Pop/Rock

In this week’s response, I will use a couple of different essays in an attempt to investigate more general methodological issues involved in the emergent state of pop/rock analysis.

Part I

David Temperley (2007) examines non-resolving non-chord-tones in order to shed some light on the “melodic-harmonic divorce” in rock music. By doing so, Temperley finds that, as opposed to common-practice music, pitch organization in rock music is stratified; in his words, “there are different frameworks for the melody and accompaniment.” (Temperley, p. 328) The origins for this independence lie, for Temperley, in the influence of the blues in rock’s genesis. He presents a few passing examples from blues and soul to support this claim. While I am unable to back this assertion with loads of empirical evidence, I would like to point to conceptions espoused by two other authors interested in music of Africa and the African diaspora that would support this understanding.

In his landmark 1983 article, “Black Music as an Art Form,” Olly Wilson lays out basic criteria of African and African-American conceptual approaches to music making. Most pertinent to the melodic-harmonic divorce: “There is a tendency to create musical forms in which antiphonal or call-and-response musical structures abound. These antiphonal structures frequently exist simultaneously on a number of different architectonic levels.” (Wilson, p. 3) I think this accurately presents an aesthetic motivation for the divorce, and is especially relevant for Temperley’s loose-verse/tight-chorus paradigm.
Similarly, the concept of the metric matrix from David Locke’s discussion of African rhythm could apply to the stratification Temperley suggests. Locke posits “the ‘metric matrix’ as a heuristic concept that tracks patterns of accentuation … [opening] for listeners the opportunity to creatively hear music of this style.”(Locke, p. 48) The stratification of rhythmic and metric levels allows a listener to explore the musical polysemy present in a repetitive, interlocking set of patterns. Though more complex in its African metric framework, I think this concept is an apt one for the melodic-harmonic divorce in which a performer is able to present (or a listener is able to experience) the musical structure’s pitch domain in a variety of ways that manifest themselves in the difference between the melodic and harmonic materials.

These examples bring up my main issue with the formal studies of pop/rock music we encountered this week. The approaches often rely on the tried-and-true methodologies meant for common-practice music, but I often leave myself wondering if the influences of other traditions are marginalized in these approaches. (I realize there is some selection bias at play here, since we were reading only music theoretical papers and not those focusing on pop music in its social realm.) Are there perhaps other analytical strategies that would be more appropriate to the pop/rock sphere that is so reliant on aesthetics of the African diaspora? Would an article like Christopher Doll’s (2009) investigation into the role of transformation in rock music be better served within the context of “Signifyin’” that has perhaps shed more appropriate light onto jazz, blues, and hip-hop traditions?
Part II

Throughout all of these articles, I found myself wondering, why is it that music theorists choose to analyze popular music? The approaches are almost as numerous as the scholars themselves, but I believe a few possible reasons motivate and permeate the literature. One reason is that the analysts like the music and want to get to know it better. Another is that they are familiar with a particular band or sub-genre and want to share it with the community. Could it be that academics are trying to prove the aesthetic worth or authentic value of something they find pleasing? More cynically, I find myself thinking that many pop/rock academics are trying to validate a music by means of justification through an established critical perspective or analytical methodology. In their attempt to subvert the specter of Adorno’s dismissal of popular culture, some analysts champion some of the same modernist, structuralist values. For instance, most of the articles in the “(Per)Form in(g) Rock” MTO special issue scrutinize formal elements in pop/rock music. I suppose part of the reason for this likely stems from the teleological tendency in some rock music (especially in the cumulative form, as noted by Spicer [2004]). But I’m reminded of many of the articles we read earlier in the course concerning theory’s relationship with positivism, objectivity, etc., especially in regards to the first few decades of music theory’s life as a new discipline. There was an institutional prerogative to couch analyses in scientific terms in order to, as Maus (1993 and 2004) notes, compensate for the perceived femininity of music as a scholarly discipline by hardening up their enterprise by taking control of the music by using “scientistic” technologies. Similarly, I think that many theorists looking at popular music take pains to put their experiences of pop/rock music in technical terminology to bolster and re-masculinate their worth.
Part III

For each of these songs, it is not enough to merely look at the chords to determine the functionality of the harmonies, though I don’t believe there to be much ambiguity in either “Blurred Lines” or “Get Lucky.” In the former, the hypermetrical placement of G on strong beats, solidified by the descending bass octaves at the end of each large-scale phrase from D – G suggests that G is indeed I, with the bass moving from 5 to 1.

“Get Lucky” (Bm–D–F#m–E) is perhaps a bit more ambiguous, but again, I think the chords’ placement in the metrical hierarchy suggests i–III–v–IV. Two other reasons to support this assertion.

1) In a hypermetric level, the bass arpeggiates the Bm chord fairly obviously and usually without much embellishment. Also, the bass line consistently embellishes the move from IV to I, creating emphasis on the plagal motion. As noted in a variety of literature, but most empirically in Temperley’s article on the IV chord,1 cadences in popular music are just as reliant on plagal motion as they are on dominant motion, even tending towards the IV – I cadence. Similarly, the progression V-IV-I is common in popular music since the 1950s, likely stemming from the blues tradition. Even with extended chords, and a modally inflected dominant, this move is unmistakable here.

2) This is supported in the final section of the song by the melody as well, with the repeated melody centered on B, with stepwise resolutions to the tonic note commonplace beginning at ~3:25.

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