Songwriters and song lyrics: architecture, ambiguity and repetition

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Abstract

This article argues for understanding popular songs and songwriting through the metaphor of architecture, an idea we draw from vernacular terms used by songwriters when comprehending and explaining their own creative practice, and which we deploy in response to those who have called for writing about music to use a non-technical vocabulary and make greater use of metaphor. By architecture we mean those recognisable characteristics of songs that exist as enduring qualities regardless of a specific performance, recording or sheet music score. We use this analogy not as a systematic model, but as a device for exploring the intricate ways that words and music are combined and pointing to similarities in the composition of poetry and writing of song lyrics. The art of repetition and play with ambiguity are integral to popular song architectures that endure regardless of the modifications introduced by performers who temporarily inhabit a particular song.

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In this article we argue for an architectural approach to the popular song, a perspective that treats songwriters as architects rather than romantically inspired expressive artists. Our approach implies that listeners are indeed dancing (and thinking) about architecture when responding to popular songs, and it is an awareness of this that informs the practices of songwriters.[1] By architecture we mean those recognisable characteristics of songs that exist as enduring qualities regardless of a particular performance, recording or version.

Focusing mainly on lyrics, our aim is to contribute to the study of songwriters and the practices of songwriting - an area neglected or treated partially in the study of popular music.[2] We also

wish to offer an alternative approach to the popular song as entity: we emphasise the architecture of the song against a prevailing preoccupation with lyrics as semantic statements and poetic forms, or song words as performed voice, melody and memorable tune. Lyrics, along with melodies and rhythms are important – but not always in the ways implied by literary criticism of song poetics, performance theories of voice, songwriting handbooks and psychological surveys of listener responses.

In developing our argument we are indebted to the ground-clearing work of Simon Frith (1996), notably his criticism of the ways lyrics have been treated as poetry, abstracted as verse on a page, and equally his debunking of a type of sociological realism that treats lyrics as indicators of values, beliefs and events. Our position in this essay is intended to complement and to counter those approaches to the popular song which emphasise the exceptional expressive moment - the claim that a song only exists as it is realised in its performance, the argument that Frith (1996) developed through his interrogation of lyrics. In addition, we wish to challenge one of the claims that such performance theory has been reacting against; that is the focus on the producer which has returned with the resurgence of research and writing about the 'art' of recording. Here we are opposed to the emphasis on the recording as definitive artefact. In our argument, producers are structural engineers making a contribution to songs that exist as entities independently of their manifestation in various recordings and performances. And, it is also worth us stating, although it may be obvious from our approach, that a song cannot be reduced to or explained through a visual score – the lead sheet or notated sheet music.[3]

Hence, we are addressing the song as entity. What is it? Where is it? Our response to such questions is that songs endure irrespective of their manifestation in a sheet music score, a particular performance, and an apparently definitive recording. This also presupposes an argument about how we should know, understand, research and study popular songs, and how we gain knowledge of them.

Musicologists of the popular song have tended to address these questions by offering interpretations derived from intense personal listening to recordings. The writings of Richard Middleton (1990, 2000), Allan Moore (2012), Philip Tagg (1991), Susan McClary (1991), Dai Griffiths (2003, 2012), Sheila Whiteley (1992), David Brackett (2000), to name some of the most significant, is dominated by the method of critical listening. Although occasionally highlighting how a song or style might articulate forms of inequality (class and gender divisions, attitudes to

sexuality, pejorative musical expressions of various demonised 'others'), such arguments have rarely been informed by 'source studies' of the practices of songwriters, musicians and composers, as has been the case in the tradition of western art music, jazz scholarship or studies of the Great American Songbook where exploration of creative practices have been more prevalent (see, for example, Furia, 1992; Friedwald, 2002).

In contrast to the musicological focus on the text, sociologists have highlighted the social contexts of production, mediation and consumption (referring to industries, media, markets, patterns of reception). Yet they have also ignored the practices through which songs are created. The sociological approach, after Pierre Bourdieu (1993), Howard Becker (1984), Peter Martin (1997, 2006) and Tia DeNora (1997, 2000), avoids musical sound and creative practice, and maintains that to understand cultural production we should not look towards the talented originator but be attuned to the quotidian qualities of music in everyday life or the struggles for position and status within fields of cultural production.

There are dissenters. In an article first published (in German) in 1982, Kurt Blaukopf warned of the 'danger of detaching the sociology of music from the music itself', arguing that it would suppress the 'dialogue between the disciplines' (2012, p.14). Nearly 30 years later, Lee Marshall argued that this detachment is a pressing issue and called for sociologists to address the aesthetic characteristics of music and develop 'new ways of writing about popular music' uninhibited by the technical, intellectual orientation of musicologists (2011, pp.167-8). Marshall advocates a focus on how music 'feels' rather than what it means and illustrates his approach via a brief case study of Bob Dylan's 'The Times They Are A-changing'. Despite this ambitious incursion into territory usually vacated by sociologists, Marshall follows musicologists in attempting to describe and comprehend Dylan's song from the 'listener's perspective'. Again, the songwriter's viewpoint is evaded. Yet, the circumstances through which Dylan created this song are surely important, not only for understanding the song as music but also for comprehending how listeners appreciated the song.

We endorse Marshall's proposal for writing about music in a non-technical manner and for making greater use of metaphor, not least to encourage dialogue between musicology and other disciplines. We believe that songwriting practice should be more central to the study of popular music and that understandings of songs are far more determined by the processes of songwriting than allowed for by musicological and sociological approaches to reception. By using the word

'determined' here, we mean shaped, limited, influenced, contested and disputed, mediated rather than fixed. We are not seeking to elevate the creative songwriter and lyricist as exceptional, nor do we wish to privilege the originator as authority and source of all meaning. We take a cue from David Lodge's discussion of fiction. Lodge acknowledges that the writer has no 'sovereign authority as an interpreter' of their own texts, and that readers can provide interpretations that the author was and is not aware. Yet, it is still the case that 'literary texts do not, except very rarely, come into being by accident. They are intentional acts and their manifest intention is to communicate (even if what is communicated, as in many modern texts, is the difficulty or impossibility of communication)' (2001, p.299). This is a comment entirely apt for the study of songwriting.

Intentional acts of songwriting are central to the dialogues that Richard Middleton refers to when he argues that 'musical meaning cannot be detached from the discursive, social and institutional frameworks which surround, mediate and (yes) produce it' (2000, p.9). We will be emphasising a range of techniques and showing how, when taking these creative processes into account, the architecture of the song is important for the creators of a song and by implication for listeners (creators being some of the most empathic and engaged listeners).

We approach songs through the voices of songwriters and largely through lyrics, acknowledging that this is one route into the issues[4]. Existing studies of popular song lyrics usually emphasise reception, privileging the interpretations of listeners rather than musicians and songwriters. Typical is Lars Eckstein's 'reading' of lyrics in which he explores 'how lyrics are implicated in the emergence of meaning in songs – in particular performative contexts, specific generic conventions, musical structures, and medial situations' (2010, p.14). His approach is from the point of view of how lyrics are understood by different audiences in different cultural contexts, drawing from 'postcolonial studies', his 'academic home ground' (2010, p.11). Despite other insights gained from critical reception of lyrics (such as Christopher Ricks's poetic interpretations of Dylan's words), the songwriter's practice is assumed, vaguely implied or neglected.

Studies of lyrics *do* make it clear that words are foundational to the design of any popular song. Our research for this article, and other sources that focus on songwriting (Flanagan, 1987; Zollo, 2003) suggest that songwriters usually construct songs without a completed lyric but with a set of interlocking parts from which they develop a finished lyric. These parts are architectural in character, providing the frameworks analogous to how a building is composed of joists, floors,

beams, poured concrete pillars, walls and floors that are filled in. The architectural frame provides a space of sections and blocks within which words, hooks, tunes, riffs, refrains can be moved around and substituted. We will be emphasising the way lyrics occupy a place within the architecture of songs whereby pattern, rhythm, repetition are as equally important as the more commonly presented semantic linear interpretations of lyrics when set out as verse on a page.

Shaping songs, combining words and music

Words may be created, composed or 'set to' an existing melody and rhythm. This common practice can be found in vernacular folk traditions, in the commercially produced broadside ballads from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, in the production of Christian hymns, and in twentieth century blues, to provide only a partial list. When reflecting upon his work for musicals, Oscar Hammerstein referred to 'the American songwriter's habit of writing the music first and the words later' (1985, p.6) and recalled:

> For twenty-five years, collaborating with Jerome Kern, Herbert Stothart, Sigmund Romberg, Rudolf Friml and Vincent Youmans, I set words to their music … Writing in this way, I have frequently fallen into the debt of my composers for words and ideas that might never have occurred to me had they not been suggested by music. If one has a feeling for music – and anyone who wants to write lyrics had better have this feeling – the repeated playing of a melody may create a mood or start a train of thought that results in an unusual lyric (pp.4-7).

It is not only show songs created during the era when Hammerstein was writing lyrics that have been composed in this way. Rock songs are often crafted from creating sonic structures first and then adding lyrics after continual listening. This might initially involve singing words or nonsensical sounds that fit existing musical patterns; as the song develops, these words and sounds are refined and developed to articulate a more precise mood or meaning. Brian Eno, discussing his album *Here Come the Warm Jets* described this writing technique:

> I wrote the lyrics at home with my girlfriend with a cassette of the backing track from the studio. I sang whatever came into my mind as the song played through. Frequently they're just nonsense words or syllables. First I try for the correct phonetic sound rather than the verbal meaning. Off the top I was singing "oh-dee-dow-gubba-ring-ge-dow". So I recorded these rubbish words and then I turned them back into words (cited in Sheppard, 2008,

p.148).

Songwriter Richard Hell described this sculptural and developmental process, explaining how he would 'come up with bass parts within a series of chord changes that caught a feeling that worked for me and I would bring that to a rehearsal and I would describe to the band the feel I was looking for' (Hell, 2013). Then, having recorded the rehearsal, Hell would take the tapes home and begin work on developing the lyric, using a to and fro process to arrive at a finished work:

> Basically, I used the music; it would suggest kinds of emotions and the subject of the songs would arise out of how the music made me feel. So then I would start playing with the lyrics. And then once I'd started with the lyrics, then that might start altering the music a little bit too; the way the chorus went and what I considered to sing might require the guitars to change a little bit (Hell, 2013)

In contrast, words may also be created first with the intention that music will be added later: Townes Van Zandt is quoted by fellow songwriter Guy Clark as telling him 'that words had to work on paper, without guitar' (McKay, 2010, p.66).

Many songwriters and songwriting teams use both approaches – producing words first or fitting words to music. Speaking of how he wrote with Burt Bacharach, Hal David recalled: 'Very often he would give me melodies, from time to time I would give him lyrics. Very often we sat in a room and banged out a song together, back and forth, back and forth' (Zollo, 2003, p.210). It was often the architecture of David's lyric that would spur the process. As Bacharach explained:

> With 'Promises, Promises' there were a lot of lyrics that came first, as there was with 'Alfie' and with 'A House is Not a Home.' […] Hal brought in a lyric, and I got a general kind of first floor of the house built, you might say, and then started designating where I wanted to change musically from what's been written (Zollo, p.203).

As should be clear from these examples, it is important not to separate words and music, as the practice of composing lyrics is embedded in an enduring history of performed poetry and versification. As Tom Paulin has written:

> Poetry begins in speech, in the skipping rhymes and chants children make up in the

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playground and the street. It moves from there into the imagination and life of the common people – into rhymes, riddles, traditional songs – and is then sometimes collected so that it moves from oral tradition, communal memory, into print (2008, p.4).

James Fenton makes a similar point:

Poetry carries its history within it, and it is oral in origin. Its transmission was oral. Its transmission today is still in part oral, because we become acquainted with poetry through nursery rhymes, which we hear before we can read. And we learn an analysis of these rhymes, a beating of rhythm, a fitting of word to pitch, a sense of structure, long before we can read (2003, p.22).

Fenton is recognised as an award-winning poet and performed lyricist, serving as librettist for Charles Wuorinen's opera *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (2001), based on Salman Rushdie's novel. When advocating the best ways for a lyricist to compose a lyric earlier than the music, he stresses the importance of the shape of the lyric, its rhythmic qualities and its implicit 'tune'. He proposes an approach to composition whereby the lyricist works with a tune in her or his head 'as a private guarantee that the words are singable in theory' whilst giving 'the composer no inkling' (Fenton, 2003, p.120) of the tune that is used when writing the words.

The lyricist's metrical architecture allows the composer to 'set' the words. Song lyric will imply a series of strong stresses, which will then be made to fall on the subsequent musical 'bed'. Because the rhythm of popular song will, almost invariably, be in fours or triplets, the existing lyric can be easily sung over the beat in the song. This has a direct relationship to poetic practice, in so far that there is an awareness of metre and/ or rhyme. But, as Latin Quarter's lyricist Mike Jones pointed out, 'because the music sets the mood and the expectations of the listener, so the words are words on music' (Jones, 2011). In a poem, the metre, rhythm, mood and meaning exist alone, whereas in a song lyric the metre provides a structural basis for musical colouring.

Fenton's and Jones's comments about the shape of the lyric are echoed in similar descriptions by other lyricists. Sammy Cahn, who composed lyrics to many songs that have become recognised as standards (including 'High Hopes', 'Come Fly With Me' and 'The Tender Trap'), explained his lyric writing by saying that particular melodies are 'architecturally great for lyrics' and going on to discuss what he called the 'architecture of the lyric' (in Zollo, 2003 pp.29-30). Cahn had

uncompromising ideas about the aesthetics of lyrical architecture and criticised writers who followed Bob Dylan as having 'no sense of the architecture. Any one of my songs, you see a word under a note. You won't see three words under a note' (in Zollo, 2003 p.35). But, there are contrasting structures of architecture, just as there are varied styles of songs and different songwriting practices. This point is developed as a metaphor by Jimmy Webb in *Tunesmith,* his reflections on songwriting in which he likens songs, like Bacharach, to designing and constructing buildings:

> Perhaps some will say at this juncture, "A barn doesn't suit my fancy just now. I have in mind a nice, sturdy cathedral". Fine. You build a cathedral, I'll build a barn or log cabin. The same rules will apply. Understanding those rules of construction calls now for a study of the *conventions* of form. That is to say the traditional, generic songwriting forms with which we are all subliminally familiar; the ones that will not leave our listeners confused about whether we have constructed a gymnasium or a motor lodge (Webb, 1998 pp.52-3).

From reflecting on his songwriting experience, Webb argues that a song's architecture significantly shapes the interpretations of listeners and should not cause confusion. He then develops the metaphor by saying that 'word and rhyme … will be our timbers and nails. With them we can build an endoskeleton or frame for our edifice' (p.53). In discussing how the songwriter will use words that are most suited to the construction, Webb presents himself as 'the architect' imagining 'the kind of building he wants to construct' and thinking about range of 'materials' that are available:

> In the dictionary he finds oaken words, words of stone and paper, plywood words and words like steel beams, words of ironwood and ash, rich resonant words of mahogany and cherry, rococo words that swirl like burled walnut, simple pungent pine words, heavy words of dark ebony, ephemeral, silly words of balsa, everlasting words of marble and granite, and translucent words like colored glass along with blunt, pragmatic words made of lead and cement (p.53).

Webb's point is that words are fundamental to the structure quite regardless of what critics and listeners might say about their semantic meaning or their apparent banality. We might push the analogy here and say that many buildings are dismissed as banal and superficial but this does not

invalidate their architectural significance. Think of the attacks on, and subsequent critical reappraisal, of 1930s and 1950s suburban housing, 1970s council estates, and various municipal buildings. Hence, we should be sceptical of a populist position that plays down the importance of song lyrics if they are reported as unheard, trite or irrelevant. Such an argument is given scholarly legitimacy in Theodore Gracyk's dismissive assertion that 'in rock music most lyrics don't matter very much' (1996, p.65). To this we respond: if lyrics do not matter, why did Paul McCartney spend so long finding words for the song he had given a working title of 'Scrambled Eggs' (the song that became 'Yesterday')? And why did Kurt Cobain write out and re-draft the lyrics to 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' if they did not matter? Cobain spent a lot of time re-working, evaluating and re-writing his lyrics – as evidenced in his posthumously published notebooks, containing different drafts of 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' (2002, p.136, p.138, p.141).

In both cases the songwriter had a structure of possibilities to be worked on. So, in certain respects we could say that *structure precedes semantics:* the sonic shape – its rhythmic pattern, melodic contour, interlocking sections allowed for a certain feel to a song. We could also argue that *structures create or imply semantics*: it was 'yesterday' and not 'scrambled eggs' that McCartney was instinctively searching for as he brought together the sonic and lyrical architecture. In a similar way, Hammerstein recounted how Rogers wrote a melody that became the refrain of 'People Will Say We're In Love' prior to the lyrics but 'with the thought that it might serve well as a duet for the two lovers in *Oklahoma!*' (Hammerstein, 1985, p.13). The point here is that the music – whether McCartney's melody or the rhythm patterns on Kate Bush's *Hounds of Love* or the songs on David Bowie's *Low* – was not created first as instrumentals per se but as lyricless songs, structured architecturally with an awareness of the will to have words added and with some sense of the style and substance of those words.

Popular song and poetry revisited

The writing of lyrics and the use of existing verse inevitably raises questions about the links between song lyrics and poetry - an issue that has provoked some animated exchanges. Frith is firmly against any notion that lyrics are poetry or that they stand up to scrutiny when taken out of their performed circumstances:

> Good lyrics by definition, then, lack the elements that make for good lyric poetry. Take
> them out of their performed context, and they either seem to have no musical qualities at

all, or else to have such obvious ones as to be silly (this goes as much for Lorenz Hart and Cole Porter as for Bob Dylan and Elvis Costello, as much for Curtis Mayfield and Smokey Robinson as for Hank Williams and Tom T. Hall) (1996 p.182).

It is debatable whether or not any writers and critics would claim that good lyrics are akin to lyric poetry. Nonetheless, there exists an audience for popular songs in printed form. Many collections of printed lyrics disregard strict boundaries between a song and a poem, echoing the roots of lyric poetry itself. As Cecil Day-Lewis says in his introduction to *English Lyric Poems*, the dividing line between songs and lyrical poems, 'is in some places as artificial as an international frontier, and in other places may seem virtually to disappear' (1961, p.1). And within his collection, Elizabethan lyrics such as Sir Thomas Wyatt's 'My Lute Awake!' or Samuel Daniel's 'Love Is A Sickness Full of Woes' with their repetitions and refrains, signal this provenance very clearly. More recently, book length collections of individual lyricist's work, such as Jarvis Cocker's *Mother, Brother, Lover,* Joni Mitchell's *The Complete Poems and Lyrics* and Adam Bradley's and Andrew Dubois's *Anthology of Rap*, provide enduring evidence of the sung or rapped lyric living healthily on the page. Acclaimed poet Simon Armitage also lives another life as lyricist (and singer) in his band, The Scaremongers, and published a book length collection of his lyrics, *Travelling Songs.* As he wryly observes: 'describing yourself as a poet is often seen as a challenge or even an alibi. In those circumstances, it's worth having a few tunes up your sleeve to prove it' (Armitage, 2014).

Poetry and song lyric are bridged and blurred in practice – by songwriters and poets, by listeners and readers. There are numerous examples of songwriters writing poetry and verse in notebooks as children or teenagers and this forming the basis for their future songwriting. Chuck Berry, in an interview with Flanagan (1987, p.80), recalls how he wrote poems as a child. Lou Reed's synthesis of poetry and rock'n'roll was inspired by poet Delmore Schwartz, who taught Reed at Syracuse. Punk innovator Richard Hell wrote poetry long before he became a rock lyricist. Paul Simon has spoken of how he has been influenced by Derek Walcott, Seamus Heaney, Philip Larkin and John Ashbery (Zollo, 2003). Suzanne Vega has talked of how she got ideas from 'studying poetry' referring to the influence of Sylvia Plath 'because of the way she uses language, the way she puts words together. She uses language almost sculpturally' (in Zollo, 2003, p.569). Billy Bragg recounted how he became a songwriter as a direct result of the recognition he received at school when a poem he had written at the age of 12 was read out on a local radio station. This spurred him to continue writing poetry and he recalled that 'by the time I

left school at 16, I had several notebooks full of lyrics; that summer, helpfully, my mate next door taught me how to play the guitar and, as a result, in 1977, I was in the right place at the right time when punk rock happened' (Bragg, 2012).

Creating songs and writing poetry involve common compositional skills and techniques, as acknowledged by both poets and songwriters during interviews. Richard Hell was a published poet before becoming a songwriter and his work as a poet was very useful when he came to write song lyrics:

> I had learned a lot about writing by the time I had started to write lyrics – I used that. Lyric writing was different from any other form of writing I'd done but in some sense on some level writing is writing, and your values as a writer are going to be applied to what you do. So that definitely contributed to my abilities as a lyricist (Hell, 2013)

PJ Harvey has also spoken of the importance of writing lyrics in these terms:

> I work at words quite separately from music. I feel for myself that I can produce better words in that way, putting all of my concentration into making them work alone, without the support of music to begin with. So, in some respects working on them as poetry, although I don't have the strengths that the poet does. But, even working towards them as poetry will produce a stronger set of words that I might take into a song. If you want to be good at anything you have to work hard at it. It doesn't just fall from the sky. And, I work everyday at trying to improve my writing and I really enjoy it. Nothing fascinates me more than putting words together and seeing how a collection of words can produce quite a profound effect (Harvey, 2011).

Despite these, and many other comments from musicians, scholars of poetry seem far more willing to discuss these links than musicologists, certainly judging by the number of books about poetry that include discussion of song lyrics when compared to the way musicologists tend to downplay lyrics. Dai Griffiths is one of the few musicologists to draw on theories and philosophies of poetry when writing about music (2003, 2012, 2013), emphasising the importance of understanding how lyrics occupy the verbal space of the song, and proposing different ways of transcribing lyrics as prose or paragraph, using varied font sizes and a 'hard right margin' in addition to the hard left margin used in the presentation of poetry. For all the

richness of Griffiths's musicological detail, for us his transcriptions offer key insight into the way song lyrics encapsulate a song's architectural structure.

To briefly summarise our points in this section, the intersections between poetry and song lyrics can be characterised in three main ways. First, poetry and song lyrics are not lived and experienced as separate entities by listeners and musicians. Poets listen to, read and are influenced by song lyrics. In turn, songwriters read, listen to and are influenced by poets. Audiences listen to, read, enjoy and interpret both poetry and song lyrics without dividing types of verse into separate domains. Second, the practices adopted when composing poetry and writing song lyrics are similar and share many techniques in the use of words as sound, in structuring according to the metre, beat, rhyme and rhythm of words. Third, poetry and song are similar in the way that they deploy repetition – an issue we now address in a little more depth.

Patterns of repetition

Jeffrey Wainwright begins his *Poetry, The Basics* with a discussion of the pleasures of using language, exploring how young children enjoy rhyme and repetition and connecting this to the way 'rhythm, rhyme, repetition of word-sound and phrase [are] deployed in just the same way as part of the pleasure' in the Abba song 'Mamma Mia'. He then moves quickly to the poetry of Gertrude Stein, linking high art and low pop through their common use of the 'resources of language, especially recurrence' (2011, p.3). Like Paulin and Fenton, cited earlier, he hears everyday poetic repetition as part of an inclusive human history whereby 'the anticipated pleasure of a sound or shape being repeated – have been used in the pre-literate, oral tradition of all societies for dances, riddles, spells, prayers, games, stories, and histories' (p.3). Wainwright highlights the importance of children in maintaining this tradition and observes that 'their precision has been honed by repetition and the fact that the playground can be a very critical arena' (p.11).

Wainwright is not alone in viewing repetition as fundamental to poetry. Repetition is also essential to the architecture of the built environment, and repetition is integral to music. Repetition is a quality and a technique that is stressed by authors who produce guidance books, blogs and videos on lyric writing (see for example Davis, 1986; Pattison, 2010). Yet, repetition in music is a quality that has posed problems for many musicologists and popular music critics, particularly those anxiously attempting to refute or move beyond Adorno's modernist critique of repetition as aesthetically worthless, politically oppressive and

subjectively regressive. Adorno (1976) supported his claims about the repetitive structure of songs with reference to books that advocated various types of repetition when offering advice to aspiring commercial songwriters – a characteristic still to be found in numerous books and websites purporting to give guidance on 'how to write a hit song.'

A rather straightforward response to Adorno's modernist critique and its populist variants ('it all sounds the same') is to argue for the pleasures of repetition – a theme common in theoretical accounts of the value of electronic dance music (see for example Garcia, 2005), and current in celebrations of postmodernist and minimalist aesthetics. A similar theme can be found in psychological and neuroscientific accounts of music, whereby repetition is given a positive gloss via the claim that it fulfils a psychic or physiological need (see for example Levitin, 2007; Margulis, 2014).

A more nuanced response to Adorno can be found in the writings of Robert Fink (2005) and Richard Middleton (1983). Both draw on psychoanalytical theories when acknowledging the appeal and potentially oppressive impact of repetition. Both accept that Adorno might have a point: Middleton suggesting that there is a process of active struggle against the standardising, repetitive imperatives of capitalist production rather than straightforward imposition on passive music listeners; Fink finding parallels between advertising, minimalism and consumer culture more generally and acknowledging collusion: 'We repeated ourselves into this culture. We may … be able to repeat ourselves out' (2005, p.235).

Philosopher Peter Kivy, discussing repetition in western art music, challenges the concern with repetition as a 'problem', suggesting that a 'means-end distinction' has been imposed on music (apparent in the above sources) in which repetition in music has to be explained – as a psychological or neurological impulse, or an imperative of capitalist consumer culture. For Kivy 'repetition is the means of grasping pattern' (p.353) and, by implication, repetition is the means of creating pattern. Arguing that music is a 'decorative art', Kivy offers his own analogy with architecture as a way of refuting any suggestion that listening to music as pattern could be deemed trivialising. He asks his readers to 'forget about music for a moment and take a good look at the Alhambra. Unlike the Sistine's Ceiling's, its adornments are "merely" decorative. They are also "merely" breathtaking, "merely" exalted, "merely" magnificent, "merely" sublime' (p358). Kivy is writing about instrumental, non-programmatic western art music (or 'absolute music'). But his conclusion about repetition as pattern is highly pertinent to most music (other

than a very narrow western modernist repertoire): 'The music which I have been discussing does not merely contain repetition as an important feature, but as a defining feature' (p.359).

As a number of writers have observed, repetition is also a defining feature of African-American music. James Snead argues that western culture privileges progress and growth and denies a value to repetition, privileging 'difference as development'. Snead observes that 'the apparently linear upward striving course of human endeavour exists within nature's ineluctable circularity' (1981, p.147). Ingrid Monson (1999) draws from Snead, amongst other writers, to highlight the ethnocentric and elitist assumptions about repetition apparent in Adorno's argument. She argues for the value of riffs and repetition as patterns that allow for intercultural and international dialogue - a point that is surely obvious to musicians and songwriters.

Like Wainwright's approach to poetry, Kivy's philosophy of music and Monson's location of riffs within intercultural dialogue, the study of the novel also has no anxieties about repetition. In his *Language of Fiction*, Lodge argued that 'the perception of repetition is the first step towards offering an account of the way language works in extended literary texts, such as novels' (2002, p.86). For Lodge repetition is crucial for understanding the writings of novelists, notably Joseph Conrad, D H Lawrence, Ernest Hemingway, Martin Amis and Charlotte Brontë.

Repetition is evidently a major part of popular song and is a pre-requisite of all popular songs. Yet, many musicians are also apprehensive about repetition. Stephen Webber (no date), producer and teacher at Berklee College of Music, has spoken of his experience of working with younger bands and musicians in the early years of songwriting and observed how they will often attempt to 'jettison repetition' believing (like so many of their peers) that they are doing something 'different', but ending up with rambling, unfocused, unstructured so-called 'through composed' songs. Webber reflects further on this unwillingness to embrace repetition:

> The stumbling block is we've all been traumatised by repetition. There are songs that we hate on the radio, by artists that we can't stand, and the chorus beats us over the head. And if you really don't like Britney Spears or the Black Eyed Peas or Lady Gaga or something and you hear one of these songs that's a big hit, and it's got a repetitious chorus, it's easy to mistake that what's annoying you is repetition. Repetition is not annoying. Annoying things are annoying. Repetition is an enhancer; it will enhance whatever it is brought to bear upon. So, if there's something that's really great, that you really dig, you want it to repeat.

Like Webber, songwriter Darren Hayman – solo artist and singer with the band Hefner - was unequivocally positive when asked about repetition in his songs, responding, 'Love it, bring it on!' Reflecting further, he explained how he consciously uses repetition in his songs:

> Usually with me the word No or Yes, I love treating those words as a mantra as they are in life. I love Beckett and all those things. Life is repetition. I am often singing about ennui and boredom, what better way to express that than through repetition (Hayman, 2014).

In Hefner's 'Hymn For the Cigarettes', Hayman emphasises the elements of a relationship in trouble by the use of repetition to signify a range of different emotions. He repeats many familiar words ('smoking', 'nothing', 'love') imbuing them with an intense yet absurd resonance; he also plays ambivalently on smoking as a repetitive behaviour and guilty pleasure: 'But I love to see the girls smoke in my bed/ I love to see the girls smoke in my bed/ I love to see the girls smoke in my bed'. Here repetition conveys both the mundane and something more obsessive, the absurd recurrent habits of ordinary life captured with lines like, 'B&H remind me of not giving up but giving in/ B&H remind me of not giving up but giving in/ B&H remind me of not giving up but giving in'. As the song moves through conflicting emotions, the vocal melody and the expressive inflections of the singing make the words appealing at the same time as their repetitions accentuate the ways that things are not quite working as they should in the relationship.

A failing relationship is also the subject of Metronomy's 'I'm Aquarius', written by Joe Mount, the singer narrating the tensions between two people with different (and presumably incompatible) star signs. The song starts and the chorus occurs in a familiar way, but with no repeats or particular emphasis, so that – unusually for a chorus - it actually passes in the song more in the way a verse might. But then, at two minutes in, the mini chorus occurs again but this time the phrase 'I'm Aquarius' is repeated eighteen times. In terms of the structural conventions of the popular song, this repeat occurs far more times than is usual: the song has been running for over two minutes with no obvious chorus, but now the chorus phrase feels hypnotically insistent. The many repeats of 'I'm Aquarius' offer an absurd and ironic commentary on both the meaningless of the idea of astrology and the state of the relationship. As Ben Beaumont-Thomas wrote in a review of this song:

> It's perhaps their greatest song yet, a deftly told tale of the various poisons that seep into

modern relationships: passive aggression, spite, narcissism and an emotional articulacy that paradoxically means a total lack of communication. "Never saw just how much you thought I meant to me", Mount raps, taking the language of love song and twisting it into baffling anti-logic. He eventually lapses into a desperate repetition of the title, blaming the stars instead of himself (2014, no page).

Repetition in popular song is not always so semantically nuanced, and is often architecturally grounded in the call-and-response pattern that forms the backbone to songs like Otis Redding's 'Fa-Fa-Fa-Fa-Fa (Sad Song)', where Redding plays with the repeats of the title phrase, singing it through and then, with 'your turn', having the horn section repeat the phrase back. There is also a dramatic intensity introduced by the way that the almost wordless chorus articulates a feeling that the singer cannot fully express (the intensity of emotions by describing them in words), so language is reduced to the inchoate repetition of 'Fa-Fa-Fa-Fa-Fa'.

The inability to eloquently articulate love and desire beyond blunt repetition is a characteristic of numerous songs. PJ Harvey uses musical and lyrical repetition in 'Rid Of Me' to articulate an obsessional love: 'lick my legs, I'm on fire' is repeated constantly, along with the phrase 'don't you wish you never never met her', within a blues-based structured that references the grooving, sexual riffing of John Lee Hooker tracks like 'Boogie Chillen' while deliberately playing them in a much more aggressive and mechanistic manner. The imperative lover's desire 'I want you' is repeated extensively in numerous songs with that title, notably Lennon's and McCartney's 'I Want You (She's So Heavy)' – Bob Dylan's 'I Want You', Elvis Costello's 'I Want You' and Joan Jett's 'I Want You'. These are examples of a characteristic that Friedwald identified in the lyrics of Cole Porter, where lyrical and musical repetition 'ties into the emotional concept of obsession' (2002, p.250).

Writing in 1966 in *Aspen* magazine, shortly before the appearance of the first Velvet Underground album, Lou Reed articulated a more arch, knowing and ironic approach to repetition, and described two examples of its use that he believed were significant:

> Have you ever listened to 'You've Lost That Lovin Feeling', where the girls are saying oohhhh and suddenly, naturally, just right, come in with 'Baby', against Bill Medley's building vocal line. Repetition. Every head in America must know the last three drum choruses of 'Dawn' by the Four Seasons. Paradiddles. Repetition (Reed, 1966, p.3).

Here (notwithstanding the rather overripe language of the time that Reed employs) he highlights the value of repeating things as homage to a glorious 'dumbness', valorising the prelinguistic pleasures that it echoes and invokes. Reed and his fellow musicians in the Velvet Underground were also aware of repetition as art form, drawing from the minimalist aesthetics associated with strands of visual art, performance, poetry and music that had emerged in New York City during the late 1950s and early 1960s, a creative moment that was (as Fink emphasised) in step with mass produced consumer culture. Reed recognised this concurrence in the work of The Velvet Underground's mentor and producer, Andy Warhol:

> Andy Warhol's movies are so repetitious sometimes, so so beautiful. Probably the only interesting films made in the U. S. Rock-and-roll films. Over and over and over. Reducing things to their final joke. Which is so pretty (Ibid, p.3).

In his songs, Reed made extensive use of repetition as a way of creating architecture to articulate a type of emotional disconnection. 'Sister Ray' is leavened with layers of different kinds of repetition to support its narrative, which, according to Reed, 'has eight characters in it and this guy gets killed and nobody does anything. The situation is a bunch of drag queens taking some sailors home with them, shooting up on smack and having this orgy when the police appear' (in Levin, 2002). The officially released version is just under 15 minutes of the same riff, which the band play progressively more manically, while determinedly remaining on the same musical pattern. Yet, that length is somewhat arbitrary when considered with live performances and the three versions captured on *The Bootleg Series Vol. 1: The Quine Tapes*, which clock in at 38:00, 24:03 and 28:43 respectively. As well as this, there are key lyric motifs ('couldn't hit it sideways', 'searching for my mainline', 'just like Sister Ray said'), which are repeated throughout, creating an emotional numbness that frames the social disconnection that Reed evokes.

Far removed from Reed's use of pop forms to create a bleakly ironic mood of detached alienation, repetition has also been used in a more conventionally ironic manner through lyrics, such as in Hoagy Carmichael's 'I Get Along Without You Very Well'. The key to the meaning of the lyric is that way that the positivity of the title phrase is undercut throughout the song – every time the singer tells the addressee how well they are getting on without them it becomes more and more clear that the opposite is true. In Willie Nelson's 'Crazy' the notion of the singer being

'crazy' in so many different ways about their love is made stronger and stronger by the amount of times the word is used; of course, the sense of the word's meaning in itself is increased the more it gets repeated – the more the singer tells us he is crazy, the easier it is to believe.[5]

These two examples highlight the mutability of language – the way a repeated word can change meaning according to the contexts in which it is repeated within a song's narrative. Before exploring ambiguity in a little more detail, we conclude this section by briefly summarising the points we have been making here about repetition. First, repetition may be used simply to emphasise the importance of a point – 'don't go, please stay' or 'free Nelson Mandela!' But the repetition of a phrase can operate in more subtle and nuanced ways. It may carry philosophical expressions of the repetitiveness of life, convey a sense of the recurrent habits that sour relationships, or articulate the obsessive desires that enliven yet fracture relationships. Here, repetition may imbue the familiar with a sense of the strange, the profound, the absurd or the erotic. Second, repetition may be used in a more knowing, intellectual and artful manner, indebted to the use of repeated forms and motifs in visual, sonic and performance art, apparent in the works of musicians such as Brian Eno, Björk, Laurie Anderson and bands such as the Velvet Underground, Talking Heads and REM. Third, repetition is used for the pleasure of the recurrent, repeated, seemingly 'nonsense' sound word, the legacies of our childhood fascination with rhymes and chants that appear in numerous hits songs such as Abba's 'Mamma Mia', The Beatles' 'Hey Jude' and Lady Gaga's 'Bad Romance'. In many songs, repetition works across all of these distinctions – adding profundity to a familiar word, playing with art forms and being a pop hook.

Clarity, ambiguity and the protean poetics of pop

Words that are combined together into song lyrics or fiction are no different to words we use in everyday life. Words come to us loaded with inherent ambiguities, multiple meanings and semantic associations that have been built up over years of cultural use. The misheard lyric is not very different to the misheard remark in an everyday encounter. Misunderstanding a song lyric is not very far removed from misconstruing something said in a conversations with loved ones, family and friends, or in the workplace or at the bar.

The mutability and ambiguity of language is something that songwriters are acutely aware of – they may deploy it playfully in deliberately ambiguous lyrics or in the use of double entendre or

they may attempt to overcome it, particularly if creating a message song. Ambiguity – the play with it, or the struggle against it - is fundamental to the way songs are constructed.

Songs may be created to convey more than just straightforward semantic meanings but precise, unambiguous responses: if the architecture of a dance song or love song or protest song is faulty then no one is going to dance or love or protest. The songwriter may also attempt to compose a 'message' in as direct way as possible – Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five sang such a song, appropriately titled 'The Message', which perhaps contained echoes of the Philadelphia All Star's 'Let's Clean Up the Ghetto' (1977). Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff had composed that unambiguous song, based on one insistent repeating riff, with a particular social purpose, one that Gamble supported with the formation of his Universal Companies, a not-for-profit, community-centred organization to help rebuild inner city Philadelphia.

We are, in part, back to Webb's recommendation that songs should be built in such a way that they are not misunderstood. Darren Hayman is emphatic about intentionality and intervention in his material:

> As a songwriter I also feel like a director. Telling the listener where to look or listen: right here is the kernel or point of the song. To make sure you know that I will sing it ten times; I enjoy being emphatically clear. If I am singing about being lonely then I want the listener in no doubt as to that is what the song is about (Hayman, 2014)

Any potential for misunderstanding can be a cue for the songwriter to intervene in order to clarify the meanings in their work. Jarvis Cocker has on several occasions spoken about his song 'Common People', explaining the narrative and highlighting the important political dimension of the song. Talking in an interview about the main character – a wealthy foreign exchange student - he explains that he was 'put off by some of her attitudes […] she was going on about wanting to live in Hackney "with the common people" and I thought "that's a bit much"' (Cocker, 2012b). Her 'slumming it' did not sit well with the broadly working class and left-leaning Cocker. As well as this, in Cocker's (2012a) collection of song lyrics, *Mother, Brother, Lover*, he has included almost forty pages of commentary, where his editorial voice engages in a dialogue with the songs' biographical details and meanings. On a more overtly political level, Smiths' guitarist Johnny Marr angrily intervened when UK Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron declared himself to be a fan of the band when he chose 'This Charming Man' as one of his Desert Island

Discs on BBC Radio. In response, Marr (2010) tweeted: 'David Cameron, stop saying that you like The Smiths, no you don't. I forbid you to like it.'

In contrast, songwriters - like poets and novelists – may knowingly encourage interpretations made possible by crafted ambiguities, aware of how reception is integral to a song's meanings. This is not to suggest that interpretation is infinite. Umberto Eco has stressed the 'limits of the act of interpretation' (1990, p.6) and Philip Tagg's (2012) comprehensive semiotics of music has demonstrated the way listeners understand the meanings of musical signifiers within specific circumstances and contexts. Musicians, of course, are well aware of this. Michael Stipe has observed: 'The listener is outside of the creative process … [but] … becomes a peripheral force of that creative process because they enter themselves into the music and they interpret it to fit their lives and to fit their needs' (in Zollo, 2003, p.633). Stipe followed up this comment by explaining how 'Me in Honey' is 'open to interpretation' to the extent that it 'could be very loving, or it can be kind of nasty', this being 'a diametrically opposed emotional thing that can and does occur' (p.635). Hence, Stipe is aware that the audience will sense how the ambiguities crafted into the lyric will connect with a listener's experiences of real tensions and paradoxes in their emotional lives.

A sense of reception is also apparent in the creation and performance of songs that deliver an ambiguous 'message' with an awareness of how this will connect with their audience's collective experience. As Peter Mercer-Taylor has written:

> At just the moment that the label 'Generation X' was entering popular parlance, Kurt Cobain—who publicly lionized R.E.M.—was equipping this generation with a lyrical style suited to its own namelessness, in which coherence, comprehensibility, and denotative meaning in general were called into question at every turn (2006, p.459).

Pete Seeger singing the lyric to 'We Shall Overcome' was not useful to this audience; the rights and wrongs in Cobain's world were better framed by the ironic protest of the deliberately equivocal words of 'Smells Like Teen Spirit'.

Ambiguity may also be achieved through the adoption of characters and performing personas. Mick Jagger spoke about how, as his work as a writer and front person developed, he got 'to a point where you are slightly more sophisticated when you write. You don't want to always write

lyrics from your own point of view. You want to be able to assume other characters' (Flanagan, 1987 p179). This is clearly evident in some of the most acclaimed Rolling Stones material from the late sixties on; famously, for example, in 'Sympathy for the Devil', where Jagger articulates terrible events on the world stage by adopting the voice of St Nick himself. This way of writing continued through albums like 'Let It Bleed', where Jagger's lyric voice and persona overtly inhabited that of the Boston Strangler in 'Midnight Rambler' and, less obviously, in songs like 'Gimme Shelter' and 'You Can't Always Get What You Want' where he speaks with the voice of a louche, drug-fuelled dandy.

Ambiguity is not only produced through the arbitrary and protean character of language, and adoption of personas. It is structured into the musical and verbal architecture of songs, and the worlds evoked by the song and the way that a character and singer inhabit the song. This has been notable in the varied renditions of 'My Funny Valentine', originally a show song composed by Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart for *Babes in Arms* which premiered in April 1937. As Alan Stanbridge has pointed out, attempting to dispel misunderstandings and narrow interpretations of the song, it was no typical love song and in its original setting was 'meant to be condescending and insulting' (2004, p.96). It was sung by lead female character Billie Smith, a '"colour-blind" opportunist', to the lead male character Valentine LaMar, 'a principled anti-racist', and conveyed ambivalence about a 'reconciliation to the lover's quarrel' (2004, p.97). As Stanbridge observes:

> Hart's finely balanced lyric attempts to portray the defensive petulance of a lover accused
> of opportunistic prejudice, in the context of a plot which pits southern racism against
> northern liberalism (p.98).

Friedwald homes in on the fact that the song went largely unnoticed after its initial performances. In his case study of the song, Friedwald makes only passing and brief references to the song in *Babes in Arms* and boldly declares that the song 'was really born when Frank Sinatra recorded it in November 1953' (2003, p.356). Sinatra's rendition omitted the verse with the most condescending tone, and his version has become the standard for many subsequent vocal performances which have lost the original resonances highlighted by Stanbridge. The dropped lyrics allowed singers more opportunities, the ambiguities identified by Friedwald in these terms:

> As constructed by Rodgers and Hart, it's a road map of infinite possibilities … By making
>   both the words and the music so ambiguous, that is to say, so open to interpretation,

Rodgers and Hart insured that no one would ever run out of ways to approach 'Valentine'. It's in major and it's in minor, it's slow and it's fast, it's a romantic song with a comic twist (2002, p.371).

The original architecture created by Rodgers and Hart has been modified by subsequent singers, notably Sinatra, to stretch and tease new meanings and emphases. Yet, it is still the same song, in the same way that the Byrds' renditions of Dylan's songs - cutting many verses, changing emphasis, playing with pitch, rhythm and harmony – are recognisable.

William Empson argued that 'the machinations of ambiguity are among the very roots of poetry' (1953, p.3). We borrow from Empson to argue that the architecture of ambiguity is fundamental to the practice of songwriting and the social life of songs. It is the play with a song's ambiguities that opens up possibilities, accommodating different types of structural modification yet still retaining its enduring characteristics. The Patti Smith group's version of 'Gloria' is an example of a song where the original serves as the basis for a new version that is radically altered in structure, scope and intention, yet remains the same song. In her version, 'Gloria' starts with 'Jesus died for somebody's sins/ but not mine,' with Smith continuing to articulate her impressionistic, poetic lines while the group vamp over the opening of what is recognisably a version of Them's 'Gloria.' In architectural terms, it is as if we are entering the main building through a newly constructed entrance or atrium, at once in a new place but still joined and fundamentally related to the original structure itself; this new introduction to 'Gloria' is a sung version of the poem 'Oath,' that Smith had written and published previously. Nonetheless, the greater whole remains the song 'Gloria', as written by Van Morrison, in spite of innumerable lyrical and structural changes.

Final thoughts on songs and buildings

We have used the metaphor of the song as architecture to argue for the importance of songwriting and to intervene in debates about song lyrics. We have used this analogy in an exploratory manner as a way of developing a non-technical approach to describing and analysing songs and songwriting practice and as a way of broadening writing about music, seeking to connect musicology with other disciplines. We have drawn the idea of song architecture from the voices and practices of popular songwriters and highlighted the patterns created by combining words and music, through the art of repetition and in struggling to impose structure on the in-built

linguistic opportunities for clarity and ambiguity. We are emphatically not presenting this as a systematic model, but as a way of understanding how songwriting practice is central to the way songs are performed and received.

It is worth pointing out that when architects plan and design their proposals for buildings, they do not present one diagram drawn from one perspective (as in a traditional music score or lead sheet), but multiple views of a potential building with varying degrees of abstraction and detail. No one sketch or diagram could capture the building, but it provides an insight and understanding of the structure, seen from different viewpoints. Similar principles might apply to understanding the architecture of the song – those elements that endure regardless of whether someone adds an extension, changes the front door, or puts on a coat of paint. Independent from performances, recordings and sheet music, a song can be heard, seen and performed from partial and varied perspectives. As recognised by musicians, performers and listeners, this is the enduring architecture of a song – you can even dance to it!

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[1] We refer to the quip that 'writing about music is like dancing about architecture' attributed to various musicians including Thelonius Monk, Elvis Costello, Frank Zappa, Laurie Anderson, although its provenance cannot be firmly accredited.

[2] A notable exception is Joe Bennett's research into collaborative processes of songwriting, mainly in commercial chart-oriented pop music. For many insights into the collaborative process of songwriting, and for astute observations on the limits of taking what songwriters say at face value, see Bennett, 2014.

[3] For an example of such an approach, based on an analysis of sheet music as an unproblematic equivalent of the song, see Alec Wilder (1990).

[4] This article builds upon research conducted for Astor and Negus (2014), and we occasionally use quotations from critics or musicians that we have also cited in this chapter.

[5] For further discussion of how the same words repeated in a chorus 'must continue to be relevant after the song's plot has progressed through additional verses', see Jocelyn Neal (2007, p.45).