, a 24-year-old Canadian PhD student at the University of Oxford, chose to listen to Canadian indie-pop artist Allie X. In her diary, Simone often cast the getting-to-know process as a matter of identifying which tracks and musical features were to her taste – for *her*. This already began on day 1: ‘So far the songs from her most recent album (*Cape God* [(2020)]) seem the most like the style I’m into’. Soon she was making more assured, categorical statements, as on day 3: “Madame X” is nice and slow and moody – this is the stuff I like ... Kind of obsessed with [“Not So Bad In LA”] 😊’. She attributed the music’s appeal to its ‘bright pop vs. dark stuff duality’, an appraisal repeated on day 9 regarding

‘Casanova’: ‘dark! But the song is so bright and dancey.’ Simone directly connected her favourite-finding with the general idea of familiarity on day 10: “‘Devil I Know” off *Cape God* is really starting to have that familiarity. Like, it starts playing, and I’m like, ah yes, this is one of my songs.’ And again on day 15, where the language of getting-to-know was modified: ‘Really getting to love “Devil I Know”. It’s a banger.’ By the diary’s close, this familiarisation-via-favouritism had fully unfurled: ‘I’m at the point now where I have favourites of her songs – “Fresh Laundry”, “Devil I Know”, etc.’ (day 26).

Perhaps necessarily, this way of conceiving of familiarisation makes heavy use of the **key tracks** heuristic, whereby conspicuous or well-(dis)liked tracks exert an outsized influence on the listener’s overall understanding of the artist’s sonic identity. In Simone’s case, these tracks were enshrined via the oft-invoked **critical concept** of the ‘banger’, a term used here to denote a track with unarguable, perhaps ineffable hedonic power, and thereby confer an implicitly universal prestige upon it. Overall, the centrality of the ideas of liking and favourites to Simone’s diary process reflects a pleasure-oriented, even somewhat instinctual approach to listening, one based on ‘binges’ and ‘subsequent mini-binges’ of a given artist and moulded around other life activities such as working, cooking, and exercising. Indeed, as Simone remarked on day 5, ‘doing [the diary] is making me realize that I listen to music to *listen* to music way less than I expected’, something she felt guilty about. The music of Allie X that could hook her, the dark bright pop bangers, becomes the music that defines Allie X’s sonic identity. Moreover, the banger concept doesn’t just consecrate the

tracks in question, but also—talking of guilt—absolves the listener of indulging in its pleasures at all. It shrugs and says, *who could resist?*

Will, who was interviewed on Belle and Sebastian, chose to listen to Northern Irish pop band The Divine Comedy (TDC), who, he wrote, ‘people have encouraged me to listen to ... based on my own musical listening tastes’. Like Simone, he spoke mostly in terms of what he did and didn’t like in their music, lending the exercise an inherently probational—rather than, for instance, merely exploratory—tone. Day 1 saw a stream of varying appraisals: ‘To Die a Virgin’ was ‘cracking’, ‘very fun to listen to’, an ‘absolute banger’ (that **critical concept** again); ‘The Plough’ ‘not terrible’ despite being ‘very similar to musical theatre’, which Will hates. Day 2’s chosen album, *Absent Friends* (2004), stood out insofar as it was less enjoyed than day 1’s *Victory for the Comic Muse* (2006). By day 5, Will was already focusing on his ‘new found favourites’—‘The Plough’, ‘Our Mutual Friend’, ‘A Lady of a Certain Age’, ‘Catherine the Great’—and by day 10 he was able to rank new tracks on a scale of relative **(dis)liking**:

“Napoleon Complex” – Like this song very much (maybe helps that I study Napoleonic history) ... “Foreverland” – I like this song but I wouldn’t call it a favourite. “Catherine the Great” – Favourite on the album. “To the Rescue” – Good but not a personal favourite. ... “I Joined the Foreign Legion” – Good but not a favourite ... “A Desperate Man” - Like this one a lot. “Other People” – No strong feelings. – “The One Who Loves You” – ditto.

By day 15, it was about second chances: ‘I spent the afternoon trying to relisten to *Fin de Siècle* [(1998)] to see if any other songs ... grow on me, but no luck’. And by the end, on day 20, Will could list his ten or so favoured **key tracks** that had graduated to day-to-day, post-diary rotation.

Like Simone, Will came out of his diary process with a positive opinion of the artist. In the vein of Simone's 'this is the stuff I like', Will's getting-to-know/-like TDC hinged on his **prior thematic affinity** for various themes consistently heard, from day 1 onwards, in their music. In the summary questionnaire, Will highlighted TDC's whimsy, literary-historical allusiveness, eclectic instrumentation (including his favoured strings-brass combo mentioned in his interview), and their balance of 'tongue-in-cheek' humour with sincerity. He identified with their 'nostalgia'—a 'romanticised view of the past'—and "“foppish” whimsy". 'A Lady of a Certain Age' and 'Catherine the Great' were nominated favourites, the former whimsical yet emotionally provocative, the latter a more fun, neatly baroque pop track. **Key tracks**, then, which between them expressed the sum of those already-liked elements.

Ideas like 'whimsy' and 'romanticisation' are recognisable from Will's interview about Belle and Sebastian, to whom he compared TDC numerous times with reference to those ideas. As on day 1, for instance: "“Arthur C. Clarke's Mysterious World” (This song stood out for me. Very wholesome/whimsical vibe. Much like certain B&S songs too.)"; or day 10: "“Funny Peculiar” – Totally different vibe to other songs on this and other albums. Reminds me more of the kind of sentimental, romantic song you'd get from Belle and Sebastian.' This context, provided by **other artists** of such importance to Will, does not merely affirm the quality of TDC's music by association, as **other artist** associations seem most prone to do. It also exists as precisely the context that primes Will to make those associations in the first place. Will's initial recognition of TDC's thematic proximity to Belle and Sebastian nudges the former into the latter's orbit, both fixing and

clarifying meanings in TDC's sonic identity while also setting them up to develop autobiographical significance for Will.

Simone made similar **other artist** associations. Indeed, she picked Allie X partly because Spotify recommended her as someone fans of singer-songwriter Lorde might also like – 'so that's key'. This association cropped up later as a way of charting both meanings and quality, as on day 17:

Stripping back songs is great but when the production adds so much you have to do it carefully I feel. Lorde does it really well on her Lorde x VEVO *Melodrama* [(2017)] re-imaginings... but I digress. Do I ever shut up about Lorde. Answer is no. ... Also, ["Little Things"] has vibes somewhat similar to "Supercut" by Lorde. Again with the Lorde takes. God I need to shut up.

But it wasn't all about Lorde. In her summary questionnaire, Simone remarked how her favourite **key track**, 'Devil I Know' had 'an Arctic Monkeys-esque bassline' and was 'danceable in a Wicked-Games-by-the-Weeknd way. Similar vibes to some of Hozier's songs as well. Basically it's got a lot of elements similar to other artists I like.' Then again: 'I don't love her lyrics in the same deep, personality-shaking level I associate with Lorde's lyrics. But I do relate to them, and like her sound'. Like Will, then, Simone used the semantic and evaluative benchmarks of **other** valued **artists**, particularly Lorde, both to define Allie X's sonic identity and judge, even rank, its value to her. As her self-admonishing tone in the quote above suggests, Simone perhaps feels this is doing Allie X a disservice. Indeed, while it is ultimately a compliment, the association with Lorde somewhat fixes Allie X in her shadow. Allie X's music could afford the affirmation, exploration, or transformation of many of Simone's identities in various scenarios, thus garnering autobiographical significance, but in those scenarios,

Lorde might pull rank, as it were. The same goes for Will, TDC, and Belle and Sebastian, although his eventual enthusiasm for TDC seemed stronger than Simone's for Allie X.

Rachel, who was interviewed about Radiohead, was unsure who to suggest for the diary. I proposed Scottish pop band The Blue Nile, but Rachel quickly took a dislike to them, so I suggested Canadian alt-rock band Arcade Fire. For Rachel, the **other artists** and **genres/traditions** heuristics dominated the interpretive process. Indeed, in her diary—which featured four days of listening spread across the month, each entry replete with terse comments on the day's diet—there were very few comments that did not employ one of these heuristics. The artists, artworks, and genres/traditions referenced (excluding repetitions) were as follows: Radiohead, ABBA, Road music, 'Dancing Queen' by ABBA, The Gypsy Kings, 'The Big Sky' by Kate Bush, '80s synth music, Australian trance/pop, Grizzly Bear, '80s-end-of-the-film song', Electric Light Orchestra, Prince (particularly 'You Got the Look' and 'The Beautiful Ones'), the *Drive* (2011) soundtrack, Groove Armada, 'Sister Saviour', New Order, Human League, MGMT, M83's sound, Bernard Sumner, Coldplay ('if they were from West Coast of US'), 'a barn dance with a choir and a school band', grunge, Pixies, 'Advert music/Dr Who/end of film vibe', Metronomy/New Electro, the album *Surfa Rosa* (1988; by Pixies), The Go Team, Vaudeville, bluesy/jazzy piano, Skiffle band, 'indie knees-up', 'could be used in a Levis advert', the film *9 Songs* (2004), the 'hipster-esque fetishization of old school Southern tunes', The White Stripes, Simon and Garfunkel, Bruce Springsteen (particularly 'I'm On Fire'), Beach Boys (particularly 'God Only Knows'), The Byrds, the film *Frank*

(2014), Alison Goldfrapp, Electro, 'Sing' by Blur, Francis Black (lead singer of Pixies), Nick Cave, Southern Gothic, Johnny Cash, Joy Division, Ennio Morricone, The Flaming Lips, the film *Paris, Texas* (1984), '70s Disco', a 'chanteuse vibe', Fleetwood Mac, Fleet Foxes, Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, music hall, 'Life on Mars' by David Bowie, and Robert Mitchum in the film *The Night of the Hunter* (1955).

Most of the rest of what Rachel said about Arcade Fire attested to her **dislike** for them and most of what they did. In her summary questionnaire, she professed little affinity. The band were, in her view, 'quite stagey and possibly hackneyed', and their electronic work was 'too firmly in pop without much genuine soul'. Somewhat indifferently, she praised the track 'The Suburbs'—'perhaps better than some of the others ... less production/layers'—but highlighted no other favourites. Their 'interesting' video aesthetics were undermined by the 'staple/identikit formula of their records', whose 'jamboree/operatic style of musical layering' 'left me cold'. Singer Régine Chassagne's "'look'" and 'French-Canadian background had the potential to be interesting', but they weren't 'experimental' enough. Meanwhile, other singer Win Butler's 'beautiful' voice was too mired in effects, 'obscur[ing] the "truth?"/vulnerability" of the listening experience'.

Although the results differed, Rachel's use of the **(dis)liking** heuristic essentially resembles that of Simone and Will: she waited to hear something she liked. But while Simone and Will ended up recognising elements they already liked—not least via other artists, as discussed—Rachel ended up doing the opposite, namely, recognising elements she disliked, at least as parts of Arcade

Fire's sonic identity specifically. The rhapsody of cultural references quoted above served to rapidly assemble a catalogue of that sonic identity's constituent parts, which could then be judged in relation to each other.

We heard in her interview how Rachel defines herself with the things she likes. Here, Rachel's cultural references express her elaborate, intuitive sense of what she (dis)likes, something I would call connoisseurship. Behind Rachel's preferences are, among other things, biases towards the experimental and against the over-produced, the latter being an expression of authenticity values. Here Arcade Fire's non-good music served Rachel's salient cultural consumer/connoisseur identity by allowing her to perceive and affirm her security in her own knowledge and tastes. But there is more bad music in the world than good, so Arcade Fire will not earn much autobiographical significance just for their badness, since any other non-good artist could do the same. Potentially more significant would be music that can pass Rachel's quality controls, precisely because those controls are so strict.

Another diary-only respondent was Errol, a 32-year-old American Music PhD student at the University of Oxford. He chose to listen to American country artist Waylon Jennings. Simone's, Will's, and Rachel's perceptions of their artist's expressive agendas/profiles were relevant insofar as they answered the more important questions of whether and why they liked them. But for Errol, as the above quotes suggest, the reverse was true. His evaluative comments on Jennings' music were digressions from the main mission outlined in the task's brief: to establish a sense of Jennings' sonic identity, of 'who he is'. This certainly is not to say that the musos have got it 'right' and the non-musos 'wrong'. If

anything, it is to emphasise that listeners whose identities (as musicologists, for instance) predispose them to engaging with music as a detached object of study diverge, in doing so, from a more habitual relation to music as an embedded part of their subjective worlds. As with any element of one's environment, one of the most essential questions to ask is, *is this good, or bad?*, and variations thereon – *do I like this, or not? is this a place for me, or not?*

To be sure, Errol did comment on his enjoyment—or otherwise—of Jennings' music. Exposure seemed to entail liking: 'It's still early in the diary, but I'm enjoying his music more than when I first started' (day 4); 'This may just be the constant exposure, but he's growing on me today for sure' (day 18). But Errol's few more specific comments on his **(dis)liking** were peripheral to his higher mission of parsing Jennings' expressive agenda/profile: 'Some of the tracks on the back half of the *Essentials* album really lean on the American folk/roots music angle more – I really enjoy this approach' (day 5); 'I've stuck with the Country-Folk album for longer than most records, mainly because I think I was getting a bit sick of the lonesome country ballads' (day 21). Much more extensive was Errol's commentary on his growing awareness of those stylistic features—American country/folk/roots styles, 'lonesome country ballads'—in and of themselves, that is, independent of his hedonic reaction to them.

Much like I did when engaging with Loretta Lynn's music, Errol negotiated Jennings' oeuvre using the **genre/tradition** heuristic. On day 2, drawn to what he imagined was the 'real appeal' of Jennings' 'robust, strong, powerful' voice, Errol noted there was 'not very much of the US country vocal slide into notes'.

By day 4, despite Jennings' broad '(and often wild choice) of backing instrumentation' throwing Errol 'off the scent' (day 3), Errol had some ideas:

He is, or at least portraying himself, as this quintessential American "doin' it my way" kind of guy. Like many country artists, there's this sense of quiet contemplation, almost as if the persona of the performer is one that has seen so much from traveling all over, but the presentation of the music still is a real down to/salt of the earth kind of person. Wise beyond their years, American rapsallion, but beneath all there is a kind loving and profound guy. ... I think the artist is all of many things: a traditional country performer, one of these characters with a "heart of gold", whilst living a scrappy life.

This generically, national-culturally conditioned view of Jennings was refined over the course of the diary. Day 5's considerations of 'Luckenbach, Texas (Back To The Basics of Love)' and 'Mammas, Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up To Be Cowboys', cast Jennings as 'outside of the John Wayne cowboy, but still attached to the mythical 19th-century idea of the American cowboy/frontiers person'. On day 12, the lyrics to 'Another Bridge To Burn' 'summarise[d] many of Jennings's lyrical tropes and ideas': 'he's a lone wolf character, a sad cowboy, independent, and a ramblin' man.'

But Errol, pivoting on the *fortuitous thought* of the sad cowboy, reflected on the difficulty of hearing Jennings himself through these tropes, both 'who he is' and who he is 'as an artist':

The act of the "sad cowboy" feels like an act to me because of his first album (not really wearing that mask at all) and from my position as an outsider to country music, even though having been surrounded by it in part during my youth.

It seems there is an authenticity gap: Jennings is failing to convince. This is Jennings' own doing: his early work doesn't sync thematically with what follows. On day 15, Errol described Jennings' gradual 'coming more and more into the

identity of the outlaw country singer. One who sings songs of the old sad cowboys but also of some modern problems.’ This later Jennings, as Errol wrote on day 23, is one so marked by his voice, whose ‘bellowing vibrato [has] certainly matured from the ‘60s’:

[It] is something powerful and almost sounds silly – it pushes to the boundary appropriate for songs but still fits aesthetically. ... I’m not sure what this means to my perception of his identity, but the baritone vibrato is the first thing I’d use to describe him.

Meanwhile, the earlier Jennings of ‘the late ‘60s and early ‘70s [is] a bit more comfortable in his voice. It comes off as more laid back in a way that shows his mastery over the craft, or maybe just is not bothered by being perfect’ (day 18). Similarly, Errol was surprised by Jennings’ ‘magnificent’ cover of Bob Dylan’s ‘Don’t Think Twice, It’s Alright’: ‘It’s similar to his first album with all the covers. He wasn’t putting on the lonesome cowboy shtick, and feels like he was just simply singing. Is that the real Jennings, or is it just another persona he dons?’. Overall, then, Errol does sense a *true* Jennings, one whose persona is himself, but that man is hidden beneath accumulated layers of genre-archetypical clothing which, to Errol’s eye, never quite sits right.

Andy, who was interviewed on The Rolling Stones/Mick Jagger, asked me to suggest a hip-hop artist for his diary. I suggested U.S. jazz-cum-hip-hop group The Roots, who Andy accepted. His time listening to them was similarly marked by shifting perceptions of their expressive profile/agenda. However, his hedonic reactions to their music were much more varied and intense than Errol’s to Jennings and his music.

Andy began on day 1 with The Roots' NPR Tiny Desk concert with the Hot 8 Brass Band, and realised, happily, that he had already encountered them: 'previously enjoyed [this track] and did so this time and so felt optimistic that I may enjoy this music as pretty funky, jazzy, cool sound'. His next reaction, though, was extremely negative:

[P]layed taste of the band on random play: OMG sounds so dreadful – idea of listening to this for a month is appalling. Throughout the whole following week: put off listening every day or else forgot ... feeling of dread that have to honour my promise to Patrick – wish I had chosen a different artist/band. Don't know anything about hip-hop and don't really want to.

Quite the extreme instance of **(dis)liking** affecting the listener's construction of an artist's sonic identity, then: Andy was literally scared off, ceasing to listen for a week. This reaction was triggered, ostensibly, by a generic bait-and-switch (in this case enabled by The Roots' expansive and stylistically rich oeuvre): the initial pleasure in recognising sanctioned **genres/traditions**—funk, jazz—was betrayed by the encroachment of the material reality of hip-hop, a normally non-sanctioned genre – ironically why Andy agreed to it in the first place.

Of particular interest here are the idiosyncrasies and **personal hangups** that so skewed Andy's appraisal of the Roots in the first place, factors much less dominant in other respondents' diaries. Indeed, on returning to the task on day 8, he managed better to connect—albeit provisionally—precisely by thematising those **personal hangups**:

Found "best of" on Spotify ... Enjoyed (more than thought would) in a kind of anthropological way ... I am a white, middle class, middle-aged Guardian-reading liberal and privileged male – what the fuck do I know about what they are singing about! ... Surprising myself and starting to feel positive towards the music and the musicians ... – not sure it will last.

The time away, perhaps along with the serendipitous sequencing of that particular best-of, have allowed the music in. As Andy remarks, it might not last. But it's enough of a contrast to his previous encounter that he can acknowledge the other dancer in this artist-listener tango, and consider his own positionality as a listener. And much as his eventual displeasure on day 1 was greater for being unexpected, so too is his pleasure here greater for the same reason.

Having started to better understand the music on day 9, Andy was, by day 10, making further personal connections, connecting his *personal hangups* to the *fortuitous thought* from his interview, his 'bad side': 'There is something exciting in this music that I have never appreciated before – appeals to my “bad” side and part of me is enjoying that I may be identifying with it despite so many differences.' Then came a decisive paratextual encounter:

Just watched live gig from North Sea Jazz Festival in 2013 – ... So bloody brilliant – so cool looking – so tight – so funky – unbelievable rhythm section and singing/rapping is awesome ... – think I have “stumbled” on something amazing and special here that I would never have otherwise seen.

And on day 11, Andy brought his own musician identity to bear on the video:

[W]hat top musicians ... – makes me ponder on my band's last gig and how much I loved that and how much I miss playing music with others ... Such a cool-looking band who clearly putting effort into stage show and presence ... fills me with sense of awe, excitement, inferiority (as a musician) and envy.

By day 22, Andy had surrendered more totally to his unlikely liking, developing nostalgia for a *key track* and shoring up his allegiance to The Roots via his *personal hangups* and the critique of an *other artist*:

White middle-aged bearded bloke dancing to some full on rap/hip-hop; is this sad or is this OK??!! Went back to listen to “Star”, which felt like an old friend ... had on Dizzee Rascal and comparatively, he sounded so dull and uninspiring and lacking in musical complexity and musicianship – he needs to listen to more Roots!!

In his summary questionnaire, Andy was brimming with warmth. Acknowledging his views had ‘changed radically’, he called The Roots ‘sublime musicians with an important message to send’. He raved about ‘their live recordings, especially the North Sea Jazz Festival ... which left me speechless’. Overall, he felt ‘very positive towards them and really glad to have been introduced ... I would have otherwise never probably listened to them.’

Andy’s familiarisation process was defined by a dramatic turnaround that pivoted on The Roots’ appeal to his ‘contrary nature’. This nature, also expressed via the *fortuitous thought* of his ‘bad side’, was best served by overcoming his own initial preferences and liking the unlikely thing, a course which also affirmed the ‘liberal’ part of his ‘white middle class, middle aged Guardian reading liberal and privileged male’ identities. Not that Andy would, or could, have liked just anything, just to be contrary. Here, The Roots’ proximity to Andy’s own jazz space, and particularly their rousing of his own musician identity, helped nudge Andy over the line. So too did their oft-vaunted ‘cool’ look – recall from his interview the importance of image to Andy’s responses to artists. The idiosyncrasies of Andy’s self-identity, then, interacted with the emerging meanings in The Roots’ sonic identity in particularly turbulent ways, given the specific harmonies and disharmonies between meanings on both sides.

Errol’s interpretation of Waylon Jennings’ sonic identity was also inflected by idiosyncrasies and *personal hangups*, albeit less drastically than Andy’s of

The Roots. I have discussed already the authenticity gap Errol encountered when getting to know Jennings. Another cause of this was Errol's own pre-existing knowledge of, and ambivalent stance towards, the country genre and its codes, the mere whiff of which could transport him to different 'temporal periods' and their accompanying "collections" of autobiographical memory' (Istvandy, 2019: p. 136). Errol acknowledged this learned ambivalence on day 1: 'His singing reminds me of my childhood with country music being played in the background of all things Indiana. That performative deep bellow country singing that I've made fun of for 25 years.' On day 5, when 'Mammas, Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up To Be Cowboys' was helping him better understand Jennings, Errol remarked '[t]his is also the first song I recognised too. If memory serves, my father would sing the chorus of this song randomly (as fathers do).' This 'dad' theme returned on day 27:

[While] working on house repairs and painting ... there was something that flashed in my mind – working on a house and listening to country music gave me a flashback of my youth, with my father fixing this or that and the radio playing country music. ... it definitely felt like a "dad" thing going on – white paint in your brow and some cowboy singing at you.

Although these seem affectionate associations, they also bear a light note of ridicule: Jennings has been ensnared within unflattering meanings that Errol has carried with him since his youth. Indeed, in the most pessimistic reading, Jennings has become a dad joke.

Errol has enough genre literacy from his childhood to identify the country archetypes Jennings manifests, but not enough generic investment to believe those manifestations so easily:

I don't feel that I relate to the artist too much. I intellectually understand why he's famous (and how others may relate), but due to not being a tremendous American country music fan, I still feel a distance between Waylon Jennings and myself even after daily interactions with his music for a month.

Were Errol initially more invested in those archetypes, and less exacting in his search for that true Jennings, then he might have seen Jennings differently. Conversely, a more convincing manifestation of those archetypes is precisely what might have encouraged that investment. Instead, the result of Jennings' 'failure' to convince is the entrenchment of the disjuncture between artist and listener. Considering Errol's strong interpretation of the diary's directive (to deduce who the artist is), his generic detachment, and his musicological circumspection, Jennings had a particularly high bar to clear.

Also like Andy, although again to a lesser extent, Errol's getting-to-know process benefitted from his engagement with epitextual and paratextual materials. At first, on day 6, he sought advice from the internet about where to start with Jennings, learning that 1975's *Dreaming My Dreams* was 'a highly regarded album'. On day 8, he returned to it to 'try to "get into it" a bit more. If this is the record people point to, it seems like a valuable place to hang around picking up ideas of "who Waylon Jennings is"'. Akin to Nathaniel's research-minded approach to getting to know Bowie, here Errol is investing in the idea of a consensus existing on Jennings' Jennings-ness, one he can tap into for clues when forming his own idea of that Jennings-ness. For both Nathaniel and Errol, this detective-like approach expresses their scholar identities.

Like Andy with The Roots' North Sea Jazz Festival performances, and Nathaniel with footage of Bowie performing as Ziggy Stardust, Errol also found

audio-visual material to work with, which, near the diary's end, he found especially illuminating:

[Watching] "Never Say Die: The Final Concert Film", [Jennings is] playing "Can't You See" in 2000, two years before his death in 2002. ... He looks like he's struggling to keep up ... When he does sing though, his voice is powerful, full, dark and loud. At the concert there's a giant "W" with a phoenix like a trans-am logo. I guess this plays well into the outlaw country thing – the firebird reminds me of films and U.S. cultural products of the '70s that really leaned into that whole thing ... It seems that Waylon was an instrumental figure within this general idea. (Day 29)

The next day, Errol enjoyed a 1983 concert featuring Jennings in the full raucous pomp promised in his '60s and '70s albums:

There's a duet scene and he sneaks a cheeky kiss (and lick?!) with his singing partner, he's really going for a "man's man" kind of thing. The kind of light misogyny that a generation or two before was viewed as fun and acceptable and part of what "makes a man a man". ... His voice has an added raspiness to it ... there is that kind of darkness and breaking heard in the voice. The live atmosphere I think adds a lot to all the songs here. ... Everything gels a bit more, like the grains on a piece of film that just smoothes out some of the sterileness.

The fullness of these sources, and the relative verisimilitude they promise, help fix in Errol's mind things he has been supposing about Jennings until now, namely Jennings' implication in and expression of **generic/traditional** archetypes and the worn power of his definitive voice. But Errol's final comment also highlights how, to his ears at least, Jennings' music itself has been poorly served by its album iterations. The rougher but more natural cohesion achieved live is not only more enjoyable, but also better aligns with the rough-and-rowdy meanings that define Jennings' sonic identity. Despite these all being conclusions Errol had already approached—if not arrived at—he wrote on day

32 that '[a]fter watching a few concerts, I think I have a relatively solid idea of who Waylon Jennings is'.

Conversely, Will found an initially noteworthy epitextual reference about TDC was contradicted by actually listening to them. On day 1, Will began by acknowledging some epitextual facts about the band. 'At this point, my familiarity with the band "The Divine Comedy" is fairly basic. I know they are Northern Irish, I know they did the music for [Irish TV comedy] *Father Ted*'. For context, *Father Ted* follows the exploits of three hapless priests living in a parochial house on the fictional, windswept Craggy Island; the music in question plays over the opening credits, laying eerily jaunty, slightly sentimental Irish folk strains over helicopter footage of the island (which ends with the helicopter seemingly crashing into the house's waving inhabitants). But on day 16, Will heard the music's full iteration as 'Songs of Love', and was baffled:

The music is actually beautiful, and the words make it more so. I think it is just a really lovely song and something about the voices in a round and the gradual layering of individual instruments gives it a very "warm" sense ... Intimate is probably a better word. I now struggle to understand why it is the theme for *Father Ted*.

The jolt of this contrast augments the meanings of the song that speak to Will—beauty, loveliness, warmth, intimacy—because they are cast into sharper relief by the less edifying meanings of *Father Ted*'s implicit context. That jolt, and Will's sensitivity to it, brings him closer to TDC: he has invested in an interpretation available only to those who know the 'true' form of the song, an interpretation, moreover, that specifically involves the denial of the music's main connotations in favour of nobler meanings. Such epitextual interactions—in which prior

epitextual meanings are undermined by the art, rather than arrive to impose upon it—are apt to have this effect, if a consensus, even if only imagined by the listener at first, is rejected rather than joined.

Lastly, some respondents employed listening strategies that affected their getting-to-know process, or revealed prior inclinations with which the artist interacted. Simone, while getting to know Allie X, was prompted on day 5 to make an interesting strategic decision by one quirk of Allie X's discography: 'Gonna give *Super Sunset* [EP] a go ... The 2019 analog version – or should I do the original first??? I wonder what analog means. Probably acoustic. Placing that bet. Gonna go with the original first.' In the context of the task, Simone's choice is a commitment to the idea of an original's greater truth value. But it also combines with another, more circumstantial choice of listening technology: 'Oh my. This production is tasty in my headphones. I had been listening on speakers mostly so far.' Simone's commitment to the original version, replete with fuller arrangements and richer production than its analog sibling, crucially intensifies the definition of Allie X's sonic identity because Simone's headphones amplify that version's qualities. This serendipity of listening choices has consequences, as Simone wonders 'how *Cape God* would sound with headphones in now ... God this is much better'. And Simone's headphones didn't just intensify what was already there, but also helped reveal things previously unheard, as when she was listening to *CollXtion I* (2015) on day 21: 'Right!! This one has "Catch" on it. I forgot this was another one of her songs I used to hear on the radio. There's a lot more layers and interest in the production than what I could hear through my car radio'. Even when the headphones themselves weren't the best medium,

Simone's sensitivity to the very fact of difference between media was a productive force, as when listening to *Cape God* on day 26: 'I'm noticing much more on the speaker than I did on headphones. "Devil I Know"'s bassline also sounds much cooler on the speaker – more Arctic Monkeys-y.'

The specific choice between the analogue and original versions of *Super Sunset* also recurred, with the effect of thematising the difference between the two versions. Rather than evaluating Allie X with reference to **other artists** or her **genre/tradition**, for instance, Simone was almost obliged to compare one version of Allie X to another, with both versions having been sanctioned by the artist. On day 13, the analogue version lost: 'I'm finding *Girl of The Year* a bit grating in this version. The vocal pops out more in this version, and not in a nice way in my opinion. Skippity skip.' The original version consolidated its victory, as on day 17:

Yeah, "Not So Bad in LA" goes much harder on the original release. And the album intro!! Honestly that's so critical, and missing in the analog version. Love me a good concept album, and if you take away the framing devices, it's just not the same.

On day 18, the same went for "Girl of The Year": SO much better on the original *Super Sunset*. AND "SUPER SUNSET INTERLUDE"!! SO important to the album and not on the analog version.'

This dynamic, whereby multiple, artist-approved drafts are available for the listener to choose between, sharpens the artist's sonic identity because clear contrasts exist to whatever the preferred option is; it is easier to say why that option prevailed because its failed variant is right there beside it. But this may also come at a price for the artist, as the meanings of that failed variant might

nevertheless remain part of their sonic identity, a blemish telling of a misstep. Some listeners might allow for this via a forgiving idea – perhaps a **critical concept** like the experimentalism that helps Daniel excuse certain kinds of failure. In this case, Simone is just looking for an enjoyable musical experience here and now—best served up by those aforementioned bangers—and the sonically richer, thematically coherent original version of *Super Sunset* does that best. Consequently, its meanings enter Allie X’s sonic identity.

Also worth mentioning is Simone’s initiation ritual, remarked upon on day 15: ‘Finally had the impulse to turn on Allie X during supper! Very interesting to me. I tend to only put on music at supper that I know well so I feel comfy talking over it. And that happened today!’. The function of this strategy—beyond the primary intent of having conversation-friendly music for supper—is to grant the artist a seal of approval by self-consciously inviting them into an intimate setting. This is akin to Daniel’s ‘I’ll listen again’, for instance, which accompanied the few Eno pieces he liked – the setting, in Daniel’s case, being the flow of his daily listening, access to which Eno earned with conspicuous infrequency. Meanwhile, a secondary effect of this strategy, in Simone’s case, is to wed the meanings of Allie X’s music to that setting: to imbue it, and her sonic identity, with ‘intimacy’ as a meaning.

‘Skippity skip’, as Simone zippily put it. Rachel, however, outdid Simone as far as skipping was concerned. ‘Skipped this one towards the end’, ‘Skipped the ending’, and the like were common expressions, perhaps because Arcade Fire’s music was ‘all a bit samey’, or ‘dull’. In total, she skipped five tracks on day 1 (‘Electric Blue’, ‘Afterlife’, ‘Rebellion (Lies)’, ‘The Suburbs’, and ‘We Used to

Wait'), two on day 10 ('Reflektor', 'Rebellion (Lies)'), one on day 12 ('Sprawl II (Mountains Beyond Mountains)'), and three on day 31 ('Afterlife', 'Keep The Car Running', and 'Creature Comfort'). This listening strategy—or perhaps anti-listening strategy—is a strong expression of her connoisseur identity. Her impulse to skip occurs once she's already appraised the song sufficiently, namely well before the end in many instances. Perhaps most interesting was her skipping of 'Rebellion (Lies)' on day 10: 'This is the catchy one again. Skipped it.' 'The catchy one' is no compliment: the song is being derided for being little but catchy, too wilfully catchy, annoyingly catchy. By operating her guillotine so mercilessly, Rachel asserts her authority as a listener. Each skip is an indictment, perhaps a deliberately disrespectful one, against the music, and a self-conscious one at that. As with her virtuosic *other artist* and *genre/tradition* references, Rachel's skipping demonstrates her connoisseurly confidence to anyone watching – herself included.

These listening diaries have given an idea of how variable the process of each listener's getting to know a new artist can be. This process can differ not only in terms of the end result—does the artist end up being valued, or not?—but also in terms of the different interpretive instincts and priorities that apply in each listener's case. These factors, when interacting with the in-the-moment circumstances of each getting-to-know encounter, are themselves what lead to the artist being valued or not in the end – although there is never really any necessary end to this getting-to-know process. While the discussion of this process in terms of autobiographical significance has been constrained

somewhat by the fact these diaries mark the very beginning of that process in each case, it has nevertheless been possible to consider the potential autobiographical significance of each new artist to their listener based on the apparent interactions of their music with that listener's identities, and by extension their autobiographies.

10: Reflections on the listening diaries

All the strangers came today
And it looks as though they're here to stay

– David Bowie, 'Oh! You Pretty Things'

While Chapters 7 and 8 aimed to show how elaborate, already-extant, autobiographically significant sonic identities make sense within the frame of their listeners' self-identities, the previous chapter aimed rather to show how sonic identities begin the journey to such a state. Earlier in this thesis, I described my own chapters on Rostam and Janelle Monáe/Loretta Lynn as being analyses of, respectively, the static and processual aspects of sonic identities. I might make a similar comparison of my interview (static) and listening diaries (processual) analyses. Of course, the sonic identities studied in the past/present-oriented 'static' chapters are as mutable and future-bound as those studied in the present/future-oriented 'processual' chapters, which themselves require the context of the listener's past to explain where both listener and sonic identity are now and where they are going. These differing analytical orientations are just that, and mainly serve to vary the perspectives available on how sonic identities exist.

Perhaps the most useful distinction between the two perspectives offered by my interview and listening diary analyses is that of scale. Though full of fine-grained recollections, my interviews served as summative, often sweeping narrations of varying proportions of various autobiographies. These diaries, by

contrast, were necessarily mundane, inching day by day into a contingent future in which the fate of the sonic identities they charted remained—as it still remains—open. As my analysis of these diaries showed, the form and evaluation of a sonic identity can be subject to various ephemerality—such as the listener’s mood, their adjacent activities, and the news of the day—ripples which nevertheless mingled with the deeper-running waters of self-identity. As with my interview analysis, I will be better able both to express and expand upon my conclusions by invoking relevant ideas from the supporting scholarship, some of which I have already visited in Chapter 8.

The finer focus of the listening diary data highlighted various empathic connections between respondents and the music of their chosen artists.³⁰ As I noted in Chapter 8, the actual figure of the artist may be more or less relevant to the listener in such encounters; sometimes the music itself is the empathiser, empathised-with, or something altogether less dualistically apprehended. Diana and Joana, for instance, experienced a variety of connections with their respective artists. First, there were value-based, common-ground identifications: Diana with the Indigo Girls’ politics and queer credentials, Joana with Joni Mitchell’s *Weltanschauung*. Following Greenberg et al.’s hypothesised self-congruity effect, such identifications will have contributed to Diana and Joana liking these artists (2020: p. 1). Then there were less conceptual affective connections between listener and artist: Diana being calmed by the Indigo Girls’ musical tones, Joana being emotionally enveloped by Mitchell’s ‘Both Sides,

³⁰ The listening exercises in the interviews aimed to do this too, but a) were a somewhat contrived or unnatural listening context; and b) aimed to prompt responses that somewhat reflected and/or re-invoked responses the respondent had already had before. These already-had-before responses are what were being had by my respondents in real time in the diaries.

Now'. Other respondents, meanwhile, noted the failure, or rather ambivalence, of such connections. For instance, Waylon Jennings' expressive inconsistency confused Errol's sense of who Jennings was. Accustomed to, but largely unmoved by, Jennings' country archetypicality, Errol was blindsided by encounters with Jennings performing in an altogether different manner; by the same token, live footage of Jennings eventually imbued his archetypicality with life for Errol. Here, empathic connection translates into aesthetic authenticity. Only once Errol could truly feel with Jennings was he able to credit the sincerity of his performance.

As with the interviews, the very premise of this study perhaps encouraged the respondents to invoke the figure of the artist more readily than they might otherwise have done. Nevertheless, this framing seems intuitive. Consider Joana's intense empathic experiences with Joni Mitchell's music. These functionally therapeutic experiences were predicated on purely conceptual knowledge about Mitchell's characteristics, derived, in the first instance, from a chance epitextual encounter. But Joana didn't talk of connecting with Mitchell; rather, she was 'enveloped' by the music itself. Nevertheless, Mitchell is the figure who gives that experience sense, the person whose credentials implied the possibility of this therapeutic experience amid emotional distress in the first place. It becomes an 'experience with the music of Joni Mitchell', whereas it was, in the midst of it, simply that experience. This is the organising function sonic identities perform, or rather constitute. After all, we name the things in our perceptual-emotional environments so as better to remember them, and better navigate them later on. In the case of popular music, the figure of an artist—the

everyday sense of their being as a person—is the most ready-made concept with which to order the often extra-human effects of their music, not to mention the one usually offered to the listener; ‘Joni Mitchell’ is the name to be read on the cover of *Blue*, after all.

This exemplifies the point of my sonic identity terminology, one worth reiterating here. The word ‘identity’ certainly means to evoke the fact of the artist being a person with an identity, in the human, social, colloquial sense; this corresponds to the figure of the artist. But it also means to denote the artist’s status as a distinctive presence in the listener’s perceptual environment, a presence with an identity in the sense that it is distinct from other elements of that environment. This is the sense in which colours or inanimate objects can also be said to have identities, once we perceive that they are what they are rather than the colour or object adjacent to them. ‘Can be said to have’ – it is precisely through such declarative acts of recognition, whether uttered or thought, that identities form decisively in the mind of the perceiver. Such moments represent the arrival of sonic identities into reflexive consciousness, where they can be knowingly acknowledged as being something distinct in their environment. And such moments are when the figure of the artist itself is most present. But surrounding these moments, feeding into and out of them, are engagements with the agencies of those sonic-identities-as-environmental-elements that the perceiver need not be conscious of, or which, even if so, need not involve the idea of what those elements are – that is, the idea of their identities-as-concepts. During a listening experience, the sense of the figure of the artist may not be relevant to the listener—they may be feeling the music on

its own, autonomous terms—but it is this concept that corrals the effects of that experience upon reflection.

The diary format also made clear the frequently significant impact of listening circumstances on my respondents' engagements with their artists. Joana's example already typifies this. On several occasions, she arrived at her listening in pre-conditioned emotional states resulting from one life event or other—whether despairing over her breakup, full of melancholy over leaving Oxford, or excited about her academic results—which set the terms of how Mitchell's music was then likely to signify. Insofar as these events were autobiographically significant, so too were Mitchell and her music, and it is those meanings in the music that resonated with the emotions inspired by those events which most mark Mitchell's sonic identity – the themes of love, loss, and the cyclical nature of life that seemed especially apt during her breakup, for instance. Diana's example evinced something similar. Often oppressed by the general state of the affairs—COVID and the George Floyd protests were the news of the day, and her DPhil was soon to be submitted—Diana reached for solace and 'wisdom' in the Indigo Girls' music, and frequently found both, given the warm, introspective, and often overtly political tilt of much of their music. Had the state of the world been less fraught during Diana's diary, she might have attended to those meanings less—or simply needed them less—and so the Indigo Girls' sonic identity would have formed differently.

One way to understand these effects is through Herbert's notion of 'trancing', a broad mode of musical involvement 'characterized by a decreased orientation to consensual reality, a decreased critical faculty, a selective internal

or external focus, together with a changed sensory awareness and—potentially—a changed sense of self’ (Herbert, 2011: p. 5). Such experiences take roughly two forms: ‘absorption’ and ‘dissociative experiences’ (p. 100). Absorption experiences arise in ‘focused, balanced or pleasantly dreamy’ states, and are characterised by ‘preoccupation with/immersion in sensation[;] alterations of consciousness are noticed retrospectively’. Meanwhile, dissociative experiences ‘often occur when individuals feel tired, emotionally overloaded, subject to external discomfort or internal rumination’; the function of listening here being to ‘numb or flood’ consciousness. Joana feeling along with Mitchell’s upbeat side while waiting for her results bears the marks of an absorption experience, for example: she felt good, buoyed on a sensation of optimistic anticipation that Mitchell’s music helped to maintain. Meanwhile, her looping of ‘Both Sides, Now’ in post-breakup anguish qualifies as dissociative: Joana sought to detach herself from the immediate realm of her own pain by filling her consciousness with the relatedly heartbroken meanings of the track, meanings which nevertheless promised something of the redemptive, full-circle equanimity that her own circumstances did not yet afford.

Diana, meanwhile, was occasionally taken from dissociative to absorption states by the Indigo Girls’ music, starting off anxious and preoccupied and ending up becalmed. These examples support Herbert’s argument that music, with its ‘fusion of modalities’, ‘is a particularly effective mediator of experience, able to bind/blend together elements of external awareness that might otherwise be perceptually separated, and to link internal thoughts and associations with external concerns’ (2011: p. 193). The consequence of this which most concerns

my arguments is that our impressions of the mediator itself, the music, is also moulded through such mediations. In other words, the listener's always-partial perception of the meanings latent in the music depends, to a greater or lesser degree, on which external, internal, perceptual, and conceptual factors the music is mediating between, which themselves are determined by the listening circumstances. If these circumstances somehow pertain to autobiographically significant events—like a breakup or doctoral thesis submission—then the alterations in consciousness experienced when trancing are more likely to assimilate into the self-identity and autobiography in question. The music-mediator in these circumstances is similarly privileged; its perceived impact and identity as the mediator of those circumstances takes autobiographical precedence over its perceived impact and identity in other less charged, more forgettable circumstances. As Clarke writes of such experiences:

We are “lost” in music in the sense of inhabiting it, and finding ourselves at one with it, and we are “found” in music in the sense of recognizing ourselves—or something like ourselves, perhaps a distortion, idealization or some other transformation of ourselves—in music. (2014: p. 364)

The self-consciousness of this ‘finding’ is the consequence of the music’s intervention in our self-identity, and this intervention cannot help but also alter that which intervenes. It is in this manner that, in such experiences, music is a true mediator in the Latourian sense (2005: p. 39): by mediating, it itself is changed. And insofar as we sense that this mediation has changed us, we also sense how it has changed the mediator, that is, how the sonic identity of the artist has been modified.

While the diary obviously determined which artist Diana and Joana listened to in these moments, it matters that they picked certain tracks over others. As Schäfer et al. have noted, self-selected music is more likely to foster an empathic connection, specifically an ‘interpersonal’ one with ‘some sort of personal entity’ perceived in the music (2020: p. 11). Similarly, Saarikallio and Erkkilä have observed the influence self-selection can have on adolescents’ ‘mood improvement’; ‘as long as the musical activity was self-selected, it always seemed to make the adolescents feel better and change their mood in a positive direction’ (2007: p. 95; see also Saarikallio et al., 2020). But why might self-selection matter in such contexts? Beyond the value of the sense of security entailed by (relative) control over one’s symbolic and affective environment, self-selected listening is likely to be a direct invocation of one or more of the listener’s salient identities. This is precisely because the listener has that environmental control, allowing them to establish the conditions for the successful activation of those salient identities. As Stryker and Serpe argue, we are prone, as much as is possible, to interpret our environments in terms that facilitate the activation of our salient identities (1994: pp. 17-18). Actual control over those environments is better still, and has indeed been connected to the self-congruity effect (Greenberg et al., 2020: p. 11). Insofar as it affirms salient identities, the self-selection of music is also the affirmation of a personal connection with that music, whether it proves, establishes, or strengthens that connection. Thinking about how circumstances motivated such selection in Joana and Diana’s case, those circumstances can be understood as occasions or prompts to self-select music. Therein lies their significance. They allowed both Joana and Diana to recognise

and elaborate on personal connections to Mitchell and the Indigo Girls respectively, connections which were, until then, less explicit. Moreover, by forming the scene in which these recognitions occur, such life-historical events as those tracked by Joana and Diana allow the sense of those personal connections to be more easily rendered autobiographically. In other words, the connection of music to an event that has meaningful consequences for one or multiple of the listener's salient identities allows the autobiographical significance of the music to be better perceived and remembered.

As has already been indicated, the question of tastes and preferences underlies my data, and its analysis, throughout. In the interviews, each artist discussed was something of an exemplar of their respondent's tastes, tastes which were themselves partially encoded by the sedimentation over time of discrete evaluative encounters with that artist. By contrast, the listening diaries charted just those encounters, which, as we have seen, were not always positive. Indeed, what the diaries show is the real-time interaction of in-the-moment, first-time evaluative reactions to the music of a new artist with the deeper-seated codes of taste. At the same time, they offered data with which to study precisely the in-the-moment whats and whys of (dis)liking that Greasley et al. (2013: p. 419) suggest is necessary to understand such responses. And they zoom in on the specific sub-identities at work in these responsive moments, complementing the reflective reports of the interviews which, as I noted in Chapter 8, better (though not exclusively) illuminate the long view of self-identity and autobiography.

In terms of individual tracks, the cumulative nature of the diaries did not necessarily illustrate the much-debated familiarisation-satiation dynamics of musical preference. Certainly, some respondents did engage repeatedly with particular tracks, to different ends and with different results. We saw, for instance, how familiarity and liking were linked for Simone and Allie X's 'Devil I Know', entailing a sense of ownership of the song. While continued exposure to this track would eventually diminish the pleasure Simone takes in it (at least for a while), her possessive way of categorising it perhaps entails a different kind of commitment, one that will pre-dispose her to returning to it after such a break as may be needed. Also illuminating was Joana's looping of 'Both Sides, Now'. To summon the language of the inverted-U theory, her arousal was stimulated by the powerful 'ecological variable' (Chmiel & Schubert, 2017: p. 887) of the song's *Love Actually*-inspired heartbreak associations, which well matched her own feelings. It is possible that this repetitive, 'focused attending' (Schellenberg et al., 2008: p. 221) already took Joana to, or near, a temporary peak of preference for the song, and that she would, soon after, have found it less enjoyable once that perceived ecological variable became less relevant, and other collative variables—contingently perceived formal features of the music like 'surprisingness, uncertainty, interestingness and ambiguity' (Chmiel & Schubert, 2017: p. 887)—more so. Such was the snapshot the diary gave on her relation to Mitchell's music that this question remains open.

On this note, I want to argue that the artist's sonic identity is itself a kind of meta-piece subject to listener satiation. Much as a single track affords the perception of numerous psychophysical, ecological, and collative variables

(Chmiel & Schubert, 2017: p. 887) that are perceived in different measures and combinations with each context-governed audition, so too does the artist's sonic identity, insofar as all meanings in all the artist's tracks lead back to it. We might like a track overall, in a given moment, but be indifferent to the lyrics; similarly, we can like the artist overall while disdaining the dud album on which the liked track appears. Recalling an observation of Greasley and Lamont's, listeners can and do sense their proximity to total satiation, and will sometimes manage their listening to avoid it (2013: p. 24). Not always, of course: some, like Simone, tend to 'binge a new artist's discography—all at once—and then add them to [their] catalogue'. But insofar as this is true for individual tracks, it also has a knock-on effect on the artist themselves.

Much as we regulate how much we gorge on preferred artists, so too do we tend to save our energy for these artists and ignore those who displease us from the start. The diaries highlighted some of these tensions. It may be that if Daniel were to devote more time and attention to Brian Eno's music, his preference would start to grow in line with familiarity, at least up to a point. But there is no reason for him to do this, since he decided early on that he had heard enough and had little appetite for more; Rachel's brusque, brief encounter with Arcade Fire was another example of this. Perhaps, instead, their preference curves for these artists simply peaked quickly, and at a very low point. After all, it was only the study itself that required my respondents to push on past such a point, as some of them acknowledged. Daniel, for instance, remarked how unusual it was for him to play one artist so persistently. He also lamented the implied need to cover as much of an oeuvre as possible, meaning opportunities

to replay favoured tracks were scarce; similarly, Simone expressed discomfort with the incremental rigidity of the daily process. These instances of the study format overriding respondents' satiation-management intuitions support the notion that the sonic identity is itself the object of (dis)liking in such cases. Having disliked so much of Eno's music, Daniel didn't keep cheerily awaiting the imminent arrival of that one track which would upend his negative judgement: he simply wanted out, out of the expressive space occupied in his mind by Eno's sonic identity. Unless—or until—Daniel becomes more amenable to the meanings that define Eno's sonic identity, there is no reason for him to expect much pleasure in Eno's music, nor to seek it there.

Beyond maximising pleasure over a longer period of time, what other uses might avoiding satiation with a sonic identity have? To recall Schaefer and Sedlmeier's argument, already advanced in Chapter 8, the functions that music affords a listener have consequences for whether and to what extent that music is preferred (2009: p. 292). In particular, they found identity-expressing functions to be most consequential in this regard (p. 296). Perhaps the most obvious function of this kind is when tradition-/genre-/artist-affiliations serve to represent salient identities in the social world, such as a national (Folkestad, 2002), gender (Dibben, 2002), or adolescent peer group (Bakagiannis & Tarrant, 2006; Lamont & Hargreaves, 2019; Miranda & Claes, 2009; Tarrant et al., 2002) identity. After his dramatic U-turn from loathing to loving The Roots, Andy typified this. His unlikely acceptance of the band affirmed important aspects of his self-identity—his contrary nature (his 'bad side'), his liberal-ness, his own musicianship—and by the diary's end he was telling his bandmates to listen to them too, a socially

assertive act that supported those same identity meanings along with the music that affirmed them. Here, Andy's ground-level preference for this new-found music translated into his broader tastes, which now countenance the various hip-hop elements that The Roots bring to the jazz Andy already favours.

In such cases, managing satiation could help protect the implicated identities from disaffirmation within the listener's self. If, for instance, Andy were to push beyond the point of satiation with The Roots such that his enjoyment partially or even wholly diminished, he might come to feel alienated from those of his sub-identities that were previously affirmed by that music. Such alienation could destabilise his over-arching self-identity and sense of autobiographical continuity, especially if a) the sub-identity in question is salient, and b) The Roots' sonic identity contributed to or shared many of the meanings in that sub-identity. By pulling away before the satiation point, he would leave The Roots' reputation provisionally intact—hopefully ready to be positively re-engaged when he's ready for a fresh phase—rather than besmirched by gluttony or even disgust, thus allowing them to continue performing identity-supporting functions down the line. The same applies for Joana and Diana, for instance. Were they to overplay, and thus alienate themselves from, Mitchell and the Indigo Girls respectively, they would deprive themselves of the proven functional value the music of those artists has.

A form of Andy's social presentation of identity also happens within an individual when they express to themselves the meanings in a salient identity that disqualify the music in question. The examples of this from the diaries show how important identity-expressiveness can be to deciding preference. Daniel, for

instance, did this when explaining his appraisal of Eno at the end of his diary, calling him a 'self-indulgent', 'new age-curious boomer-type'. By doing this, Daniel is clarifying for himself—and perhaps, I suppose, for me—the meanings with which he can't and won't identify, and which, as such, debar Eno from preferential regard insofar as he evokes them. Rachel's dismissal of Arcade Fire's efforts was similar; having catalogued the myriad cultural references their music inspired in her, she was able to point to those which—in certain measures, combinations, or simply in and of themselves—contradicted the meanings in her own self-identity. These meanings are what connect tastes to self-identity: if we perceive in music certain meanings that are different from, or even contradict, those in our self-identity, we understand that music as not being to our tastes. While Daniel and Rachel may in certain moments have shown a liking for, respectively, certain Eno and Arcade Fire tracks (or even just parts of them), the larger pictures painted by these artists' bodies of work were simply too incompatible with their tastes. Likewise, those few enjoyed moments were simply not revelatory enough to meaningfully transform those tastes themselves; the music of these moments could not convince Daniel and Rachel that its meanings were ones they could learn to identify with.

Indeed, although they are internal, these self-clarifications are a kind of private rehearsal of the social, and remain implicitly social as such. The music in these instances mediates, however vaguely or erroneously, certain social values to which Rachel and Daniel are resistant, specifically on Born's second plane of social mediation on which 'imagined communities [and] ... virtual collectivities and publics based on musical and other identifications' are 'animate[d]' (Born, 2011:

p. 378; see also Born & Haworth, 2018; Hesmondhalgh, 2005). As Boer et al. argue, shared musical preferences can indicate shared values (2011: p. 1160); as such, to like certain music, and to acknowledge liking it, would be to commit to the values it seems to express, and, by extension, to align oneself with others, real and imagined, who hold these values already. The anxiety this entails found expression in Daniel's rhetorical attempt to imagine who were the Eno fans who could enjoy what he was hearing. Once again, Daniel's declarative failure—or perhaps refusal?—to understand this imagined point of view serves to clarify his own values and allegiances to anyone paying attention – first and foremost, to himself. And again, the artist themselves is implicated as a member, if not a leader or catalyst, of these imagined groups.

There can also be an affective aspect to such judgements of social incongruity. As Schubert remarks, '[l]isteners prefer emotion felt to be well matched with emotion expressed' (2007: p. 510),³¹ and if the listener decides the artist is trying but failing to evoke these emotions in them, this leads to a negative evaluation. Even if the emotional response is achieved, the overall result could be ambivalent, as in Juslin's 'cheap art' example of a mixed emotional response to music, in which 'one is "seeing through" a manipulative attempt to evoke emotions ... and still cannot help but being affected' (2013: p. 259). A listener might be moved in, for instance, physiological ways by a piece of music—let's imagine it is invasively loud and engenders rhythmic entrainment—while perceiving that the music is otherwise expressing things antithetical to their self-

³¹ Similarly, Juslin distinguishes between the '*perception* and *induction* of emotions' (2005: p. 91; his italics).

understood tastes (inappropriate emotions, say) – and, by extension, to the meanings in their self-identity. The listener might respond by contextualising the piece as a guilty pleasure, or even by reassessing the values that condemn the piece; conversely, they might reject the music, as Daniel and Rachel did, and perhaps even feel ashamed of their initial emotional response.

Notably scarce in the diaries were examples of MEAMs. This is, arguably, to be expected. Firstly, MEAMs are most likely to be prompted by music that has ‘personal significance’ (Rathbone et al., 2017: p. 148) or ‘autobiographical salience’ (Barrett et al., 2010: p. 399) for the listener. The music of the diaries was too new, and thus, for the most part, not sufficiently assimilated into the selves of the listeners by the time the diaries were finished. Secondly, the diary method arguably does not facilitate the recording of MEAMs, at least given that many respondents wrote theirs after listening. This kind of after-the-fact chronicling seems apt to forget or ignore any such MEAMs—which may often only be idle, perhaps unacknowledged wanderings of the ‘mnemonic imagination’ (Pickering & Keightley, 2015: p. 20)—unless they were actually perceived in the moment as being relevant to the prescribed task of getting to know the artist.

In the end, Diana and Errol were the only respondents to report anything of the kind. Errol’s occasional imaginative-mnemonic returns to the scene of his childhood—his father DIYing around the house while country radio played—supports the point made by Janata et al. that MEAMs can occur in constructively associative ways (2008: pp. 858-859). The genre of country has enough associative power to take Errol there; it isn’t necessary for the specific Jennings

track that prompted that MEAM to have been a part of the scene evoked. Diana, by contrast, was the exception who proved the rule that the diary method tends to lose MEAMs in the wash. Diana's particular disposition as a listener—quiet, ruminative, and reflective—made her mnemonic imaginings necessarily relevant to the task: it is simply how she listens. Even though the MEAMs she experienced during the diary were often tinged with melancholy—whether recalling her childhood, reflecting on past feelings of romantic rejection, or surveying more broadly the course of her life—they did not seem unwelcome. As Barrett et al. remind us, such mixed emotions often characterise nostalgic recollection (2010: p. 400), and indeed, it seems fair to say Diana is a nostalgia-prone listener (p. 399; see also Garrido & Davidson, 2019: p. 32). Following Schindler and Holbrook, this nostalgic disposition is reflected in and supported by Diana's general interest—professional and personal—in the past (2003: p. 280). Ostensibly, another dispositionally nostalgic respondent was Will, who often celebrated nostalgia as an aesthetic category. But he reported no MEAMs. This might seem surprising: perhaps they simply got lost in the wash? Or perhaps, for him, nostalgia is indeed most pertinent as a style, rather than an experience? Perhaps. But I think instead that Will is simply less dispositionally nostalgic than Diana, and, moreover, that he was less circumstantially inclined to ruminate through the music than she was: unlike Diana, he reported no particular emotional turbulence in the background of his life during the diary period. The feelings of nostalgia he related regarding Belle and Sebastian's music, for instance, ran autobiographically deep. While The Divine Comedy evoked Belle and Sebastian stylistically—particularly the idea or vibe of nostalgia—they lacked

the personal significance/autobiographical salience to be particularly MEAM-evocative.

Rathbone et al. and Barrett et al. are more general in their use of the terms personal significance and autobiographical salience than I am with autobiographical significance, which, at the risk of being repetitive, denotes a particular relation between an agent (such as music) and the self-identity of the listener who engages its agency. If the salience of the identity affected or created by that agent endures over time, that agent is autobiographically significant. Nevertheless, there is clearly something in common, and the observations of those scholars that MEAMs occur more readily in response to personally significant/autobiographically salient music suggests some possible links between MEAMs and my own specific use of the term autobiographical significance.

Firstly, that observation can perhaps be inverted into a hypothesis: the more MEAMs certain music evokes, the more autobiographically significant that music is likely to be or become. As I suggested in Chapter 8, this is the kind of question we can answer by asking respondents simply to tell us about it. Following on from this hypothesis is the idea that any *new* music—i.e., music yet to prove its autobiographical significance, such as that reported on in the diaries—that evokes MEAMs is, in doing so, revealing its nascent autobiographical significance. For instance, I would say that the Indigo Girls have shown they will be somewhat autobiographically significant for Diana by enabling MEAMs. In doing so, they have involved themselves in Diana's mnemonic imagination, becoming part of the symbolic language she uses to interpret her

autobiography, the events in it, the various sub-identities whose roles within it fluctuate, and so on. Of course, Diana is more prone to MEAMs than some; it seems to follow that the more dispositionally reflective a listener is, the more readily they might experience MEAMs in response to unfamiliar music. In light of this, I would suggest an analytical principle similar to the one I proposed for comparing autobiographical significance between differently aged listeners: the music of The Indigo Girls is as autobiographically significant to Diana, for instance, as some music which enables, say, half as many MEAMs in a listener half as prone to them as she is. This raises the tricky question, however, of how such proneness might be measured so as to permit the operation of this equation in the first place. One way might be to measure the frequency of MEAM occurrence between listeners presented with the same sizeable and diverse array of unfamiliar music; this would minimise the risk of a disproportionate number of MEAMs being evoked by a few particularly evocative and/or familiar pieces of music, and thus inaccurately suggesting that the listener in question is overall more disposed to MEAMs than they actually are.

Of course, as all this serves to reiterate, autobiographical significance is a mostly speculative question when considering a listener's relation to music that is new to them. But the concept is no less relevant or revealing for it, as I hope I have shown. By appraising which sub-identities involve themselves in a given listening moment, and how those identities help form the listener's overarching self-identity, it has been possible to suggest how and why the sonic identity encountered in the music may or may not have garnered autobiographical significance in that encounter. This autobiographical significance could be

confirmed or refuted by the listener at a later date, although such testimony would be reliably true only up to that autobiographical moment: who can say how the listener may come to relate to the sonic identity at some time in the future?

And indeed, the ways in which any respondent might portray this relation are never going to be neutral, a fact targeted by my efforts to imagine ways of comparing such things between individuals. If a given listener is dispositionally reflective, and prone to MEAMs and nostalgia, that does not mean that any music they assimilate into their selves is necessarily more autobiographically significant than that assimilated by a listener with a different disposition. Rather, it seems truer—at least more analytically useful—to posit each person’s self-identity as being equal in scale to everyone else’s. I may feel that my self-identity is somehow a larger, more elaborate, more intense phenomenon than yours, but that is just my subjectively biased perception. Similarly, the dispositionally more reflective listener is simply more consciously attuned to and involved in their self-identity and music’s connections to it. This might entail them being able to talk about these matters with more detail and fluency than a less reflective listener. But this does not mean that their self-identity is more important to them than that of the less reflective listener is to them, even if both might avow that as a subjective difference. In other words, this is essentially a matter of style, one that itself reveals something of the listener’s self-identity. And it is worth reiterating that, in creating their narrative for, say, a musicologist to analyse, a respondent is also creating it for themselves.

On that note, I will close with some methodological reflections and suggestions for future research. As I have already noted, the diary process I

proposed had some blind spots, at least insofar as it was left to each respondent to tailor it to their own listening habits. While this yielded some analytically fruitful differences between each diary, differences that helped define each respondent's profile as a listener, I would aim at a more standardised approach were I to repeat this study. In particular, I would prescribe a daily minimum of, say, five tracks a day, and emphasise the importance of keeping to the daily schedule. I would also ask each respondent to offer a mix of both in-the-moment and retrospective entries, perhaps both for every day. As Randall and Rickard note, there is, naturally, a distortion between what happens in the moment and how it is later communicated (2017: p. 490). To have both would be a boon.

I do believe that the diary format, with its narrative nature, satisfied my analytical aspirations in a unique way. After all, even in-the-moment reports still distort what is experienced insofar as they tend to monothematically interpret multifaceted effects (Randall & Rickard, 2017: p. 492; Greasley & Lamont, 2011: p. 63). On the one hand, a discursive report like a diary entry best facilitates more appropriately multifaceted interpretations from the diarist. On the other, it provides the self-identity context and detail that helps explain the priorities behind a monothematic interpretation, should it occur. As with the interviews, the more would be the merrier as far as future research is concerned; a larger response pool would certainly afford a richer analytical product. While I would lament this breadth coming at the expense of depth of detail, a response pool large enough to be statistically representative of one group or another would allow more general questions to be asked, questions whose answers would not necessarily rely on the level of detail I have pursued here in order to be informative.

11: Conclusions

Make camp by sundown, watchfire burning bright
Songs bloom in the dark and throb down in the night
I seek the gate of wisdom, the secret state of play
I rode past you on the road again today

– The Mountain Goats, 'To the Headless Horseman'

Any of you reading this would no doubt be able to name a fair number of popular music artists whose music, when you hear it, you just know is *that* artist's. You would no doubt say that many, or even most, of those artists are in some way special to you, beloved by you, perhaps even somehow definitive of you. Naturally, these artists would no doubt represent a tiny minority of all those whose music you have ever engaged with, at some time, in some way, to some degree. But the relative anonymity of this looming majority is not necessarily proof of their having been wholly forgotten. After all, it is they who taught you the language in the first place. They are the ground waiting for a figure. Their implicit mass silhouettes the few who break away. Theirs is the blur of features in a crowd, in whose midst the faces of those you really know, those who really matter, are to be discerned.

Having spent this thesis gradually shifting away from the hard stuff of perception and into the discursive abstractions of autobiography, it is important to reiterate these perceptual premises. The term 'sonic identity' denotes, first and foremost, a type of thing that is to be perceived within the cultural-perceptual environment of popular music culture, as I have defined that culture throughout

this thesis: that ostensibly global, supremely inclusive space of musical activity whose definitive objects are records. As I have reiterated at various points throughout this thesis, my conceptual-terminological reliance on identity has leant on the word's sense of distinction: things have an identity insofar as they are what they are, and not something else. This has, in turn, served to emphasise the constant acts of distinction that underpin popular music listening, acts by which we decide, consciously or unconsciously, whether the artist we are hearing belongs to the anonymous majority or stands apart from it. Whatever happens after such acts is in essence an elaboration on them.

But of course, most of this thesis has dealt with that 'whatever', and this too has been an endeavour helped along by the flexibility of identity as a term and a concept. Indeed, I have invoked identity not only as a psychological and sociological phenomenon, one wrapped up in autobiography and memory, but also as a powerful, multiplicitous ideological term that operates both in and out of plain sight. The word itself, normally used to denote precisely that psychological and sociological phenomenon, seems to be everywhere and on every tongue – certainly in that nebulous meta-realm we call Western society. But the sense behind it also propagates surreptitiously through other, relatedly individualistic ideas like creativity, originality, and authenticity. By these means, identity is a core concern of popular music culture; you cannot understand the latter without critiquing the doings of the former.

These ideas, of course, have been with us since the first pages of this thesis. I rehash them partly to say: identity's been doing an awful lot of work. With

this final chapter marking the end of its labours, the only question to ask now is: where has it taken us?

Let's start with sonic identities themselves, the chief concern of these pages, that 'type of thing that is to be perceived within the cultural-perceptual environment of popular music culture'. A sonic identity is the sense a listener has of who a popular music artist is, a sense developed first and foremost through repeated engagement with that artist's music, but also with paratextual and epitextual materials surrounding their works proper. As I elaborated on in Chapter 3, the act of listening to a given track by an artist can be understood as the act of perceiving a sonic environment in which the artist's identity is specified. Whatever invariant elements of that environment serve to distinguish the artist—both from other, less striking elements of that same environment and from an implicit standard texture—also serve to define them conceptually. Each such interaction between listener and artist necessarily conveys but some of the manifold meanings latent in the artist's entire oeuvre, not to mention the mass of paratextual and epitextual material that frames and pertains to that oeuvre.

Exactly which of these meanings is interpreted in a given listener-artist interaction will vary between listeners, not only according to the perceptual sensitivity of each listener to that artist's expressive patterns but also to those listeners' idiosyncratic concerns, interests, listening strategies, and preoccupations. Moreover, while the same listener engaging the same track under roughly consistent circumstances will tend towards an ever more consistent interpretation of that track, each new audition nevertheless carries the possibility of novel, perhaps tangential, perhaps even contradictory

interpretations. In a similar way, different tracks by the same artist may, all else being equal, contradict each other's significations, leading the listener to assimilate contradictory meanings into the artist's sonic identity. This does not necessarily entail the assimilation of contradiction itself as a meaning within that artist's sonic identity (although it may), much like we don't (necessarily) decide that a friend is mixed up—perhaps even dishonest—when they contradict themselves, or behave one way in certain circumstances and another in others. Each track, and each nugget of paratextual and epitextual material, may simply address different issues than its fellows, and it is a listener's unique negotiation of this morass of meaning, a negotiation that is itself subject to the ever-varying priorities of the listener in each encounter, which forms the unique sonic identity of the artist for that listener.

Already we are firmly back in the consciousness of this hypothetical listener to whom I have so often alluded throughout this thesis. It is in the listener's consciousness, after all, where sonic identities emerge and exist. As I strove to show in Chapters 4-10, the identities of the listener themselves are tightly intertwined with that emergence and existence. In Chapters 4 and 5, through my listening diary exercise, I aimed to situate the emergence of two new sonic identities, those of Janelle Monáe and Loretta Lynn, within the everyday context of my listening, with all its shifts in mood, attention, interest, and circumstance. As I argued there, the emergence of these sonic identities was governed above all by a handful of heuristics, those prefigured interpretive structures that inclined me to assimilate certain meanings into each artist's sonic identity. In my case here, these heuristics were the following:

Other artist/s (collaborative/associative): the interpretation of the artist's sonic identity proceeds in terms of an understanding of a different artist in some way implicated in the material at hand, whether that other artist is inferred **associatively** in those materials or is actually present as a **collaborator**.

Genre/tradition: the interpretation of the artist's sonic identity proceeds in terms of an understanding of the genre or tradition perceived to be invoked in, or represented by, the material at hand.

Critical concept: the interpretation of the artist's sonic identity proceeds in terms of a pre-existing critical term or idea, such as Afrofuturism in Monáe's case, or the idea of the Great Singer in Lynn's.

Fortuitous thought: the interpretation of the artist's sonic identity proceeds in terms of an original thought that seems particularly apposite or insightful.³²

³² Such thoughts are to be distinguished from critical concepts insofar as they emerge spontaneously through 'everyday' private thought and interaction with others, while critical concepts are drawn from implicitly public discourses that can be understood as being overtly concerned with the negotiation of a consensus regarding music, or art more generally. It was along these lines that I classified the comment by Nathaniel's barber regarding David Bowie's sinisterness as a **fortuitous thought**, but the remark of professional, public-facing music critic Robert Christgau regarding the 'thinness' of Monáe's voice as a **critical concept**. If Nathaniel had encountered the same observation of sinisterness in, say, a review of one of David Bowie's albums, I would have classified it as a **critical concept**. Likewise, if I had had the 'thinness' thought myself, I would have classified it as a **fortuitous thought**. Delicate though it seems, this distinction remains analytically useful since it differentiates between the different kinds of sociality that each enacts: **fortuitous thoughts** the micro of the intra- and inter-personal; **critical concepts** the macro of the communal.

Personal hang-ups: the interpretation of the artist's sonic identity proceeds in terms of idiosyncratic, self-consciously appraised prejudices that the listener has about some aspect(s) of the artist and their work.

(Re)purposing the music: the interpretation of the artist's sonic identity proceeds in terms of the uses the artist and their music are put to by the listener, and the meanings they afford in the specific context of those uses.

Eras: the interpretation of the artist's sonic identity proceeds in terms of a perceived logic of division, succession, or development between the works that make up the artist's oeuvre, and the inferred meaning of that logic.

Key album/track/lyric/moment: the interpretation of the artist's sonic identity proceeds in terms set by particular parts of the artist's oeuvre, or of works within that oeuvre, which, for one reason or another, are granted disproportionate attention and/or significance.

This list of heuristics no doubt fails to account for everything that was going on in my development of Lynn's and Monée's sonic identities, in which I am sure there were other, less obvious, more subtle interpretive rules also at work that I did not apprehend during my analysis. By the same token, my interpretations were also formed through the steady accrual of first-order, bottom-up perceptions that signified on their own terms, and/or were otherwise themselves the fuel for precisely those heuristics. In this sense, such heuristics are the 'underlying

mechanisms' of sonic identity interpretation, to borrow Juslin and Västfäll's (2008) turn of phrase. Their functional consequence lies in the way they dynamically connect moments of perception to the enculturated values that inform them, thus illuminating the distributed cognitive ecologies (Tribble & Sutton, 2011: p. 94) of the listener. Therein lies their analytical value as concepts.

In Chapters 7 and 8, I delved deeper into the matter of the listener's own selfhood through interviews with respondents about their personal connection to a popular artist of their choice. By doing so, I aimed to show how the sonic identities of these artists had affected the identities of my respondents on a yet larger scale than that explored in Chapters 4 and 5: that of the autobiography of the listener. To do this, I introduced to the discussion the concept of autobiographical significance (Peck & Grealey, 2020), by which I judged the impact of the relevant sonic identity on the respondent in question in terms of whether, and to what extent, that sonic identity had affected or inaugurated any of the respondent's identities, and, more importantly, whether these identities had remained salient for the respondent over time. The interviews yielded a wealth of captivating examples of how different sonic identities achieve autobiographical significance for different respondents, and offered key insights into how we can understand the doings of sonic identities in the lives of listeners. My main assertion off the back of the interview analysis was that the most prominent meanings in an artist's sonic identity will be those that are most autobiographically significant for the listener. By this, I mean those meanings that have had the strongest effects on the listener's most enduringly salient identities. To complement this idea, and to better enable the comparison of the

autobiographical significance of sonic identities between listeners, I offered the idea of sonic identity durability, i.e., a sonic identity's resistance to irrelevance. This durability, however much of it a given sonic identity may have, is the measure of its entwinement with the self of the listener. For a sonic identity to defy irrelevance—for it to remain autobiographically significant—it requires those listener identities it has affected to persist throughout the listener's life, and for them to weather any crises of identity that may arise. If these listener identities fall away, then the artist's sonic identity, by extension, risks becoming irrelevant to the listener. As such, the durability of a sonic identity can be gauged by the durability of the relevant listener identities themselves.

The listening diaries of Chapters 9 and 10 sought to add more data of the real-time kind to my overall analytical picture. Continuing with my emphasis on autobiographical significance, here considered in more speculative terms given the newness of the sonic identities being created by each diary respondent, I focused on the on-the-ground interactions of the new artists' sonic identities with their respondents' own identities and self-identities. Here we saw the development not only of treasured sonic identities—as, for instance, in the cases of Diana and the Indigo Girls or Will and The Divine Comedy—but also of sonic identities that jarred with their listeners, in particular those of Arcade Fire with Rachel and Brian Eno with Daniel. We also saw various satiation trajectories charted by the different artists diarised: some diaries ended seemingly without the point of satiation having been reached, while others saw this threshold being crossed after a matter of days. And we saw how these trajectories, and each respondent's conscious or unconscious awareness and management of them,

related to what each sonic identity was able or unable to do to for various identities of their respective listener. As a way of connecting the autobiography-spanning scope of the concept of autobiographical significance to the real-time emergence of these still-fresh sonic identities in the consciousness of their respective respondents, I proposed that the eventual autobiographical significance (or lack thereof) of that artist's sonic identity was augured in the (in)frequency with which the artist's music evoked MEAMs (music-evoked autobiographical memories).

My analysis of these respondent datasets—both the interviews and the listening diaries—also identified heuristics that had not yet emerged, or perhaps had simply not yet been acknowledged,³³ in my own listening diary. These were the following:

Historical logic: the interpretation of the artist's sonic identity proceeds in terms of how the materials at hand seem to make sense in and/or of the historical moment in which they emerged.

Mystery: the interpretation of the artist's sonic identity proceeds in terms of the conscious disavowal of the very idea that meaningful sense can be made of some aspect of that sonic identity, or of the listener's relation to it specifically.

³³ For instance, it seems clear to me in hindsight that the ***(dis)liking*** and ***life relevance*** heuristics were operating during my own listening diary. However, it was only during the later analysis of the data collected from my respondents that it became clear to me that these should even be considered heuristics, rather than just themes. It seems necessary, when summarising all my analyses here in the conclusion, that I respect the fact that my analysis of my own listening diary was as much a part of the autoethnographic process as the diary itself, and therefore that I resist retroactively inserting analytical conclusions that were not forthcoming at the time.

Formal analysis: the interpretation of the artist's sonic identity proceeds in terms of a deliberate attempt at an analysis of the given material's formal properties, rather than, say, its effect(s) on the listener.

(Dis)liking: the interpretation of the artist's sonic identity proceeds in terms of the listener's hedonic experience and evaluation of the materials at hand, that is, in terms of whether or not they liked it. Originally slotted in my listening diary analysis as a flat thematic category rather than a dynamic heuristic, I came to realise that **(dis)liking**, like **formal analysis**, was a particular interpretive stance towards the artist's sonic identity, rather than a prior, more fundamental mode of engaging with the artist's music that transcended the operation of heuristics altogether.

Life relevance: the interpretation of the artist's sonic identity proceeds in terms of how their music seems somehow to speak to the circumstances of the listener's life at the time of listening.

Interpersonal identification: the interpretation of the artist's sonic identity proceeds in terms of the specific sense the listener has of identifying with the figure of the artist itself—that is, with the person that the artist is—and the meanings this identification consequently emphasises.

Associations and episodic memories: the interpretation of the artist's sonic identity proceeds in terms of associations or memories that occur to the listener as a result of, or in conjunction with, their listening.

Prior thematic affinity: the interpretation of the artist's sonic identity proceeds in terms of bodies of meaning that the listener perceives both they and the artist share an interest in.

Oeuvre-eye view: the interpretation of the artist's sonic identity proceeds in terms of the meanings that seem relevant to the listener when they consciously take a total view of the artist's oeuvre.

Social relationships: the interpretation of the artist's sonic identity proceeds in terms of the meaning and significance of certain social relationships the listener maintains with which the music becomes entangled.

As with my own listening diary data analysis, I am sure that these new heuristics, along with those I had already identified, fail to represent fully all the interpretive dynamics that were at work, since, in the interviews, my respondents expounded on their chosen artist's sonic identities for me, while in the diaries they reported on the real-time emergence of a new sonic identity. What's more, there were no doubt yet other processes at work throughout each respondent's engagement with their artists in each case.

Each of the chapters of this thesis has aimed to address the question of sonic identities from a different angle, and to present enough analytical and empirical detail that a somewhat comprehensive view of that question could be achieved. If there are some fundamental ideas that this project has yielded regarding sonic identities, they are these.

First, whatever distinguishes the artist the most, defines them the most. This may seem obvious, or even banal, but it is important to emphasise because it firmly connects the endlessly varied interpretations of an artist's sonic identity to the humbler act of 'mere' recognition with which these interpretations begin. Second, the meanings that settle as the most prominent ones in the artist's sonic identity are those that are most autobiographically significant for the listener. Between them, these ideas aim to theorise something like the whole of the experience of sonic identities, from the moment of perception to the widest scale of autobiographical reflection.

It is worth stressing here a question, perhaps inadequately explored on its own terms, that lies behind turns of phrases like 'autobiographical reflection'. This is the question of how we engage with sonic identities in the absence of any stimuli – that is, any music, or any paratextual or epitextual materials. In truth, I have implicitly dealt with these dynamics throughout this thesis: my analysis of Rostam's sonic identity, while supported by listening, involved much stimulus-free reflection on my sense of him, my memories pertaining to him and his music, and so on; both my diary and the diaries of my respondents were often, if not usually, written after listening; and the interviews, for their part, were wholly discursive, with even the listening involved being discussed only once the music

had stopped. Despite this post-stimulus quality, I have, throughout all of these exercises, placed an emphasis on what the stimuli had been doing to produce sonic identity meanings for listeners. Even in the most obviously reflective, stimulus-free context of the interviews, for instance, my questions sought to link my respondents' reflections back to their (memories of) perceptions of the artist's music and other stimuli. Given that sonic identities cannot exist until some music by the artist in question is actually heard and connected to that artist, that emphasis strikes me as having been reasonable. But now that we are nearing the end of our road, it would perhaps be useful to think directly about what it means for sonic identities to exist and be engaged absent of any relevant stimulus.

I have invoked already the notion of the mnemonic imagination: that faculty which facilitates the temporally unlatched, back-feeding process of constructing imaginings in confluence with our somewhat malleable memories (Pickering & Keightley, 2015: p. 20). This idea prompts two acknowledgements: not only can sonic identities still be engaged mnemonic-imaginatively absent of stimuli; but also, this engagement is transformative, rather than merely reflective. By this I mean that to reflect on our sense of who an artist is—whether we do so in just those terms or more implicitly, such as by considering the times and ways their music has had meaning in our lives—we necessarily alter that sense by bringing it to bear on the circumstances of that act of reflection, and vice versa. In Chapter 1 of this thesis, I characterised this as a stock of meanings that is selectively accessed by the listener in a given situation. When we access that stock, we jumble its contents; perhaps we add something, or perhaps we take

something away. I mentioned in Chapter 3 the awkward thoughts and queasy feelings I sometimes get at U-Bahnhof Schlesisches Tor in Berlin, as I stare at the platform Rostam so cornily and ingratiatingly strolls down in the ‘Bike Dream’ video. Every time this happens, I am re-imagining memories—of watching, thinking, and writing about the video; of having these thoughts and feelings before—that partly form my sense of who Rostam is. And in doing so, I am further emphasising the meanings of these mnemonic imaginings as constituents of Rostam’s sonic identity; I am increasing their share in the stock of meanings that define Rostam-ness for me. When I bring this Rostam-ness to my subsequent stimulus-based experience, it is different from what it would have been without this mnemonic imagining.

Understanding sonic identities in the mnemonic imagination requires the rejection of the subject-object, inside-outside, Cartesian-dualism view of consciousness. Our consciousness of sonic identities is not a form of spectatorship whereby we observe something that is apart from us; this is the understanding of consciousness that I have pushed against at various points in this thesis, most pointedly in Chapter 5. Even the word ‘stimulus’ itself can seem to push us in the direction of that binary: it seemingly implies that the music of a given artist is a kind of provocation to consciousness, which then gets on with the business of perception and interpretation all by itself as an effect of the music’s cause. But this is not how we should understand these processes. When we perceive a sonic identity, whether in a stimulus or through the mnemonic imagination, we are not conscious *of* it in the spectatorial sense; nor is it *in* our

consciousness, an infiltrator from without to within. Rather, it *is* our consciousness in that moment.

In this sense, the mnemonic-imaginative engagement with a sonic identity is not a second-order engagement subordinate to the first-order engagements of stimulus-involving encounters. Certainly, these types of engagements may differ in their nature and intensity. But they are both equally immediate conscious experiences of the sonic identity in question. If I were to put this in terms of stimuli, I would say that whatever memories, passing thoughts, or purely everyday perceptions that happen to initiate the operation of the mnemonic imagination on a sonic identity are stimuli in the same way that the music of the relevant artist itself is a stimulus. In this thesis, I have prioritised the ‘real’ stimuli—of music, and of paratextual and epitextual materials—because this reflects the concerns of popular music culture itself. In this space, artists exist precisely in order to present music to us, and it is our role as listeners to hear it. This is why I asserted a few paragraphs ago that a sonic identity only exists once the music of the artist in question has actually been both heard and attributed to that artist by the listener. Whatever thoughts an individual may have about an artist before this moment—before they become a ‘listener of that artist’—are, in and of themselves, different phenomena, even though these very thoughts may indeed help form the sonic identity once listenership has been inaugurated. But only once those thoughts can be related to actual sonic perceptions—and memories of them—can they constitute a proper connection to the artist on the terms set by the popular music culture which they and their music help iterate.

Indeed, what of that culture, and its oft-mentioned array of individualistic ideologies? Has the theoretical elaboration of the concept of sonic identity in these pages illuminated anything about it, and its entanglement with those ideologies? I think so. As I outlined in Chapter 2, some fundamental premises of this project, and of my presentation of the concept of sonic identity, were the following:

1. that the production and propagation of popular music is grounded in discourses of individuality, discourses which find their heartiest embodiment in prevalent, interdependent ideas like creativity, originality, and authenticity;
2. that the experience of engaging with popular music as a listener is itself becoming ever more individuated, with technological developments enabling us to tailor our sonic environments according to our needs with ever finer degrees of control, and by extension rendering popular music an increasingly ubiquitous actor in our lives;
3. that those needs and their negotiation correspond to our very self-identities and their negotiations, with popular music's growing ubiquity both resulting from and helping to cause that music's infiltration of these negotiations; and
4. that 1 collides with 2 and 3 in the constant differentiation between artists that is involved in listening to popular music, an activity in which Production is concerned with striking the perfect balance of novelty and intelligibility to stand out to listeners while remaining intelligible, while

Consumption, accepting the gambit, is concerned with finding just the right thing to meet each ever more music-ifiable need.³⁴

The idea of sonic identity pins down these dynamics, from the values of production to the personal consequences of consumption via the moment of encounter where differentiation occurs. Sonic identity reflects the fact that the production of popular music of diverse kinds is geared towards identity both as a theme and as a perceptual goal: artists strive to mark out who *they* are as a matter of thematic priority, and do this by producing material that can be perceived as unique to them. This is what I account for in the first of my two Big Assertions about sonic identities: that whatever distinguishes them the most, defines them the most. Meanwhile, sonic identity connects this distinction and definition to that which arguably makes popular music so important to its listeners, namely the ways it becomes implicated in the lives of those listeners. This is what I account for in the second of my two Big Assertions: that the meanings that become most prominent in an artist's sonic identity will be those that are most autobiographically significant for the listener. The processes of differentiation or individuation, in which ideology colludes with perceptual—as well as, consequently, economic—efficacy, underpin popular music listening itself. That this individuation can have significant consequences for listeners has, I hope, been made clear by the analyses that have helped shape this thesis, in

³⁴ Elvers writes in similar terms of the 'self-enhancement' effects of music. He suggests that:

musical self-enhancement is a culturally established practice where, on the one hand composers, musicians, and music producers essentially draw on music's ability to provide access to feeling states in which self-worth is high, and on the other hand, listeners share, at least to a certain degree, a familiarity with and appreciation of this particular type of music, enabling them to benefit from its self-enhancing function. (Elvers, 2016: p. 5).

which the potential for popular music artists to have a momentous influence on a given listener's whole life and self-identity—not to mention the sheer specialness of such connections—was exhibited time and again.

By starting with these processes of individuation, the concept of sonic identity invites the study of popular music in both of the directions leading away from the encounters in which they occur, that is, with an eye towards production one way and consumption in the other. Despite this two-way analytical potential—if 'despite' is really the right word—my thesis has for the most part ventured in the latter direction: that which follows the listener. Future research could shine a yet brighter light on this path. I have already suggested some ideas for further study in Chapters 8 and 10, with these pertaining specifically to the further study of autobiographical significance and sonic identity itself. More broadly, I would advocate for the incorporation of the sonic identity concept into any listener-oriented research on popular music, whether ethnographic, sociological, or psychological in its stance. As my own empirical work has suggested, sonic identity can be a profitable starting point for studying issues as diverse as how we manage our own identities and self-identities using popular music, how and why we experience emotions when listening to popular music, how our musical tastes and preferences emerge and develop, how we navigate and tell our life stories through popular music, and how listening technologies intersect with all these things. Other worthwhile applications of sonic identity not pursued in this thesis might include its use in the study of listener consumer behaviour (e.g., how does the perception of an artist's uniqueness affect their sales?); in the study of the proliferation and negotiation of social prejudice

through popular music (how are such prejudices both fanned and quelled by the music of successfully distinctive and autobiographically significant popular music artists?); and in the study of the experience of mental illness in confluence with popular music listening (what happens to the sonic identities of artists, and the autobiographical significance of these sonic identities, when the self-hood of the listener themselves is threatened; and what therapeutic functions might autobiographically significant sonic identities be able to serve in such contexts?). Regarding the trajectory of the concept itself, it would be invaluable to test its scope not only in the abovementioned contexts, but also through its application to the study of listenership on a smaller scale than that of popular music culture at large – to see what happens to the concept, in other words, when it is applied in, say, the study of particular popular music genres and traditions.

And what of the other direction, in which unravel the processes that produce popular music in the first place? Certainly, sonic identity would offer a steady theoretical ground for studying what it is like for popular music artists to make their art at all, whether—again—this question was addressed from an ethnographic, sociological, or psychological standpoint. More broadly, it offers a perspective from which to critique more extensively the ideological currents I have repeatedly mentioned. How, for instance, is popular music marketed in such a way that the identity of its performers is emphasised? Negus identified authenticity and originality as dominant values of music industry executives in the '90s; how, if at all, are things different today? As with the listener's side of the bargain, the role of technology in the production of popular music can also be usefully critiqued in terms of sonic identity. How do different technologies, from

Digital Audio Workstations to acoustic musical instruments to microphones, enable or curtail the successful creation of distinctive popular music, for instance? As I argued in the introduction, this is a question most productively addressed by considering technologies themselves as agents in the processes they are involved in, rather than as vacant facilitators of human agency.

These are just a handful of the no doubt much more numerous questions that the concept of sonic identity can help us address. But, in the words, as it were, of Bill Evans and his trio, some other time. For my part, and for now, I have nothing to add that has not already been said in the previous ninety-seven-and-a-quarter-thousand words or so. Ultimately, it has been my goal to communicate the sense behind sonic identity; to argue not only for its existence as a phenomenon, but also for its potential as an analytical premise. When I began my research, it seemed that the idea of sonic identities could explain so much of my own listening experiences. As I believe I have shown, it could indeed explain these experiences, along with, much more interestingly, the experiences of my respondents. Now that my work is coming to its end, I feel somehow returned to where I started from. I know that this thesis, like any other, has been in essence a response to an impulse to *explain*. But now that I am back where I began, I realise, or rather remember, that this impulse was itself a response to another, one more precious: the impulse just to *know*. Know what? Well, the question is rather: know *whom*?

The answer, in the broadest sense, is all those artists whose music has accompanied me throughout my life, has mattered to me, has made me who I am. More specifically, and being true to the particular history of this thesis'

origins, I suppose I mean Rostam, loath though I am by now—after all these years, Rostam!—to give him any more time in the spotlight than he’s already enjoyed. After all, it could easily have been someone else. Indeed, barely a paragraph ago, I found myself listening for the first time in a while to Yo La Tengo, a band I love, and remembering how they were almost the flag-bearers of a different thesis on an idea that was not quite yet the sonic identity I have expounded upon here. But then again, perhaps it is fitting after all that I find myself, in this moment, listening to a bundle of Vampire Weekend tracks—a few B-Sides hidden on Spotify—that I have somehow never heard before. As ‘California English Pt. 2’ plays—and as I think more about whether to use commas or em dashes than about what I’m hearing—I believe for a second that it’s Rostam singing the lead, until I realise it’s just Ezra Koenig putting on a strikingly Rostam-esque voice. Clearly, I don’t know these guys quite as well as I thought I did. But you learn something new every day.

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