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ON THE APPEARANCE OF THE COMEDY LP, 1957–1973

by

DAVID MICHAEL McCARTHY

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Music in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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On the Appearance of the Comedy LP, 1957–1973

by

David Michael McCarthy

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Music in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

On the Appearance of the Comedy LP, 1957–1973

by

David Michael McCarthy

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Many observers of contemporary comedy in the United States during the 1960s referred to musical aspects of extra-musical performances. Comedy LP records furnish important artifacts for the study of the musical appearances these observers produced for themselves. Where contemporaries described appearances characterized by printable words and polemics as "satirical," the musical appearances discussed in this dissertation can instead be described as "comic": instead of mocking persons or ideas, they show people and things becoming involved with one another in absurdly triumphant ways. These two different sorts of appearances correspond to two different uses for comedy in a class society, one consolidating a hegemonic middle-class "consensus" against ridiculous adversaries, the other exploring surprising potentials in even the most ridiculous circumstances. A history of antagonistic ways of listening to sixties comedy can be read as a history of the making of class relations in an advanced capitalist society.

This dissertation discusses four case studies selected with two complementary aims: to produce an appearance of the comedy LP as a densely varied form and to produce knowledge of the political stakes involved in historical conflicts over formal appearances. In each study, a musical appearance becomes involved in the making of class. The jazz critic Nat Hentoff insisted on musical appearances of the iconic sixties comedian Lenny Bruce over and against what he

derided as "liberal" readings for printable messages. His chief artifacts were comedy LP records. Elaine May and Mike Nichols—television stars, dinner club sensations, and luminaries of the most popularly influential improvisatory theater in the United States—used a tangled musical texture associated with affluent social circles. By invoking descriptions of the self as she might have found them in her widely reported readings of Freud, May seems to undermine the ethical significance of the tangled texture as previously determined by Katharine Hepburn's films. The "blue record" or "party record" produced by and for black Americans in the 1970s was advertised in middle-class periodicals as a genre characterized by "dirty words." But *Tramp Time Volume 1* (La Val LVP 901, 1967), a purportedly early example of the party record featuring an itinerant Midwestern performer named Jimmy "Mr. Motion" Lynch, instead seems characterized most importantly by features of blues music. The Firesign Theatre, a Californian comedy troupe popular with the "dormitory debauchee set," performed a peculiar involvement in history using a quasi-musical style based upon the characteristics of radio as a broadcast medium. This radiophonic style places observers "inside" history after the perceived closures of 1968.

Art-critical, archival, and philological methods shape this dissertation's argument. Formalistic descriptions based upon vocabularies critically adapted from modern and contemporary writings produce "abstract" appearances. Artifacts collected through archival research ground these abstract appearances as "historically possible appearances." As a formalism, this historical method uses its thickening self-referential vocabulary to invent its own critical universe. As a historical method, this formalism produces knowledge of appearances which, because they are grounded in activities, leave no self-contained artifacts.

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This dissertation has been shaped by the training I received from the faculty at the Graduate Center (CUNY) and the University of Minnesota. I am grateful to the faculties of both institutions. Special thanks is due to the members of my dissertation committee—Sumanth Gopinath, Amy Herzog, Anne Stone, and Jane Sugarman—who read and provided important feedback on drafts of this dissertation. My mentor Marshall Berman (1940–2013) passed away

during the early stages of this project. I have had many occasions to think of him as I completed it. To his loved ones I say, as he often said to me, shalom.

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An earlier version of chapter two appears as "Textured Voices and the Performance of Ethical Life in the Case of the Laff Box (1966)," *Twentieth Century Music* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 109–137. Substantial portions of this article have been reproduced here with the permission of Cambridge University Press.

Above all, I thank my family. I dedicate this dissertation to my mother, my first teacher, Catherine Rose McCarthy.

It is an old saying but a wise one: this dissertation's faults are my own, but for its merits, I owe a debt to all of you.

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ARCHIVES, COLLECTIONS, and ABBREVIATIONS

ASRP "Adventures in Science" Radio Programs. National Museum of American History, Smithsonian.

ABD Allen B. DuMont Collection. National Museum of American History, Smithsonian.

ACR Ampex Corporation Records. Manuscripts Division of the Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University.

DOC Daphne Oram Collection. Special collections, Goldmsiths College (University of London).

GHC George H. Clark Radioana Collection. National Museum of American History, Smithsonian.

JHN James H. Nicholson Amateur Radio Collection. National Museum of American History, Smithsonian.

JCR Jean Clairmook Radio Scrapbook. National Museum of American History, Smithsonian.

LVA La Val Records archive. Private collection, care of Vincent Taylor, Benton Harbor, MI.

LBCB Lenny Bruce Collection. Robert D. Farber Archives and Special Collections, Brandeis University.

LPA Library of the Performing Arts, New York Public Library.

NWA N.W. Ayer Collection. National Museum of American History, Smithsonian.

OFR Old Fashioned Revival Hour Collection. Archive of Recorded Sound, Stanford University.

PRF Pacifica Radio Foundation Audio Archive, Los Angeles.

RPF Records of the Pacifica Foundation. Broadcasting Archives, University of Maryland (College Park).

NEWSPAPERS

American Weekly
Baltimore Sun
Eugene Register-Guard
Focus (Kalamazoo)
Glasgow Herald
Herald Tribune (New York)
Kalamazoo Gazette
Manchester Evening News
New York Daily News
New York Journal-American
New York Post
New York Times
Newark Evening News
Press (New Jersey)
San Diego Union
San Francisco Examiner
Saturday Review (New York)
Sunday News (New York)

A jest's prosperity lies in the ear […]

—Rosaline in *Love's Labour's Lost*

The important thing is to be good at learning.

—Mao Zedong, "Problems of Strategy in China's Revolutionary War" (1936)

Introduction The Musical Appearance of the Sixties Comedy LP

A musical term grounds the first of the "two great fantasies" Lenny Bruce confided in his Carnegie Hall audience at the beginning of a landmark midnight, February 1961 performance. Someone in his fantasy audience uses it to make sense of an unforeseen activity:

> He introduces me and I come out with a violin and I just cook, man. [sings like a violin, sostenuto] But for an hour, man! [sings again] Every Stravinsky, heavyweight— [sings] And I don't say a word, *zog nisht* [say nothing], and I split, y'know? They go, "What was that?" "I don't know—it's a 'concert'; he played a violin."[1]

This dissertation asks why musical aspects of extra-musical performances mattered to audiences for contemporary comedy in the 1960s. How, for example, did a comedy concert appear, for whom, and why? My focus will be on one of the decade's most recognizable forms. The comedy LP record appeared on at least three different levels during this period: as a form of commercial entertainment, as a cultural form, and, to use the formalist's sense of the term, as a "form" shaped by formalizing observers. Several events can be used to mark its advent as a commercial form. *Inside Shelley Berman* (Verve Records MGV-15003) of 1959—"the year everything changed," according to one recent history—was the first comedy LP ever to reach the status of gold record.[2] LPs by two black standup comedians, Dick Gregory and Jackie "Moms"

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[1] Lenny Bruce, *The Carnegie Hall Concert*, World Pacific CDP 7243 8 34020 2 1, CD, 1995. All translations and transcriptions are my own, except where another is cited. In places where both an original and a translation are cited, I have consulted both sources. I do not use the editorializing "sic." Where I have found unambiguously typographic errors or where I have modified an existing translation, I have edited the sources at my discretion, citing my sources but providing no further comment. In all other cases I have preserved the original grammar and spelling as important characteristics of the source.

[2] Fred Kaplan, *1959: The Year Everything Changed* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2009).

Mabley, achieved startling "crossover" success in 1961. By the end of 1962, Vaughn Meader's situation comedy featuring President Kennedy and his "First Family" had formed the basis of what was then the fastest selling phonograph record ever released. And beginning in 1963, a series of blockbuster LPs for Warner Brothers established Bill Cosby as the most widely admired U.S. comedian to have emerged between Groucho Marx and Richard Pryor. The appearance of the comedy LP as a cultural form was equally vivid. Del Close organized entire feature-length programs, including *The 'Do It Yourself' Psychoanalysis Kit* (Hanover M-5002) of 1959. Over the course of the period as a whole, performers as unalike as Bert Henry, Rudy Ray Moore, and Rusty Warren used LPs to distribute "blue comedy" while circumventing the censorship of broadcast media.[3] Lenny Bruce's notoriously unwieldy routines could be pressed on record more completely, although such a practice did not become conventional until the early seventies.[4] As for the appearance of the comedy LP as a "form" in the formalist's sense, this dissertation provides several illustrations of my meaning. My premise is that we can't understand the comedy LP as a cultural or a commercial form without being able to discuss it as an aesthetic form shaped variously by observers listening in antagonistic ways. The mass-market comedy LP left behind a surplus of artifacts, but those artifacts by themselves do not tell us how they were heard or how they appeared. Their historical appearance must be produced imaginatively. Since musical descriptions are especially prominent in extant criticism of sixties comedy, it makes sense to study that appearance using musical terms.

---

[3] Jacob Smith, "33 1/3 Sexual Revolutions per Minute," in *Spoken Word: Postwar American Phonograph Cultures* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011), 79–121.

[4] The Carnegie Hall concert, for example, first appeared in a heavily edited form as *Lenny Bruce* (United Artists UAL 9800) in 1967; it did not appear in a much more complete two-LP set until *Carnegie Hall* of 1972 (United Artists UAS 9800).

The method I will use to argue my complex case combines art-critical and historiographical approaches. This is a critical study in that I have used LP records and formalist descriptions to produce an appearance of the sixties comedy LP. It is a historical study in that I have used archival research to produce conditions where complex aspects of that appearance could have appeared for mortal observers. I speak of an "appearance" in the singular because, through all of the antagonisms I will examine, I am using one complex appearance "for us" to produce "knowledge of" historically possible experiences. My focus will be on aspects of that appearance produced through "musical ways of listening," an open-ended term I use to refer to modes of perception which themselves seem or which listen for aspects which seem appropriate to music as heard in whatever way by whomever. The contemporary who remembers dozing off listening repeatedly to a comedy LP the way some "people fall asleep at night listening to music" recalls a musical way of listening.[5] The music critic who described the "new wind blowing in the fields of American comedy" and "the New Comedy of Dissent" in terms of jazz was promoting a

[5] Steve Martin, *Born Standing Up* (New York: Scribner, 2007), 72.

musical way of listening.[6] Although some of the terms I use to describe audile appearances are visual terms etymologically ("observer," "appearance"), these terms are also used both formally and ordinarily to discuss knowledge in general ("The patient is under observation," or "It appears to me … ").[7] This commonsense manner of speaking is a good one for a historical study of audible texts because it recognizes that for all of the peculiarities of listening as a sense activity, what a person knows by listening they know not as a severed ear but as a person living with conditions, including their own embodied mind.

My critical and historical argument is worth our while because the appearance of the comedy LP was an antagonistic affair and because we, as people who share a contemporaneity with the 1960s, are still involved in its antagonisms. The comedian Lenny Bruce appears as a concert violinist. But to appreciate the bit, we must understand that this does not mean the same

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[6] Ralph J. Gleason, liner notes to Lenny Bruce, *I Am Not a Nut, Elect Me!' (Togetherness),* Fantasy 7007, LP, 1960, and *Lenny Bruce: American,* Fantasy 7011, LP, 1961. On the "New Comedy" of artists such as Shelley Berman, Bob Newhart, Nichols and May, Mort Sahl, and Jonathan Winters, see: Robert Shelton, "Mike and Elaine," *The American Weekly* (August 7, 1960); Gilbert Millstein, "The New Sick and/or Well Comic," *New York Times Magazine* (August 7, 1960), 36; Nathan Cohen, "Nichols and May," *Toronto Daily Star* (December 7, 1961); Nicholas Breckenridge, "Life, Love, & Death," *Dude* (January 1962), 23–25, 51; Ralph J. Gleason, "The Meaning of the New Comics," April 3, 1963, clipping, Box 1, Lenny Bruce Collection, Brandeis University; "new wave of American comedy," October 23, 1963, clipping, New York Public Library of the Performing Arts (LPA), MWEZ+n.c. 24837 (clippings); "Bruce's Trial," *Newsweek* (July 20, 1964), 76; Janet Coleman, *The Compass: The Story of the Improvisational Theatre that Revolutionized the Art of Comedy in America* (New York: Knopf, 1990), 241; Stephen E. Kercher, *Revel With a Cause: Liberal Satire in Postwar America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 135–138. In these sources, the New Comedy seems "more modern" than something else—a comparison between Bob Hope (1903–2003) and Bob Newhart (b. 1929) is often invoked—and appears to be characterized by authenticity, critical directness, informality, intimacy, and topicality.

[7] I don't know if there are or have been places where people do not use or have not used optical terms to describe human knowledge in general, but the usage is not an exclusively modern development. Cf., e.g., Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. F.J. Sheed, second edition, ed. Michael P. Foley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006), 219 (Book X, Chapter XXXV).

thing for all involved. Bruce takes the term "concert" as given by promoters and fantasizes about appearing as a wordless, virtuosic violinist. Why? In part because where the bewildered fantasy audience represents the Carnegie Hall audience, the actual audience feels that it knows better—both the fantasy Bruce's triumph and the actual audience's satisfaction in that triumph depend upon that condition.[8] Much the same disarticulation of the Carnegie Hall audience and its fantasy image occurs in the second of the two great fantasies: "Since this is the twelve o'clock scene, maybe the people who own this place don't even know we're here!" A "good corrupt janitor" had let everyone in after hours. The satirical aspect of Bruce's two fantasies—in both, Carnegie Hall patrons seem ridiculously out-of-the-loop—appears to be considerably less important than the comic satisfaction: the Carnegie Hall audience, looking askance at a Carnegie Hall audience, observes a whimsical modulation of its own contemporary world.

Bruce and his audience must have had the self-awareness to recognize the fantasy liaison with the good corrupt janitor as little more than wishful thinking. Wishful thinking remains. It is therefore not enough to speculate that Bruce's Carnegie Hall audience "really" belonged to a socioeconomic class other than that of most janitors. As Marx observes in a famous passage, people must become conscious of a problem before they can "fight it out."[9] In my guise as a historian of what Marx calls "ideological forms," including music and comedy, I am concerned with the particular ways people actually become conscious. Since wishes shape political problems, fantasies enter into those consciousness-making activities.

---

[8] "'He didn't do any bits?' 'No, man. He jus-swail [just wailed?] his ass to the violin.'" Bruce, *Carnegie Hall*. Of course, for Bruce's audience, the swailing of the ass to the violin *is* the bit.

[9] Karl Marx, "Marx on the History of His Opinions" (1859), in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, second edition (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1978), 3–6. See also, id., "For a Ruthless Criticism of Everything Existing" (1844), ibid., 12–15.

This is not to say that I am unconcerned with real material conditions—no one would quibble with Marx when he observes, in the same passage, that we never form opinions of people based solely on their own opinions of themselves. But if class is what is at stake in the appearance of a comedian as a wordless and virtuosic violinist, the question is not, "how should people who listened to a comedy concert be sorted into a definite sociological category?" but rather, "what did people and their musical ways of listening accomplish at particular historical junctures for the antagonistic making of class relations?" We can't explain away musical ways of listening by assigning them to the representatives of a sociological category. People don't merely "have" experiences in the way leopards have spots, not even in the way that capitalists have capital or affluent observers have "cultural capital." They seek out particular experiences, and they do so in part on the basis of their own understandings of and desires for the world. In doing so they shape the world at the levels of their own subjective experiences, of actions informed by those experiences, and of conditions shaped in part by those actions and productive of subjective experiences. They perform none of these tasks in a vacuum—in capitalist societies, for example, advertising and education permeate the trade in experience. They *actually* perform them nonetheless.

Were actions merely expressions of positions in a definite social structure, we would fully interpret them simply by defining our sociological categories—this *is* what that does, or this *is* what does that. Because actions can have unexpected effects for diverse observers, "this" has to be defined in its complex effects rather than merely in its definite source. Were musical ways of listening merely the property of a haughty and bewildered exploiting class, Bruce could only have mocked and rejected the term "concert." Instead he makes that term his own by using it as

the basis of his own comically triumphant fantasy. This is unsurprising considering that, to the pleasant surprise of affluent promoters, mass audiences enthusiastically embraced classical music in public parks and on national television during the same period.[10] Listening to classical music in a public park and listening to a comedy concert in Carnegie Hall are alike in that both weave together the vulgar and the refined. Yet even having recognized homologous activities, we don't immediately know any better than surprised promoters or absentee owners what classical music or comedy concerts did, or for that matter what the vulgar and the refined meant, for any given member of a mass audience. Bruce's fantasy is about seizing conditions imposed by the affluent and using them in an unexpected, superhuman way to produce an experience previously unheard of. But where are the real conditions grounding this meaning? The bit neither accurately describes reality nor proposes a viable course of action—Bruce calls it a "fantasy." A Carnegie Hall audience is overturned for the amusement of a Carnegie Hall audience.

Whither goest this contradictory overturning? We might want to say that because affluence was greater and more general in the United States of the postwar decades than at any point in the history of any nation before or since,[11] Bruce's bit constituted a fantasy performance of the overturning of the old elite by what seemed like a new and ever-expanding middle class. Someone might reasonably object, however, that a mass audience's adoption of classical music and adaptation of musical ways of listening to extra-musical texts constituted the

---

[10] Howard Brick, *Age of Contradiction: American Thought and Culture in the 1960s* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 88.

[11] Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914–1991* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994), 302–310. Herman Van der Wee, "Chapter Six: The Imperative of Demand," *Prosperity and Upheaval 1945–1980*, trans. Robin Hogg and Max R. Hall (University of California Press, 1986 [1983]), 233–258.

"bourgeoisification," as one contemporary described it, of the proletariat.[12] In one reading, the new middle class overturns the old guard; in the other, the one is assimilated to the other. According to the one reading, Bruce's bit develops class consciousness by celebrating real conditions; according to the other, it betrays distorted thinking.

I would argue that each of these two readings is as abstract and misleading as the other. The old guard and the new class involved in Bruce's fantasy were objects of fantasy, not definite, really existing groups interacting with one another across history at all. Bruce abstracts his referents from lived experience—he refers to Carnegie Hall audiences and virtuosic violinists—but we can't interpret his bit simply by saying that it reflects or distorts any real existence. Putting two misleading readings together as if they were two sides of a "dialectical" coin would only leave us with a misleading narrative on the one hand and an unrelated misleading narrative on the other. To interpret the bit, we have to watch to see what Bruce was doing with it. And the first thing we can say in that regard is that Bruce and his audience were fantasizing about what happens and what might happen in and through a class society, albeit a fantasy class society. They were *making* class.[13] They weren't randomly, arbitrarily assembling it—the affluence which made it possible for a mass audience to patronize Carnegie Hall, for example, was

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[12] For the term "bourgeoisified," see Garry Wills, *Nixon Agonistes: The Crisis of the Self-Made Man* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002 [1970]), 240.

[13] On the "making" of class, see Edward Palmer Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1963).

grounded not only in "discourses" or "imaginings" but also in real relations of exploitation.[14] But they were making it nonetheless. They were distinguishing themselves imaginatively from another Carnegie Hall audience. We can't learn what that distinction might have meant to them merely by determining how and to what degree it corresponded to some really existing division or merely by assigning them a place in a sociological structure. People don't ask future historians what they should think of themselves or their world before they set about having experiences. If we want to understand musical ways of listening to extra-musical comedy historically, we have to be able to say what diverse ways of listening did not only "in a context," but for the very making of class relations.

The story of the involvement of sixties comedy in the making of social relations has been told many times before, but with a focus on printable words and messages rather than musical

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[14] Domestically, the "education" and automation which made many Americans unemployable left the college-educated middle-class with the right "skills" for an expanding "service economy." Members of the predominately white, suburban middle class proudly waxed strong at the expense of the highest income groups; they proved less keen to acknowledge that their gains were being made at the expense of the predominately colored, urban poor, and this at a time when labor productivity had never been higher—the contemporary phrase was "poverty in the midst of plenty." Van der Wee, *Prosperity and Upheaval*, 253–254, 257; Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1998 [1974]), 273. Internationally, containerization, supertankers, and jet airliners made it possible to extort more unpaid labor from a greater mass of humanity than ever before. Postwar liberalism under the hegemony of the United States provided the international relations needed to put the new technologies to work. Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power and the Origins of Our Times* (New York: Verso, 2010), 1–27, 58–74, 269–300; Fredric Jameson, "Periodizing the 60s" (1984), in *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971–1986: Volume 2: Syntax of History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 178–208; van der Wee, "The Liberalization of World Trade After the Second World War," in *Prosperity and Upheaval*, 345–379.

aspects.[15] From at least the 1970s onward, sixties comedians have routinely been cast as satirical preachers who, through the intrinsic merits of their sermons, win a broader public over to the repressed, "oppositional," "dissenting" position of a heroic, liberal middle class often represented by the figure of a disaffected white man, often Mort Sahl or Lenny Bruce.[16] This narrative has proven inadequate. At least one contemporary comedian recalled discovering that the satirical aspects of his work accomplished none of the political tasks he had set for them.[17] And narratives featuring a printable sixties comedy have been unconvincing and contradictory in their interpretations of one of the decade's most important riddles: the rapid decline of the satirist

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[15] By at least the early seventies, filmmakers and writers had developed conventions for treating the politics of sixties comedy as a matter of satirical messages and "dirty words"—Dustin Hoffman's *Lenny* (1974) is a foundational illustration of this development. These conventions were subject to contemporary criticism: see chapter one. An entire media industry exists to manufacture and distribute the myth that sixties comedy was the purview of "stridently rebellious" liberals (Morris Dickstein's term, cited in my next footnote). Historical accounts, many of them written for the popular press, tend to pander to audiences enamored of this myth. For a strong example of readings for satire, see Kercher's *Revel With a Cause*.

[16] Kaplan (b. 1954), in an epigraph to *1959*, quotes an observation by one of the great liberalist historiographers of the 1960s, Morris Dickstein (b. 1940): "What we in hindsight call change is usually the unexpected swelling of a minor content as it imperceptibly becomes a major one and alters the prevailing mood." In the passage Kaplan seems to be citing, Dickstein depicts affluent, white, liberal authors in the 1950s catching a prophetic glimpse of "a new spirit they themselves only dimly anticipated." Dickstein, *Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1977), 55. The message for Kaplan and for Dickstein is as clear as it is consistent between two books written thirty years apart by representatives of an older and a younger generation of postwar "liberals": the story of the 1960s, we are told, is about the process whereby some sort of general public embraces the "oppositional" strands of "stridently rebellious" (Dickstein's terms) affluent white men writing in the 1950s. Ibid. Both Kaplan and Dickstein cite sixties comedy as exemplary of the "change" they are discussing. Kaplan, *1959*, 55–62; Dickstein, *Gates of Eden*, 289.

[17] See Ted Flicker's remarks quoted in Rocco Landesman, "Interview: Ted Flicker," *Yale/Theatre* 5, no. 2 (Spring 1974), 69.

Mort Sahl (b. 1927), once the very luminary of the New Comedy.[18] In an age when opposition to or dissent from "the establishment" was said to be on the rise, Sahl's stock could only have been expected to go up with Bruce's—Sahl himself reportedly sought an explanation in what some might consider bizarre conspiracy theories.[19] Where one observer claims that Sahl went too far with his satirical thrusting,[20] another claims he didn't go far enough.[21]

We can do better if we compare Sahl's decline not with the ascent of Bruce in general, but with the ascent of a musical Bruce in particular. The sixties never saw the homogeneous dissemination of the white middle class's liberal opposition. If we can read the decade as an age of historical progress, we can do so historically only by attending not to "dissent" in general but to the ways people dissented and to the establishments they opposed. At least one contemporary reported that Sahl's scoffing superiority to the characters in the events printed on the newspaper he carried onstage every night appeared as the attitude of a farcically self-important, politically powerful minority: affluent, white, Northeastern professionals often described as "liberals."[22] A printable Bruce, like the sermonizing satirist played by Dustin Hoffman in *Lenny* (1974), looks

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[18] On Sahl's rapid fall from grace, see "The Comedy of Lenny Bruce," *Saturday Review* (November 24, 1962); Martin Garbus, with Stanley Cohen, *Tough Talk: How I Fought for Writers, Comics, Bigots, and the American Way* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998), 37–38; Kercher, *Revel With a Cause*, 202–214, 260–261, 436–437.

[19] Garbus, *Tough Talk*, 37–38; Kercher, *Revel With a Cause*, 202–214, 260–261, 436–437.

[20] Kercher, *Revel With a Cause*, 436–437.

[21] "The source of his barbs, excellent as they were, was perhaps not so much his 'penetrating insight' into the 'mores of suburbia' as his own reluctant desire to join the exurbanite scene. True, Sahl did his act dressed in a sweater, and he made fun of Ivy League suits and sports cars. But the roll of his button-down collar looked suspiciously Brooks Brothers, and, after all, it is easier to manipulate an MG when one is wearing a sweater than when one is encased in a three-button jacket." See "Comedy of Lenny Bruce" (1962).

[22] See "Comedy of Lenny Bruce" (1962). See also chapter one.

very much like a satirical Sahl.[23] The difference, I would argue, lies in Bruce's musical aspects. Studs Terkel told Bruce in a 1959 interview, "The key difference between you and a man like Sahl [… is that he comments] from the outside looking in. But you are a participant. You do all the voices; you become the various characters."[24] The transition from Sahl to Bruce appears in Terkel's description as a shift from commentary upon to involvement within a "shape of ethical life," by which I mean an imagined order of life among others, however fantastical or grotesque.[25] Music as *Spiel*, as a form which appears in and through relationships between voices in motion,[26] provided a fitting point of reference for observers trying to imagine diverse forms of involvement in distinct shapes of ethical life. To use a contemporary term, observers listening for

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[23] There is evidence that, precisely because of this apparent similarity, Sahl resented Bruce's success. See Garbus, *Tough Talk*, 37–38.

[24] Quoted in Lenny Bruce, *The Almost Unpublished Lenny Bruce: From the Private Collection of Kitty Bruce* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 1984), 16. Some of Bruce's dialogic scenes can be heard on the two-volume set, Lenny Bruce, *The Lenny Bruce Originals*, Fantasy FCD-60-023-2, CD, 1991.

[25] I borrow the term "ethical life" from Hegel's *Philosophy or Right* where it is used to describe life among others on three levels: family, civil society, and the state. By "shape of ethical life"—as by "ideology," "imagining of history," or "imagining of the political"—I mean a particular conception of the nature of life among others. I do not mean an organization of life which is somehow ethical in the sense of morally good, politically desirable, or correct. Nor do I mean to refer to some kind of "community" opposed to a "bourgeois ethos" composed of individuated consumers—in my usage of the term, both are shapes of ethical life, however antagonistic. I am simply looking for terms to describe and compare imaginings of something everyone imagines in one way or another.

[26] "All form of objects of the senses (the outer senses or, indirectly, the inner sense as well) is either *shape* [*Gestalt*] or *play* [*Spiel*]." Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment: Including the First Introduction*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 71.

musical aspects were able to listen for the shape of a complex "bit."[27] While satirical appearances have proven more printable and hence better suited to the academic methods typically brought to bear upon extra-musical texts—and while professional academics, dependent as such upon the institution which does more materially and ideologically than any other to reproduce middle-class hegemony,[28] have reason to identify with the standpoint of the liberals—a tale told around printable, satirical appearances tells much less than half the story. The musical ways of listening I will focus on are those which I argue produced appearances of comedic performances as dynamic audible forms and in that way helped make an antagonistic

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[27] The term "bit" in the sense used to discuss popular performing arts, including comedy, appeared in print during the late 1950s, presumably as part of the widespread adaptation by white, middle-class society of a "hip" vernacular. Andrew Ross, "Hip, and the Long Front of Color," in *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 1989), 65–101; Scott Saul, *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain't: Jazz and the Making of the Sixties* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 29–97. The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites several uses of the term from between 1958 and 1969. In their 1960 *Dictionary of American Slang*, Stuart Berg Flexner and Harold Wentworth say that the term originated in "bop and cool use" and provide a useful definition: "any expected or well-defined action, plan, series of events, or attitudes, usu., but not necessarily of short duration; one's attitude, personality, or way of life; fig., the role which one assumes in specif. situation or in life." A bit can be the essential germ worked over by a comedian during a routine, sometimes also referred to as a bit. A good bit can sustain a lengthy routine (see Carlin's "Seven Words") or even an entire career (Vaughn Meader's comedy career depended upon his Kennedy impersonation). The term accounts for three of the aspects of Aristotle's poetics: the *dianoia* or theme, the *mythos* or narrative sequence, and the *ethos*, which includes the "character" both of the individual actors and of their setting. See Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000 [1957]), 52.

[28] On the privileged function of "education" in contemporary capitalist ideology, see Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards an Investigation" [1969], in *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 104–106. For the white liberal as such, education solved everything. Cf., e.g., Eric Sevareid, "A Plain, Painful Truth for White Americans," *Eugene Register-Guard*, June 16, 1963. The federal Upward Bound program, established by the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 and the Higher Education Act of 1965, was essentially a program designed to increase the proportion of college graduates in the United States.

contemporary society.[29] Just as a printable satirical mode served white professionals by consolidating their celebrated "consensus" and mocking backward naysayers,[30] so observers outside the middle class or critical of their own middle-class position had reasons to feel that they were better served by appearances operating in a musical "comic" mode.

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[29] Ad Reinhardt's musical metaphors in didactic cartoons promoting "High (Abstract) Art" after World War II depended upon an understanding of music as form. "Because music is the most abstract of the arts, abstract painting is often compared to chamber music and jazz (like 'architecture is frozen music.')" Ad Reinhardt, "How to View High (Abstract) Art," *P.M.* (February 24, 1946), reproduced in Ad Reinhardt, Robert Storr, *How to Look: Ad Reinhardt Art Comics* (New York: David Zwirner, 2013), 24–25. Reinhardt (1913–1967) taught people to regard the act of looking at the shape of "High (Abstract) Art" as analogous to the act of listening to music as a form of forms. Similarly, where comedy can be interpreted as "just words and a guy being funny," as an exasperated Jerry Seinfeld recently remarked, a focus on comedy's musicality—encouraged by Seinfeld in this same place—can serve as a means of directing listeners' attention to a "formal" appearance. "Fred Armisen: I Wasn't Told About This," *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee*, entry posted December 4, 2014, http://comediansincarsgettingcoffee.com/fred-armisen-i-wasnt-told-about-this-with-special-feature-i-m-dying-jerry (accessed May 2, 2015).

[30] On the "consensus" historians, including Daniel Boorstin and Louis Hartz, and the "end of ideology" thesis promoted by the journal *Encounter*, the Congress on Cultural Freedom, and the Central Intelligence Agency, see Wills, *Nixon Agonistes*, 560–571.

Many modern observers have found that things appear "comic" when looked at ethically, historically, ideologically, or politically.[31] If there is any continuity between medieval and modern theories of "comedy," it lies less in humor, funniness, or happy endings than in a "big picture" or a valence on a universe of human relations: for readers of an introductory paperback series on "Modern Literature" published in the U.S. at the end of World War II, Nabokov quipped, "one likes to recall that the difference between the comic side of things, and their

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[31] The clearest critical antecedent of which I am aware for my usage of the term "comic" is Kenneth Burke's *Attitudes Toward History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984 [1937]). Burke describes a "comic frame" as "most serviceable for the handling of human relationships." Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 106–107. An erstwhile "Marxist," Burke was certainly aware of Marx's famous uses of the terms "comedy" and "farce" to describe historical situations. For both Burke and Marx, history appears comic not because of its happy ending, but because of the peculiar involvement of people in their historical circumstances. Cf., e.g., Karl Marx, "Letters from the *Franco-German Yearbooks*" [1843], in *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 200; id., "Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie" [1844], in *Die Frühschriften: Von 1837 bis zum Manifest der kommunistischen Partei 1848* (Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner Verlag, 1971), 212. T.E. Hulme used the term "tragic" to oppose what he called the "spilt religion" which looks for "Perfection" in the "actual": for Hulme, "the *tragic* significance of life" is found in the absolute "*gap* between the regions of vital and human things, and that of the *absolute* values of ethics and religion." T.E. Hulme, "Humanism and the Religious Attitude," in *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art* (New York: Routledge, 1965), 32–34, 118, emphases in original. The "futility of existence is absolutely lost to the modern world, nor can it be recovered without great difficulty." Ibid., 34. Hulme expressly opposes his "tragic" vision to "humanism," whereas Burke observes that his "comic frame" is basically synonymous with "humanism." Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 237. Both thinkers are dealing with experiences of modernity. Raymond Williams comments on Hulme: "The pressure of [Hulme's] alternatives makes us suppose that we have to choose between considering man as 'intrinsically good' or 'intrinsically limited', and then, in a desperate world, we are invited to look at the evidence. I can perhaps best describe the alternatives, however, as pre-cultural. Neither version of man takes its origin from a view of man *in* society, man *within* a culture." Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780–1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 192–193 (emphases mine). Cp. Hegel's remarks on "The Comic Treatment of Contingency" in the section of that name in Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T.M. Knox (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 590–592; and ibid., 1194, 1199–1200.

cosmic side, depends upon one sibilant."[32] There appears to be something comic about seeing things and people becoming involved in larger situations in ways which have pervasive consequences for the people, things, and situations, as long as the consequences are never absolutely destructive—comic characters suffer, but they live on, sometimes on and on and on (as in the serial sitcom or comic strip)—and always somewhat triumphant, if quixotically so. The world as seen in this way seems to double over on itself: the same action appears twice, once as what someone or something does and once as what is actually accomplished in and through a larger area, an area which in one way or another includes individuated actors and which in some cases is only illuminated for an observer by the action's radiant effects. A single action appears out of step with itself as something more than itself. This doesn't mean that ethics, history, ideology, and politics all examine the same object. Nor does it mean that all observers see the same thing when they look at the world ethically, historically, ideologically, or politically, not even that they all agree on what is being examined when we look at the world in these ways. It means that modern observers, as such, have peculiar ways of recognizing characteristics common to ethics, history, ideology, and politics—whether they regard these domains as scientific fields of knowledge, "spilt religion," or something else altogether—and that they have

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[32] Vladimir Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions Books, 1944), 142. Zygmunt G. Baranski, "Dante, the Roman comedians, and the medieval theory of comedy," *The Italianist* 15, supp. 2 (1995), 61–99. Someone once said that life is a tragedy when seen in closeup but a comedy in long-shot (I have often seen the phrase attributed to Chaplin, but I have not been able to find a reliable source).

often described these characteristics as those of the comic.[33] Where the cynic laughs at a flat, eternally undifferentiated impotence—"it is what it is," and it *is* basically ridiculous—an observer with an eye for the comic has a taste for whimsical modulations of complex situations actualized through surprisingly effective activities. My case studies will all appeal to the latter sort of observer, although this is not to say that their appeals will all be of the same sort.

As I noted at the outset, the method I will use to study musical, comic appearances combines formalist criticism and archival research. My main artifacts are comedy LPs pressed between the resolution of the Suez Crisis in 1957 and the onset of the OPEC Crisis in 1973, a period Fredric Jameson has described as a "long 1960s" lasting from the moment when a contradictory U.S. anti-colonialism asserted its unassailable dominance to the moment when U.S. neo-imperialism already seemed impotent.[34] Because these artifacts look different when heard in different ways and with reference to different bodies of knowledge, it is never possible to say for certain how they appeared for historical observers. I will refer to a handful of contemporary descriptions, but these are only so helpful. Contemporaries, as such, are supposed to see what their contemporaries see. People writing for their contemporaries therefore tend to treat their descriptions not as productive of actual appearances but merely as supplements to the recordings themselves. Contemporary descriptions leave historians back where they started, with artifacts abstracted from conditions. At some level, historians must therefore refer to their own

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[33] Hulme, "Humanism," 32–34. Cf., e.g., Hegel "Comic Treatment," in *Aesthetics*, 590–592; Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 106–107, 166, 169–174, 344. Hegel's discussion of "ethical life" proceeds through three stages: family, civil society, and the state. G.W.F. Hegel, "Third Part: Ethical Life," *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. T.M. Knox (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 154–323. Burke uses the term "history" to describe "man's life in political communities." Burke, "Introduction," in *Attitudes Toward History*.

[34] Jameson, "Periodizing the 60s," 178–208.

descriptions. I refer to that level as "abstract" because, when historians work on it, they make no effort to explain why we should believe that the appearances being described ever appeared as such for anyone other than the historian as critic. "Abstract appearances" are relatively abstracted from any historical conditions beyond the ones we take for granted. An abstract appearance appears as what I will call a "historically possible" appearance only after it has been grounded elsewhere. When I listen to a recording of Elaine May, for example, I hear her performing what I will describe in chapter three as a "Freudian self." That appearance is therefore abstractly possible. But when I show that she herself read Freud extensively and that she had at her disposal all the resources she needed to hear her own performances as performances of something like a Freudian self, I provide historical conditions for my abstract appearance. I ground it as a historical possibility. No one will ever be able to prove historically that May heard herself in any particular way—May (b. 1932) might remember things one way or another, and she may have access to sources I have overlooked, but were she to write as a historian, she would use something like my method. We cannot even reasonably say that she "probably" heard her recordings in any particular way. Historians have no denominator with which to calculate probabilities of that sort, high or low. If we accept that experience is conditional, that people can have experiences unlike our own, and that these experiences matter historically, then we must produce critical and historical studies of audible texts as studies of historically possible appearances.[35]

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[35] My vocabulary in this paragraph is influenced by Lucien Febvre's in *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: The Religion of Rabelais*, trans. Beatrice Gottlieb (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 16. My reasoning should be clear with or without reference to this source; I cite my source in this case simply to give credit where credit is due.

Because the sense-making activities I study refer to materials which otherwise bear no immediately apparent connection to one another, primary source material for this project was scattered. I consulted the Daphne Oram Collection at Goldsmiths College (University of London), the Lenny Bruce Collection in the Robert D. Farber Archives and Special Collections at Brandeis University, the Records of the Pacifica Foundation in the Broadcasting Archives at the University of Maryland (College Park), and the Ampex Corporation Records in the Manuscripts Division of the Special Collections and University Archives at Stanford University. At the National Museum of American History (Smithsonian), I consulted the N.W. Ayer Collection, the George H. Clark Radioana Collection, the Allen B. DuMont Collection, "Adventures in Science" Radio Programs, the Jean Clairmook Radio Scrapbook, and the James H. Nicholson Amateur Radio Collection. I listened to unpublished recordings of original broadcasts of *Radio Free Oz* at the Pacifica Radio Foundation Audio Archive in Los Angeles and of the *Old Fashioned Revival Hour* in the Old Fashioned Revival Hour Collection in the Archive of Recorded Sound at Stanford University. The periodical clippings cataloged and stored at the Library of Performing Arts at the New York Public Library were indispensable, even in this digital age. Most importantly, I was invited to make use of a private collection of material pertaining to La Val Records and Productions. Of course I also spent a lot of time on the Internet, although I found that it served better as a communications device and guide to "brick and mortar" institutions than as an adequate repository for primary source material.

Critical secondary sources on sixties comedy range from studies of specific artists or groups to those on broader trends in postwar comedy. Janet Coleman's classic study of the Compass Theatre is a foundational work on the intersections of politics and aesthetics in the

comedy most beloved by the affluent, postwar, white—often Jewish—North-American middle class.[36] Stephen E. Kercher looks at approximately the same milieu but with a much wider frame of reference encompassing the full range of "liberal satire in postwar America," including not only the Compass and similar theatrical troupes but also standup comedians and cartoonists.[37] He presents a compelling and richly sourced argument for the satirical readings I am trying to diminish in historical importance. Steve Martin—born in 1945—has used his own enormous private collection to write a consummately researched autobiography recounting his first attempts in the 1960s to misread the comedy being produced by a generation of comedians born, like most of those discussed here, in the 1930s.[38] The book is a model of autobiography and a vital contribution to the literature on postwar comedy. Similarly, Scott Saul's recent biography of the most important stand-up comedian of the last quarter of the twentieth century—born in 1940—can largely be read as a study of an enormously talented young black performer's first attempts to emerge from the epochal shadow of another black comedian born about three precious years earlier and nine hundred miles further east.[39] Both Martin and Saul look at sixties comedy through the eyes of the next generation of performers; both represent some of the best work on the topic. Saul benefits from his scholarly knowledge of the 1960s, but both authors demonstrate that the standpoint of alienated baby boomers allows for some detachment from the

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[36] Coleman, *Compass*.

[37] Kercher, *Revel With a Cause*.

[38] Steve Martin, *Born Standing Up* (New York: Scribner, 2007). Mike Nichols, Elaine May, Jimmy Lynch, and all four members of the Firesign Theatre were born between 1931 and 1941. Of the performers who constitute my main case studies, only Lenny Bruce (1925–1966) was born more than two years outside the calendrical 1930s.

[39] Scott Saul, *Becoming Richard Pryor* (New York: Harper, 2014). On the place of Cosby in Pryor's early career, see ibid., 113–115, 118–119.

decade and its mythology. The key is that both Martin and Pryor were not only alienated but also creative enough to find compelling ways of producing unprecedented places for themselves.

This secondary literature can be expanded further by studies of the period which discuss comedy without making it an express focus. Kyle Stevens treats Nichols and May as representative of contemporary understandings of improvisation.[40] Joshua Kun has studied the intricate political and aesthetic problems raised by "Jewish" comedy in the first decades after the Holocaust.[41] And Jacob Smith deserves special mention in this dissertation for remarks on sixties comedy made in his various studies of "phonograph cultures."[42] Smith has gone further than anyone of whom I am aware in the study of the actual uses people had for comedy LPs, including the creation of "niche" markets, the circumvention of broadcast media censorship, and the invention of an early form of home entertainment.

In general, the comedy LP appears as a collection of LP records, each LP comprised of a rapidly unfolding series of jokes, each joke structured by a longer and more complex bit. It appears as an extra-musical form: song is not uncommon, but even performers known best for their novelty songs—including Tom Lehrer, Allan Sherman, the Smothers Brothers, and Rusty Warren—shape their songs around a steady series of jokes. Many sixties comedy LPs make little use of the long-play record's long track, appearing instead as mere "albums" of shorter routines. Continuous reproductions of entire concerts became typical only gradually. Albums resembling

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[40] Kyle Stevens, "Tossing truths: improvisation and the performative utterances of Nichols and May," *Critical Quarterly* 52, no. 3 (October 2010), 23–46.

[41] Josh Kun, *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America* (Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 2005); id., "The Yiddish Are Coming: Mickey Katz, Antic-Semitism, and the Sound of Jewish Difference," *American Jewish History* 87, no. 4 (December 1999), 343–374.

[42] Smith, *Spoken Word*; id., "The Frenzy of the Audible: Pleasure, Authenticity, and Recorded Laughter," *Television New Media* 6, no. 1 (February 2005), 23–47.

"concept albums" based on coherent themes, including *The 'Do It Yourself' Psychoanalysis Kit* and *Don't Crush That Dwarf, Hand Me the Pliers* (Columbia C 30102, 1970), appear throughout the decade, but only as exceptions. In these respects, the comedy LP appears as a direct descendant of recorded comedy monologues such as "Cohen on the Telephone" or "Uncle Josh" which were released on cylinders and discs in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The innovation of the sixties comedy LP appears technologically in the increased fidelity of the magnetic tape used in its production and economically in both the widespread affluence characteristic of an advanced capitalist society and the relative affordability of LP records, stereos, and magnetic tape. If the basic unit of the comedy LP is the bit, and if the medium's basic technological innovation is greater fidelity, we can expect to find that even the subtlest audile characteristics seemed important as integral aspects of a complex form. Since the comedy LP appeared as a viable form to persons with extremely disparate backgrounds and interests, we can anticipate that a critical construction of its formal appearance will appear in and through antagonisms which would be unknowable in a study focused on any one movement or genre —"liberal satire," "the New Comedy," or even the comedy LP as marketed to a homogeneous "mass audience."

My incongruous critical and historical perspectives shape my twofold interest in the particular LPs I selected for this dissertation. Critically, these selections are useful because they extend the depth and breadth of my own "critical universe."[43] When read in relation to one another, each appears to expand the range of the comedy LP not as a genre with generic features

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[43] The term is mine, but the understanding of criticism it expresses is especially indebted to two sources: Octavio Paz, "Sobre la crítica," *Corriente alterna* (México: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1967), 39–44; and Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*.

but as a literature or antagonistic set of texts. My first criterion in selecting LPs was that their abstract musical appearances have an “intrinsic” or relatively autonomous interest. Historically, what interest me are not the sociological categories these artists might be used to represent, but the problems their artifacts seem to have caused for a hegemonic order and its categories of representation.

In each of my case studies, a particular musical appearance challenges or remains invisible to a way of listening associated with whiter professionals. For these professionals as such, Lenny Bruce appeared as the iconic sixties comedian, the patron saint of a freewheeling decade and the crucified messiah of dirty words. But during the late sixties and early seventies, the jazz critic Nat Hentoff explicitly diminished the comedian’s printable words and messages in favor of musical forms found on LP records. He set one appearance of Lenny Bruce against another. Long before their days as Hollywood directors, Mike Nichols and Elaine May were twenty-something stars of a New Comedy addressed to affluent observers. My contention, however, is not that May was representative of her affluent circles but rather, on the contrary, that she used a texture widely associated with her circles to invoke an understanding of ethical life substantially different from that found in comparable audible texts. The Californian Firesign Theatre comedy troupe had a cult following among students in the North American university. But what especially interests me is how and why a comedy troupe found a quasi-musical radiophonic style grounded in characteristics of radio as a broadcast medium serviceable for dealing comically with the apparent setbacks of 1968 as these appeared to college graduates critical of a society which was supposed to serve college graduates. Rudy Ray Moore, legendary star of some of the greatest “blaxploitation” pictures ever made, produced LPs which are far

more "representative" of the seventies blue record or "party record" genre than the LP I have elected to study, *Tramp Time Volume 1* (La Val LVP 901, 1967), the obscure premiere album by a little-known performer named Jimmy Lynch. I could have studied Moore instead of Lynch; undoubtedly the results would have been just as interesting in their own way. But *Volume 1* makes the problems involved in inventing the blue record by black entertainers especially apparent, and this for the simple reason that it finds no adequate solution to those problems: its musical appearance might have meant little or nothing to the whiter mass audience which was supposed to be granting non-middle-class black performers a recognized place in the order of things at the end of the 1960s. The album appears as an archival record of motion abstracted from its own vanishing circles. I study it as such rather than as representative of those circles.

The LP records I have selected all seem to have caused productive problems for liberal, middle-class ideology as the ideology which would like to see the conditions of the professional established as the universal condition, if not legislatively through subsidies to the whiter middle class and its employers—including tax breaks and other public expenditures made in the name of "education," "homeownership," "opportunity," and "service"—then at least at the level of discourse, where the unprofessional can be portrayed in all of their diversity with varying measures of charm or eccentricity, dissolution or libertinism, and rebelliousness or victimhood. In understanding the sixties, we better understand the narrowness of middle-class politics as a capitalist politics or a politics subordinated to the vicissitudes of limitless capitalist growth. As we will see, middle-class observers were among the most stringent critics of that narrowness. A distinction must be made between what the middle class does as the middle class and what it does as the proletariat, which is to say, between what it does to shore up its class position and

what it does to abolish class society.[44] From precarious positions within middle-class society, I will argue, comedy LPs became involved in diverse ways of making sense or making fun of an "advanced" capitalist society, a society felt to verge on both the utopia of the professionals and apocalyptic race war. In doing so, they produced new social relations.

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[44] "The proletariat only perfects itself by annihilating and transcending itself, by creating the classless society through the successful conclusion of its own class struggle." Georg Lukács, "Class Consciousness" (1920), in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971), 80.

Chapter 1 Lenny Bruce's Sound and the Making of a Jewishness for a Classless Society

> If Bruce were a play, one wouldn't hesitate to say that its theme and content were magnificent even though some of the characters were a little confused and much of the dialogue needed tightening up. For in a lot of Bruce we are exposed to laxity and fuzziness. And much of the time we are being told simple home-truths that we can just as easily get from the bartender down the street or the personal page of a woman's magazine.
>
> —A critic on listening to Lenny Bruce (1925–1966), summer 1962[1]

> It's so goyish you can't say it!
>
> —Bruce, one month after his first arrest on obscenity charges, on pronouncing the name of the hero of a Camel cigarette ad, fall 1961[2]

Lenny Bruce's most persistent champion, the jazz critic Nat Hentoff (b. 1925), rejected an appearance he and his contemporaries saw being produced during the early 1970s by a heterogeneous memory project elsewhere referred to as "The Electric Resurrection of Saint Lenny Bruce."[3] The purpose of this chapter is fourfold: I will imaginatively reconstruct Hentoff's rejected appearance, explain why Hentoff and others, from the early sixties through the

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[1] Charles Marowitz, "The Confessions of Lennie Bruce," *Encore* (London, July/August 1962), 31–32.

[2] Lenny Bruce, *Live at the Curran Theater*, originally recorded in San Francisco, November 1961, Fantasy 34201, three LP set, 1971. For more on this quotation, see section 1.3.4 and Figures 1.3 and 1.4.

[3] Nat Hentoff, "Lenny: Redeeming the Memory of a Heretic," *New York Times* (July 2, 1972). Albert Goldman, "The Electric Resurrection of Saint Lenny Bruce," *New York* (May 20, 1968), 43–44. For the "contemporaries" who, like Goldman and Hentoff, rejected the appearance discussed here, see section 1.1. For some sense of Hentoff's persistence, see "Hentoff" in my Bibliography.

early seventies, rejected something like it, produce an alternative appearance grounded in the LPs Hentoff recommended and the musical ways of listening he and his contemporaries encouraged, and explain why that alternative appearance might have seemed preferable to the rejected appearance. Another way of summarizing my argument is to say that I will analyze some of the antagonisms involved in the making of a sixties icon by producing two historically possible appearances, a rejected appearance emphasizing printable words and an alternative with musical characteristics. My larger aim is to provide an ideological critique of what I take to be the historically more important yet historiographically neglected musical appearance.

While participants in the making of Lenny Bruce's appearances seem to have agreed that Bruce was somehow involved in history's progress, they disagreed about whose history was progressing. "Lenny Bruce made me feel very old," one melancholic critic complained in 1960; yet, resigned to his own aging, he conceded, "That is the direction the world is going today."[4] Bruce, for his part, described himself as torn between distinct ends of a world-historical temporality. "I'm either a little ahead or a little behind the times, and that causes a friction," he lamented toward the end of his life in 1964.[5] It appears as though he felt he was moving against a grain with an established flow. While Lenny Bruce appeared for some as the "evangelist of the

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[4] Earl Wilson, "It Happened Last Night," *Post* (New York, March 11, 1960). That same week, *Variety* reported the same temporality, but with skeptical scare quotes: Bruce's act represented "'advanced' humor." See "Blue Angel, NY: Pat Scot, Robert Clary, Lenny Bruce, Jimmy Lyon Trio; $6–7 minimum," *Variety* (March 16, 1960).

[5] Bruce, quoted in Jerry Tallmer, "Lenny Bruce: No Help Wanted," *Post* (New York, Tuesday, April 7, 1964).

new morality,"[6] conflicts over his appearance involved claims about where the world was headed and what direction it could or should take.

The texts I will be reading as descriptions of a rejected appearance—some written by those who evidently saw that appearance as their own, most by those who rejected it as an appearance for the liberals—repeatedly call attention to dirty words. An affluent middle class, as it appears in and through these descriptions, can be seen assembling those sorts of words into an edifying "vernacular," the term Allen Ginsberg chose for a 1964 petition signed by a veritable who's-who of the New York intelligentsia protesting one of Bruce's arrests on obscenity charges.[7] An appearance grounded in a vernacular would have had a recognizable appeal to what was widely imagined as the hegemonic class in the United States during the early sixties: "new-class," relatively affluent and educated white Northeasterners who identified, however graspingly, with John F. Kennedy and who claimed to live after "the end of ideology" or in an

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[6] Christopher Booker says that George Melly named Bruce the "evangelist of the new morality" while writing for the *New Statesman* in 1962. Christopher Booker, *The Neophiliacs: A study of the revolution in English life in the Fifties and Sixties* (London: Collins, 1969), 186.

[7] See section 1.1. For the "Petition Protesting the Arrest of Lenny Bruce," see the Committee on Poetry, "press release," typescript, June 13, 1964, Box 4, Lenny Bruce Collection, Robert D. Farber Archives and Special Collections, Brandeis University, cited as LBCB in this chapter. See also the Appendix, Signatories to a "Petition Protesting the Arrest of Lenny Bruce" (1964); Stephen E. Kercher, *Revel With a Cause: Liberal Satire in Postwar America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 420.

age of liberal "consensus."[8] Such an appearance could have helped make almost all people everywhere—everyone but the scapegoat—appear as a common people defined against a vaguely specified regressive standard language.[9] The "progressive" shepherd class could fold itself into its flock with an approved mode of release from the strictures of some menacing

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[8] Kercher, *Revel*, 189. For a brief period lasting almost through the mid-1960s, it evidently seemed to some observers as though an entire society were being remade in the image of affluent, liberal professionals. That was the message of the advocates of the "end of ideology" thesis and the "consensus" historians. See Garry Wills, *Nixon Agonistes: The Crisis of the Self-Made Man* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002 [1970]), 560–571. Seymour Martin Lipset argued that the term "class politics" applied only during periods of economic depression, whereas the conflicts characterizing an affluent society were a matter of mere "status politics." Daniel Bell, ed., *The Radical Right: The New American Right, Expanded and Updated* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1964 [1955]), ix. Everyone was in the middle class, ergo anyone expressing qualms about the politics of that class was displaying symptoms of a neurosis. See George H. Nash in *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2006 [1976]), 208; Hoberman, *Dream Life*, 114. The affluent society could easily have appeared as the white professional's society. See C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956). Very few members of the massive "middle class" (see chapter two) could ever have belonged to any sort of "power elite," but many of them did identify in one way or another with that elite. Contemporaries reported that the emerging "meritocratic" ethos of the postwar "university college" left young people aspiring to elite status and looking to higher education as a point of entry. See Christopher Jencks and David Riesman, *The Academic Revolution* (New York: Anchor Books, 1969), 26, 41, 75, 88, 356, 462. According to Jencks and Riesman, college education was especially important to the Negro middle class, reportedly because the professions seemed less segregated than the business world. Ibid., 423, 448, 452.

[9] In his "Seven Dirty Words" of the early seventies, George Carlin asked for an administrative "list" to spell out the shape of the repressive standard language.

"bourgeois" society. In this narrative, the "vernacular," celebrated or rejected on whatever grounds, appears as an affluent middle class's world of desire.[10]

Bruce himself, like Hentoff a precarious ally yet vocal critic of what both men called "the liberals," does not appear to have been fully invested in this making of a vernacular.[11] Even as late as 1964, hopelessly mired in trial expenses and barred from the financial support once provided by prestigious gigs for affluent audiences, he quixotically stated that he wanted to be

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[10] For centuries, prohibitions on obscenity, pornography, profanity, and vulgarity have formed a recurring polemical target for relatively affluent and educated people living in capitalist societies. On "the taints of liberty" (Polonius's phrase in *Hamlet*), particularly obscenity and "profligacy," as modes of resistance characteristic of the relatively affluent and educated directed against the perceived strictures of "bourgeois" society, cf., e.g., Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 1991 [1972]), 201–203, 254, 339; Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* [1759] (Lexington, KY: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014), 51–52 (part 1, section 3, subsection 3). Obscenity in these sources is shown functioning as an escape either downward or upward—that is, as a means of escaping from bourgeois strictures downward into a humble vernacular, but also as a "gentlemanlike" (Bunyan quoted in Hill) means of escaping upward into high society and its "fashionable profligacy" (Smith's term). "For the lower classes [in the mid-seventeenth century] swearing was expensive: we recall the 'debauched seaman' who after being fined at the rate of 6d. for an oath put 2s. 6d. on the table and had his money's worth. Lower-class use of oaths was a proclamation of their equality with the greatest, just as Puritan opposition to vain swearing was a criticism of aristocratic and plebeian irreligion." Hill, *World Turned Upside Down*, 202. The comic triumph of the debauched seaman is delightful. By contrast, the affluent middle class of the mid-sixties makes for a considerably less sympathetic character when it celebrates its own "vernacular": such a celebration reads more like a means of shrouding class power in a pseudo-democratic populism than like an actual democratic rebellion. See section 1.1.

[11] Lenny Bruce, "The Violent Liberals" [undated but written sometime after, evidently shortly after, the lynching of Mack Charles Parker on April 24, 1959], in *The Almost Unpublished Lenny Bruce: From the Private Collection of Kitty Bruce* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 1984), 12–13; Nat Hentoff, "Where Liberals Fear to Tread," *Reporter* 22 (June 23, 1960); Kercher, *Revel With a Cause*, 413–415, 423. This is not the place to categorize Hentoff's politics. A blurb for his memoir, *Speaking Freely* (New York: Knopf, 1997), says that the book documents his "lives as a radical (according to the FBI); an 'enslaver of women' (according to pro-choicers); a suspiciously unpredictable civil-libertarian (according to the ACLU); a dangerous defender of alleged pornography (according to [his] friend Catherine MacKinnon); an irrelevant, anachronistic integrationist (according to assorted black nationalists); and, as an editor at the *Washington Post* once said, not unkindly—'a general pain in the ass.'"

acquitted on the basis of the law as it already existed, not as it might be reshaped by the ruling of a higher court.[12] U.S. society in general may not have seemed especially repressive to him, leastwise not in the ways which preoccupied middle-class champions of a vernacular. They were obliged to shape the national culture; he did not necessarily look to any nationstate for his cultural practices. Only after his enlistment as the darling of the liberals did he find himself being persecuted for words and messages which seemed perfectly ordinary, even passé, to some of those who had traveled with him through small burlesque clubs during the 1950s.[13] What the "progressive" segment of an affluent minority saw as oppressive strictures to be valiantly resisted could have appeared to him as the fanatical hangups of an essentially impotent minority. Prosecuting Bruce without any hope of an ultimate legal victory seems at least in hindsight like a

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[12] "It's a beautiful law." Lenny Bruce, quoted in Tallmer, "No Help Wanted." See also section 1.1. Bruce had wanted to defend himself on his own terms, to the horror of his attorneys. "Bruce broke openly with his distinguished liberal attorney […] and assumed his own defense, stating that he believed in censorship and did not wish to be exonerated at the cost of weakening the law," putting him in direct opposition to his liberal champions. Albert Goldman, quoted in Lionel Trilling, "The Sad Fate of Lenny Bruce," *New York Review* (November 17, 1966), 39–40.

[13] "Bruce's homosexual preoccupation *and* sex-patter *and* four-letter liberties, is by no means unique." Marowitz, "Confessions," 33. Marowitz, writing in London, cites Ray Martine (1928–2002) as a "homebred" example. See also a letter from Malcolm Muggeridge, reportedly published in the *Chicago Daily News*, quoted in "Former Editor of 'Punch' Brands Chi Charges Vs. Lenny Bruce as 'Fatuous,'" December 19, 1962, clipping, MWEZ + n.c. 247, LPA; Sydney J. Harris, "Useless Indignation," clipping, April 25, 1963, Box 6, LBCB.

lawless, vigilante means of demonstrating agency where hegemony was lost.[14] Bruce undoubtedly despised his persecutors, but it does not follow that he was ever fully on board with his liberal champions. "I believe in censorship, I believe in the watchdog, in the arrest," he explained, "but they were wrong to deny me a chance to testify at my trial."[15] He was referring to his equivocal allies.[16]

Looking back in 1972, Hentoff steered readers in the direction of LP records, the best of which, in his opinion, had only become available as part of the very memory project he generally rejected. Like Bruce seeking a hearing in court, Hentoff evidently expected listeners to hear what

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[14] "Finding an attorney to prosecute [Bruce's New York case …] was a […] difficult matter. Gerald Harris, an assistant D.A. who normally tried such cases, told [New York's district attorney Frank] Hogan he could not in good conscience take it […]. A number of others on Hogan's staff also declined, insisting that a conviction would not stand up on appeal." Martin Garbus, with Stanley Cohen, *Tough Talk: How I Fought for Writers, Comics, Bigots, and the American Way* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998), 31. Bruce might have appeared as a shanghaied pioneer on a hackneyed frontier. At least one contemporary portrayed the last few years of Bruce's life and career as mired in someone else's petty squabbles. "Egged on" by "the sacerdotal class, […] Bruce forgot the art of comedy, and became the fall guy in an essentially silly campaign to embarrass the fuzz." Dick Nolan, "Lenny Bruce the Saint," unmarked clipping, Box 5, LBCB. Bruce appreciated the irony. "Being guilty in a civil liberties case is almost desirable. You become a wounded bird, the darling of the liberals." Lenny Bruce, quoted in Heywood Gould, "Lenny Bruce: I'm No Martyr," *Post* (New York, November 5, 1964). The prosecution of Lenny Bruce appears today as a flagrant abuse of the office of district attorney for the purpose of outright harassment. See Ronald K.L. Collins and David M. Skover, *The Trials of Lenny Bruce: The Fall and Rise of an American Icon* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks Inc., 2002).

[15] Lenny Bruce, quoted in Gould, "I'm No Martyr."

[16] George Murphy, "Lenny Talks—Attorney Near Tears," *San Francisco Examiner* (March 8, 1962). "The sophisticated public opinion that had championed Bruce in the early course of the trial changed during the muddled last phase to disgust." Goldman, quoted in Trilling, "Sad Fate," 39–40. "It used to be fashionable, in certain groups, to be for Lenny Bruce, and against the laws that were harassing him," Dick Shaap observed in 1964. But that had changed. "The real trouble with Lenny Bruce is that he is alive. He is not a book or a movie or a painting. Books and movies and paintings are nice and dependable for liberal causes. They don't argue in court. They don't wear blue jeans. They don't tell a judge, 'I so desperately want your respect.'" Dick Shaap, "The Friends of Lenny Bruce," *Herald Tribune* (New York, November 19, 1964).

he heard simply by listening. No one can reproduce with any certainty the appearances Bruce or Hentoff had in mind at the time. Historians instead produce "knowledge of" past experiences by imaginatively constructing historically possible appearances. With that aim in mind, I will follow Hentoff's emphasis on listening musically and focus on audible form.

The musical appearance this chapter produces is characterized by lacunae and curt dialogues between contrasting voices. One illustration of such an appearance can be found on the first page of this dissertation in my transcription of the first Carnegie Hall fantasy. Bruce, speaking in the present tense, strings together short phrases with the words "and" and "but," narrates a scene in one moment and then imitates the sound of a violin being played in the next, starts a series ("Every Stravinsky, heavyweight—") without signaling its conclusion grammatically, says something in English only to repeat it in Yiddish ("don't say a word; *zog nisht*), and switches from one voice ("What was that?") to another ("I don't know") without identifying the speakers.

I will argue that something like this appearance seemed productive of a cosmopolitan sensibility suited to a desired classless society. Bruce himself used the term "Jewish" to refer to a non-sectarian, highly mobile, modern sensibility reminiscent of contemporary "new cultures" and hip sensibilities associated with affluent middle-class observers (see section 1.2), and so that is the term I have adopted.[17] The Lenny Bruce who appears for this Jewish sensibility would

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[17] Lenny Bruce, "S.F. Gossip/Jewish & Goyish/cat Downstairs Taping Show," originally recorded at the Jazz Workshop, San Francisco, CA, October 5, 1961, previously unreleased, Disc 3, Track 17, *Lenny Bruce: Let the Buyer Beware*, Shout! Factory DK 37109, CD, 2004; id., *Curran Theater*; id., "Neologize: Jewish? or Goyish?" *Jazzworld* 1, no. 2 (November 1961), 16–21; and id., *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People: An Autobiography* (Chicago: Playboy Press, 1972 [1965]), 6–7. On contemporary "hip sensibility," see Phil Ford, *Dig: Sound and Music in Hip Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). On "new cultures," see section 1.2.

have rewarded listeners who felt that by making judgments about and inferences regarding starkly individuated artifacts they were learning to range widely across a shattered modern life. That appearance could have "seemed productive of" a sensibility characterized by that kind of learning to the extent that it appeared for and in that sense rewarded that sensibility—not in that it created a sensibility out of thin air, but to the extent that it provided a practice space for the consolidation of existing activities.

Hentoff's description of the political merits of jazz could be read as a description of the political merits of the musical appearance produced here: both seemingly distribute "the risk of unpredictability," if not between people on a stage, then between Bruce and his audience; punctuate their unfolding with moments of "sudden revelation"; portray ethical life as made up of "thousands of fiercely individualistic players," each one working over a "constantly shifting terrain," some attaining the status of the "incandescent hero-as-world-overturning-improviser"; and involve, if not a "compellingly international," then at least a compellingly heterogeneous geography through which an individual from the most distant locale might not only hear "it all" but also put it all "together" as something which was "really his own," rather than as a mere "pastiche."[18] Both could be seen accomplishing all of this as part of a unique cultural "product" of "American society."[19] The audible form of Bruce's performances provides something like a musical setting for a performance practice which obliges people to produce their own content by moving amidst and drawing connections between free-floating artifacts. Bruce's performances were heard to provide conditions for more than one imagined way of being in the world: in my

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[18] All of the terms in quotation marks are Hentoff's. See Nat Hentoff, *Jazz Is* (New York: Random House, 1976), 25–30, 47, 123, 173, 234–235, 264.

[19] Ibid.

narrative, Bruce and Hentoff involve themselves in one imagining, the liberals in another; one group baptizes itself into a lowly vernacular structured by a threatening standard, the other into the universal mobility of an emerging classless society.

1.1 Editing Lenny Bruce and making a desired "vernacular"

Normally historians would dismiss a circumlocution like the one quoted in the epigraph to this chapter as merely fatuous: the theme and content is "magnificent," but in the form "we are exposed to laxity and fuzziness," besides which, much of what is said—the theme and content? —is inane. This particular statement, however, seems characteristic of the literature surrounding Bruce. Critics who tried to elevate the "evangelist of the new morality," a modern Jesus Christ crucified by antediluvian prosecutors for courageously speaking in a "vernacular,"[20] appear to have run up against a recurring difficulty: the new morality, ostensibly characterized by greater permissiveness and interpreted by reference to the pretense that spreading affluence would structure more liberal, egalitarian relations between all people everywhere, was already

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[20] Committee on Poetry, "press release." See also chapter four and the Appendix. On Lenny Bruce as Jesus Christ, see Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty*, 121; id., "Why Ruby did it," *The Berkeley Concert*, recorded at the Berkeley Community Theatre, December 12, 1965, Bizarre Records 2XS 6329, LP, 1969; Fred Baker, Lenny Bruce, Steve Allen, Paul Krassner, Eric Gale, and Charlie Smalls, *Lenny Bruce Without Tears*, DVD (First Run Features, 2005); Gould, "I'm No Martyr"; Collins and Skover, *Trials of Lenny Bruce*, 351; "Narcotics Undercover," in MWEZ + n.c. 247, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (LPA); Jack Kroll, "Lenny Lives," *Newsweek* (June 7, 1971); Julian Barry, *Lenny* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1971), 107; Arthur Cooper, "The Hollow Man," *New Republic* (June 15, 1974), 23–24; Eric Bogosian, introduction to *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*, by Lenny Bruce (New York: Fireside, 1992), 2; Goldman, "Electric Resurrection"; Donald Singleton, "The gospel according to Lenny, reissued," *Daily News* (New York, May 13, 1971); William Karl Thomas, *Lenny Bruce: The Making of a Prophet* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1989); Nat Hentoff, "The crucifixion of a true believer," *Gadfly* (March/April 2001); Kercher, *Revel With a Cause*, 414–415.

hegemonic by the time Bruce arrived to establish it on the earth.[21] Listeners who had passed through places like "Strip City," the burlesque club where Bruce cut his teeth in the 1950s, even described the "vulgar" aspects of Bruce's act as hackneyed.[22]

Yet the audible form of that act apparently seemed inaccessible or meaningless to many observers. One or more producers of the 1971 *Live at the Curran Theatre* LP marked a timesheet for the taped recording with suggestions for an editor. "Bruce fools around with microphone. Not usable," declares a typescript. Penciled marginalia distinguish between the essential and the inessential as between the "tight" and "loose": "Essential, tight"; "Essential, can be edited a little"; "Very loose, needs editing, maybe not essential."[23] As an editor of one of the comedian's own typescripts had observed in 1960, Bruce needed to be "translated" before his texts seemed legible, or before they seemed legible for a particular way of reading.[24] In practice, this meant

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[21] Mirra Komarovsky used the term "new morality" at least as early as 1953 to describe the ostensibly more egalitarian gender relationships which were taking shape as married women began performing paid labor in growing numbers. Mirra Komarovsky, *Women in the Modern World* (Boston: Little Brown, 1953), 48. Michael Szalay does not use the term "new morality" in his *Hip Figures: A Literary History of the Democratic Party* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), but his discussion of Norman Mailer's "Hip morality"—defined as doing "what one feels whenever and wherever possible"—indicates that there is a link between the imaginings of egalitarian race relations among white men inclined to vote for northern Democrats and what I am calling the "new morality." Szalay, *Hip Figures*, 93, 105. The intellectuals' fascination with Bruce evidently expresses a desire to participate in a "lower," more "burlesque" ethos, easily confused with a desire for a more democratic society. And the imagining of more egalitarian class relations on the part of the affluent middle class also took the form of outright proclamations that the U.S. was becoming ever more "meritocratic."

[22] Marowitz, "Confessions"; Harris, "Useless Indignation."

[23] "Lenny Bruce—Curran Theater Concert," typescript, Box 5, LBCB.

[24] Lenny Bruce, "An Impolite Interview with Lenny Bruce," *The Realist: Freethought Criticism and Satire* 15 (February 1960), 4.

that "literate" editors had to separate an essential content from a fuzzy form.[25] It did not mean, one critic observed, that Bruce had to be "whitewashed"—if anything, he was made to appeal to a taste for the sordid and grotesque.[26] But there was more than one way to clean up his act. The people who prosecuted the man for his dirty words were not necessarily any less equipped to hear the musical characteristics of his act than the people who celebrated him for his dirty words. Both focused on printable "words." The very sounds I will be producing as the musical condition of Bruce's Jewishness might have been heard as noise and "fuzziness" to be polished away from what was "essential" in the making of a "Tintype Portrait."[27]

Not all contemporaries were impressed with Bruce's printable appearances. When the first posthumous releases of performance films, recordings, and dramatic reenactments of various sorts inaugurated the electric resurrection shortly after 1966, many observers lamented that precisely the more "whacked-out […] behavior" sold best.[28] Printable words helped ensure that behavior seemed "whacked-out" relative to the right coordinates. After the release of the

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[25] The term "literate" is Bruce's. "In the literate sense—as literate as Yiddish can be since it is not a formal language—'goyish' means 'gentile.' But that's not the way I mean to use it." Bruce, *How To Talk Dirty* (1972), 6.

[26] Kathleen Carroll, "'Lenny': A Tintype Portrait," *Sunday News* (New York, November 17, 1974). Of Albert Goldman's biography, Carroll writes, "I'm told that it describes Lenny just as his critics wanted to see him, as a loathsome, crude, ugly-tempered man who mistreated women." Ibid. Cp. Albert Goldman and Lawrence Schiller, *Ladies and Gentlemen: Lenny Bruce!!* (New York: Random House, 1974).

[27] Carroll, "Tintype Portrait."

[28] Albert Goldman, "Electric Resurrection," 43–44; Hentoff, "Redeeming the Memory"; Horton, "Fantasy Records"; Arthur Bell, "The Intimate Lenny Bruce," *Village Voice* (November 21, 1974), 131–132. By the time Bell wrote, Bruce had been portrayed by Bernie Travis, Cliff Gorman, Dustin Hoffman, and Sandy Baron. In 1992, the *New York Times* counted fifteen actors who had filled "Lenny's shoes." Bruce Weber, "The Iconoclast as Icon: Filling Lenny's Shoes," *New York Times* (July 24, 1992). There has been at least one more actor since, Steve Cuiffo, star of the "one-man show," *Steve Cuiffo is Lenny Bruce* (2008).

1974 biopic *Lenny* starring Dustin Hoffman, derisive critics showed that filmmakers had justified or corrected rather than excised the comic's dirty words by producing contexts where Bruce's less "savory" aspects could be smoothed into a liberal program of opposition to the supposed "containment" of the fifties: the infamous epithet "cocksucker"—at least one contemporary snickeringly remarked on Bruce's "ten-letter word"—could somehow be used to defend a persecuted gay man.[29] For a young and indignant Fred Kaplan (b. 1954) writing in 1975, the reason for the film's "sanctimoniousness" was obvious: *Lenny* made an appeal to an older generation of liberal "intellectuals"—Kaplan names Kenneth Tynan and two signatories to Ginsberg's 1964 petition, Lionel Trilling and Dwight Macdonald.[30] To put it in my own terms, Kaplan claimed that the biopic's image of Lenny Bruce was an appearance for the liberals of the early sixties. Similar attempts to interpolate Bruce into an approved "vernacular" date back to the

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[29] Carroll, "Tintype Portrait." For the term "ten-letter word," see Murphy, "Lenny Talks." Fred Kaplan explains: "Hoffman's Bruce is first busted for saying 'cocksucking' on stage in the context of defending a San Francisco schoolteacher who was fired because of his homosexuality —when in fact, the real Lenny Bruce was first arrested for saying 'cocksuckers' in the somewhat less savory context of describing the clientele at a cheap San Francisco nightclub he once performed in." Fred Kaplan, "Lenny," *CINEASTE* 6, no. 4 (1975), 40. Then as now, the terms Bruce used to describe gay men could be something of an embarrassment to his progressive champions. In this regard, Bruce may have seemed fairly typical of his era. At least one contemporary critic was under the impression that "queer-jokes are part of any American comedian's stock-in-trade." Marowitz, "Confessions," 32. Marowitz suggests that "the homosexual reference" for Bruce "takes into account the subversive connotation of homosexuality in America." Ibid. Here again, Bruce is redeemed by being made to participate in the right kind of subversion: Bruce is preoccupied with gay men, but this is because the figure of the gay man is subversive; his homosexual reference "takes into account" or is mediated by the right context; Bruce is a "good" subversive. Whether or not Marowitz's interpretation of Bruce's preoccupation was the same as Bruce's, Marowitz's serves the interests of liberals intent on making Bruce one of their own.

[30] Kaplan, "Lenny," 40.

comedian's initial rise to stardom.[31] Censors and district attorneys were not Bruce's only nor even his most important editors. As far as he himself could see, his progressive allies were celebrating the same dirty comedian his backward antagonists were prosecuting: "There were 2,130 errors in the transcript, all of them drastically altering harmless phrases into obscenities. It was the DA's show, not mine, and everybody was trying to defend it."[32]

Perhaps the cruelest aspect of this Kafkaesque scenario was that the more Bruce could be seen doing what liberal audiences wanted him to do, the more he must have seemed passé.[33] In 1962, one critic recounted the inverted career trajectories of Mort Sahl (b. 1927) the liberal satirist in the collegiate sweater and his exact contemporary, Lenny Bruce the hipster. Sahl had fallen out of fashion as his "taste and point of view" started to appear "essentially as middlebrow as those of his targets."[34] His erstwhile "champions, many of them, took up Lenny Bruce," a

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[31] As far back as 1960, an editor preparing to publish an interview carried out by post had added the word "damn" to one of Bruce's typescripts. Bruce, "Impolite Interview," 4. Evidently an opportunity to interpolate the burlesque comic into a recognized "vernacular" was not to be missed. This was not a "vernacular" exclusive to more "progressive" types. Wills paints a farcical portrait of Pat Buchanan as a young professional in the mid-1960s compulsively repeating the word "damn." Wills, *Nixon Agonistes*, 10–11.

[32] Lenny Bruce, quoted in Gould, "I'm No Martyr."

[33] At least one observer had detected the Kafkaesque quality of Bruce's situation long before his first arrest. In the summer of 1960, a bemused critic writing for the *Village Voice* under the name Joseph K. (of *The Trial*) foretokened, "There was a danger that the Sixties were going to be serious and, so called, significant, but with the HIP FIGHT FOR FREEDOM in the hands of the IN, it looks like it's going to be FUN and SHOW BIZ all the way." Joseph K., "We Are Not Amused," *Village Voice* 5, no. 41 (August 4, 1960). The most scathing aspect of this philippic against the liberals is not that the fight is portrayed as mere fun and show biz, but that the fight is "HIP" and the crowd is "IN." The fight could appear as entertainment in the first place because, according to Joseph K., it had been orchestrated for somebody's particular benefit. Bruce was "in," but only as he appeared for a particular ingroup—an ingroup which often imagined itself as a group of oppressed rebels and "outsiders." See Hale, *Nation of Outsiders*.

[34] "The Comedy of Lenny Bruce," *Saturday Review* (November 24, 1962).

comedian who appeared to have "the audacity not of a satirist but of a good low comedian, an audacity […] not seen since the heyday of pre-striptease burlesque."[35] What might otherwise have seemed passé or mediocre could appear as the object of nostalgia. Middle-class listeners —"middlebrow," as at least one critic derided them—could find in Bruce's manner desired echoes of an imagined mode of class belonging preceding "bourgeoisification."[36] When interviewed in the early nineties, Woody Allen, the first name on an alphabetical list of the signatories to the 1964 petition, recalled thinking that for all of Bruce's talent, his stock was overvalued by "straight middle-class people who thought they were doing something wicked, that they were suddenly 'in the know,' that they were suddenly hip or rebellious."[37] Liberal middle-class rejection of bourgeois strictures has appeared only as liberating to some as delusional to others. Indeed, amidst the mass-media sixties revival of the early nineties, Allen's ambivalent recollections might have been read as contrarian remarks on the backward "straight middle-class" program of "suddenly rebellious" instant progressives. An idealizing image of a wholesome past with Bruce in it appears to have informed definite desires for the future of the United States: the 1962 critic suggested that the good low comedian harkened back to an age of innocence before strippers; Strip City was hardly in the picture.

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[35] Ibid.

[36] One reader objected to my reading of middlebrow as middle-class. Of course "middlebrow" is a pejorative term, but a pejorative term for what? For cultural practices associated with segments of the U.S. middle class. See Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

[37] Woody Allen and Stig Björkman, *Woody Allen on Woody Allen* (New York: Faber & Faber, 2004 [1993]), 31. On middle-class, mass-market hipness, see Ford, *Dig*.

1.2 Bruce's Jewishness as a "new sensibility" for a "new culture"

Bruce's autobiography spins an etiological narrative around the sounds of a mass society:

> The desperate tension of the Depression was lessened for me by my Philco radio with the little yellow-orange dial and the black numbers in the center. What a dear, sweet friend, my wooden radio, with the sensual cloth webbing that separated its cathedrallike architecture from the mass air-wave propaganda I was absorbing—it was the beginning of an awareness of a whole new fantasy culture.[38]

A typescript draft for this excerpt refers simply to a "new culture," saying nothing about "fantasy."[39] What the draft lacks in adjectival finesse it gains in grandeur. "Fantasy culture" might be confined as such to the realm of fantasy; "culture" in the typescript seems pervasive, even lubricious or harmful: the sentence in the typescript which introduces the "new culture" describes something the listener not only gains an "awareness of" but also undergoes an "exposure to."[40]

In both the typescript and the published autobiography, Bruce describes the new culture by citing a series of media events which shaped him as a child, and not only him: "Procter & Gamble provided many Fulbright and Guggenheim fellowship winners with the same formative exposure."[41] But whereas the published version concludes that series by citing the Lone Ranger's

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[38] Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty* (1972), 2.

[39] Lenny Bruce, "How to Talk Dirty and Influence People," undated typescript, Box 5, LBCB.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty* (1972), 2. The undated typescript reads "Proctor and Gamble probably provided many Fulbright and Guggenheim award winners with the same formative exposure." To my ear, the hedging "probably" and the word "award" rather than the more formal sounding "fellowship" read in Bruce's voice more than the published version. I suspect that the differences between the typescript and the published version were introduced by an editor other than Bruce.

iconic exclamation—"With a cloud of dust, the speed of light and a hearty *Hi-Yo Silver Away!*"—the typescript drifts off into the recondite and candid: "And Uncle Don spitting out the first heavy blooper: 'I guess that will hold those little sons of bitches!'"[42] Bruce's juxtaposition of an obscure Uncle Don with the Guggenheim fellowship winners crystalizes the contrast already drawn between intimate vulgarity and ecclesiastic stateliness in the Philco radio. The image is not only that of a child enjoying a world of fantasy, but also of an individual's intimate experience of the making of an entire mass society, a society where national networks and tetchy entertainers shape a "culture" absorbed by people of the most diverse backgrounds and divergent prospects.

Especially in its typescript form, the autobiography conveys an unabashed hope that a so-called "popular culture" might be made into a genuine popular culture, a vital condition of a diverse and egalitarian society. What comes across most strikingly is less the hint of disillusionment than the expression of love—the Philco radio appears as a "dear, sweet friend." Hope in and love for mass culture might have been especially important to a professional impersonator weaving fantasies mediating society.[43] Bruce would have had reason to feel that he had the power to participate in the making of a "new culture."

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[42] The Uncle Don scene which appears in Kermit Schafer's *Pardon My Blooper!* series for Jubilee records in the mid-1950s has a children's program host signing off and then muttering, "I guess that'll hold the little bastards tonight." See "Kermit Schafer – Pardon my Blooper! (Special Edition)" entry posted October 24, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kvyISMXVrmY (accessed May 26, 2015). This recording is apparently a "reenactment" of an original event which may or may not have happened.

[43] Bruce's early work as an impersonator can be heard on the two-volume set, Lenny Bruce, *The Lenny Bruce Originals*, Fantasy FCD-60-023-2, CD, 1991.

Much of the cultural history of U.S. middle-class society in the 1960s could be told in terms of attempts, like Bruce's, to discover an elevated or "spiritual" (*geistlich*) dimension in popular culture, to take something that on one level had been manufactured with the aim of making money, "killing time," and manipulating a consumer public (mass airwave propaganda) and to make it, on another level, into a vital part of a life well lived (a new culture).[44] The "new sensibility" advocated by Sontag in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (1966) was supposed to provide the basis for "one culture," a "vantage point" from which "the beauty of a machine or of the solution to a mathematical problem, of a painting by Jasper Johns, of a film by Jean-Luc Godard, and of the personalities and music of the Beatles is equally accessible"—both the personalities and the music, because these are not the same thing, and yet Sontag would like them both to be visible from the standpoint of her "new sensibility."[45] Warhol and others championed new ways of looking at the artifacts of consumer society.[46] Cecil Brown's 1971 essay on James Brown in the first issue of *Black Review* appeared as a landmark offensive in an

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[44] Andrew Ross is critical of these attempts in *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 1989). On parallel developments in England, cf. George Melly, *Revolt into Style: The Pop Arts* (New York: Faber & Faber, 2012 [1970]). For a "tradition" grounding these projects, see Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780–1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

[45] Sontag, "One culture and the new sensibility" [1965], in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 1996 [1966]), 304.

[46] Warhol's remarks in 1975 are reminiscent of Bruce's a decade earlier. "What's great about this country is that America started the tradition where the richest consumers buy essentially the same things as the poorest. You can be watching TV and see Coca-Cola, and you can know that the President drinks Coke, Liz Taylor drinks coke, and just think, you can drink Coke, too. A Coke is a Coke and no amount of money can get you a better Coke than the one the bum on the corner is drinking. All the Cokes are the same and all the Cokes are good. Liz Taylor knows it, the President knows it, the bum knows it, and you know it." Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 100–101.

ongoing battle against what LeRoi Jones, later Amiri Baraka, had derided in 1963 as the "whiter" tastes of the black "middle class."[47] Significantly, Brown remarked at the beginning of the essay that those whiter tastes suddenly appeared to be on the wane. This is not to say that Sontag, Warhol, Brown, and Baraka championed the same sensibility in the name of the same political-aesthetic project. But they were all dealing with the practical and ideological difficulties involved in making a "culture" for an industrial society characterized by the emergence of a relatively affluent and enormous proletarian "middle class."[48] Bruce was not the only comedian to have found himself embroiled in heated inter- or intra-class conflicts as entertainment associated with the "nightclub" or the "burlesque" began appearing in the "theatre" as a kind of "musical" art.[49] The staging of a comedy "concert" in Carnegie Hall was one event in a more complex historical movement.

When Sontag and Baraka (then Jones) signed Ginsberg's petition in 1964—the same year Sontag finished the title essay of *Against Interpretation*—they might have seen in the comedian not merely a rallying point for people in their own social circles or an opportunity to promote "free speech," but something of an alien kindred spirit.[50] Bruce too cultivated a sensibility, and his vocabulary, like Sontag's, acquired meaning from long lists of particular examples rather than from definitions or abstract principles.[51] "Perhaps at this point I ought to say a little something

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[47] Cecil Brown, "James Brown, Hoodoo and Black Culture," *Black Review* 1 (1971), 180–185. Amiri Baraka [then LeRoi Jones], *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1999 [1963]). On Amiri Baraka, see also chapter four.

[48] See chapter two.

[49] See chapter three.

[50] Committee on Poetry, "press release."

[51] Susan Sontag, "Thirty Years Later …" [1996], in *Against Interpretation*, 309.

about my vocabulary," Bruce explained. "In the literate sense—as literate as Yiddish can be since it is not a formal language—'goyish' means 'gentile.' But that's not the way I mean to use it."[52] Bruce's "Jewish and goyish" bit makes use of what Kenneth Burke calls a "perspective by incongruity" whereby terms supposedly belonging to one domain are applied to another.[53] In this case, a pair of terms belonging to the level of ethnicity or religion is applied to every corner of modern life: Ray Charles is Jewish while Sammy Davis Jr. is goyish;[54] cigarette smokers can choose between goyish Camels and Jewish Salems; Dick Tracy and Riverside Records are Jewish, while restaurants serving two flavors of ice cream, chocolate and vanilla, are goyish; Spanish music is goyish; Mexican music is Jewish; Jack Sheldon is Jewish, but his parents are goyish; the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps are all goyish; the Air Force is Jewish; a guy named "Tony" and "Irishmen who have rejected their religion" are both Jewish, as is John Cage. Of the four variations on the routine I am citing here, only the one found in Bruce's autobiography makes any observations, uninspired at that, about any sort of recognizable "ethnicity" (one line, for example, mentions a Jewish woman who keeps a handkerchief balled up in one hand). Everywhere else I have looked, Bruce uses the routine to outline a way of life transcending ethnicity or religion. "[If] you live in New York or any other big city, you are Jewish. It doesn't

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[52] Bruce, *How To Talk Dirty* (1972), 6.

[53] Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984 [1937]), 308–314. As indicated in the note above, I am synthesizing four sources for Bruce's "Jewish and Goyish" routine: Lenny Bruce, "S.F. Gossip"; id., *Live at the Curran Theater*; id., "Neologize"; and id., *How to Talk Dirty* (1972), 6–7.

[54] Sammy Davis Jr. publicly identified as Jewish in "Why I Became a Jew," *Ebony* 15, no. 4 (February 1960), 62–69. It is hard to believe that Bruce could have been unaware of Davis's conversion. Regardless, according to the routine, one can be goyish even if Jewish.

matter even if you're Catholic; if you live in New York you're Jewish. If you live in Butte, Montana, you're going to be goyish even if you're Jewish."[55]

Morris Dickstein reports that by the 1950s, improving understandings of the atrocities being described as "the Holocaust" were prompting many observers in the U.S. to produce a figure of the Jew as that of an "American Everyman," Jewish history as "a parable of the human condition," particularly the "modern" human condition.[56] As a particular sort of Jewishness severed from family, ethnicity, and religion became synonymous with an emergent, broadly inclusive, contemporary American culture, the need for a discerning sensibility capable of learning on the fly became that much more urgent. Proponents of the "new culture" had to be wary of explicitly invoking any venerable traditions. This is where a musical Bruce might have intervened.

1.3 Making a sensibility

Bruce furnishes no overarching rules in his Jewish and Goyish routine; he enumerates particular judgments. Ray Charles, the Air Force, hairdressers, Paul Newman, mouths, and John Cage cannot all be Jewish in the same way or for the same reason. Where reasons for Bruce's individuated judgments could be inferred, an act of frigid categorization could seem "intimate," a characteristic repeatedly cited in descriptions of Bruce, the New Comedy, and the comedy of the

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[55] Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty* (1972), 6–7.

[56] Morris Dickstein, *Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1977), 46. See also James D. Bloom, *Gravity Fails: The Comic Jewish Shaping of Modern America* (Westport, CN: Praeger, 2003).

1960s in general.[57] Whether the pathways drawn were those Bruce originally had in mind was unverifiable and in that sense immaterial. Regardless of whether they communicated a definite content, Bruce's performances depended upon an appearance of direct communion grounded in ungrounded lists. Where communication was not simulated, where pathways were not drawn, frigid categorization might have been alienating. Like most preachers, the "evangelist of the new morality" often seemed "arrogant and boring."[58] The "most obnoxious act I've seen in a night club […]," wrote one critic in 1960,

> was perpetrated by a pretentious young man, posing as an avant garde, who fancies himself a perceptive observer of men and affairs and has what he considers a new concept (his word) of humor. He talks on and on, mostly about himself, and finds it necessary from time to time to explain his type of alleged comedy. […] He has an annoying habit of not finishing his sentences. In fact, half the time I couldn't understand what he was talking about.[59]

Unless the observer already "knew" the hairdresser not as an entry in a phonebook but as an integral part of an entire way of being in the world, it could easily have sounded as though Bruce was reading from a phonebook. He seemed boring when he talked on and on about things his audience didn't already know about, arrogant when his judgments, lacking any basis in a shared

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[57] "The New Comics, Bruce in particular, establish a very personal relationship with their audience by the simple process of extending their own intimate circle to include the audience." Ralph J. Gleason, liner notes to *Lenny Bruce, American*, Fantasy 7011, LP, 1961. "Often I have heard the believers in Bruce say how warm they feel when they see him." Joseph K., "We Are Not Amused," *Village Voice* 5, no. 41 (August 4, 1960). On intimacy in sixties comedy in general, see also Bell, "Intimate Lenny Bruce"; "An Evening with Mike & Elaine," *Variety* (April 27, 1960); Harold DeMuir, "Three Guys Feeling an Elephant: An Interview with Firesign Theatre," *Aquarian Weekly* (October 24, 1984), 41.

[58] Booker, *Neophiliacs*, 186; Marowitz, "Confessions," 28–29. Gene Knight, "At the Blue Angel: Arrogant and Boring Comic," *Journal-American* (New York, March 11, 1960), 23.

[59] Knight, "At the Blue Angel," 23.

ethical life, seemed to proceed from the mysterious, higher realm of some sort of "avant garde" and its heady "new concept." Talking about himself was alienating where it wasn't a way of talking about his interlocutor. According to at least one sensibility, this was bad. My purpose in this section is to show how, by contrast, Bruce's performance could have been productive of intimacy.

1.3.1 "Exposure"

During his 1961 Carnegie Hall concert, Bruce suggested that nothing more than a lack of "exposure" caused the lack of communication between himself and what he called the "what's-it-mean," the person who incessantly asks for definitions. "Doesn't make you hip or square or highly intellectual or lacking in intellectual capacity if you don't understand a joke, because if you haven't been exposed to it— ."[60] Bruce spoke with ellipses even when observing how difficult it was for some audience members to understand what he was saying. He illustrates his claim with a joke, the premise of which proceeds as follows:

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[60] Lenny Bruce, *Carnegie Hall*, United Artists UAS 9800, LP, 1972, originally recorded February 3, 1961, also released as id., *The Carnegie Hall Concert*, World Pacific CDP 7243 8 34020 2 1, CD, 1995. I have been asked whether what I am describing as a "Jewish" sensibility is nothing more or less than a "hip" sensibility. Obviously the two overlap, but no, they are not the same. Bruce's remark quoted here—"Doesn't make you hip or square"—sets hipness to one side as he discusses "exposure": in this sense, Bruce reduces the importance of hipness; the hip and square alike might appreciate Bruce's jokes, as long as they have been exposed to the referent. By contrast Bruce's "Jewishness" seems far more pervasive and exceptionally mobile. I can't imagine that Bruce or anyone else would have described the Air Force as "hip." Bruce does however describe it as Jewish. A possible reason for this is obvious: the hipster needs no military because he has no nation, no need for national defense, and no need to earn his keep in an actual society; Jewishness, at least as I am describing it here, grounds a new culture in a complete society. The Jewish for Bruce cannot be read as absolutely synonymous with the hip.

> Kennedy can*not* make the acceptance speech. They got about a half hour to go, and they're just flipping out. "[In a nasally voice sounding suspiciously like one of Bruce's gangster characters] S'aright?" "[throaty] I know a guy in Boston who's a ringer for him." "[nasally] Well get him here, right away." "[throaty] Well the only trouble is he's a real burlesque comic. He works real toilets, and uh …" "[nasally] Yeah? Alright, get him anyway. Dress him up." [Bruce's voice] Now the guy is frightening! The *punim* [face]. He's a real ringer. "[nasally] Does he drink?" "[Bruce's voice] No, it's a little speech, he'll memorize it and that's all." "[Bruce's voice] Can we trust him?" "[Bruce's voice] We'll kill him right after the show!"

Still in the setup to the joke's punchline, Bruce gets a big laugh at this point. His audience would already have been "exposed" to all of the experience they needed in order to understand the humor of Bruce's premise. By 1961 audiences in the U.S. could not have avoided exposure to depictions of electoral politics as a "show" like any other.[61] The Carnegie Hall audience might also have detected an amusingly morbid remark about the comic's own status among Kennedy's supporters—a prescient remark, some might argue. And at the moment that the conversation takes its darkest turn, Bruce's satirical object subtly changes from a group of menacing stooges with cartoonish voices plotting a ruse to a pair of individuals both speaking in a voice everyone listening has already heard, Bruce's own as marked by both timbre and phrasing—rhythmic and linguistic phrasing: this is not the only place in this chapter where we will see Bruce use the two-syllable refrain "that's all." At the level of the speaking voice, the shape of ethical life where the characters are seen at work most closely resembles Bruce's own life at the moment where the conversation shifts furthest away from a world where entertainers are not routinely murdered after performances. Conspirators lurking in the highest and darkest social echelons emerge as

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[61] Hoberman. *Dream Life*, xv, 18, 21, 37; Norman Mailer, "Norman Mailer on John F. Kennedy: Superman Comes to the Supermarket," web publication of the original November 1960 article, entry posted on December 8, 2009, http://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a3858/superman-supermarket/ (accessed June 9, 2015).

entertainers putting on a show in the same kind of toilet where they find their real burlesque comic. To the extent that their murderous solution can be spoken in Bruce's own voice, that solution becomes "like" one of his own. The powerful are reconstituted as ordinary people with vulgar problems—a formulaic, easily appreciated premise requiring no esoteric exposure. What taxes the audience's experiential knowledge, Bruce claims, is the punchline. "Thank you, ambassador," begins the Boston ringer, apparently in some sort of Kennedy impersonation.[62] "Before I introduce my cabinet members, I'd like to, uh, I'd like to—I'd like to give you my impression of Clyde McCoy [imitates a trumpet, see Figure 1.1]."

The audience laughs in appreciation, but Bruce suggests that they only understand the joke because they share a prior experience:

> Funny, right? Funny. Now: only funny if you have been exposed to that many toilet comics. Y'know, [sings Figure 1.1 again, this time with an eighth-note on the and-of-one preparing the first Bb]. And Al Jolson [sings, see Figure 1.2]. But to perhaps a capper astrophysics major, nuclear fisherman, he's been, "What is so cute? He doesn't even have any structure. What is funny— [sings the first three notes of the Clyde McCoy lick, descending through the first half-step and allowing the B double-flat to dip downward in pitch as it fades away in volume]?"

At one level, Bruce's theoretical claim—that listeners will not appreciate this punchline without first having been exposed to its referent—can almost be taken seriously. Perhaps the recognizability of the referent ("Y'know, [sings]") was indeed a large part of what Bruce found funny about his joke. Perhaps Bruce was steeped in burlesque impersonations of Clyde McCoy. The iconic hip comedian might have had what the musicologist Phil Ford, studying Bruce's

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[62] It sounds like no Kennedy impersonation I have ever heard. But all modern Kennedy impersonations are in one way or another—whether or not the impersonator is aware of the fact—imitations of Vaughn Meader's Kennedy impersonation in *The First Family*, Cadence CLP-3060, LP, 1962. And in the fall of 1961, Bruce was not yet able to make use of that referent.

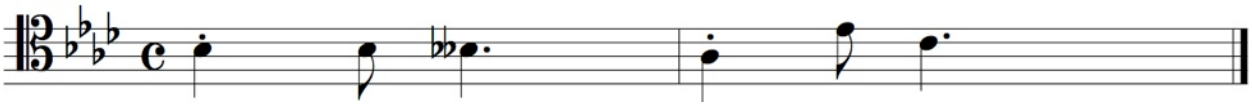

Figure 1.1 Bruce's Clyde McCoy on *Carnegie Hall* (1972). My choice of key is approximate enough to provide a loose sense of where the lick fits in a typical male voice and to make the tonal relationship with the Al Jolson lick (Figure 1.2) apparent.

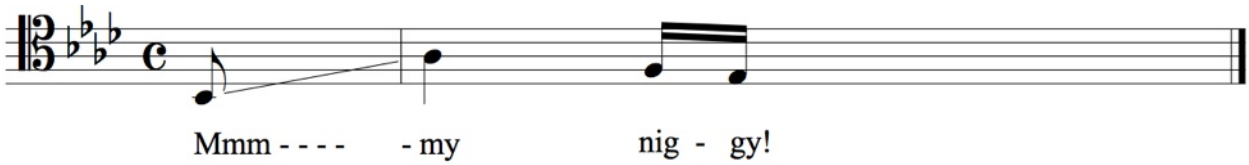

Figure 1.2 Bruce's Al Jolson on *Carnegie Hall* (1972).

generation, describes as a "hip sensibility," a sensibility which prizes "experience" as that which is "embodied, concrete, and anchored in place and time."[63] The Boston burlesque comic unexpectedly does precisely what someone familiar with burlesque comics could expect. By contrast, the "nuclear fisherman,"[64] unable to faithfully reproduce so much as a simple two-bar phrase, lets his quotation fall apart as it sags past a drooping tonic. It might have appeared to Bruce as though the lick had no shape for those who had never been exposed to it.

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[63] Ford, *Dig*, 9.

[64] The term sounds like a hurried reference to a "physician in the nuclear age" (nuclear physician) or to a "nuclear physicist," and Bruce evidently uses it to refer to a highly educated professional securely interpolated into a technocratic military-industrial complex. He may also be producing the nuclear physicist as a worker akin to a fisherman. On technocracy and the role of institutions of higher learning in the rapidly expanding military-industrial-university complex, see Howard Brick, *Age of Contradiction: American Thought and Culture in the 1960s* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 8–9, 18–22.

The problem with this explanation begins with the fact that the nuclear fisherman has indeed been exposed to the lick, and recently: he heard it only moments ago. Someone might interject that this is a misleading objection. Bruce's claim is not that the nuclear fisherman hasn't heard the lick, but that he hadn't already been exposed to the "original" Clyde McCoy as this might have appeared in a prior moment mediated by a prior context. Exposure to "culture," in Bruce's telling, is a thick, enveloping experience, not something that could be imparted simply by the experience of hearing a burlesque comic deliver an impersonation. However, when reduced to that claim, Bruce's argument seems not so much mistaken as simply irrelevant. Since the phrase must have a shape for anyone who has just heard it—whether or not that shape is the same as the one which appears to those steeped in the music of Clyde McCoy—the fisherman's reproduction, obviously feigned in its clumsiness, seems spiteful. One has to assume that the fisherman is producing not what he hears, but what it benefits his case or his position to hear: shapelessness. He evidently wants his interlocutor to agree that the joke "doesn't even have any structure." A willful deformation of the punchline bolsters that claim.

This apparently willful construal of the joke's ostensible shapelessness seems especially unethical because the joke teller's Clyde McCoy and Al Jolson appear less steeped in some sort of esoteric body of knowledge—exposure to the real Clyde McCoy, for example—than productive of their own cartoonish objects. Both impersonations could be called "epigrammatic" rather than "thorough," by which I mean that each of them constitutes a shape relatively complete unto itself rather than a faithful reproduction of some external or prior referent.[65] An

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[65] An excellent example of a "thorough impersonation"—distinct from the "epigrammatic impersonations" of Bruce or Robin Williams—is John Belushi's uncanny Joe Cocker as performed on *Saturday Night Live*.

aficionado of Clyde McCoy or Al Jolson might say that Bruce's impersonations fail as thorough impersonations: perhaps the real Clyde McCoy and Al Jolson don't sound anything like that. But they serve perfectly well as epigrammatic impersonations: by themselves, they are able to tell any listener with even the most cursory knowledge of culture and society in the U.S. of the early twentieth century—that is, virtually everyone in Carnegie Hall at midnight on February 3, 1961—everything Bruce could possibly have wanted his listener to know.

For example, in his gleeful, brassy, nasally Clyde McCoy impersonation (see Figure 1.1), Bruce half hums a syncopated excerpt with a touch of chromaticism contained by a boxy—visibly "square" in my transcription—melodic contour: the lick essentially outlines a triad. The syncopation barely disguises its own repetitiveness or regularity (quarter, eighth, dotted-quarter, quarter, eighth, dotted-quarter). And because the hemiola begins on the second beat of a duple meter, the effect is not that of an attack on the downbeat being expanded into a cross-rhythm on the occasion of its repetition, but rather, on the contrary, that of a syncopated rhythm lending weight to an accented attack square on the downbeat—a downbeat on the first scale-degree no less. Rhythmically, the lick could hardly be more square without being totally devoid of the syncopation required to make it seem "jazzy." Melodically and harmonically, the chromaticism is not enough to obscure the fact that the underlying contour is that of a glorified triad—at most the beginnings of a pentatonic scale—bounded by the sparse interval of a perfect fifth. Whether or not we know of another Scotch-Irish musician who plays jazz poorly, we "re-cognize," we cognitively produce, the empirical data furnished by Bruce as the spitting image of a Scotch-Irish musician playing jazz poorly. Prior exposure is beside the point. The lick produces its own knowledge of Clyde McCoy. Even dropping Clyde McCoy's name in the first place is

necessitated by the form more than the content of Bruce's joke: if an impersonation has to be an impersonation of someone, it might as well be an impersonation of someone with a humorous name—were it not for the clumsy "Clyde" and the ethnic "McCoy," the name of virtually any other white trumpeter from any age before bebop might have served just as well.

Similarly, Bruce's Al Jolson appears as a complete package (see Figure 1.2). The fleshy, humming "Mmm" giving way to a twangy, throaty "(w)ah-ee" in the word "my" sounds exaggerated by comparison not with Jolson's pronunciation, but with that of the listeners themselves. Almost any speaker of the English language—save perhaps the occasional Madeline Kahn character—could be expected to hear that pronunciation as "too much"; no special knowledge of Al Jolson is required. Bruce boxes in his excerpt with two more of the bland, open intervals which had already been used to structure the Clyde McCoy lick, in this case, an ascending octave and a descending fourth. He lands with an unabashed accent on the downbeat. He uses an anacrusis and a pair of sixteenth notes to add nothing more than a hint of syncopation. He even manages to squeeze in a hideous racial epithet ("niggy").

These are not reproductions of Clyde McCoy or Al Jolson so much as they are repeated instances of one thing in one key, a thing which, by itself or with no unique connection to any one referent, could have been perfectly recognizable for virtually all of Bruce's contemporaries: with a comically misplaced jubilance, a fleshy, racist, square, white entertainer betrays his essentially hokey character as produced by Bruce himself.

1.3.2 Exposure mediated by a shape of the political

What, more precisely, might people have recognized in this "one thing" and in the structure of Bruce's joke as a whole? Michael Szalay has shown how mid-century novelists such as E.L. Doctorow, Joan Didion, Ralph Ellison, Norman Mailer, William Styron, John Updike, and Robert Penn Warren helped forge a "literary hip" for the sorts of "white-collar," "white male professionals and managers in the Northeast" who were seen grounding their own political power in an alliance with a black electorate by "sponsoring"—the word is apt for both its ecclesiastical and commercial connotations—"the aims of the Civil Rights Movement."[66] At least one of these novelists was explicitly critical of the power relations he claimed were involved in something like that "literary hip." A Southerner transplanted to the North, Styron (1925–2006) corroborated an observation elsewhere attributed to his exact contemporary,[67] that the northern liberal's modish racial imaginary was obscuring a "buried animus" toward the white Southerner.[68] Styron insisted that the inevitable "corollary" to bigoted views of Southerners was a farcically undemanding and self-involved form of racial sympathy: "to show that you really love Negroes, smoke pot, and dig the right kind of jazz."[69] A cultured nuclear fisherman as he might have appeared for Styron, steeped as such in a "liberal" racial imaginary, could not have failed to "dig" the painfully obvious fact that Bruce's Clyde McCoy and Al Jolson do not play

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[66] Szalay, *Hip Figures*, 2–4. It was widely believed that Kennedy could not have beaten Nixon in 1960 without the support of black voters. See Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (New York: Viking, 2011), 240.

[67] Bruce appears with something like Styron's observation in Cohen, *Essential Lenny Bruce*, 238.

[68] William Styron, "A Southern Conscience," *New York Review of Books* 2, no. 4 (April 2, 1964), 3.

[69] Ibid.

"the right kind of jazz," whatever that might be. They are too "square" rhythmically, melodically, and harmonically. Their fleshiness is not that of a sensuously textured "grain" or body—like the raucous "pianism" of Thelonious Monk, as one musicologist has described it, or the mutters, whispers, and aching cries of Miles Davis—but that of a half-naked performer straining after a "blatant," fleshy effect: Clyde McCoy's lips flap against each other; Al Jolson opens his jaw with a twang.[70] The nuclear fisherman may not have liked the joke, but he could not possibly have failed to appreciate its rudimentary structure: by playing the wrong kind of jazz for the people who decide what the right kind of jazz should be, the burlesque comic exposes himself, the dirty secret of the conspirators, and perhaps also the dirty secret of the sophisticated jazz aficionado. The joke seems almost phallic, especially when we consider that the possible players—the comic, the conspirators, and the hip aficionado—would all have been overtly gendered male.

Thus the very gesture which justifies the what's-it-mean likewise paints that same what's-it-mean in an unflattering light. What Bruce's contemporaries could have recognized in Bruce's illustration is a fantasy overturning of power relations: to the extent that the murderous conspirators fail in their devices, the burlesque comic wins, perhaps even saves his own life—with the secret already out, there is no longer any reason kill him after the show. In and through those same social relations, the nuclear fisherman cannot appear merely as an independent observer accidentally lacking exposure. His sophistication depends upon his capacity to dig the

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[70] Benjamin Givan, "Thelonious Monk's Pianism," *The Journal of Musicology* 26, no. 3 (Summer 2009), 404–442. Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice" [1972], in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), 267–277. On the "blatant" effect as the thing to be progressively eliminated by the professional, see chapter five. I am arguing that squareness and fleshiness makes the musical examples cited here representative of "the wrong kind of jazz"; whatever "the right kind of jazz" might have been, this music would remain "wrong."

right kind of jazz. Intentionally or otherwise, Bruce is depicting stupidity at work: the nuclear fisherman's way of listening is not merely one way of listening as valid in its own way as any other; he has plainly arrogated to himself the right to declare which shapes have "structure" and which ones are meaningless "fuzziness," and he looks especially bad because his judgments appear to be grounded in an ulterior motive—the joke he claims lacks structure functions as a pointed satire of people like him. Fanatical pluralists might repress these sorts of inferences on the duplicitous grounds that any interpretation is as valid as any other, that sense and "structure" are in the absolutely self-contained eye of an observer cut off from all conditions—as if it were possible for a nuclear fisherman as such to miss the structure of the joke. A genuine pluralism would instead look for the conditions where a nuclear fisherman could possibly miss the structure of the joke; I see no evidence that anyone in Bruce's audience could have referred to those sorts of conditions. If Bruce's depiction of the nuclear fisherman was unfaithful to some really existing nuclear fisherman, the rotten character of Bruce's nuclear fisherman and the nature of his activity in a particular bit is plain nonetheless. That character and that nature might have counted for something without being translated back, in a straight line, to any "real" conditions.

The appearance I have been describing—an impersonator comically triumphs by failing on his opponents' terms—can be further grounded as a historical possibility in the affinities it shares with at least one contemporary routine. The Smothers Brothers, a folk-music comedy duo best known for hosting an allegedly "controversial" CBS variety show in the late sixties, shaped class relations along much the same lines in their 1963 recording, "The Incredible Jazz

Banjoist."[71] The white Jazz Banjoist and Bruce's burlesque comic share hackneyed tastes in jazz music.[72] The clumsy yet endearing elder brother Tommy, eponymous hero of the "Incredible Jazz Banjoist," evidently shared with Bruce a degree of pleasure in portraying a white man who failed to measure up to the suave sophistication based on a hegemonic image of black men. Lenny and the brothers Tommy (b. 1937) and Dicky (b. 1939) had all grown up outside the circles of the Northeastern intelligentsia and without the structure of the nuclear family widely articulated to

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[71] Smothers Brothers, "The Incredible Jazz Banjoist," in *Curb Your Tongue, Knave!*, Mercury SR 60862, LP, 1963. The title parodies Wes Montgomery, Tommy Flanagan, Percy Heath, Albert Heath, *The Incredible Jazz Guitar of Wes Montgomery*, Riverside RLP 1169, LP, 1960. For *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* as oppositional, see David Bianculli, *Dangerously Funny: The Uncensored Story of The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009). Here again, oppositional comedy appears as comedy opposed to censors.

[72] "The Incredible Jazz Banjoist" features actual banjo solos performed by Tommy with two songs as referents. The first song is "Whispering," by Malvin and John Schonberger, originally recorded by Paul Whiteman in 1920. The audience laughs as soon as the song is named. The second song, "Nola," was performed by Liberace on his television show in the 1950s. It too elicits laughter simply by being named.

the supposed "containment" of the 1950s.[73] None of the three ever attended an elite university.[74] Both Lenny and Tommy seem to sympathize with an ambiguous underdog: the uncool white man, the white man who hasn't learned to model himself after the affluent white man's "right kind" of black man. "It's getting chic to be a liberal," Bruce was once quoted saying. "I figure I'll be the first hip bigot."[75] The impossibility of being a hip bigot made it possible for the literal inversion of hegemonic social mores to appear desirable, if only at the level of fantasy. Bruce's lowly burlesque comic triumphs by spoiling Kennedy's acceptance speech with a wrong performance fitted to the right rules—jazz, but the wrong kind. Tommy, for his part, finds pathos in the banjoist who, if he is completely hopeless as an incredible jazz musician, is still

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[73] Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988); Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1989). I owe both these citations and the general point I am using them to make to Richard Leppert and George Lipsitz, "'Everybody's Lonesome for Somebody': Age, the Body and Experience in the Music of Hank Williams," *Popular Music* 9 (1990), 259–274. The Smothers's father died a POW in 1945, when the boys were roughly the same age as Bruce had been at the time of his parents' separation (conflicting reports put him at age 5 or 8), and all three were raised for the most part by single mothers.

[74] Bruce, the oldest of the three by well over a decade, served in the Navy and later joined the Merchant Marine, and the younger Smothers brothers, both of whom attended what was then called San Jose State College, were part of the first generation to have benefited from the rapid expansion of state university systems in the postwar decades.The relationship between "public" and "private" universities during the 1960s is too complex and dynamic an issue to be summarized here, but a class distinction would have been felt. See Jencks and Riesman, "Class Interests and the 'Public-Private' Controversy," in *Academic Revolution*, 257–290. Californians, like those in the rest of the nation, would have felt that class distinction in terms of the public versus the private—Stanford seemed to hold a substantial lead over UC Berkeley even as late as 1967 (ibid., 284), at least for those without a stake in the prestige of UC Berkeley. But they would also have felt a similar distinction in terms of the prestigious University of California system, modeled after the high-investment, research-oriented, private Northeastern university, versus the considerably less prestigious California State system. Ibid., 286. As one of my readers observed, San Jose State College was unmistakably a "blue-collar" school, in a blue-collar part of the Bay Area at that.

[75] "V-27 Jane Reardon pamphlet," undated, Box 4, LBCB.

humanized by his relatable desire to be black, albeit without needing to be black, that is, to participate in all of the virtues of the figure of the black man "in the white mind" while bearing none of the burdens of being black, a desire with a long and complex history among white men in the United States.[76] By the 1960s, Norman Mailer's "White Negro," famously described in a 1957 essay for *Dissent*, already appeared to some at least as a ridiculous figure.[77]

Both Tommy and Lenny were able to perform a fantasy overturning of contradictory race and class power relations, an overturning which we can see transpiring in a specific way: labored white appropriations of black music fail, thereby making fools of the appropriators; yet the failures of insufficiently "chic" white men function as triumphs over more affluent, liberal white men and their more licit racial imaginaries. Given a class society known through contradictory racial categories—the exploiters appear as white and the exploited as black, yet the affluent justify themselves or set themselves aright by participating in one way or another in a chic blackness—those least able to participate in "the right kind" of blackness triumph over the more affluent by participating in a legitimated minstrel show in a manner reminiscent of a blatantly racist minstrel show. Neither the Incredible Jazz Banjoist nor Bruce's burlesque comic provide

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[76] See Paul Mooney, "Ask a Black Dude - Walking - Uncensored," *Chapelle's Show*, Episode 5, Season 1, originally aired February 19, 2003, http://www.cc.com/video-clips/lo6e8w/chappelle-s-show-ask-a-black-dude---walking---uncensored (accessed June 13, 2015). For more on this history, see Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013 [1993]); George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1971). See also chapter four.

[77] Norman Mailer, "The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster," *Dissent* 4, no. 3 (1957), 276–293. Cp. Nat Hentoff, "A Brief Note on the Romance of 'The White Negro'," in *The Jazz Life* (New York: Dial Press, 1961), 138–142. "[The] hipster's reactions to the music itself [i.e., jazz] are usually as superficial and unknowledgeable as those of the hungrily impressionable adolescents who watch Stan Kenton imitate the American eagle." Ibid., 138–139.

good role models for "real life." Yet observers could have made the triumphs of those heroes their own at the level of fantasy while living in a real world where Bruce, the Smothers Brothers, and Styron all referred in one way or another to a class of exploiters which, despite its ostensible anti-racism, perpetuates and manages racist social relations.[78] The racist terms transparently structuring the progress of chic liberals appears in a "basic" and hence blatant form shaped by the very primitiveness of Bruce's epigrammatic impersonations: Bruce's Clyde McCoy sounds as much like Stephen Foster (1826–1864) as anyone who lived at any time in the twentieth century; while hegemonic ideology leaves the inherently racist terms mediating contemporary jazz transparent, Bruce's Al Jolson says "my niggy" out loud. As a purified abstraction, the desire of the affluent white middle class to embrace all that was good about their virtuous black man was unimpeachably "good." All people everywhere can agree, everyone should want to be more like the liberals' virtuous black man. But in a society which was actually reproducing itself as a capitalist society—that is, a racist class society—failure might have appeared as the most triumphant manner of satisfying that "good" desire.

1.3.3 Exposure mediated by a musical shape of the political

If the nuclear fisherman's annoyance cannot be explained away in terms of a lack of exposure, why then the complaint, "He doesn't even have any structure?" Bruce's inadequate explanation notwithstanding, that complaint sounds familiar. It resembles the critic's annoyance, cited above, at Bruce's habit of not finishing sentences. And it is not the only place in the

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[78] Stuart Hall, "Race, articulation and societies structured in dominance," in *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism* (UNESCO: Bernan Associates, 1980), 339–343; Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

Carnegie Hall concert where Bruce invokes the image of an audible, formal structure in a discussion of communication:

> With exception of perhaps that group over forty-five that relates because of business to a younger group, I will lose them. 'Cause the most erudite guy all you have to do is hit one word that'll send him off. Like, "What does 'bread' mean? What's 'pot' mean? What's that mean?" And then he just missed the whole zup, bup, bup [in an ascending contour, as if climbing his way upward through an argument toward a higher plane]. And then I lost him.[79]

Bruce's what's-it-mean loses the form of the routine to a preoccupation with pinning down the contents. The problem is not so much that the what's-it-mean can't pin down the contents as it is that he stubbornly insists on having the contents pinned down even when it means missing the larger "zup, bup, bup" of a performance. Incapable of observing a routine which has not yet been subordinated to his own vocabulary, he produces that routine as one without structure.

Bruce proposed a solution to this ethical problem:

> So I started thinking that I am going to make it so that people … [another aborted sentence] Between 20 and 40, that's my audience. Then I really cook, man. […] I'll cut anybody in that area. Yeah. [the audience begins applauding in affirmation] But now when I go to another scene … [Bruce breaks of this sentence and then continues, speaking rapidly and loudly as if to cut through the applause] So y'know'at I do? Dig: I'm gonna have a thing where nobody over forty is allowed to come in to see me. I'll have a sign up, man. Y'don't have to explain it. They have "White Only." That's all. "Nobody Over Forty." "You can't come in?" "No." That's all. "You can sit in the car. Somebody can tell you about it, but you can't come in." And they have to have IDs. Yeah. An ID. "How old are you?" "I'm, [the "m" in "I'm" sounds as an "n," as if Bruce's lips are hardly moving, and a glottalization in his vowels appears to place the voice on the vocal folds, thereby making it sound almost as though the speaker is peeking out from

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[79] Bruce, *Carnegie Hall* (1995). Bruce returns to this lack of a common language repeatedly in the Carnegie Hall concert, pointing out that people younger than him might not catch his reference to "every dumb, old RKO picture" and that people might not understand his "language," "larded" as it was with "hip idiom" and "Yiddish idiom."

> inside his own throat] uh, thirty-nine, uh." "Have to see an ID." "[Whining] We're just gonna have cokes, that's all." "No." They forge the IDs [Bruce's voice breaks into a grin as he mutters something I can't make out]. I've been thinking about that, seriously.[80]

The comic world Bruce weaves here is not consistently "ironic," leastwise not in the sense of the ironic statement which merely affirms for the audience that the speaker would never make such a statement in earnest. The comparison of his own modest proposal with the overt forms of segregation roundly condemned by the northern liberals he would have expected in his Carnegie Hall audience—many of whom were perfectly familiar with the North's barely less overt "Restricted" signs—helps make Bruce's policy seem farcically unjust and thus both unreasonable and impracticable. In this sense there is a level of irony to the bit: his audience laughs approvingly at something they would only approve at the level of fantasy. But this does not change the fact that Bruce's horrendous world of desire is desirable, albeit only to the extent that it is impracticable—it is desirable as a desire which would only take that shape if the world were more like Bruce's fantasy world. In that key respect, there is no reason to speak of irony

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[80] Bruce, *Carnegie Hall* (1995). On hearing "different kinds of smile" in a voice, see Amy Drahota, Alan Costall, Vasu Reddy, "The vocal communication of different kinds of smile," *Speech Communication* 50, no. 4 (2008): 278–287.

here.[81] Bruce performs something like what Freud would call "dream-work" on the segregationist's detestable sign by making it into a "wish-fulfillment" for him, by which I mean that he alters the segregationist's sign at the level of fantasy and makes it into a Nobody Over Forty sign productive of the desired space where he can "really cook."[82]

And there is another wish being fulfilled here as well, because in the foreground of Bruce's diegesis is not the comic cooking, but rather the excluded trying to get inside. The over-forty wait in the car for someone to tell them what is going on, lie about their age—murmuring like ventriloquists as they try to speak without being seen speaking ("nine" rhymes with "I'm") —plead for special concessions, and counterfeit paperwork. The ultimate triumph in Bruce's fantasy is not the ironic triumph whereby Bruce gets rid of the over-forty crowd only by resembling segregationists, but the one in which an ethical life reshaped by a "Nobody Over Forty" sign provides the conditions where the rotten character of his antagonists can really shine: the over forty are living in a state of protracted adolescence.

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[81] I understand our relationship to our own desires as such that we can desire horrible things, things we would never "really want," without saying that we desire "ironically." The desires are "sincere," if that word can be used, but they are stupid. Spinoza calls them "blind": see *Ethics*, trans. Edwin Curley (New York: Penguin, 1996), 147. In actual practice, desires can be understood as mediated by the complexity involved in being alive. There are no "pure desires" as far as the complete individual, as I am describing it, is concerned. A standard illustration of this principle is Freud's account of the "young girl" who dreamed that her nephew had died and who was distraught at the thought that she might subconsciously have desired something wicked. Freud "cures" the girl by interpreting the dream as a wish-fulfillment, but as the fulfillment of a wish in which the poor nephew appears as an essentially accidental casualty in the imaginary fulfillment of a desire which otherwise has nothing to do with him. See Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. Joyce Crick, ed. Ritchie Robertson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 119–121.

[82] On the "wish-fulfillment," see Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*, 98–105. On "dream-work," see ibid., 211–329.

The what's-it-mean's complaints ignore the workings of Bruce's narrative practice. First, Bruce's ellipses allow him to work with his audience. "But now when I go to another scene"—Bruce has no reason to make this phrase a "literate" sentence and good reason to move forward: the missing content is already supplied by the structure of the utterance,[83] and the audience, rapidly getting carried away with its own applause, compels the speaker to bound forward with a concatenated query ("So y'know'at I do?"). Furthermore, the dynamic shape of Bruce's dialogic scenes, a celebrated specialty of his since his days as an impersonator in the late 1950s,[84] has an entertainment value of its own. Between the introduction ("Dig: I'm gonna have a thing where nobody over forty is allowed to come in to see me") and the conclusion ("I've been thinking about that, seriously"), the jagged parataxis moves at a rate of something like half the number of syllables per sentence averaged in the rest of my transcription in this section (section 1.3.3).[85] The consequently increased tempo of the phrasing, rendered visible by the punctuation in my

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[83] The missing phrase has a negative relationship to the corresponding phrase in the preceding clause: here *it happens*, but there (*it doesn't*).

[84] Lenny Bruce, *Almost Unpublished*, 16. Many of Bruce's early dialogic scenes can be heard on the two-volume set, Lenny Bruce, *The Lenny Bruce Originals*, Fantasy FCD-60-023-2, CD, 1991. They markedly decline after the Carnegie Hall concert, suggesting to me that Bruce was learning to speak the message-oriented, printable language celebrated by his middle-class patrons.

[85] I see no reason to try to be technical about where a sentence begins and ends in an oral performance or what counts as a syllable in Bruce's delivery: the contrast I am describing is stark no matter how one makes those determinations. If we said, for example, that there are seventeen sentences outside of Bruce's dialogic scene, with syllable lengths of 31, 21, 5, 3, 3, 10, 5, 17, 12, 6, 11, 1, 10, 6, 1, 23, and 11 respectively, Bruce averages about 10.4 syllables per sentence. Throwing out one outlier on either end makes for an average of 9.6 syllables per sentence. By contrast, counting nineteen sentences within the dialogic scene, with syllable lengths of 6, 7, 5, 2, 7, 4, 1, 2, 6, 14, 7, 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 1, and 5, makes for an average of 4.9 syllables per sentence. Eliminating an outlier on either end leaves an average of 4.4 syllables per sentence. There would be other ways to perform this sort of calculation, but all of them would produce a similarly stark difference.

transcription, is even more vivid aurally: as Bruce shifts between voices, he alters his timbre, slips into a nonverbal exclamation, terraces his dynamics, yanks his tempos up and down, rushes through a seemingly compulsive refrain ("That's all"), and mumbles something as if speaking from a distance, leaving the audience to survey the counterfeiters at work. Instead of contextualizing utterances verbally by saying who is speaking and when, he presents each utterance as if it were appearing for us in the elaborately detailed form shaped by the fantasy characters themselves, the fantasy characters as overheard from an almost cinematic perspective.[86] Complaining that a show of this sort does not appear in a "literate" form is simply a way of dressing up in a pseudo-critical guise the stupid remark, "I didn't like it, and so you don't have to either"—like complaining that an apple is no orange.

It turns out, once the over-forty have been transplanted to the circumstances of Bruce's fantasy narrative, that this obstinate group was never concerned with understanding as a general principle at all. What they wanted was integration, and "understanding" was the mode of control they used to establish social integrity. We the audience "know" this fact when we see that what is continuous between the over-forty as what's-it-mean and as impotent teenager is a desire for integration. Hip idiom, Yiddish idiom, and people with the annoying habit of not finishing sentences were automatically threats to the sort of integration desired by the what's-it-mean, the integration where everything is given its definite place in an established order. Every word

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[86] This is to say that he speaks in a kind of "direct discourse." Aaron Fox explains this standard linguistic term by opposing it to "full indirect discourse" where a speaker uses "constructions […] to assimilate" an utterance "to the reporting speaker's context" (e.g., instead of saying "She said 'I'll be there by two-thirty'" one says "She said she was going to be here by two-thirty"). Direct discourse does not use these constructions. Fox states that direct discourse is typical in the "working-class speech" he recorded in Texas and suggests that full indirect discourse is "prevalent in middle-class and professional speech styles." See Aaron A. Fox, *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 38.

needed to be defined in advance, not so that the "zup, bup, bup" of Bruce's limber gait could be better followed, but so that it could be grounded in an established territory.[87] Now that they have been turned out of the inside and deprived of their power by a variation on one of "their" own signs ("They have 'White Only'"), they begin behaving like grasping children.

The main function of Bruce's proposal is not that of an ironic, Swiftian "modest proposal" but that of a fantasy premise. The narrative staged upon that premise is the focal point: it is not merely that the satirical object is satirized; it is that the satirical object behaves in a particular way through the distinct modulations of its circumstances. We hear how it behaves as Bruce's voice carves that behavior through a rapid montage. Speaking purely in terms of duration, the vast majority of the routine is spent fantasizing about the desirable things which might happen if something otherwise ridiculous somehow happened. The basic elements of the routine are borrowed from the real world—the over-forty, the what's-it-mean, the restricted sign, the excluded teenager—but what becomes of those elements in Bruce's diegesis has less to do with mocking something which really exists than with imagining basic elements mediated by a new shape of the political, however absurd or abhorrent that new historical form might otherwise be.

1.3.4 Producing a sensibility for the density of modern life

Ultimately, Bruce's rapidly expanding fantasy narrative redeems the over-forty, debased to the level of impotent adolescents, as a group of feisty teenagers. The generation gap is bridged

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[87] Here Bruce's fiction is scathingly close to his everyday reality. We have extant recordings: the claim that "half the time" an educated, English-speaking adult couldn't understand "what [Bruce] was talking about" reflects upon the listener, not the performer. Knight, "At the Blue Angel," 23.

when the positions of the generations are restructured by a sign. Treated like children, as segregationists had treated an entire race of people, the over-forty regain their youth. Now they are the underdogs, now they are the ones who delight listeners listening to their escapades. The occasion of their triumph occurs, paradoxically, when they lose control of a "prop" they had used to regulate their circumstances (the "restricted" sign).[88] The paradox would not work in real life. In real life, it would simply be that despotic power had changed hands. But at the level of comedy, where there is something to enjoy about the involvement of actors in their own situations, the capacity to move through the paradox appears as whimsy.

In this way, Bruce modulates a contradiction between integration and exclusion: the forces of exclusion begin acting as forces of integration because of a change in their circumstances rather than a change in some sort of secret, innermost being; and it is this reversal of an essentially unchanged set of behaviors which makes the modulation of contradiction visible as such—now in the place of the over-forty as flat, self-contained antagonist, we have the over-forty mediated by circumstances. An abstract conflict (us v. them) appears now as a determinate contradiction (the over-forty as grounded by their variable circumstances). The most important consequence of the modulation in the fantasy terrain is not that the forces of exclusion are shown to be ridiculous—that was already common knowledge. The point of Bruce's satire is not merely the satirization of a satirical object. I have not described a "transposition" of contradiction: rather than merely moving the act of exclusion between actors like shifting a theme between keys, taking someone else's act of exclusion and "ironically" making it his own, Bruce alters an aspect of the present contradiction, altering the tables rather than merely turning them in a circle with

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[88] For more on the "prop" in modern criticism, see Sumanth Gopinath, *The Ringtone Dialectic: Economy and Cultural Form* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013), 206–210.

their symmetry otherwise preserved. Excluded, the forces of exclusion remain forces of exclusion only by integrating themselves. And this produces the essential character of their objections: they objected not to Bruce's performance as such—they refused to even hear that performance "as such," or as I have produced it—but to their own loss of control. If a slight alteration in the shape of their ethical life, a new nobody-over-forty sign, obliges them to alter their strategy in such a way that it appears as its own contradiction, they will be unfazed by such a contradictory obligation. The contradiction remains, only now there is no mistaking it as such. Its essence is made to appear not by whittling away a shape of ethical life until a rotten kernel is revealed, but by providing the contradiction with a new shape of the political.

If this sort of contradiction is to be transcended—rather than merely resolved by giving one side the moral high ground—the difference between our exclusion and theirs must be something other than an arbitrary ambivalence: they want in, we want in, and their wants are essentially the same as ours; we are all merely people who want in, each eternally the same as the other in our infinitely undifferentiated desire. It can't merely be that we like Bruce and they don't, and somebody has got to exclude somebody else, and you might feel one way and someone else another, but in the end everything is the "same difference" because everyone wants the same general thing. It has to be that the over-forty, as such, are seen to be better off as feisty teenagers: if their own prejudices make them incapable of participating in a modern, egalitarian society—"half the time," they claim, they can't even understand what is being said—then they are better off for now in that shadow realm between childhood and adulthood, not yet fully admitted into ethical life, but already desirous of admission. This would be abhorrent as a program for political action in real life; Bruce could have expected his liberal audience to find it

abhorrent as such. But at the level of fantasy, the routine names some of the stakes of political action. When Bruce involves his audience in his own weaving of his dialogic scene, he implicitly asks that audience to affirm that his movement of integration is better, in an ethical sense, than that of his antagonists.[89] Bruce's inanely urbane theory—"Doesn't make you hip or square"—partially effaces this imperative, but only to the extent that it manages to obscure his actual practice. Asking people to listen musically might have served as a means of illuminating the form of that actual practice.

Whereas Bruce was faulted for lacking form, his complaint about goyishness was not that it lacked form, but that it was formed with such impeccable regularity that it could never be articulated in speech or worked through the warped crevices of an actual life. In the rendition of his Jewish and goyish routine recorded in November 1961 at the Curran Theater in San Francisco, only one month after his first arrest in that same city on obscenity charges, nearly a full year after his Carnegie Hall concert, Bruce strains to pronounce the name of the hero of a contemporary Camel cigarette ad (see Figures 1.3 and 1.4):

> [In an announcer's voice] This is— [slipping out of the announcer's voice and into a whisper] Dig: his name is so goyish, it's beautiful. Bob B-Y-H-R-E. Try to say it. [louder, in his normal speaking voice] Bob B-Y-H-R-E. Bob [in a long ascent, as if exaggerating the sound of a question] Byhre? It's so goyish you can't say it! Bob [in a long, slow descent, as if sloping down the mountains seen in Figure 1.4] Byhre!

Unlike the what's-it-mean who allows his rendition of the Clyde McCoy lick to fall apart, thereby demonstrating or producing its supposed lack of structure, Bruce points toward the shape

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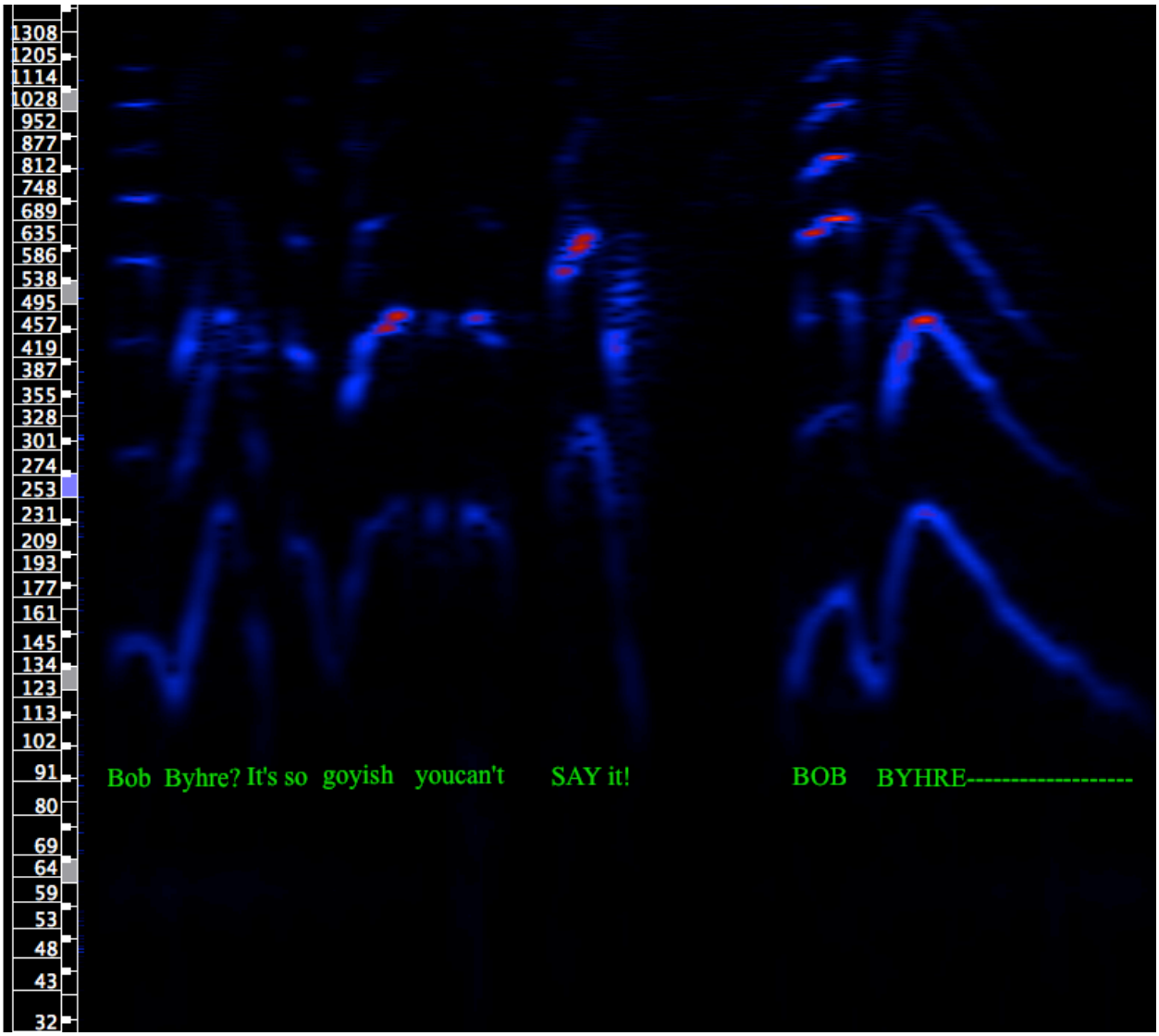
[89] At least one critic did affirm that Bruce's ethics were better than those of his antagonists."With such seemingly intolerant humor as this, Lenny Bruce preaches tolerance and only the prude and the bigot fail to get the message." Larry Siegel, "Rebel with a Caustic Cause," *Playboy* (February 1959), 21, 66, 78.

Figure 1.3 Bruce trying to say “Bob Byhre.” *Live at the Curran Theater* (1971). Melodic range spectogram (Sonic Visualiser). The scale refers to hertz.



he claims the name Bob Byhre must be striving to attain. “Bob” appears with a straight, horizontal contour filled with clearly defined partials: Bob as a block, square as the hero’s jaw. And “Byhre” curves and slopes like a mountain arching through the heavens. “Bob Byhre” the spoken name appears with the superhuman regularity implied by the image Bruce found in *Life* magazine (see Figure 1.4), regularity such as that of the line or curve determined by

Figure 1.4 "Bob Byhre risks his life—without pay." "What Jew would do that?" Bruce asks on *Live at the Curran Theatre* (1971). Camel, "Have a real cigarette - Mountain rescue," *Online Exhibits@Yale*, http://exhibits.library.yale.edu/items/show/7584 (accessed September 23, 2015).

mathematical rules. Whether or not Bruce's listeners had already been exposed to the visual image, they received the essential information in the form of an aural image. And the very act of striving to produce that image produces that regularity as ridiculous: Bob Byhre and his "real" cigarettes belong to the sort of goyishness which seeks to escape from a world where cigarettes lose their flavor, lamentably, and to ascend to a realm of mathematical eternity. Bruce's Jewishness, by contrast, is happy to find ways of moving through that world, even where it means confronting the artifacts of goyishness. Rather than merely rejecting the goyishness of Bob Byhre and Camel cigarettes, Lenny Bruce could have produced a sensibility productive of a goyishness impoverished by its own transcending retreat from the contradictions of the present into an eternal domain of lines and arches.

1.4 The ideological function of Bruce's sound

At least two existing ideological critiques are relevant to the preceding description of Bruce's audible practice. First, Manfredo Tafuri, writing in the 1970s, argued that a Pop Art "championship of the imagination" had assured observers "that the contradictions, imbalances, and chaos typical of the contemporary city are inevitable" and "that this chaos contains an unexplored richness."[90] Writing as an architectural historian, Tafuri argued that when civic planning became less profitable for architecture's "natural consignee," industrial capital, capital's potential critics needed to be convinced that no one benefited from civic planning, that each individual could make a bountiful imaginary for their own self out of whatever catastrophe industrial progress brought their way. Second, Adorno's interwar critique of a popular culture

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[90] Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia*, 135–141.

productive of what he called a "pretense of immediacy and intimacy" is of obvious relevance to a critique of the "intimacy" of the New Comedy.[91] Since Adorno's critique of interwar entertainment fits Bruce's case incompletely, it can be used to produce some historically possible specifics of one comedian's newness.

Taken together, Adorno's and Tafuri's critiques produce a suffocating atmosphere. If an Adornian pseudo-intimacy can be contrasted with a genuine intimacy grounded in individual autonomy,[92] Tafuri presents the autonomy of the imaginative observer as itself a political problem, not a reliable solution. Bruce's intimacy (subject to Adorno's critique) is grounded in his Jewishness (subject to Tafuri's critique), and it is not immediately clear whether they are "genuine" or whether they are caught in a vicious circle of illusion.

This chapter has produced substantial grounds for the criticism made by contemporaries themselves that Bruce's performances could be used to create a titillating feeling of belonging to an outsider underworld.[93] That feeling can be described as relatively "false" in the sense that a more "authentic" mode of belonging, by definition, would be grounded in various obligations. It might have appeared as a "cheap" feeling not in the sense that it was insincere or unreal, but in the sense that it promised rewards which should have required more commitment than what the act of listening to comedy actually involved. The disparity between the promise of rewards and the lack of obligations makes instant intimacy seem "hollow" or "without substance."

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[91] "Radical reification produces its own pretense of immediacy and intimacy." Adorno, "On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening" [1938], in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert, trans. Susan H. Gillespie (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 299.

[92] Iain Macdonald, "Cold, cold, warm: Autonomy, intimacy and maturity in Adorno," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 37, no. 6 (July 2011), 669–689.

[93] See my reference to Woody Allen's recollection in the note above. Allen and Björkman, *Woody Allen*, 31. Cf. also Hale, *Nation of Outsiders*.

Yet critics of instant intimacy or the "suddenly hip and rebellious" might have found Bruce's lack of substance considerably less troubling than the appearance of antagonists who farcically claimed they were alienated not by hollow intimacy but by some supposed lack of structure. Bruce's what's-it-mean wants to hear Bruce's joke as meaningless, fuzzy, and shapeless. Against that flagrantly irrational, spiteful desire, the progressive rationalization of popular culture, famously described by Adorno, could have had no defense: the what's-it-mean is too foolish to be fooled by pseudo-intimacy.[94] Intimacy, relatively authentic or inauthentic, appears preferable within a bounded set of alternatives. Herein lies the satirical element of the bit Bruce weaves around his Kennedy impersonator joke: however magnanimous Bruce's commentary, the observer who "gets the joke" is plainly superior to the what's-it-mean. If we can say musical characteristics were mediated by the false intimacy of a titillated middle class, we must also recognize that something is rightly being rejected, even as Bruce professes acceptance in theory. A musical Bruce rewards listeners who can hear particulars mediated by particulars and by personal experiences without first needing to have the particulars defined or the experiences ordered. Despite what historians and critics sometimes assert to the contrary, I have seen no substantial evidence that in practice Bruce ever challenged prevailing contemporary prejudices. But taking pleasure in seeing one's own biases confirmed is ethically problematic in one way; needing to have every particular defined and every experience ordered is something

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[94] The "comparative backwardness [of the 1920s] in the techniques of consumer culture is misinterpreted as though to mean it was closer to the origins, whereas in truth it was just as much organized to grab customers as it is in 1960. In fact, it is a paradox that anything at all changes within the sphere of a culture rationalized to suit industrial ideals; the principal of *ratio* itself, to the extent that it calculates cultural effects economically, remains the eternal invariant. That is why it is somewhat shocking whenever anything from the sector of the culture industry becomes old-fashioned." Adorno, "Those Twenties" [1961–1962], in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 42.

much worse. If everyone takes at least some pleasure in seeing their biases confirmed, a person open to the whimsy of Bruce's musical practice might at least learn to revise their biases; learning for the what's-it-mean can only take the form of subordinating new data to definite categories. Even a practice as innocuous and insubstantial as Bruce's poses a genuine threat to a worldview as frail as that of the what's-it-mean.

Bruce's sympathetic observers might have knowingly rushed through moment after moment of "sudden revelation." The deftly woven audible scene where the over-forty try to sneak into a restricted club is composed of tiny scenarios, each one condensing facets of "real life" so divergent that they could only be perfectly identified with one another at the level of fantasy—the over-forty appear, capriciously, as segregationists and teenagers alike. Taking pleasure in such a scene requires an appreciation for its peculiar workings rather than a mere recognition of its definite pieces; it neither reflects nor "subverts" any given social context straightforwardly. Whimsically modulated contradictions not only satirize the "bad side" of a contradiction but also reward people who listen for contradictions happening. Epigrammatic impersonations, because they are relatively complete unto themselves, have to succeed in their own way, or as they appear relative to an observer's diffuse body of knowledge. The referents Bruce lists as Jewish must be recognized as such by reference to a complex life in progress.

The intimacy involved in Bruce's whimsical, musical Jewishness is far removed from the intimacy of the "radio favorites" who, in Adorno's account, "insinuate themselves into the families of their listeners as uncles and aunts."[95] It is an intimacy which requires not an eternal family, but a historical capacity to make decisions about the particulars of a world which

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[95] Adorno, "Fetish-Character in Music," 299.

individuals must be able to make for themselves as individuals living with others. If a "championship of the imagination" obfuscated the disintegration of society as the liberation of vital forces, it is also the case that people needed to deal in one way or another with what might have been felt as the disintegration of their society. A way of dealing which looks to intimate, personal experiences should have seemed preferable to the rigid structures of the what's-it-mean. In other words, what seems inane by itself might have seemed sturdier when involved in a particular historical antagonism—better false intimacy than stupid alienation. This is perhaps the most important reason for Bruce's preoccupation with the what's-it-mean.

And if the two sides of this antagonism can be described as those of the intimate and the alienated, the intimate themselves had at least two possible alternatives: what I have been critiquing as Bruce's "Jewishness" and what has been widely critiqued as "hipness." Ingrid Monson shrewdly situates white hipness in a broad, transhistorical Western exoticism.[96] The image of Lenny Bruce the Liberal Messiah produces outsiderness only as a negation of mainstream society, like the white hipsters who, in Monson's account, produce blackness as a mere lack. By contrast, Bruce might otherwise have been seen producing a positive alternative to mainstream society, a bounteous Jewishness grounded in select artifacts of consumer society. Bruce's Jewishness is less a characteristic of a nomadic figure with a definite "outsider" position, a mirror image of the lonely white man severed from all ties, than a condition lived in and through the open fields of a treacherous mass society. In this sense, Bruce updates the false intimacy of the eternal family by better adapting pseudo-intimacy to a world in which the family

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[96] Ingrid Monson, "The Problem with White Hipness: Race, Gender, and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 48, no. 3 (Autumn 1995), 396–422. See also chapter 4.

already appeared, for at least one of Adorno's colleagues, to have been reduced to a convenient guise for an otherwise arbitrary collection of individuated consumers.[97] Such an improvement may have more efficiently manipulated people by participating in their own imagining of the political as a rich tapestry woven out of the chaos of atomized particulars, an imagining of the political which people experiencing the atomizing forces of modern capitalist development could reasonably have found more serviceable. A seemingly new and improved intimacy might have provided the conditions where, at the level of fantasy at least, people could practice not only surviving as outsiders lugging their own privately held, abstracted artifacts along with them, but living among others through thickly woven conditions.

Asking people to actually listen to Lenny Bruce LPs might have undermined the clean image of Bruce as bleached force of opposition, champion of a neatly printed list of dirty words; listening musically provided an opportunity to hear Bruce's actual practice as a determinate "form." Those who carried Bruce's theoretical claims to their logical conclusions might have produced the particulars he cited as absolutely self-evident and self-contained: Bruce himself even went so far as to claim that Eichmann was simply one man like any other man doing what anyone else would have done in his shoes, a sentiment Hannah Arendt, in rejecting something

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[97] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991 [1962]), 151–159.

like it, claimed was typical of Bruce's historical moment.[98] But there is an incongruity between Bruce's pseudo-pluralistic theory and his actual audible practice with its weaving of contradictory scenes. Listeners who could attend to what Bruce actually did with particulars had the opportunity to hear those particulars mediated and in that sense produced by a whimsically modulated fantasy shape of ethical life—not as mere expressions of their circumstances, neither guilty nor innocent, but as themselves revealed in and through changing conditions. The individualistic exoticism which seeks escape from society through identification with the pure outsider may constitute one historical possibility. The making of a "new culture" might have functioned as something very different, and a musical form may have provided a more suitable setting for that alternative function. Bruce's jazz-like style might have seemed politically worthwhile—that is precisely what might have made it diverting and manipulative—even if the

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[98] Bruce, *Live at the Curran*. In defending Eichmann, Bruce may have been preaching to the choir. Arendt could have been speaking to Bruce himself when she criticized "those who today refer to Christian charity" and who "kindle a spirit of forgiveness" by saying "that you yourself might have done wrong under the same circumstances." She continues: "It seems to me that a Christian is guilty before the God of *Mercy* if he repays evil with evil, hence that the churches would have sinned against mercy if millions of Jews had been killed as punishment for some evil they committed. But if the churches shared in the guilt for an outrage pure and simple, as they themselves attest, then the matter must still be considered to fall within the purview of the God of *Justice*. […] Justice, but not mercy, is a matter of judgment, and about nothing does public opinion everywhere seem to be in happier agreement than that no one has the right to judge somebody else. What public opinion permits us to judge and even to condemn are trends, or whole groups of people—the larger the better—in short, something so general that distinctions can no longer be made, names no longer be named. Needless to add, this taboo applies doubly when the deeds or words of famous people or men in high position are being questioned. This is currently expressed in high-flown assertions that it is 'superficial' to insist on details and to mention individuals, whereas it is the sign of sophistication to speak in generalities according to which all cats are gray and we are all equally guilty." Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006 [1977, 1963]), 296–297. For Arendt's distinction between "understanding" and "judgment," see Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992 [1982]).

substance was lacking. In any case, the substance would have seemed especially lacking from the "disillusioned" standpoint of the observer who had foolishly asked standup comedy to play the role of the critic in a society systematically deprived of the organs of criticism.[99]

Conclusion

Saint Lenny was not the only contemporary fantasy figure who, to put it in the language of a celebrated passage published in 1964, rose from a "substratum of outcasts and outsiders […] outside the democratic process" and hit "the system from without" as an unblemished force of pure "opposition."[100] This basic narrative—messianic outsider delivers "one-dimensional man"—would have allowed middle-class observers to create a picture of their world unsullied by their own contradictory involvement in the making of an affluent capitalist society. The Marcusian "one-dimensional man" is neither "good" nor even sympathetic—indeed, contemporaries might have felt that a narrative of one-dimensional men appealed most to the

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[99] On the systematic deprivation of the organs of criticism, see Habermas, *Public Sphere*.

[100] Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2002 [1964]), 256–257. Hale does not consider Marcuse in her *Nation of Outsiders*, but she provides numerous examples of the same basic narrative: a messianic "outsider" delivers the one-dimensional man.

lonely observer who sympathizes with no one.[101] But neither is he subject to any kind of moral judgment at all; he is basically a passive inhabitant of a "web of domination" (Marcuse's term), absolutely at home within modernity as a flat network of rationalized relations.[102] His redemption, whether it appears in the guise of a saintly pre-striptease burlesque comic or a substratum of outcasts, seems to emerge from outside all circumstance.[103] To the extent that Bruce seemed to inhabit no definite position, he could have done no wrong.

That would have been one aspect of his apparent inanity; the other was that more critical observers were apt to find that a messianic Bruce outside all circumstance was grounded in definite circumstances: in the fantasy life of white middle-class observers. If Bruce seemed like a new and improved sort of comedian, it was a serious liability to find that the seemingly esoteric knowledge he produced tended to be of the sort dispensed by bartenders and women's magazines. Bruce could not very well play the absolutely autonomous outsider while serving as

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[101] One young contemporary (1940–2013) remarked upon Marcuse's evident gratification in finding himself all alone on the inside: "Marcuse seems to take a perverse pride in his isolation—indeed, this pride is the dominant personal note in a book where personality is mostly effaced—and carries it to gratuitous extremes." Marshall Berman, "Theory and Practice," review of *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, by Herbert Marcuse, *Partisan Review* 31, no. 4 (Fall 1964), 624. To "put down Marcuse's book and pick up the morning paper, the reader might think he were in different world. [… There] is a whole […] dimension of experience which [Marcuse] doesn't see at all: the moral life." Ibid., 625. Although he fleetingly grants that Marcuse's narrative might have better applied to the fifties, Berman quickly rejects an image of that decade as a "deadly monistic world": "There were new dimensions, new contradictions, new life in the old system yet." Ibid., 626. Marcuse's esteem for outsiders is the flip side of his disdain for everyone on the inside.

[102] Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 169.

[103] Compare Williams's remarks on "negative identification" in *Culture and Society*, 175–178, 271–272. As Williams notes, what follows after the middle-class white man's identification with an "outcast" can be "disillusionment."

the evangelist of any placid hegemonic morality, and yet in practice it was precisely as the evangelist of the new morality that he appeared as the seemingly autonomous outsider.

The very fact that Bruce was made to appear as an outsider in the first place tells us something about the preferred ideology of the class society which has been establishing itself since World War II. As one contemporary observed, "Failure—the jaunty hardness of the 'outsider'—will lose its present glamour" as the classless society is established.[104] The observation remains just as scathingly contemporary half a century later: as long as we occupy the "transitional society," the society transitioning not from one middle-class society to yet another but from an evolving "middle-class society" to a classless society,[105] the figure of the outsider retains a contradictory appeal for observers who would like to fancy themselves "progressive." Outsiders need the dreadful "inside" they reject to retain not only their glamour or privilege but even their very being as "outsiders." The messiah has to die to establish the new order, like a seed going to ground. And if the messiah is no messiah at all but merely an evangelist of yet another class morality, keeping that false messiah alive for interminable decades keeps the new order shrouded in the realm of miasmal prophecy: even as the new order establishes its transparent standards, observers are directed to spend their time not critiquing the new order, but fretting over the malicious old guard. It is not surprising to find that observers who might in other respects have been described as "liberal" and "middle-class" were critical of what they saw as "the liberal middle class's" Saint Lenny. What is alarming is how much that figure seems at my first glance to have triumphed as the appearance most often remembered today.

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[104] Williams, *Culture and Society*, 334.

[105] On the "transitional society," see ibid., 319.

What appearance or appearances Saint Lenny's critics wished to substitute will always be more difficult to say. Negative statements produce their own point of orientation with ease, in part because they say no more than meets the eye: this is not that; the liberals' Lenny Bruce is not the real Lenny Bruce. What "that" is, what appearance critics of postwar liberalism would have substituted for the one they rejected can only be produced for us as a historical possibility. But not all observers rejected Lenny Bruce in general; Hentoff, for example, rejected a particular appearance of Lenny Bruce. If we want to understand what Hentoff was doing, we need to practice an imaginative, speculative formalism. Considering the prevalence of musical terms and the emphasis on audible appearances in the writings of contemporary critics, it has made sense to begin with a possibility made apparent by listening in musical ways.

A number of qualities characteristic of Bruce's performances can be described in musical terms. The temporal unfolding of his routine is starkly differentiated by dialogues with curt, contrasting statements and by montages articulated with changing tempos, timbres, and dynamics. His impersonations are epigrammatic: small, dense phrases contain large amounts of information, including recognizable timbres, phonemes, melodic shapes, and rhythms. His texts and trains of thought can be tailored on the fly to fit uneven rhythmic exchanges with a responsive audience. It is easy to see why Bruce once represented the structure of his act as a "zup, bup, bup." The continuity of his flow is broken by abrupt leaps between small, sometimes free-floating (what's that mean?) pockets of information. Such an appearance can likewise be used to ground analogies with jazz in tattoo-like "licks" and vanishing "ghost notes." At least one of the people who has claimed to have had communication with the spirit of the late Lenny Bruce said that she recognized him even though, or perhaps precisely because, the only thing she

could perceive was the snap of his fingers.[106] The essence which appeared for this observer was perfectly encapsulated in an exceptionally compact, abrupt, isolated sound. If the "rhythmic principle" of jazz is syncopation,[107] the "modification" of that principle which perhaps interested Bruce's contemporaries could be that of the mobile unit—the epigrammatic impersonation, curt utterance, or snap—abruptly interpolated into the temporal flow at unpredictable intervals.

Appearances such as these might have served at least a few functions, all of which could have been made to participate in Bruce's apparent "intimacy." Bruce's habit of not finishing his sentences allows him to shape his monologues to the contours of his audience's interjections. Rapid transitions between aural objects with distinct referents reward listeners who are quick to make inferences, thereby contributing to the feeling that Bruce and his listener share an esoteric knowledge or "exposure." Bruce's facility as an impersonator makes it possible for him to produce such a knowledge "on the spot": given an elementary background knowledge, listeners hear everything they need to hear in order to "know" what Bruce is doing. But because he provides this information without packaging it in the form of an explanation or definition, the listener is able to feel as though their exposure was experienced firsthand, as if their own unique experience fills in the blanks, however general the experiences invoked actually were. Consequently, Bruce's performance practice was well-suited to the sort of pseudo-intimacy which Adorno critiqued as a basic characteristic of popular culture. By stripping that intimacy of the familial character Adorno scorned—by saying not, "You and I are family: we already agree

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[106] Honey Bruce, "Communicating with Lenny Bruce through Spiritualism," undated typescript, Box 1, LBCB. See also Linda Meris Skwer, "Through Author's mediumistic Automatic Handwriting Entity identifies himself as the late Legendary Comedian Lenny Bruce," marked "Unpublished Work Copyright 1988," typescript, Box 4, LBCB.

[107] I am using Adorno's vocabulary as found in "On Jazz" [1936], in *Essays on Music*, 470.

about everything," but rather, "Here is this, can you dig it? Can you make it your own?"—Bruce might have produced a performance practice which could fulfill the needs of the culture industry while simultaneously producing a representation of the sorts of conditions where people might have hoped to thrive.

In hindsight, the most striking thing about those imaginary conditions is that Bruce extends his sensibility across a fairly wide range of socio-cultural spheres, including those of experimental music (Cage), ethnic music (Mexican), popular music (Riverside Records and Ray Charles), popular entertainment (Dick Tracy and Paul Newman), the geography of life in the polis (New York), daily life (hairdressers), and military service (the Air Force). It would not be surprising to find that Bruce's historical moment was characterized by a greater degree of mobility than we find in our present. As the architects of the United States' current all-volunteer military had hoped, the suspension of conscription in 1973 has removed military service even further from the democratic process than various exemptions already had.[108] No doubt the mobility of a man who traveled from Strip City to Carnegie Hall in a matter of a few years would have seemed an exceptional sort of mobility in virtually any age. Even so, it seems plausible that a person born in 1975 would be no more likely than a beneficiary of the G.I. Bill born in 1925 to have both served in the military and listened seriously to any sort of contemporary experimental music. Besides which, in a study of the subjective aspects of class formation, the amount of mobility the imagined "average person" actually enjoys is only as important as the forms of mobility individuals might have been able to conceive of as desirable.

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[108] Stephen Ambrose, *Nixon, Volume Two: The Triumph of a Politician 1962–1972* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 264–266.

My aim in this chapter has been to show that Bruce's dreams might have been grounded in actual practices productive, if only at the level of comic imagination, of a "new culture" which might have been felt as appropriate to a classless society as Bruce himself might have imagined it. As opposed to the ostensible homogeneity of a vernacular outside the reach and thus outside the corruption of polite society and its invisible standard language, the classless society is the first diverse society in that it is the first society characterized by universal mobility. But universal mobility is itself the contradictory problem.[109] Without some means of actually mapping infinitely particular artifacts, we have no way of even asking whether we are producing mobility and diversity or simply spinning in colorful circles—worse, accumulating colorful illustrations for our monotonous prejudices. Bruce could name at least one thing goyish for everything Jewish, and I see no indication that his goyish observers are any less contented than his Jewish observers. On the contrary, Bruce's Jewish nomadism suggests restlessness. This is where the apparent immoral stupidity of the what's-it-mean and his preference for definite order and stability furnishes an important contrast: Bruce does not say so out loud, but his goyish observers appear to live in a hell of their own devising. The merit of Bruce's audible practice has to be grounded not in its fairly parochial content, but in a form seemingly based upon and productive of a desire for unbounded, unpredictable motion.

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[109] Octavio Paz, *Corriente alterna* (México: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1967), 39–44. Cf. also Paz's remarks on the "universal" as a problem in ibid., 185, 192, 220.

Chapter 2 Texture, the Performance of Ethical Life, the Proletarian Middle Class, and the Illustrated Laff Box (1966)[1]

Two phantasmagoric Arnold Roth cartoons published by *TV Guide* in the summer of 1966 illustrate an almost Hegelian narrative of freedom and terror: the "Laff Box," a motley, unwieldy musical instrument performed upon by a group of "Laff Boys," is horrifically condensed into an oppressive, univocal, autonomous machine (see Figures 2.1 and 2.2).[2] On one level, the illustrations and their accompanying pair of articles work as little more than a behind-the-scenes look at skilled laborers fine-tuning sitcom laugh tracks. Yet in the process of providing that inside look, they draw relationships among a variety of actors, including machines, performers, writers, technicians, audiences, and network executives. Capital and labor, mediated by conflicting and ambivalent desires, are seen at work shaping "textured voices," a term I will use to refer both to voices heard as interpolated into a musical texture and to voices heard as having their own textured character, whether as "voices" with a "timbre" made up, as had long since been argued,[3] of many parts, or as "collective voices" with a "composite timbre" made up of many voices, each somehow textured in itself. The publications are important as illustrations of an ethically complex situation where observers could imagine textured sitcom laugh tracks being

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[1] An earlier version of this chapter appears as "Textured Voices and the Performance of Ethical Life in the Case of the Laff Box (1966)," *Twentieth Century Music* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2016), 109–137. Substantial portions of this article have been reprinted with permission of Cambridge University Press.

[2] Dick Hobson, "The Hollywood Sphinx and His Laff Box (First of Two Parts)," *TV Guide* 14, no. 27 (July 2, 1966), 3–6; id, "The Laff Box (Second of Two Parts)," *TV Guide* 14, no. 28 (July 9, 1966), 20–23.

[3] Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 65.

manufactured. They provide evidence for some ways and means whereby contemporaries might have listened for texture as mediated by the political.

The aesthetic these cartoons might have taught readers to practice brokered no political guarantees. By describing the varied modes of perception involved in the production of a finished laugh track, including the purposeful appraisal of network executives, the highly skilled, corporeal involvement of a virtuosic Laff Boy with headphones and score, and the disgruntled boredom of another Laff Boy waiting for his shift, *TV Guide* encouraged close attention to traces left by the deft weavers of laugh tracks. But if the way of listening proposed by *TV Guide* invokes the relationships involved in a complex system of industrial production, it likewise performs an aestheticizing detachment, a detachment which might have been felt to distinguish the sophisticated *TV Guide* reader's godlike "perspective of perspectives" from the naive viewing practices of some supposed group of lowly, easily manipulated masses without even a *TV Guide* subscription to guide them in their listenings—one commentator is quoted referring to imbecilic "hordes of cackling geese."[4] In other words, the ethical life we will see depicted and described polemically in these publications can be said to include the sensibility needed to perceive the particular shape of ethical life being described: by seeing the world "as it is," the observer both produces that world and stakes a claim to a definite position within it. And yet that sensibility seems all but transparent: it is as if the listener by listening were not participating in the production of the voice being heard, as if a speaker's speech is immediately transmitted to the listener without the the act of listening itself becoming involved in the making of a "voice."

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[4] I borrow the phrase "perspective of perspectives" from Kenneth Burke's description of irony. For Burke's usage, see *A Grammar of Motives* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969 [1945]), 503. Hobson, "Laff Box (Second)," 22.

The particular confluence of historical conditions which concerns me in this chapter is that of the meeting between a manner of listening which listens in one way or another for "texture"—what I will call "textural listening"—and the "proletarian middle class" ascendant in the United States during the postwar decades. This latter term especially will require some explanation.[5] As the New Left historian E.P. Thompson puts it in *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), class is not a static thing, a "structure," or a "category," but rather "something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships."[6] One of the things which might have happened in the case of the proletarian middle class was a peculiar experience of being both in the middle and on the bottom. To the extent that the conditions of this experience can be set before us, the proletarian middle class can be shown to have been happening, however imperfectly (see section 2.2). Textural listening

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[5] Because it involved new kinds of clerical, managerial, and service occupations, the phase of proletarianization which unfolded in the United States after World War II was not always recognized as such. But Herman van der Wee shows that the increased share of salary and wage earners in national incomes needs to be "primarily ascribed to the increasing dependence on wages, that is, the long-term steady rise in the number of wage and salary earners in relation to the total working population. This has taken place at the expense of the self-employed, including farmers, merchants, artisans, and entrepreneurs." See *Prosperity and Upheaval 1945–1980* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986 [1983]), 241–242. For a detailed treatment of the economics involved in postwar proletarianization, see "Chapter Six: The Imperative of Demand," ibid, 233–258. See also Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914–1991* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994), 302–310; Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1998 [1974]), passim and, for a discussion of the unique place of women in the class, 266–267, 270–271; E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1997 [1957, 1962]); and Eli Ginzberg, Vincent Bryan, Grace T. Hamilton, John L. Herma, and Alice M. Yohalem, "Chapter 6: Life Goals," *The Middle-Class Negro in the White Man's World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 96–126. On parallel developments in France, see Serge Mallet, *Essays on the New Working Class*, ed. and trans. Dick Howard and Dean Savage (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1975).

[6] Edward Palmer Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1963), 9.

might have become a part of this happening by fulfilling a task or a set of tasks. The goal of this chapter is to distinguish between some of those possible tasks.

2.1 Texture, surface, and depth

To the extent that "texture" in its musical sense today has been reduced to a bland umbrella term comprising older terms like monophony, homophony, and polyphony, observers must have forgotten how novel it might have seemed and how important it was in attempts, during roughly the middle third of the twentieth century, to describe some contemporary musical sounds.[7] Jonathan Dunsby finds no uses of the term in its musical sense from before 1930,[8] and while precedents for "musical texture" are not hard to spot, these only serve to demonstrate that observers might have found something innovative in an ear for texture. Cowell for example, during the 1920s, used textile metaphors like "weave" and "fabric" to describe compositions with novel relationships among their voices.[9] *New Musical Resources* interpolates these metaphors into the composer's elaborate reading or misreading of acoustic theories derived from

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[7] "Many of the familiar terms and concepts in music criticism had become irrelevant [by the second quarter of the twentieth century]," explains Dunsby, "and in the search for an assimilation of modern music, what we now think of as texture was often the only hook on which critics, reviewers, and teachers too, were able to hang their musical understanding of the new." Jonathan Dunsby, "Considerations of Texture," *Music and Letters* 70, no. 1 (February 1989), 47, 49.

[8] Dunsby, "Considerations of Texture," 47.

[9] Henry Cowell, *New Musical Resources* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1930), 42, 108, 138–139; id, *Fabric: for piano* (New York: Breitkopf, 1922).

Helmholtz's groundbreaking work in the physiology of perception.[10] Cowell evidently did not find himself alone in grasping after newer musical forms with "material" and "physical" properties not easily described with older vocabularies.

An antagonistic political-aesthetic field structured by supposedly "newer" and "older" sounds and vocabularies provided the backdrop for a variety of incompatible historical narratives. As early as 1939, when Copland included texture on his didactic list of things "to listen for in music," the luster of Cowell's hopes for a new musical fabric could only have faded as texture became merely one of those objective, transhistorical musical characteristics which the cultivated listener learned to "listen for."[11] And yet even as late as 1959, a full two decades later, a disgruntled composer named Robert Simpson could still bracket off texture in splenetic scare quotes, denouncing it as a term belonging to that class of empty "slogans" preoccupying

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[10] Helmholtz's influence, though uncredited, is written all over Cowell's *New Musical Resources*. Cowell knew Helmholtz's work, if only indirectly through Dayton Miller's *The Science of Musical Sounds* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916). Cowell, *New Musical Resources* (1930), 5. Dayton Miller's explicit citations of Helmholtz can be found in *The Science of Musical Sounds*, 43–44, 62–63, 66–69, 185, 194–196, 215–217, 237, 240, 244–246, 263–266. A description of Helmholtz analyzing "composite sounds" can be found on page 68. Miller acknowledges his debt to Helmholtz in an appendix by placing *Sensations of Tone* at the top of a list—not evidently organized either alphabetically or chronologically—of seven "general references" (271). Cowell's prophecies and his whole way of handling "musical resources" can be understood as an interpretation of Miller's own rewriting or misreading of Helmholtz. See Miller, *Science of Musical Sounds*, 265–270; Hermann L.F. Helmholtz, *On the Sensations of Tone as a Physiological Basis for the Theory of Music*, trans. Alexander J. Ellis (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1875), 384. (Miller used the second edition of this same translation.) Helmholtz's theory of perception, with its treatment of music as a "material," was ready to be reworked by modernist writings seeking the future of music in ever more elaborate "composite sounds." See also Benjamin Steege, *Helmholtz and the Modern Listener* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 58–79.

[11] Aaron Copland, *What to Listen for in Music* (New York: Whittlesey House, McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc, 1939).

composers who were not "talented."[12] Simpson's contempt for the word "texture" reads as expressive of a suspicion that textural listening was part of a virtually conspiratorial effort to legitimize a dangerous theory of art, even a looming anti-art. "Texture" finds no legitimate place in his future of music. It appears instead as what he calls a mere "surface" phenomenon distracting from the true aim of all composition in all times and places, "expressing human feelings in music."[13]

To his credit, Simpson had a grasp on the stakes. An emphasis on surface, or on surface as a plane of mediation between diverse voices, might have been the chief feature making textural listening compelling both aesthetically and politically. But "surface" has evidently not meant the same thing for all observers: Simpson describes the textural surface as a worthless shell deprived of a depth of human feeling; his contemporaries were by no means obliged to recognize that characterization. Cage's total topology, discussed below, can be said to lack depth as well, but neither the depth itself nor the nature of its absence resemble the depth and lack thereof described by Simpson—Cage himself does not refer to any kind of depth at all. Surfaces as unalike as Cage's or Simpson's become important to my argument because they allow me to begin mapping textural surfaces comparatively. Toward that end, I will speak of a "dialectic of surface and depth" whereby a particular textural surface seems both productive of and mediated by its own peculiar depth or lack thereof. My chief concern will be with the sorts of surfaces and depths *TV Guide* might have invoked for particular observers.

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[12] Robert Simpson, "Thoughts on Composing," *The Listener* 1602 (December 10, 1959), 1034. Dunsby cites Simpson's article because it was the second reference provided under the newly introduced heading for musical "texture" in the 1986 supplement to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. See Dunsby, "Considerations," 47.

[13] Simpson, "Thoughts," 1034.

Textural surfaces themselves have been characterized by a variety of properties. If classical training has taught musicians to listen in a manner privileging pitch, harmony, and architectonic form, textural listening becomes sensible for the sorts of listeners who privilege detail, presume a corporeity where materials and bodies can be blended into the same continuous plane, refer to extremes of temporal duration ranging from fractions of a second measured in frames of film to "Mega-Years" (Nam June Paik's term) comprised of centuries, and describe a "total sound-space" (Cage's term) where the end of a "context" and the beginning of the "music itself" is significantly blurred.[14] I am using the term "textural listening" as a shorthand for the way of listening recognizable in these activities.

Any one of these activities can be read against a long and complex history.[15] The history of art, communications, entertainment, film, industry, labor, medicine, music and music theory, philosophy, physics, science, theater—in short, the history of most of social life over the last two hundred years has involved a flattening out of the human sensorium into a single material-corporeal plane stretching without interruption through the perceiver's body and through the

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[14] Nam June Paik, "New Ontology of Music" in *Postmusic: The Monthly Review of the University for Avant-garde Hinduism*, ed. Nam June Paik (1963), Museum of Modern Art, Fluxus Collection (2623.2008.x1–.x4), front. John Cage, "Experimental Music [1957]," in *Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 9. See also Sterne, *Audible Past*; Steege, *Helmholtz*.

[15] The classic account of this history is Sterne's *Audible Past*. Sterne draws on Jonathan Crary's foundational study of vision during roughly the same period (both authors emphasize the years between the 1830s and the 1860s), *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).

detailed phenomena of the physical world.[16] This aesthetic history, aesthetic in the sense of dealing with sense perception, appears as political history, not least of all because parties with conflicting ends have struggled to manipulate the newly discovered or invented "corporeity," a term I find suitable because it collapses distinctions between "bodies" and "things."

Artists, for their part, have sometimes treated the textured surface as a place where corporeity could be not only manipulated but even produced from scratch. Moholy-Nagy suggested that because sound could be inscribed by hand directly onto sound reproduction media, microscopically textured surfaces could be productive of sounds that had not yet sounded.[17] The mystical dimensions of these sorts of inscriptions are especially pronounced in Raymond Roussel's *Locus Solus* (1914) where a character attempts to bring a little girl back to life by inscribing the sound of her voice as he remembers it by hand on a wax tablet, the idea being that once the little girl's voice has begun to sound, the body and soul which had once given that voice life will spontaneously materialize.[18] While some applications of the principle have proven more practicable than others, the idea itself should be clear: modern listeners have heard sound as being neither wholly interior nor wholly exterior to various sounding and listening

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[16] Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, 96, passim. Modern sound reproduction technologies depend for their functioning upon the fact that what we hear depends as much on our bodies and what is done to them as on the sounding sources themselves. The "lossless compression" prized by the designers of the MP3, for example, is based upon the idea that huge amounts of data can be deleted from a recording without normal human listeners, however these are defined, losing any of their auditory experience. Jonathan Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

[17] László Moholy-Nagy, "Produktion-Reproduktion," *De Stijl* 7 (1922): 97–101.

[18] See Douglas Kahn and Gregory Whitehead, *Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992), 81–84.

bodies. It has appeared for some observers as though the textured surface were capable of producing its own depth.

By its very nature, corporeity extended through art and life. Kristine Stiles has shown that from the 1930s and especially after 1945 a variety of artists including Hans Arp, Wassily Kandinsky, and Max Bill used the term "concrete" to argue that artistic objects, processes, and media were just as material as the rest of the world.[19] The Hochschule für Gestaltung, with Bill as Rector, had been training students in a synthetic approach to art and science since the early fifties, and courses like Max Bense's on "information aesthetics" were at the cutting edge of artists' interest in cybernetics and communications theory, two fields of eager activity during the sixties and seventies.[20] Since at least the founding of the Bauhaus, where Bill had studied, considerations of the artwork's material function within a broader society had been at the front and center of artistic "progress."

A seemingly newer emphasis on an increasingly complex set of functions evidently implied for some observers a theoretical model involving unpredictable interdependencies between art and the rest of the world. "The reason for building a pyramid was one thing,"

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[19] Kristine Stiles, "Geometric Abstraction," *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 63–64.

[20] Stiles, "Geometric Abstraction," 64. Norbert Wiener's bestseller *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* was published in 1950, and artists had begun to work with cybernetic theory by at least the mid 1950s. See also Edward A. Shanken, "Cybernetics and Art: Cultural Convergence in the 1960s," in *From Energy to Information*, ed. Bruce Clarke and Linda Dalrymple (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2002), 155–177; Pamela M. Lee, *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), 64–78; Niklas Luhmann, *Art as a Social System* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000). Those especially interested in music history will remember that Pierre Schaeffer was interested in both cybernetics and a theory of the "concrete," as he himself explained in *A la recherche d'une musique concrète* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1952).

Gerhard Richter put it in 1972. "As we see it today is quite a different matter altogether."[21] Even the shape of perception mediating human involvement with reality was a haphazard affair, as Richter demonstrated by pushing his argument into the deepest recesses of cosmic history: "Our eyes have developed such as to survive. It is merely a coincidence that we can see stars with them as well."[22] In their theoretical writings of the early sixties, artists and critics discussed the problem of being and reality using terms like "New Ontology" (Nam June Paik), "Nouveau Réalisme" (Yves Klein and Pierre Restany), and "Correalism" (Frederick Kiesler).[23] "The era of experimentation in materials and forms over half a century has run its gamut," Frederick Kiesler (1890–1965) wrote shortly before his death in his "Second Manifesto of Correalism" (1965). A "new era has begun, that is an era of correlating the plastic arts within their own realms but with the objective of integrating them with a life freed from self-imposed limitations."[24]

Experiences of rapid and pervasive social change after the World Wars only served to reinforce the impression that development—more to the point, desirable development—could be actualized. For Richter, corporeity and contingency set the preconditions even for the age-old heavenward glance. It might have followed for some that these same preconditions, coincidentally or otherwise, could ground totally unforeseeable activities. As artists demystified the firmament, they also implied the potential for a totally new way of relating to the sky, as

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[21] Gerhard Richter, "Interview with Rolf Schön," in *Gerhard Richter, 11.6–1.10.1972: 36, Biennale in Venice, German Pavilion* (Essen Museum Folkway, 1972), 23–25; reprinted in Stiles and Selz, *Theories and Documents*, 315.

[22] Richter, "Interview," 23–25; Stiles and Selz, *Theories and Documents*, 318.

[23] Paik, "New Ontology of Music," front; Frederick Kiesler, "Second Manifesto of Correalism," *Art International* 9/2 (March 1965), 16–19.

[24] Kiesler, "Correalism," 17.

Kiesler's space-age vision put it aptly: "To look up at the sky, at the stars, at the moon, at the sun was a romantic or fearful dream. Now the outer-space (as the super-galaxies are called) is coming closer and closer to us and is changing from an abstraction into the realism of our world."[25] New ontologies, realisms, correalisms, and happenings grounded an art that, for Joseph Beuys writing in the 1970s, could reshape "the TOTAL ART WORK OF THE FUTURE SOCIAL ORDER."[26] John Cage struck a similar yet eerily fatalistic tone in his own reflections in 1957 on a "total sound-space" shaped with attention to every conceivable parameter:

> Any sound at any point in this total sound-space can move to become a sound at any other point. But advantage can be taken of these possibilities only if one is willing to change one's musical habits radically. That is, one may take advantage of the appearance of images without visible transition in distant places, which is a way of saying 'television,' if one is willing to stay at home instead of going to a theatre. Or one may fly if one is willing to give up walking.[27]

Cage's elliptical description of watching television or flying as a kind of suicide—the death of theatre and the end of walking—requires only a corporeity more rigorously consistent than those invoked by the other writings discussed here. In an eternally flat, absolutely undifferentiated corporeity, doing something, anything at all, meant bringing to an end an entire former way of life. No voice can exist at all except as it exists in and through the total order of a continuous sound-space. This can be described as an extreme or heretical theory in the sense that, when read as participating in a broader literature on texture as a political-aesthetic category, Cage's theory seems to eliminate one of the variables—depth—altogether. There is nothing

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[25] Kiesler, "Correalism," 19.

[26] Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys, exhibition catalog* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1979), 268–269.

[27] Cage, "Experimental Music," 9.

beyond the surface; everything conceivable is incorporated into the visible order. In his Darmstadt lectures the following year, Cage mitigated the creepiness of his absolutely flat sound-space by suggesting that performers, who might otherwise "act like sheep rather than nobly," could benefit from a "separation in space."[28] Cage's total sound-space appears as a topological field or pure surface where all possible sounds appear, each in its plenitude. With no deep personhood where performers could think for themselves or with detachment, independence or nobility could only appear in the form of a separation within the surface itself.

More than a direct line of influence stretches from Helmholtz's "physiological basis for a theory of music" to Cowell's "fabric" to Cage's "total sound-space." All three terms presuppose that sounds are heard through relationships mediated by the same continuous corporeity: a theory of music can be grounded in a physiological plane of perception; a fabric can be woven from equivalent sounds; sounds can move through a topological sound-space in its totality.

But the literature through which I have produced Cage's sound-space as heretical also leaves us with a range of alternative approaches to the mingling of surface and depth. Not all listeners could have had much use for Cage's noble vision of ethical life as an absolute, divisible surface. Interpolation into a class society involves a depth of field where what one "is" at one level has already been mediated by relationships existing on other levels of the political. As we will see, textured voices in a corporeity structured by multivalent relationships can take on a contradictory appearance unknowable in a world as truly flat as Cage's: a voice as it appears in a class society appears as such on irreducible levels for antagonistic observers.

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[28] Cage, "Composition as Process [1958]," in *Silence*, 39.

2.2 Textural listening and the proletarian middle class

The two parts of my term, proletarian and middle class, perform two different functions, referring to two different yet interrelated aspects or levels of social class. The term proletariat describes a definite position: a person who has virtually no means of earning a living without selling their labor power to a capital formation is a member of the proletariat, whether that sale involves wage, debt, or nefarious wage-debt mechanisms. At this level of social class, we must agree with Lukács that, "Bourgeoisie and proletariat are the only pure classes in bourgeois society."[29] As capital has become increasingly concentrated and centralized, as alternative means of earning a living have been decimated all around the globe, that statement has come to appear almost prophetic. And yet it is also the case that members of the proletariat in the 1960s did not routinely describe themselves as such. To work with this situation, we need to appreciate another level of class, one privileged by Thompson. At this level, class is "an historical phenomenon, unifying a number of disparate and seemingly unconnected events, both in the raw material of experience and in consciousness."[30] It is necessary to see how these two levels—class as a determinate position in class society and class as a historical phenomenon made up of raw material and consciousness—mediate and work on one another.

During the 1950s, as Harry Braverman points out, sociologists made the embarrassing discovery that the enormous group of people in the U.S. describing themselves as "middle class"—up to ninety percent of respondents in some cases—rapidly disintegrated as soon as sociological questionnaires included the option "working class" alongside W. Lloyd Warner's

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[29] Georg Lukács, "Class Consciousness" (1920), in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971), 59.

[30] Thompson, *English Working Class*, 9.

three classical options, "upper," "middle," and "lower."[31] In cases such as this, it can be seen that the term "middle class" has in part been foisted upon the working class. But it would be a mistake to make more of this fact than can be substantiated. "Working class," whatever virtues the term may have, is not a more scientific term than middle class, and it would be premature to decide that respondents who did in fact sometimes identify themselves as middle-class were merely duped. One can learn so much but only so much about the making of a class from studying the words people use to describe themselves, especially since, whether or not a questionnaire is involved, those words are often provided to individuals by their antagonists in conflicts between classes and between segments of a class.

Thus I use the term proletarian middle class not to tell historical actors after the fact what they should have called themselves, but to call attention to the contradiction involved in being both in the middle and on the bottom of an "advanced" capitalist society. Circumstances provided many occasions for observers to get a sense of those contradictions. The class as a whole was "better educated" than the industrial working class had ever been, yet more often than not, the jobs first-generation high school and college graduates were assigned turned out to require virtually no education whatsoever; even children of college graduates found themselves confronting a generational "downward mobility" in their working conditions if not in their job

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[31] Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, 19. Braverman cites Joseph A. Kahl, *The American Class Structure* (New York: Rinehart, 1957). Braverman proposes an excellent term, "wage workers." Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, 245.

titles.[32] Younger workers crossed over the barrier between "manual" and "mental" labor, seemingly insurmountable for many of their parents, only to find that "mental" labor had already been subjected to the rigorous division of "conception" and "execution" (Braverman's terms), with the power of conception monopolized by capital.[33] In part because of the general increase of prosperity during the postwar decades, in part because the unpaid labor of married women was being converted into paid labor—though with the prices of consumer goods exercising a restraining influence on the increased standard of living depicted in contemporary advertising—household income was generally higher than it had been a generation earlier, and yet on average "middle-class" workers earned considerably less than skilled workers in manufacturing.[34] The proletarian middle class and its booming "tertiary" or "service" economy were held up as the future of U.S. society, all the more so, and all the more desperately so, after the "secondary" or "industrial economy" suffered a premature absolute decline in employment in 1965 (premature

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[32] Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, 24, 147, 229. See also Christopher Jencks and David Riesman, *The Academic Revolution* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968); Paula S. Fass *Outside In: Minorities and the Transformation of American Education* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 156–188; Nicole Stoops, "Education Attainment in the US," *Current Population Reports* (June 2004).

[33] Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, 79.

[34] Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, 206, 232, 243, 245, 253, and especially 271–277; Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes*, 302–310; idem., *The Age of Empire, 1875–1914* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), 198–199; Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003 [1983]).

in the sense that the corresponding decline in Western Europe did not come for another decade).[35] Yet that future seemed medieval.[36]

For all of the possible reasons that can be given for the meeting of textural listening and the proletarian middle class,[37] the main aspect that interests me here concerns a specific way of relating listeners, sounds, and sounding sources. Textural listening can seem to put the listener inside complex and contradictory systems of production without tragically reducing that listener to the status of a mere societal appendage. This might have worked in specific ways (see section 2.3), but already we can anticipate why a peculiar insideness would have helped the proletarian

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[35] Howard Brick, *Age of Contradiction: American Thought and Culture in the 1960s* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 54–57; Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, 141–143, 156, 252, 294–295; van der Wee, *Prosperity and Upheaval*, 250.

[36] Since World War II, warnings about a kind of neo-feudalism or "industrial feudalism" had been voiced on both the right and the left. Cf. Friedrich A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1944); Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991 [1962]), 154, 195.

[37] There are a number of incongruous explanations for the proletarian middle class's cultivation of textural listening. In providing a kind of aestheticizing detachment, textural listening may have given people the thrill of a quasi-divine gaze. The privilege it was accorded in didactic publications, especially evident here in *TV Guide*, may have led listeners to regard it as a classy and thus desirable way of listening. In this regard, see also James H. Fassett and Mortimer Goldberg, *Strange to Your Ears: The Fabulous World of Sound* (New York: Columbia Masterworks, ca. 1955). Meanwhile, variations on textural listening were involved in the managerial strategies of the proletarian middle class's exploiters. One example of this will be seen in the case of the grey suits in Figure 2.1 as discussed below. Similarly, in the case of a device based upon the Doppler shift known as the Universal Operator Performance Analyzer and Recorder (UNOPAR), an inaudible sounding source was attached to the limb of a worker while three microphones recorded the speed, acceleration, and distance involved in a fluid motion. The device was accurate to within 0.000066 minutes. It is described by Gerald Nadler in *Work Design* (Homewood, IL: Irwin, 1963), cited in Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, 122. See also Mark R. Lehto and James R. Buck, *Introduction to Human Factors and Ergonomics for Engineers* (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2008), 261–262. Thus textural listening was already articulated to power, and it would have made sense for the proletarian middle class to find ways of adapting that power to its own ends.

middle class deal with the contradictions of its class position. History was big and so was Capital, much bigger than individual observers. Sometimes the world seemed to go on "over the heads" of individuals.[38] Given these circumstances, it would have made sense for people to revert to "pre-political" theories of ethical life and to look at "history" as merely a modern illusion distracting from the little things that matter most, to draw back in horror and disgust from the contradictions of daily life, contradictions which were sometimes made intelligible only by reference to the machinations of an alien power; those in power, if they did not want to see their power democratically distributed, had reason to encourage these sorts of pre-political feelings: if the political cannot be imagined as such at all, no one can fight for a new political form.[39] The meeting of a class and a way of listening might have been occasioned not by any

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[38] Adorno uses this image—"over their heads"—repeatedly in *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, Inc., 2007 [1966]), 199, 304, 354. This is not to say that Adorno's archly Hegelian phrase was a spontaneous expression of any homogeneous zeitgeist: he used the same phrase repeatedly around the same time in a separate discussion of Hegel, and I assume he had in mind Marx's use of the same phrase in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*. See Theodor W. Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964–1965*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Malden: Polity Press, 2006), 25, 27; Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 2008), 71. My point is that the phrase seemed apt to at least one contemporary observer.

[39] Richard Goodwin, the speechwriter for Kennedy and Johnson credited with coining the phrase "Great Society," argued in 1969 that a tendency toward pre-political theories of the political could be channeled toward desirable ends. The "dissatisfied, half-affluent laborer is psychically crippled; he cannot even define his own troubles." A "malaise of powerlessness" envelops this laborer because "crucial aspects of his environment seem in the grip of forces that are too huge and impersonal to attack." Goodwin's solution: the laborer must "become 'politicized,'" but politicized by means of a "decentralized" shape of the political based upon local units. Quoted in Garry Wills, *Nixon Agonistes: The Crisis of the Self-Made Man* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1970), 502. As Wills points out, in practice, since farming out special operations means centralizing actual decision-making, Goodwin's solution could only have meant substituting the "feeling" of power for its reality. Ibid., 503.

inherent affinity, but by a historical need, the need for a way of entering history without being liquidated by the continuities of a total order.

2.3 The illustrated Laff Box

TV Guide's articles and illustrations are compelling in part because the Laff Box enabled an extremely complex manipulation of sound as material.[40] Roth's first illustration in particular expands and exaggerates details found in an accompanying article by Dick Hobson (see Figure 2.1). A padlock keeps the lid shut and the box's contents, thirty-two loops of tape with ten separate samples each, hidden from prying eyes. A shining red bulb indicates that the machine is on, and buttons, switches, dials, pedals and the "master mixer pot" or "potentiometer" all stand ready to help craft a carefully tailored laugh track. Below a small television, a score, perhaps marked with timings from the illuminated footage indicator, rests atop the lid.[41] The "Laff Boys" have removed their right shoes "for sensitivity" as they press the single "damper" (expanded into multiple foot pedals in Roth's illustration), the purpose of which must have been to adjust reverb since, according to the article, its "function is that of expanding or contracting the size of the presumed auditorium."[42]

Texturally, the Laff Box allowed performers to weave together as many as thirty-two separate strands, each playing one of ten possible samples at independently adjustable volumes. The machine was used less as a substitute for than as a means of sculpting a pre-existing audience laugh track: "sweetening," "desweetening," increasing or decreasing duration, or filling

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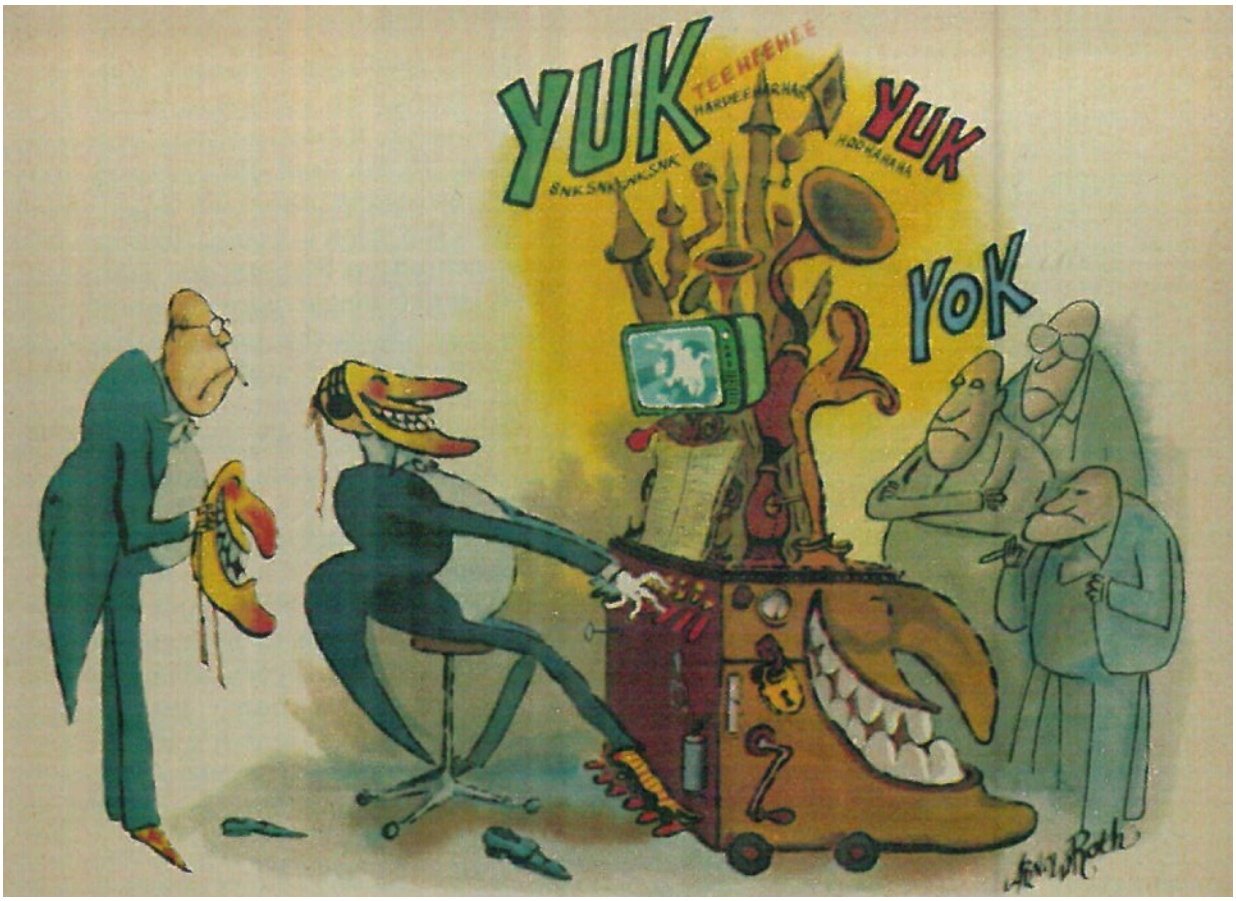
[40] Hobson, "Laff Box (First)," 3–6; id., "Laff Box (Second)," 20–23.

[41] Hobson, "Laff Box (First)," 4.

[42] Hobson, "Laff Box (First)," 4.

Figure 2.1 The musical Laff Box as illustrated by Arnold Roth (scan by the author, courtesy of the New York Public Library). Dick Hobson, "The Hollywood Sphinx and His Laff Box (First of Two Parts)," *TV Guide* 14, no. 27 (July 2, 1966, Issue #692): 3.



in details like titters, gasps, chuckles, "oo's and ah's," "sharpies," and aspects of an audience's "presence"—"the sound of breathing, rustling of clothing, [or] shifting in seats."[43] Finished weaves could be adjusted in terms of volume and reverb, subtly changing the apparent spatial relationship between a studio audience and onscreen performer. The illuminated footage indicator provided an external point of reference for planning extremely precise rhythms. Despite the Laff Box's dependence upon "prerecorded giggles and guffaws [...] begged or borrowed"

[43] Hobson, "Laff Box (Second)," 22.

from undisclosed sources, in Roth's cartoon especially the instrument seems capable of shaping the sound of a laughing audience with the extreme flexibility of a fine art.[44]

Charley Douglass (1910–2003),[45] the inventor of the Laff Box and the "King of the Laugh Tracks," stood to profit from cultivating this aura because, as the padlock on the contraption he invented attests, his relatively privileged position in a perilous system of production depended in large measure on the value of his proprietary secrets. The contraption had evidently been designed with a variety of political-economic strategies in mind. To try designing a machine that could dethrone the "Yock Czar" was said to be "like trying to unlock the Coca-Cola formula."[46] Five boxes were stored in Douglass's private, padlocked garage, signed out by Laff Boys, and repaired in locked men's rooms. Clearly Douglass had thought about how to retain control over his contraption even as it crossed proprietary borders in its journeys across Los Angeles. Perhaps Douglass thought of himself as something like what Immanuel Wallerstein calls a "petty proprietor," the owner of a productive piece of property who needs to sell finished wares almost immediately (as opposed to the capitalist proper who accumulates surplus value by avoiding commerce as long and as often as possible). In Marx's terms, however, Douglass produced no commodities, since in a large system of manufacture,

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[44] Hobson, "Laff Box (First)," 3. A variety of sources—none of which, as far as I have been able to see, provide any reliable citations—have since claimed that Douglass took his laughs from a recording of a mime's performance (some say Marcel Marceau's). Whether or not the story is true, the point is obvious: the sounds of laughter would have needed to be carefully isolated from any surrounding sounds before they could be put to work. Compare the argument made by Jason Stanyek and Benjamin Piekut in "Deadness: Technologies of the Intermundane," *The Drama Review* 54/1 (2010), 14–38.

[45] The name is spelled "Douglas" in *TV Guide*, but "Douglass" in all the other sources I consulted.

[46] Hobson, "Laff Box (First)," 3–4.

"only the common product of all the specialized workers [...] becomes a commodity."[47] Since Douglass's potential customers comprised only a tiny handful of extremely powerful networks, his own position might have been more like that of a subcontractor dependent on the large capitalist than like that of a capitalist proper.

It is hard to believe that Douglass had much in the way of leverage over the networks. The rituals he used to protect his proprietary secrets resemble less an effective strategy than the obsessive behavior of a person desperate to believe that he has control over his working life. Douglass was almost certainly at least in part the beneficiary of a large concern's lavish display of its own beneficent wealth. After all, the networks stood to gain from fostering the illusion that an industrious worker could become the owner of his own capital.

In a sense, the fantasy life of the middle class had something to gain from that illusion as well. At least one part of the dreamwork in the first cartoon has to do with the depiction of a world where skilled or innovative workers operate just beyond the reach of the anonymous

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[47] The capitalist as such prefers to use coercive wage and debt mechanisms throughout the process of production, only entering the "free market" once the finished product is ready to price out competition in the sale of a commodity to a consumer. "But what is it that forms the bond between the independent labors of the cattle-breeder, the tanner and the shoemaker? It is the fact that their respective products are commodities. What, on the other hand, characterizes the division of labor in manufacture? The fact that the specialized worker produces no commodities. It is only the common product of all the specialized workers that becomes a commodity." Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1990), 1:475. "Commerce is frequent, but far from universal, as the mode of linkage [in a capitalist world-economy], and is in no way essential to the functioning of a commodity chain, except at the very end when the final consumable product is sold to the final consumer. Both the great merchant companies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the contemporary multinational corporation have been structures that eliminated much (though seldom all) of the commerce in the interstices of given commodity chains." Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Politics of the World-Economy: The States, the Movements, and the Civilizations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 3. It cannot be repeated enough, capitalism as such is systematically opposed to anything that might reasonably be described as a "free market."

forces of obsessive management. In Roth's illustration, the Laff Box looks messy and unfinished. Before digital software made it possible for producers to work on a soundtrack from outside time —or in a temporality distinct from that of the audible text "itself"—the diverse functions involved in the shaping of a laugh track had to be separated out manually while remaining within the reach of a single decision-making operator. The Laff Boy's score, like a musical score, gave the performer a big picture of the temporal unfolding, but the actual operations had to be performed in "real time." Since industry had not yet fully atomized the manufacture of laugh tracks into manageable—in the loaded sense—tasks, the Laff Boy appeared to retain the privileges of a skilled worker. At a time when monopoly capital already had at its disposal highly sophisticated strategies of managerial control,[48] the Laff Boy and his Laff Box must have seemed like desirable specters from a bygone era. Much of the charm of the Laff Box, brilliantly captured in Roth's illustration, had to do with the sense that its complexity escaped control—the

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[48] Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, 59–95, and passim.

Laff Boy gets lost completely to his unruly practice.[49] Nevertheless, the disgruntled Laff Boy waiting for his shift illustrates the looming shadow of an all too modern industrial timetable.

Each of the main players in the production of the laugh track appear to be living on the cusp of modern strategies of managerial control. Braverman's vocabulary is especially helpful in describing this appearance. The Laff Boy seemed to be highly skilled at a time when the "degradation of work" was already well under way. Douglass, confronted by the forces of an extremely advanced monopoly capital, occupied the position of a "subcontractor," a position which was supposed to have been a mere "transitional form" belonging to a much earlier phase of capitalism.[50] In stark contrast to the capital-intensive machinery involved in postwar mass-

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[49] The advent of more technically sophisticated sound and music departments for network radio and television in the mid-twentieth century was evidently expected to cause a serious managerial problem. "Whilst a free hand must be given to those working in [the BBC Radiophonic Workshop], it will be necessary to exercise a strict, but understanding control over their work. Self-discipline is most important as their work will be erratic and will not follow a normal shift pattern. [...] The main qualification required of personnel should be based on a good "ear" and a fervent desire to work in this field of aural conception." "Historical Outline," November 1956, typescript, Oram 3/2/1, Daphne Oram Collection, Goldsmiths, University of London. One has to wonder about the nature of the anxiety expressed here. Certainly there were creative workers at the BBC who needed a "free hand" to complete their work. Were writers esteemed more highly than sound technicians? Or was there something about music and sound that seemed more threatening to management? The author of this typescript singles out "fervent desire" as a useful element in a strategy of managerial control. Later in the 1960s, managers would try to tap into such a desire with an "I Am" plan, short for "I Am Manager of My Job." Needless to say, management never had any question about who was the manager. Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, 24.

[50] "[The] early domestic and subcontracting systems represent a transitional form, a phase during which the capitalist had not yet assumed the essential functions of management in industrial capitalism, control over the labor process; for this reason it was incompatible with the overall development of capitalist production, and survives only in specialized instances." Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, 43. This survival can appear in novel instances. See also two of Braverman's sources: Maurice Dobb, *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (New York: Routledge, 1946), 266–267; Sidney Pollard, *The Genesis of Modern Management: A Study in the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965).

production, the Laff Box appeared as an unwieldy contraption requiring skilled craftsmanship for its invention, maintenance, and operation. Many, perhaps most, of *TV Guide's* readers lived in a world of work where the engineering department had already been separated from the labor process in both time and space, where even the engineering department was already being subjected to an atomizing division of labor. They suffered through the monotony of this world.[51] Looking at a picture, an enchanting picture no less, of a new device which seemed to lie outside yet on the edge of a degraded working life could have been a way of performing a dreamlike wish-fulfillment, of enjoying an imaginary resolution of a real social problem.[52]

Although much of what made Douglass, the Laff Boys, and the Laff Box seem like desirable figures out of a vanishing age cannot be separated from this realm of fantasy, it is not inconceivable that Douglass's machine helped him in limited ways to negotiate a favorable agreement at a bargaining table otherwise dominated by the power of major networks. The Laff Box had been relatively cheap to build, meaning that Douglass had not been trapped by ruthless debt mechanisms. And its workings were, ostensibly at least, shrouded in mystery, allowing him to maintain a monopoly on a new, more efficient means of production. To put it in the terms Marx uses in *Capital*, Douglass needed considerably less labor time to produce a satisfactory

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[51] Expressions of worker dissatisfaction were evidently especially pronounced in the early 1970s. "In the years that have passed since this study was begun, dissatisfaction with work has become what can only be called a 'fashionable topic,'" wrote Braverman in 1974. "Almost every major periodical in the United States has featured articles on the 'blue-collar blues' or 'white-collar woes.'" Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, 21–27. But indications of dissatisfaction with the kind of working life characteristic of postwar consumer society can be detected from as early as the 1950s. See, for example, C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956).

[52] Fredric Jameson, in a reading of Claude Lévi-Strauss, discusses "the imaginary resolution of a real contradiction." See *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 77.

laugh track than had previously been "socially necessary." Because he was the sole proprietor of a new machine, he could sell his wares at a price below that of any potential competitors, yet above the cost of labor power and raw materials, leaving him with a precarious "surplus value." If some of this was a mere illusion, it was an illusion the networks could afford to maintain.

Douglass might have further benefited from a production process dependent upon an independently contracted workshop of highly skilled laborers. The subcontractor himself could remain "a hopeless square with no sense of humor" because he stood on one side of the property relation, his "boffola technicians" on the other (is there perhaps something self-consciously or ironically patriarchal about referring to employees as "Boys" even as late as 1966?).[53] Indeed, Douglass remained a stealthy party in a complex system of production; he does not appear at all in Roth's crowded illustrations. Although his samples were merely "begged and borrowed," presumably without either payment or attribution, his workers engaged every day in a renewable, high value-added process:

> Picture if you will Lon Chaney Sr. in 'Phantom of the Opera' flailing at the pipe organ in the darkened cathedral crypt and you have some notion of the Laff Boy at work. Hunched over the keyboard of Charley's box on the darkened dubbing stage, his fingers punching at the keys, his feet manipulating the pedals, he wrings forth his fugues and caprices. He's a veritable virtuoso of titters and snorts.[54]

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[53] Hobson, "Laff Box (First)," 6.

[54] Hobson, "Laff Box (First)," 4. Musical metaphors sprang to mind on the other side of the Atlantic too. "When we made [*The Disagreeable Oyster* for the BBC], though it was recorded, it was mixed in one continuous "take." Michael Bakewell came to watch me mixing and said afterwards that it was like watching someone play Liszt on the piano." Donald McWhinnie quoted in Desmond Briscoe and Roy Curtis-Bramwell, *The BBC Radiophonic Workshop: The First 25 Years* (London: British Broadcasting Corp., 1983), 20. In the case of both the early laugh track and the early work of the Radiophonic Workshop, part of what makes the performance seem especially musical is the fact that it has to be performed in real time.

It would have been difficult to name a contemporary handicraft so physically elaborate. With Lisztian fingers, Roth's Laff Boy harmonizes tape loops, leaving the tiniest gap between punchline and laugh. "George Burns, a pioneer of the 'laugh spotting' art, contends [this gap] should be eight frames or one-fifth of a foot of film, which on the screen is a third of a second," Hobson explained.[55] The finished product needed to be shaped according to the most precise specifications and with the most exact synchrony. This meant measuring time in units determined by the diverse media involved in the total production process.

> To manufacture a natural sounding laugh, the Laff Boy must let a few 'people' in his box anticipate a joke. This is called 'giving it a little tickle.' Then he might punch in a 'sharpie' just before the main laugh. The climax of the laugh is equally intricate. He has to punch his keys so as to 'tail out' with a little chuckle and 'slide under' the incoming line. [...] He must take care not to 'laugh' a straight line, not to 'cover' a line of dialog, and never to 'bury' a gag line.[56]

Finally, at the level of architectonic form, a laugh track needed to build gradually in intensity, saving the "biggest laugh" for "the payoff."[57]

Thus a successful laugh track needed a personal touch on two levels. From moment to moment, the "natural sounding laugh" had to sound like a knotty group of diverse individuals, each with a distinctive personality. And over the architectonic sweep of an unfolding track, the audience needed to sound as though it felt itself to be moving forward in time, following the ebbs and tides of a well-written script. The audience had to be made up of personalities while at the same time possessing its own unified personality. By referring to this as a "natural sounding

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[55] Hobson, "Laff Box (First)," 6.

[56] Hobson, "Laff Box (First)," 6.

[57] Hobson, "Laff Box (First)," 6.

laugh," Hobson invoked a political desire for some supposed state of nature where individuals could retain their individuality within a harmonious whole.

And yet Hobson also invokes a far more gruesome state of nature, because what sounded most "natural" turned out to be the sound born feasting on the freshest labor. "They say that the Laff Boys are getting stale over the years."[58] It is not hard to guess why. Both the article and the illustration play with a tension between intricate crafts and industrial manufactures—the Laff Box is a musical instrument crowned by an unruly tower of factory whistles. Hobson describes a performer exhausted and sweaty at the end of a take, and the cartoon is even more evocative. One bald and surly Laff Boy can be seen awaiting his shift at the machine, a cigarette hanging bend-dexter from his scowling profile, while another performs in concert black and tails, his face hidden behind a ruddy, leering theatrical mask. The Laff Boy must be lost completely to the craft, covered from head to sock-clad toe, his body impressing hardly a trace on the finished track, for the most skilled Laff Boy is the one with "a lighter touch."[59] The article suggests that there is a difference between a desirably stylized, tailor-made artifice and something more rigidly mechanical. "Too many rehearsals" can spoil a take, and, from the standpoint of the producer, Laff Boys are best wrangled up for the morning shift "because by afternoon they're all laughed out and nothing is funny to them anymore."[60] The lifeblood coursing through the ostensibly natural laugh track must be syphoned out of the spontaneous, passionate, yet ideally

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[58] Hobson, "Laff Box (First)," 6.

[59] Hobson, "Laff Box (First)," 6.

[60] Hobson, "Laff Box (First)," 6. Here we have an excellent illustration of manufactured scarcity and a consequent loss of quality.

imperceptible Laff Boy. If the finished laugh track seemed to prefigure a harmonious state of nature, the processes involved in the production of that state of nature seemed more Hobbesian.

Little of this apparently mattered very much from the standpoint of the three suits, all bleeding into a cloud of grey, aloof on the far side of the Laff Box, appraising their purchase with detachment. For them, what mattered was the material value of a finished product. The suits do not laugh—actually, no human being in either image ever does unless violently coerced—and they show no interest in the Laff Boy at work behind the bellowing yuks and yoks. They have learned to listen carefully using their own highly disciplined mode of perception.

Indeed, part of what makes the image comic is the way that it involves three or four otherwise incompatible modes of perception. First, the suits isolate and measure a laugh track as a material shaped according to precise specifications. Second, on the other side of the machine, the Laff Boy's mode of perception requires both a more intent focus on sound—he wears a pair of headphones—and a visual attention to screen and score. Sitting at the heart of the production process, the Laff Boy's mode of perception requires a multi-sensorial attention to sound, image, and synchrony. Third is the mode of perception of the disgruntled Laff Boy trying to distract himself with a cigarette. Implicitly there is also the mode of perception of the ostensibly passive television viewer, another actor with whom the *TV Guide* reader could have identified,[61] who evaluates a finished program solely in terms of its capacity to evoke laughter. Readers could discover with delight that the programming they watched every evening was capable of being perceived in such varied ways. By describing an intricate handicraft of rhythm and weave, by

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[61] On popular criticisms of "distracted listeners," see David Goodman, "Distracted Listening: On Not Making Sound Choices in the 1930s," in *Sound in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, ed. David Suisman and Susan Strasser (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

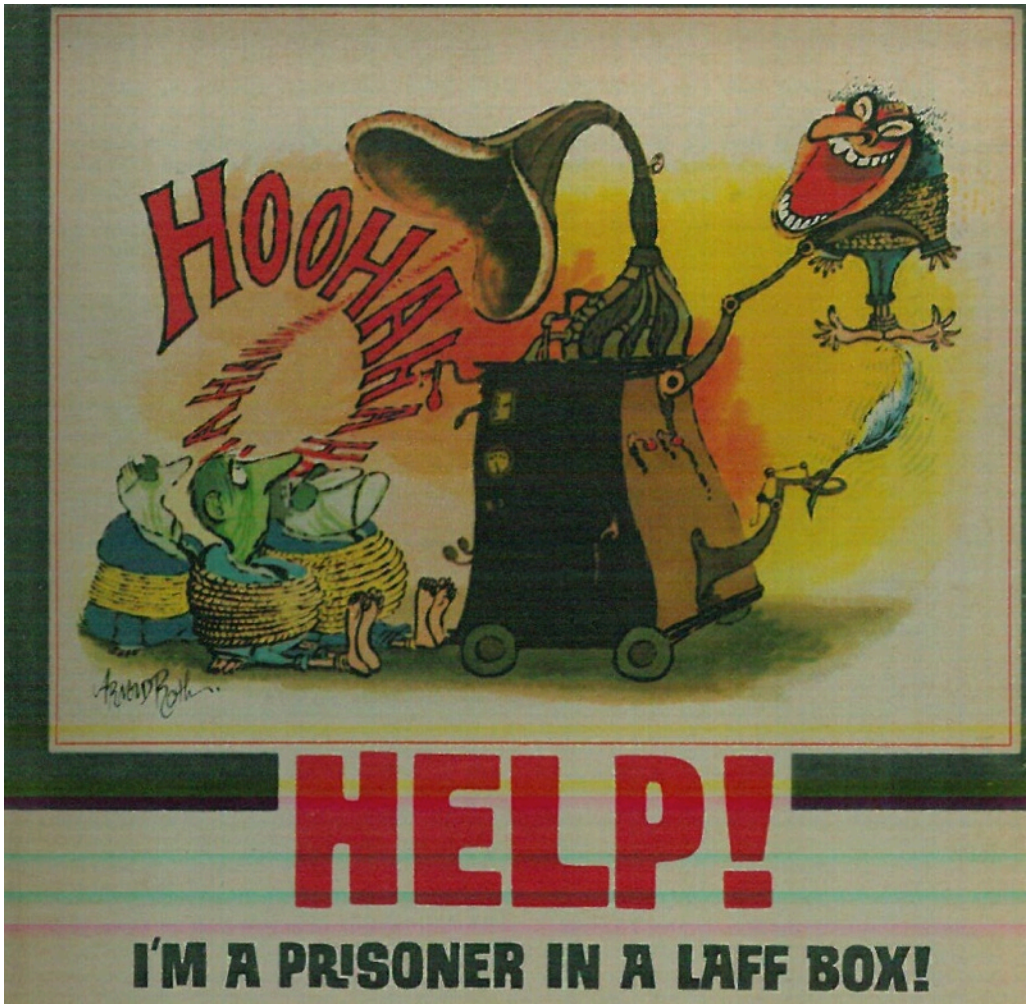
explaining how a Laff Boy used a Laff Box to shape a laugh track as if out of streams of clay, *TV Guide* provided its readers with a kind of crash course in diverse, specialized modes of perception. Ominous shadows loom within this first cartoon, but for the most part the observer enjoys all the pleasures involved in looking down from on high.

Trouble arises in earnest only after the laugh track seems to possess its own vitality. As the complexity of the production process fades in importance, the Laff Box appears to gather terrifying autonomy. A narrative reversal suffocates the variety of the opening illustration (see Figure 2.2). Prolific pedals, knobs, cranks, and buttons are reduced to only a few brown switches, crowds of horns and whistles meld into an ominous, univocal mouth, and the laugh track bellowing red from a gnathostomatic smirk appears now as one long serpentine tongue rather than as a bubbling, multicolored symphony. Now that the finished product pours out like thread from an automatic loom, the craftsmanship of the Laff Boy no longer enters into the picture at all. This is the future of the quaint Laff Box, the followup illustration seems to say, and, what is worse, that future might already be here.

Furthermore, whereas the first cartoon played on differences between varied modes of perception, the second suggests that what matters is not perception at all, but violent affect. Executives, Laff Boys, and presumably readers as well are all bound up, waiting to be stripped barefoot and tickled. The relationship between subjects and objects has been reversed: whereas in the first illustration people handled sound, manipulating and perceiving it, in the second, sound touches people, forcing them to laugh.

On careful consideration, then, this dramatic reversal depends upon a submerged contradiction: the manipulative laugh track is only understood in light of the exceedingly

Figure 2.2 The unethical Laff Box as illustrated by Arnold Roth (scan by the author, courtesy of the New York Public Library). Dick Hobson, "The Laff Box (second of two parts), *TV Guide* 14, no. 28 (July 9, 1966, Issue 693): 20.



complex labor invested in its manufacture; yet when it is portrayed as manipulative, this labor is erased. *TV Guide*, no doubt unconsciously, helped spare this contradiction from interpretation. The cartoons were printed discretely, a full week apart, thereby only encouraging a tendency to express contradictions using misleading formulations such as, "on the one hand/on the other"—as if the two aspects of a contradiction do not form an actual unity. Continuities running across the two cartoons are easily dismissed and differences treated as unconnected aspects of separate

circumstances. Related to this, the follow-up article also appears to break from the concerns of the introductory article, leaving aside the techniques of the Laff Box to debate the ethics of the laugh track. "The worst thing that ever happened to radio was the studio audience," Fred Allen is quoted saying. "Somebody like Eddie Cantor brought these hordes of cackling geese in because he couldn't work without imbeciles laughing at his jokes."[62] From Allen's perspective, the laugh track stultifies individual freedom and is only appropriate for people living at the level of easily manipulated animals.[63] Roth's second illustration in some ways appears as nothing more than an illumination of Allen's assertion, and it is telling that this illumination only works by excising most of the complexity of the first illustration. The layout of the publications suggests that the separate editions deal with separate topics. Consequently, their contradictions appear merely incidental.

And yet those contradictions have a way of seeping into the frame. As a counterpoint to Allen, Harry Ackerman is quoted saying that Lucille Ball "was 'dead' on a bare soundstage," not because she wasn't funny, but because her performances were not her performances at all without the accompaniment of an audible audience.[64] Ball's performances involved an actual

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[62] Hobson, "Laff Box (Second)," 22.

[63] The formulations of Allen's side of the debate have remained fairly consistent down to the present. As recently as 2003, one university professor was quoted authoritatively proclaiming, "Most critics think that the laugh track is the worst thing that ever happened to the medium, because it treats the audience as though they were sheep who need to be told when something is funny, even if, in fact, it's not very funny." Brian McTavish, "Laugh track is serious business," *The Baltimore Sun* (July 3, 2003), http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2003-07-03/features/0307030060_1_bob-douglass-laugh-track-canned-laughter (accessed April 3, 2013). From *The Simpsons* (1989–) and *The Larry Sanders Show* (1992–1998) to *Modern Family* (2009–) and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000–), the sitcom sans laugh track has frequently been advanced as something more modern or progressive. Here we have something like Cage's nobility at work in class conflicts over popular culture.

[64] Hobson, "Laff Box (Second)," 22.

interaction, even co-labor, between performer and audience. Audience laughter was a constituent part of her style. It was recognized as such by sound technicians, writers, directors, actors, and film editors, all of whom deliberately created a space for this crucial stylistic element, an element that the Laff Boys became responsible for stylizing.[65] Nevertheless, Ackerman's valid counterargument hardly does away with Allen's objection to the manipulative laugh track. It simply expands upon the first article's observations about stylized audible practices, further fleshing out a lingering problem. The programming *TV Guide*'s readers consumed in their living rooms every evening was the meticulously crafted, valuable product of highly skilled labor, yet it was also a polished, mass-marketed commodity processed by a complex system of production, a system that, at every stage, hid the manipulative actions of various parties. The issue was not the fact that laugh tracks made people laugh; from the standpoint of the television viewer, one of the main reasons to watch a sitcom was to be made to laugh. The issue was that the laugh track worked in and through a field of heterogeneous actors each with different aims and expectations. The laugh track worked for all concerned, but not in the same way for each of them. Part of what makes the Laff Boy's mask so eerie is the sense that something unseen is going on behind the smile. The very fact that the Laff Box worked, that it did what everyone wanted it to do, was

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[65] Hobson, "Laff Box (Second)," 23. These reasoned apologies have had their own absurd variants. When new "laughterless" comedies started appearing in significant numbers in 1988, another authoritative professor was quoted saying, "There's a sense of community reflected in the laugh track. It helps the individual melt into an overall community of laughter." Steven D. Stark, "Is Canned Laughter a Joke?" *The New York Times*, January 3, 1988. More recently, James Parker wrote in prose becoming *The Atlantic*, "Silence now encases the sitcom, the lovely, corny crackle of the laugh track having vaporized into little bathetic air pockets and farts of anticlimax. Enough, I say. This burlesque of naturalism has depleted us. [...] Who knew irony could be so cloying?" James Parker, "Family Portrait," *The Atlantic*, October 3, 2011, http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/11/family-portrait/308685/ (accessed April 4, 2013). In these arguments, the disappearance of the laugh track is only one more symptom of modernity's atomizing disintegration of communal bonds.

itself already a contradictory political problem. The audience at home might have rested uneasy knowing that their programming had been tailor-made to suit them. Textural listening appraised laugh tracks, and what it heard could have seemed both delightful and alarming.

TV Guide raises this contradiction only as an ambiguity, without suggesting how actors in existing relationships might act in ways that could change existing relationships and, with the relationships, existing actors as well. It portrays complex social relationships and relations of domination, but not both at once. In this respect, the cartoons participate in a general tendency: as Braverman remarked in 1974, "It has become fashionable [...] to attribute to machinery the powers over humanity which arise in fact from social relations."[66] The cartoons do not perform a fluid dialectical reversal. They do not even depict the same "thing"; they are united only by the moralizing narrative of ambiguity itself. Univocal manipulation was made to appear on the other hand only after heterogeneous forms of semi-autonomous labor—the paid labor of Laff Boys and executives, but also the unpaid labor of audiences at home working their way through programming and, most importantly, advertisements—had already been dealt with on the one hand. Neither the articles nor the illustrations found a way to show the heterogeneity of working life becoming the homogeneity of monopoly capital as the machine performed its work in and through social relations.

But there is also a way in which the first cartoon lingers as an afterimage even after we turn to pick up the next issue. If the second cartoon participates in the fashionable attribution

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[66] Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, 158. As Braverman quickly goes on to observe, this mystifying attribution is an instance of what Marx diagnosed as "fetishism." Marx, *Capital*, 1:165. Some readers might appreciate a word of clarification: by denying machines "powers over humanity," Braverman does not place those powers in the hands of human beings. Social relations and their "structural causality" remain. Louis Althusser, "Marx's Immense Theoretical Revolution," in *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Verso, 2009), 201–214.

derided by Braverman, the first one makes it hard to fully invest oneself in that mystification. Besides which, there are already shadows in the first cartoon: the grey suits on one side, the scowling Laff Boy on the other. By providing visible sources for the minute audible details readers were learning to hear with ambivalence, the first cartoon illustrates what is at stake in listening for a superficial texture mediated by depth. And this is hugely important because unless the problem could be understood as being the mere existence of the laugh track in itself, any kind of political intervention needed to take place in a world that more closely resembled the first cartoon than the second. The first cartoon was more realistic not because it more closely corresponded to an external "reality," but because it was more relevant to what readers were already doing. While the discrete cartoons failed to depict heterogeneity becoming homogeneity, a return to the comic heterogeneity of the first cartoon was a precondition for any attempt to imagine the laugh track as a voice becoming something else, rather than merely being silenced.

Conclusion

Any substantive change needed to occur in the depth mediating the textured surface. Textural listening became an effective activity in this case because it could hear that depth as itself mediated by the surface. The laugh track as a voice made up of voices could not be followed back into the depths to find the simple, secret truth it expressed. Rather, it took shape through relationships between sounding and listening bodies. A kind of audience "presence" could be produced by minute textural details; an auditorium could be given shape by manipulating reverb. The truth about the bodies made present and the spaces they inhabited was not their mere being, but their accomplishments in an actuality with a shape structured by

relationships drawn between actors with conflicting interests. The natural sounding laugh was the one which sounded untouched by human hands; what made it sound that way was that it had been soaked in labor. Listeners were able to learn to hear the laugh track in and through such contradictions. But they had to actually learn to hear it that way. They had to produce the depth before they could feel themselves inhabiting it.

Textural listening can be read as characteristic of a class not because it originated with members of that class or expressed some prior, hidden essence, but because it had the ability to satisfy the need to enter history without being reduced to a mere category. As a practice, textural listening had been characteristic of other classes before the 1960s—the acceptance of the word "texture" in its musical sense from the 1930s onward can be taken as symptomatic of the standardization of a listening technique. At the specific historical juncture studied in this chapter, however, both textural listening and the proletarian middle class can be understood in their correlation and co-labor. Members of the proletarian middle class could see that sound functioned as an instrument of control—work was evaluated by sophisticated listening techniques and devices, and laugh tracks were used to compel laughter. Where futile attempts to retreat from these modes of control might have seemed tempting, textural listening gave listeners an opportunity to evaluate their conditions, even to do so with a degree of comic delight. That the determinate form of political knowledge cultivated by textural listening guaranteed nothing politically—that it could just as quickly aestheticize politics as politicize aesthetics—only left its importance for the political life of that class more open-ended.

There is a peculiar choice of preposition in the *TV Guide* publications. The voice crying for "Help!" in the second cartoon is not the prisoner "of" but rather the prisoner "in" a Laff Box.

The preposition was evidently not chosen by accident. Attentive readers would have come to the followup issue remembering the three hundred and twenty anonymous samples literally padlocked inside the Laff Box. The article itself makes no mention of those unpaid audiences condemned to sweeten laugh tracks for decades on end in a syndicated limbo. Perhaps the slippery identification of home audiences with recorded samples was too mind-bending to be developed any further by *TV Guide*. But the identification could have been made, at least by way of a slippage, and even in its undeveloped form, it was a provocative one: whether they were at home or on tape, audiences were already inside a complex system of production, distribution, and consumption. More importantly, textural listening allowed them to feel that they were inside that system.

Textural listening involves a thought of totality—this is one reason why references to "essence" and "truth" are so prevalent in modern discussions of "texture."[67] But imagined totalities can work in diverse ways. The sorts of "essence" which can appear in all of their plenitude on the surface of Cage's "total sound-space," for example, are unlike the ones haunting Roth's first illustration. A textured voice in Cage's total sound-space is exactly what it appears to be in that sound-space, so that the only way to maintain nobility is through a separation of voices at their individuated points of origin. By contrast, the textured-voices described by *TV Guide*

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[67] Robert Erickson's discussion of texture as an "overall quality" has been cited in this regard. See *Sound Structure in Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 139; Albin J. Zak III, *The Poetics of Rock: Cutting Tracks, Making Records* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 85–96. To take a hugely influential example from the study of the visual arts, Barthes writes of Cy Twombly, "By withholding the pressure of substance, by letting it come to rest quite casually, so that its texture is somewhat scattered, matter will reveal its essence, grant us the certainty of its name: *this is* pencil." Roland Barthes, "The Wisdom of Art" (1979), in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), 178.

become what they are by appearing, and since they appear for diverse listeners with divergent, conflicting interests, their essence can be fraught with contradiction. Roth's second cartoon resolves those contradictions by creating a single, master voice wrapping all listeners in its malevolent coils. This is precisely the kind of singular voice Cage cordoned off by means of a separation in space. His total sound-space is free of both contradiction and conflict: it is what it is. It is also a space where the totalizing listener hears only one composite voice. And this is a totalizing listener who listens in only one way, for texture as a pattern on a pure, one-dimensional surface. But between the voice conceived as the pure expression of an underlying essence and as a voice heard in its contingencies there is a range of possibilities. Pieties about hearing a voice as contingent upon its context do nothing to address the ethical problem at stake: to listen for a textured voice at all is to participate in the making of a voice and the weaving of contingencies. This is as true in the case of Roth's second cartoon as in that of the first. The difference is that the first cartoon obliges listeners to incorporate into their own listenings, with a certain measure of delight, a range of possible listenings. The natural sounding laugh track's intricately detailed surface thereby gains a depth. This depth is lost the moment the same laugh track is heard as a totally external enemy audible only as an enemy.

Critical listeners can be content neither to merely contextualize a voice nor to piously comment that there are many different ways of listening. Textural listening as a critical practice has to produce voices not as things which are merely out there—whether they wait to be uncovered in their plenitude or elude our humble grasp—but as voices which become voices for us. By proposing ways of listening, we become who we the listeners are. There is no point of remove at which we can find listening/sounding bodies prior to dynamic interrelationships in

flux; we are already interpolated into those interrelationships in one way or another, and in one way or another, we participate in our own interpolation. A way of listening which obliges us to annihilate a voice as an enemy can turn out to be a way of listening which demands that we destroy a part of ourselves: readers of *TV Guide* would only have destroyed some of the best performances available to them by eradicating laugh tracks. Yet in the same way, merely trying to preserve a voice as it "is" ends up as a way of denying our own dynamic involvement in the making of that voice. Roth's first cartoon better served the proletarian middle class to the extent that hearing a textured voice in its deep contradictions was a way of getting inside the surface. That was where individuals in their capacities as voices and as listeners would live or die.

Chapter 3 The New Sound of a Freudian Self in a Tangled Texture on Nichols and May's *Improvisations to Music* (1958)

> [...] only the concept of a subjectivity at odds with itself gives back to women the right to an impasse at the point of sexual identity, with no nostalgia whatsoever for its possible or future integration into a norm.
>
> —Jacqueline Rose, 1986[1]

> A preoccupation with giving each member of the performing group its own musical identity characterizes my *String Quartet No. 4*; thus mirroring the democratic attitude in which each member of a society maintains his or her own identity while cooperating in a common effort.
>
> —Elliott Carter, 1986[2]

Even by comparison with the rest of the "New Comedy" and its acclaimed musicality, the improvisatory duo of Mike Nichols (1931–2014) and Elaine May (b. 1932) seemed both exceptionally new and exceptionally musical, at least as far as tastemakers were concerned.[3] One jazz critic for the *New York Times* wrote in 1959 that a performance by Nichols and May "involved an interplay so skillful that it can be compared with the work of the better musical

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[1] Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (New York: Verso, 2005 [1986]), 15.

[2] Elliott Carter, "Program Note," *String Quartet No. 4* (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1986).

[3] Robert G. Elphick, "Along the Frontier With Nichols & May," *Falmouth Playhouse* 12, no. 7 (week of August 15 thru August 20th, 1960), 14, MWEZ + n.c. 24,505, no. 3 (Coonamessett: Falmouth Playhouse), New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (LPA); Janet Coleman, *The Compass: The Story of the Improvisational Theatre that Revolutionized the Art of Comedy in America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 241; clipping, *New York Times*, June 16, 1960, CLIPPING MAY 1960 AN EVENING WITH MIKE AND ELAINE (REVUE), LPA; Sam Zolotow, "stage news," June 16, 1960, ibid; Richard Boeth, "Just Don't Fence Them In," clipping, October 2, 1960, MWEZ + n.c. 24,837 (clippings), LPA; Nathan Cohen, "Nichols and May," *Toronto Daily Star*, December 7, 1961.

groups heard in Town Hall. [… They] create an atmosphere that suits the concert hall surroundings and is, on its own terms, a concert performance rather than vaudeville."[4] Academics, such as those first enchanted by the duo in Hyde Park's Compass Theatre outside the University of Chicago, still praise them for having been progressive in an intertwined, if not critically defined, political and aesthetic sense.[5] According to Janet Coleman's classic study, the Compass "revolutionized the art of comedy in America."[6] In her narrative, the Compass prepares the more commercially oriented Second City only by working through improvisatory "Spolin games" originally devised by a drama teacher in Chicago's WPA-sponsored Hull House

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[4] John S. Wilson, "Satirists Heard in Program Here," *New York Times*, May 2, 1959.

[5] On Hyde Park as it appeared to at least one member of the affluent middle class which frequented the Compass—although not necessarily as it appeared to the laboring classes Shepherd had hoped his theatre would attract—see Isaac Rosenfeld, "Life in Chicago," *Commentary* 23 (June 1957), 523–534. The circles involved in the Compass were evidently left/liberal. David Shepherd, cofounder of the Compass, had wanted to build a "proletarian theatre" or "people's theater," and Viola Spolin, whose improvisatory "games" were an import influence on the Compass, associated her work with that of "socialist political theatres in Europe." Coleman, *Compass*, 23, 42–48, 134; Stephen E. Kercher, *Revel With a Cause: Liberal Satire in Postwar America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 122. An encore performance of *An Evening with Mike Nichols and Elaine May* was presented as a benefit for the Congress of Racial Equality (C.O.R.E.). Press clipping marked *New York Times*, dated June 4, 1961, CLIPPING MAY 1960, LPA. Both Jacob Smith in his study of "postwar American phonograph cultures" and Virginia Wright Wexman in a study of cinema cite Nichols and May as exemplary of a "Chicago school of comedic improvisation" (Smith) or a "Second City approach" (Wexman) which both writers characterize as especially community oriented, interpersonal, or intersubjective. Jacob Smith, *Spoken Word: Postwar American Phonograph Cultures* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 166–168, 243n55; Virginia Wright Wexman, *Creating the Couple: Love, Marriage, and Hollywood Performance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 184–189. See also Kercher, *Revel*, 123.

[6] Coleman, *Compass*.

Recreational Training Schools.[7] Nichols and May ended up as exhausted, formulaic commercial entertainers in an individualistic, consumer society, but their background was in community oriented, federally funded, experimental games—or so goes the tragic narrative told from the standpoint of a progressivism for which progress means publicly subsidizing the lifestyles of service-oriented professionals, their children, and their supposed admirers.[8]

An alternative narrative can be spun if we begin by asking how the musicality of Nichols and May's "improvisations" participated in their apparent newness. Where the progressive's terms are transparently moralizing—communalism and individualism, good and evil—I will be using archival research and formalistic criticism to produce and interpret more opaque appearances. Decades after listening to the duo's LP records "over and over and over"—falling asleep to them the way "people fall asleep at night listening to music" and hearing in them proof that comedy "could evolve"—Steve Martin (b. 1945), chief among the generation of baby-boomer comedians who came of age listening to the New Comedy, claimed he could still hear

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[7] Coleman, *Compass*. Viola Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater: A Handbook of Teaching and Directing Techniques* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1963). The original Compass rested at a crossroads, sometimes a battlefield, between avant-garde improvisational theatre and sketch comedy. Along with Nichols and May, participants included Shelley Berman, Roger Bowen, Severn Darden, Andrew Duncan, Bobbi and Mark Gordon, Barbara Harris, David Shepherd, and Spolin's son, Paul Sills. Later manifestations of the Compass featured Alan Alda and Jerry Stiller.

[8] Much the same narrative appears in Smith, *Spoken Word,* 166–168, 243n55; and Wexman, *Creating the Couple*, 184–189. On "service," rather than "solidarity," as the keyword of "reformist" politics in the mid-twentieth century, see Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780–1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 325–332. Williams uses the term "reformist" to describe what I am calling the professional's liberal progressivism; in Williams's description, reformism rejects the individualistic and flirts the with the communistic, socialistic, and cooperative, but within the framework of a "hierarchy of [supposed] merit." Ibid.

Nichols's phrasing in his own delivery.[9] The fact that Martin evidently experienced this as an effect of audile erudition rather than as a formulaic mannerism indicates that something about Nichols's phrasing continued to work for him. Martin's sensibility or a set of sensibilities sharing certain affinities forms an enduring aspect of the contemporaneity we share with Nichols and May.[10] Unfortunately for the historian, Martin has little to say about his sensibility, the work that Nichols and May performed for it, or the work that it itself performed in the shaping of the duo's newness. Again: William Goldenberg, the pianist for the duo's Broadway revue, *An Evening With Mike Nichols and Elaine May* (1960–1961), observed, "When Elaine and Mike sing, they are [...] invariably a quarter tone off. I'd have to be able to play between the keys to be with them. But [...] their rhythm is excellent."[11] Goldenberg's inability to reach between the keys seems to place his technique behind Nichols and May relative to the progress of a melodically flexible, rhythmically precise audible practice. And yet why this? Why doesn't Goldenberg's statement read merely as a complaint that the duo was off pitch? Talk of quarter tones alerts us to the fact that Goldenberg spoke a peculiar language, but it doesn't by itself explain what his description did for him. A certain sound sounded new, more revolutionary or more highly evolved than something else. But how?

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[9] Coleman, *Compass*, plate 6; Steve Martin, *Born Standing Up* (New York: Scribner, 2007), 72.

[10] "Edmund Wilson writes in 1961 that the effect of hearing his first Nichols and May record was that 'people … sound immediately afterwards as if they were having Nichols and May conversations'. If Nichols and May elucidated something real about language use at the time, their influence is still felt decades later." Kyle Stevens, "Tossing truths: improvisation and the performative utterances of Nichols and May," *Critical Quarterly* 52, no. 3 (October 2010), 23.

[11] Goldenberg, quoted in Whitney Bolton, "He Plays Piano For Nichols, May," damaged and undated clipping, MWEZ + n.c. 24,837 clippings, LPA.

This much is clear: Nichols and May's musicality seemed new in the sense that it somehow worked for particular observers. We can well imagine that any single one of the tasks it performed might have been extremely complex in itself. What, for example, were all the potential pathways leading outward from the term "quarter tone" for a professional pianist in the late 1950s? The duo might have performed different tasks for different people, or even for the same people at different moments or levels of experience. It makes sense to begin by examining a particular, exceptional instance.

The historical possibility I will produce here could have appeared for middle-class observers at an intersection of an intellectual literature and a theatrical literature. The theatrical literature I will be discussing is characterized by the use of an intricate texture whereby relatively independent voices sounding on the same textural plane weave across one another, speaking not only at the same time but also on what appears as the same one-dimensional level. I will refer to

this intricate texture as a "tangled texture."[12] In "Cocktail Piano," the opening salvo on the duo's 1958 album *Improvisations to Music* (Mercury MG-20376), May can be heard etching delicate sounds at the back of her throat as she and her partner carve fleeting pockets of tangle. Goldenberg and Martin, it has already been seen, prized some kind of intricacy or another, as did a contemporary critic who complained that the duo had been "drowned out" by "segments of laughter" in a live performance: the "talented, fresh comics […] appear lost in a 1,550-seat theatre after playing the intimate confines of nightclubs and in the even closer confines of television."[13] *Improvisations*, the central artifact in this chapter, not only makes use of close

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[12] Lewis Rowell proposes "tangle" as a possible characteristic of musical texture in *Thinking About Music: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Music* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1983), 158–162. The tangled texture appears to have been prevalent in the circles surrounding Nichols and May. Mark Gordon's recollection of a Compass performance featuring "a quartet where one was gargling water and one making sounds like a violin" sounds like a possible description of a tangled texture. Coleman, *Compass*, 134. Another Compass performance, this one recalled by Andy Duncan, involved one performer reading a poem while another rang a bell, making the poem inaudible. Ibid., 124–125. It is even possible that one critic's description of a Playwrights Theatre Club production of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* as "strongly syncopated and infectiously multi-rhythmed" (ibid., 58) referred to something like the tangled texture, in which case the sound could have been heard in the circles around Nichols and May since at least 1953. Certainly the tangled texture was a mainstay of Nichols and May's performances from early on. Nichols described a piece called "Pirandello" thusly: "I would get pissed off at [May] and start to say something—while she was talking—under my breath. And then we had a few more moments like that, and then the audience really got scared because it was clear we were really having trouble with each other." Interview with Jeffrey Sweet in *Something Wonderful Right Away* (New York: Avon Books, 1978), 79. The recollection is intriguing for at least two reasons. First, it provides evidence that Nichols self-consciously layered his voice over May's. Second, it describes an occasion where a kind of performative realism slipped toward the frighteningly real: Nichols boasts that on one occasion, an onstage fight between characters devolved into a violent fight between actors.

[13] "An Evening with Mike and Elaine," *Variety* (April 27, 1960).

"confines"—the actors speak close to the microphone—but also appears stripped of any "segments of laughter."[14]

I can speak of a theatrical literature of tangled textures because something reminiscent of the duo's audible practice had already been used for decades in entertainment associated with affluent audiences. Capra's *You Can't Take It With You* (1938), for example, weaves tangled textures through desirably heterogeneous social groups—a wise and richly individuated crowd in a courtroom, a utopian community of free individuals bounded by the walls of a cavernous living room paid for with money accumulated through a benevolent patriarch's systematic, guileless tax evasion. Of the fourteen films starring Katharine Hepburn I consulted, I have yet to find a single one between 1937 and 1967 which does not feature pockets of tangle woven between her voice and those of others; I will discuss *Desk Set* (1957), one of the nine films Hepburn made with Spencer Tracy, in greater detail below (see section 3.2).[15] Welles used tangled textures in both *Citizen Kane* (1941) and *Touch of Evil* (1958) to portray characters who had become dangerously misanthropic, if not altogether evil. And a similarly grim treatment of the tangled texture, this

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[14] When listening to a monophonic disc, such as *Improvisations to Music*, we hear sounding sources in relation to only one "microphone." I will therefore speak of "the microphone." I discuss monophonic recording further in a footnote to chapter four.

[15] *Stage Door* (1937), *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), *Holiday* (1938), *The Philadelphia Story* (1940), *Woman of the Year* (1942), *Without Love* (1945), *State of the Union* (1948), *Adam's Rib* (1949), *The African Queen* (1951), *Pat and Mike* (1952), *Desk Set* (1957), *Suddenly, Last Summer* (1959), *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1962), *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967). Of these examples, the closest that comes to being an exception to the rule is *The African Queen*. The only tangled texture I can count there is in the opening scene where Hepburn's character tries desperately to lead a hymn over a commotion in the congregation. In a sense the tangled texture is heard as failing to materialize in this case. The result is a muddled texture. The reason for this is plain enough: from the standpoint of liberal modernity, the African congregants are not properly individuated—children wander about the sanctuary from one adult to the next—and so they cannot produce the kind of tangle characteristic of Hepburn's other films.

time depicting the disintegration of a marriage between two shattered personalities, appears in an iconic sixties play, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962). Albee notated exceptionally thick tangles of exceptionally long duration by writing blocks of text for separate characters side by side in the script. In this respect, performances of the play resemble a scene in *Desk Set* where Hepburn's character recites a poem in a loose, hocketing synchrony with panicked characters onscreen with her. *Improvisations* does not feature a moving image, of course. But in all of the examples cited here—as in the 1966 film adaptation of *Virginia Woolf?* directed by none other than Mike Nichols—characters speaking in a tangled texture speak onscreen or onstage together; nothing in the staging, filming, or recording of these examples untangles the tangled voices by placing them in different spaces (e.g., onscreen and offscreen, onstage and offstage, or with and without reverb). The tangled textures cited here are comparable. That Nichols made his debut as a film director with a hit adaptation of Albee's play suggests that at least some of his contemporaries were reading his work as part of something like the literature I produced in the preceding paragraph. There is circumstantial evidence that Nichols was the one who brought the tangled texture as a stylized practice associated with affluence to the duo's work.[16] The story to be told in this chapter might be about how May worked with her partner's performance practice. The question is, what differences have appeared between these examples for diverse observers? In particular, what was May's innovation?

The intersecting literature I will use to produce some such innovation is comprised of Freud's writings on the problem of selfhood as divided. May's readings in psychoanalysis are the

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[16] It is Nichols who, in a description of a piece called "Pirandello" cited in a footnote above, recalls speaking "while [May] was talking," and it is Nichols who, in passages like the one I have produced as a spectogram in Figure 3.3, produces tangle by interrupting May. Sweet, *Something Wonderful Right Away*, 79.

stuff of legend, and she was hardly alone in her enthusiasm.[17] If she altered the contours of a literature of tangled textures, she might have done so for readers of affordable paperback editions of canonic psychoanalytic texts. Her possible readings can be grounded in her recorded performances and her possible listenings in texts available to her at the time. With reference to a few of Freud's writings, especially those written after the pivotal essay "On Narcissism" of 1914, I will describe a Freudian conception of selfhood as divided against itself across a distributed cartography.[18]

Since one of the recurring themes in contemporary writings on Nichols and May was that their portrayals of college graduates, doctors, intellectuals, and secret agents "mirrored" their

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[17] The portrait of May which emerges throughout Coleman's book, however much it has been mingled with legend, is of a precocious young person who was enamored of psychoanalysis, read avariciously, if haphazardly, and dropped fragments of her reading into her performances. See Coleman, *Compass*, 38–39, 65–69, 95, 106, 111–112, 118–119, 131, 146–147, 167, 232, 266–267. Nichols's recollection is typical. "She hung around school. She sat in on classes. She never registered. She once convinced an entire philosophy class that everybody in Plato's *Symposium* was drunk and that was the point of the *Symposium*. She used to go into classes and do things like that and then leave." Interview with Sweet, *Something Wonderful*, 80–81. The anecdote depicts a May who thought about and involved herself in performances which effectively restructured real life. Everybody in the *Symposium* in fact *is* drunk, and if it is debatable whether that is "the point," it does seem like it is at least *a* point. A reader sensitive to the malleability of ethical life—the sort of person who would go places and "do things like that and then leave"—would appreciate that point. Much of the psychoanalytic theory being popularized in the fifties involved no radical theory of the self: see Nathan G. Hale, Jr., "The 'Golden Age' of Popularization, 1945–1965," *The Rise and Crisis of Psychoanalysis in the United States: Freud and the Americans, 1917–1985* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 276–299; Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (New York: Verso, 2005 [1951]), 63–64. But Freud's writings after 1914 do involve such a theory, and it is easy to imagine that these writings themselves held the chief appeal to a precocious, inquisitive young person like the Elaine May who appears in the recollections of her closest associates.

[18] On the importance of "On Narcissism," see Peter Gay, ed., *Freud Reader* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1989), 545 (cited as *FR* in this chapter). See also section 3.3. For a more extended treatment, and for the Lacanian connection neglected in this chapter, see Rose, *Sexuality*, 170–183, 195. For a useful introduction to relationships between psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity and radical, especially feminist, politics, see Rose, *Sexuality*, 1–23.

audience, and since these performances appeared on Broadway and in "the country's top supper clubs," we have every reason to believe that at least a portion of the duo's audience was relatively affluent.[19] But affluence does not a class make. Coleman's account of the Compass cites several intimations of a new taste for both the expensive and the vulgar, a sensibility at odds with what Coleman depicts as cofounder David Shepherd's old-money, Popular Front sense of propriety.[20] Through the late fifties, Nichols and his promoters seem to have taken measures to cultivate the air of an especially "middle" middle-class belonging. Some of their attempts can be

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[19] On Nichols and May's "mirroring" of contemporary circumstances, see Robert Wool, "Mike & Elaine: Mirrors to Our Madness," *Look* 24, no. 13 (June 21, 1960), 46–48, 50; *Theatre Arts*, December 1960, CLIPPING MAY 1960, LPA; ad for *Nichols & May Examine Doctors* in *The New Yorker*, January 20, 1962, MWEZ + n.c. 24,837 (clippings), LPA. The claim about "top supper clubs" appears in the liner notes to Mike Nichols, Elaine May, and Marty Rubenstein, *Improvisations to Music*, Mercury MG 20376, LP, 1958.

[20] David Gwynne Shepherd (the Buckley School 1938, Exeter 1942, Harvard 1946, and Columbia M.A.) had moved to Chicago with a ten or fifteen-thousand dollar inheritance—no small sum in the postwar decades, but apparently not enough to make an enduring impression in Shepherd's memory—seeking what Coleman later called a "culturally deprived" neighborhood to establish what he called "a proletarian theatre" or "people's theater." Coleman, *Compass*, 47; Kercher, *Revel*, 122. "For all the talk about getting away from the bourgeois theatre," Coleman quotes Andy Duncan remembering, "we were straitjacketed in a way. May had a way of sitting, folding her legs, that could have been construed as flashing. [...] I don't know if she did it on purpose, or didn't know, or didn't care. But it upset [David Shepherd and George Schall]. They didn't want that. I mean, they wanted to be respectable in a sense." Coleman, *Compass*, 156. The sense in which they wanted to be respectable, however, was rapidly becoming senseless: Coleman quotes Shepherd later lamenting that he had been "such a prude in those days." Ibid., 187. Yet precisely because the new sensibility ultimately triumphed—even Shepherd was eventually won over—it would be best not to leap to any moralizing conclusions. Coleman cites Larry Arrick describing how the Compass quickly became a place "for the rich kids in Evanston to drive down in their Mustangs to Chicago on Friday or Saturday night to hear dirty words." Ibid., 187. Greater acceptance of profanity, vulgarity, obscenity, pornography, or dirty words cannot be understood merely in the abstract. That greater acceptance itself was part of the making of a class, so that by the time greater acceptance had been achieved, it already could no longer be compared to the former lesser acceptance. The historical moment had passed. To ignore the particularity of a practice productive of a class (Evanston, Mustangs, Chicago, Friday and Saturday nights, dirty words), to weave a timeless tale of "rich kids" enjoying the sins of their youth, is to ignore the historical question.

explained away as mere variations on the enduring myth of striving talent.[21] At other times, however, Nichols's efforts seem more pointed. In 1959, for example, he was quoted recalling, apparently without so much as a shade of irony, "I was in the position of going to expensive schools without having any spending money."[22] This "position," a position Nichols evidently wanted to be seen as having once occupied, is closely related to the one where people can be found "starving to death, in a genteel sort of way," as the author quoting Nichols put it. The descriptions rightly provoke our indignation. Yet this does not make the position being described, however unsatisfactorily, unreal. What we are looking for is not the stratum of society indexed by these expressions, but rather the field of conflicts where someone found it desirable to be seen as affluent and vulgar, mediocre yet exceptional.

Sorting people into strata will not help us describe class standing in circumstances where Nichols and May's Broadway revue could simultaneously be interpreted as both high and low,

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[21] "If it is true that struggle sharpens the talent of creative people," remarks a souvenir programme, "then both of these young performers have come by their present situation honestly." *An Evening With Mike Nichols and Elaine May*, souvenir program, December 10, 1960, MWEZ + n.c. 28,719 #31, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (LPA).

[22] Quoted in Joseph Wershba, "Daily Closeup: Mike Nichols Elaine May," *New York Post* (May 29, 1959).

more glamorous yet beneath the real theatre.[23] Who was the ideal target of a promotional tie-in with local restaurants: "Nine O'Clock Curtain – Dine at Leisure," reads the tagline?[24] Presumably someone who had seen Nichols and May on television, who was not familiar enough with the city to have a regular night spot, and who was budget-conscious enough to go shopping for package deals. Suburban consumers could have felt an indignity in their current situation as compared with memories of an urban life, real or imagined, which seemed less packaged, more integrated, or of greater integrity. Self-appointed defenders of the "real theatre," disdaining the incursions of swarms of suburbanites attracted by a package "thrown together in order to cash in

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[23] While Nichols and May were busy preparing to make their Broadway debut, such a conflict was being fought out publicly as the duo's "maverick" producer Alexander H. Cohen found himself embroiled in a "controversy" over his decision to remain the "lone holdout" in a plan to have an early, 7:30 pm curtain at all Broadway theaters on Wednesdays. Cohen's argument was that his "Nine O'Clock Theatre" was "a boon to leisurely dining. […] Imagine dining at 5:45! The suburbanite doesn't go to the theatre because of curtain time. He goes because he's sophisticated and discriminating." "Controversy," *World Telegram*, August 12, 1960. Although Cohen's incredulity at the thought of eating dinner before six is as definite a mark of affluence as any other, some of his equally affluent friends evidently did not share this aspect of his sensibility. For Cohen's "old friend" Louis Lotito, the president of the League of New York Theatres, Cohen was on the wrong side of history. "Mr. Lotito, half-jokingly, said that Mr. Cohen's theatre was, in effect, 'a nightclub without booze,'" said one reporter. "Mr. Lotito indicated that he and his fellow theatre owners and producers were concerned with 'the real theatre.'" Ibid. Cohen's glamour was Lotito's decadence, and the League of New York Theatres was fully prepared to adapt itself to the needs of a new and vast suburban middle class. See also Robert A. Beauregard, *When America Became Suburban* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Michael Johns, *Moment of Grace: The American City in the 1950s* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004). Yet it was precisely the pragmatism of the plan that irked a man who claimed he was "trying to bring the glamour of night life back to the main stem." Quoted in "Controversy," *World Telegram*. It is possible that Cohen was simply as out of touch with suburbanites as Lotito claimed; but it is also possible Cohen's attempts to recover lost glamour spoke to people dissatisfied with the affluence of the affluent suburbanite—there is something ritualistic and staged about the practices promoted by the Nine O'Clock Theatre, as if glamour had to be invoked before it could be enjoyed.

[24] "Nichols-May Posters on Restaurant Pass," undated, CLIPPING MAY 1960, LPA.

on the comics' tv popularity,"[25] could have read the promotion in precisely this way. The portion of Nichols and May's audience which concerns me here includes anyone who felt caught up in the sorts of contradictions I described in chapter two as characteristic of a rapidly expanding, increasingly affluent proletarian middle class. Here as everywhere in this dissertation, I am producing historically possible experiences, not definite sociological categories: I have no evidence that suburban consumers and defenders of the real theatre could be sorted into separate sociological categories, only that observers became conscious of a conflict grounded in the depressing upward mobility of an increasingly affluent and suburban consumer society. "Suburban consumers" and "defenders of the real theatre" are among the terms these observers might have recognized.

Where the narrative I cited at the outset of this chapter works with "communalism" and "individualism" as its moral poles, I will instead be working with antagonistic conceptions of "the individual." Elliott Carter, an exact contemporary of Hepburn's—she was a Bryn Mawr alumnus born to affluent professionals in Hartford in 1907, he a Harvard graduate born to a wealthy lace importer a year later only a little over a hundred miles away in Manhattan—explicitly reads the tangled textures of his fourth string quartet as performances of a particular form of ethical life, a "mirror" of "the democratic attitude."[26] "Identity" appears in his description merely as something to be maintained, not as a political problem. Carter refers to a thought of the self entirely unlike the one Jacqueline Rose invokes when she claims that

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[25] "An Evening With Mike & Elaine," *Variety* (April 27, 1960).

[26] For more on Carter, see David McCarthy, "Textured Voices and the Performance of Ethical Life in the Case of the Laff Box (1966)," *Twentieth Century Music* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2016), 109–137.

progressive politics cannot function at all without an understanding of subjectivity as divided through and through. If Hepburn, Carter, and their fellow travelers felt crossed by others from time to time, a "democratic attitude" made it possible for them to perceive this experience as an elegant and amusing social entanglement. It must be this aspect of the tangled texture, even more than its preciousness or aloofness, which makes it appear as a mark of affluence—indeed, this would explain the otherwise peculiar fact that Carter heard his quartet as a performance not of an action or even of a condition but of an "attitude": his string quartet does not represent democracy; it appears as productive of an aesthetic which prizes what Carter calls the "democratic." Considering the cast of characters she played on screen, Hepburn's audible practices could easily have been perceived as belonging to the waning class or caste sociologists were calling "White Anglo-Saxon Protestant" or "Wealthy Anglo-Saxon Protestant" (WASP).[27] If so, this alone would have marked Elaine May's new sound as "other." But while Nichols and May's otherness reads as "Jewish," May's also read as somehow feminine. I would suggest that she produced the problem of the self in a manner which better served women whose working lives little resembled those of the successful professionals and wealthy heiresses portrayed by

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[27] Andrew Hacker, "Liberal Democracy and Social Control," *American Political Science Review* 51, no. 4 (December 1957), 1011; E. Digby Baltzell, *The Protestant Establishment: Aristocracy & Caste in America* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1964). The term "WASP" has found a second life as a euphemism for almost anyone who is white. But what Hacker and Baltzell describe is a virtual caste with a monopoly on the best schools, jobs, and government positions. By the time this caste began to be criticized as a "WASP" caste, critics could already note signs of its decline as an aristocracy. "Upper-class society as such is […] fast disappearing from the American scene." Whitney M. Young, Jr., "The Role of the Middle-Class Negro," *Ebony* 18, no. 11 (September 1963), 69. As David Harvey points out, what he calls "the restoration of class power" through neoliberalism in the eighties and nineties did not necessarily restore the aristocracy which declined after the World Wars. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 16–19, 31.

Hepburn.[28] For these women, such a performance of a Freudian self could have appeared as the most important aspect of her newness.

3.1 The work of criticism in the appearance of Nichols and May

Nichols and May's contemporaries were accustomed to hearing performances as parts of literatures assembled through criticism. One critic writing for *Theatre Arts* in 1960 found space in a mere two-hundred words to place the duo in the company of the American monologist Ruth Draper (1884–1956), the British monologist Joyce Grenfell (1910–1979), *The New Yorker* cartoonist Helen E. Hokinson, and the Marx Brothers.[29] A year before, a critic for the *New York Times Magazine* had likened the duo to Chaplin, Fred Allen, and, again, the Marx Brothers.[30] Two decades later, a critic for the *New York Times*, referring to the *Village Voice* cartoonist, wrote that "[May's] body remains a triumph of angularity; she is a Jules Feiffer cartoon woman sprung to life." The title of this same article alludes to Albee—"Who's Afraid of Nichols and May?"[31]

At least one of these comparisons encouraged a specific way of listening. Although May performed with a partner, the critic for *Theatre Arts* interpolated her into a literature, what could be referred to as "the affluent Anglophone woman's monologue." Aesthetically, the interpolation

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[28] On the the twilight dawning of "second wave" feminism, see Wini Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

[29] *Theatre Arts*, clipping, December 1960, CLIPPING MAY 1960, LPA.

[30] Gordon Cotler, "For the Love of Mike—And Elaine," *New York Times Magazine*, May 24, 1959.

[31] Frank Rich, "Who's Afraid of Nichols and May," *New York Times*, May 4, 1980. The punning title has appeared more than once. See Kashner, "Who's Afraid of Nichols & May?"

was part of a contemporary effort to create this literature for the first time; politically, it helped to elevate that literature and the texts comprising it.

The work of criticism in the reception of Nichols and May can be said to have operated on at least three levels. First, at a formal level, criticism functioned simply *qua* criticism, without the need for any substantive content. Comparison has the capacity to produce a kind of depth and breadth without necessarily referring to anything outside of itself—a text in a literature can be just that and nothing more (relatively speaking at least): a text inside a literature. At this level, the mere act of making a comparison is enough to produce a "criticism effect": the act of rattling off a list of examples "sounds" like criticism.[32] Second, at a social level, criticism served to create a social standing that could be shared by all the artists being compared: Grenfell and May could inherit the estate of a theatrical matriarch (Draper), an estate imbedded in a set of venerable institutions, including "the theatre." Finally, at an aesthetic level, the act of criticism enters into sense perception. Draper is made to sound a particular way by being drawn into relation with later performers, just as those performers are made to sound a particular way by being drawn into relation with Draper and with one another. It is also at this level that the act of making a recording in a particular way can itself serve to suggest the relation in advance: that is to say, to the extent that the recording of comedic performances sans laugh tracks has become less a matter of technological limits or theatrical conventions than of fashionable styles,[33] it

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[32] If what Althusser calls a "knowledge effect" is "the peculiarity of those special products which are knowledges," a "criticism effect" is characteristic of what we recognize as criticism. See Louis Althusser, "From *Capital* to Marx's Philosophy," in *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Verso, 2009), 66.

[33] The audience today is taken so seriously as a stylistic element that Maria Bamford even released a comedy special, *The Special Special Special!* (2012), with precisely two audience members, her mother and father.

could almost be said that the creators of comedy records enter into the critical act themselves, producing a text in the first place as a piece of a literature. At this point the literature begins to appear more like a mere convention than like something which needs to be read and produced comparatively. Of course, this only makes critical reading that much more important.

3.2 Hepburn and Tracy's tangled textures

In Katharine Hepburn and Elaine May we find two women with dark hair and famously "angular" features,[34] both celebrated for their fine verbal delivery, acclaimed as comedic actors, known for their portrayals of one kind of affluent class or another, and associated with a somewhat ursine, blonde white man. A comparison of the two can be grounded as a historical possibility in these many affinities.[35] For sake of space, I will limit myself as much as possible to the 1957 film *Desk Set*, contemporary to *Improvisations to Music* (1958). Both "Cocktail Piano" and *Desk Set* use tangled textures in a portrayal of gender relations in a contemporary New York corporate office. The problems they seem to address, however, involve distinct shapes of ethical life.

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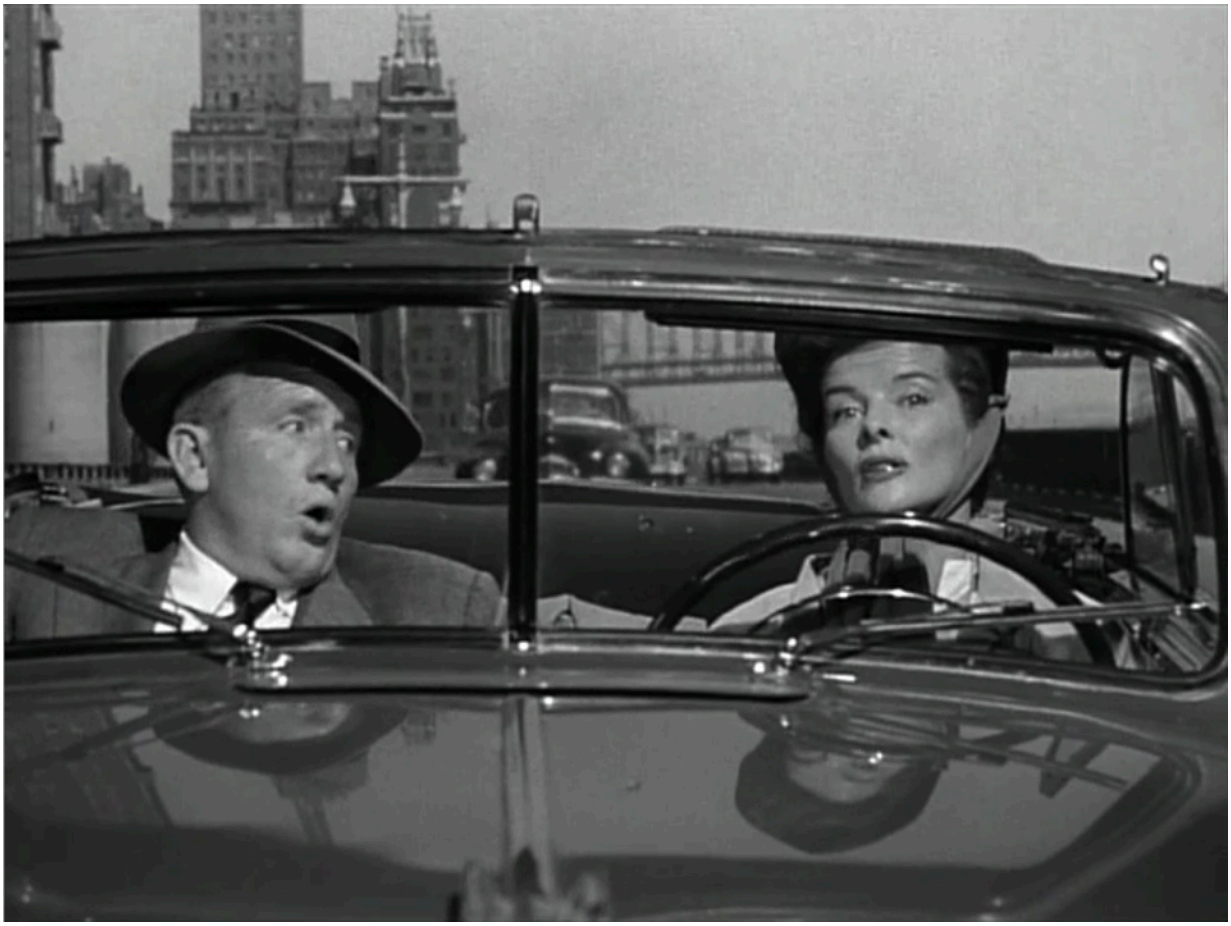
[34] Just as May was praised for a "triumph of angularity" akin to a cartoon woman by one of the signatories to the 1964 petition protesting the arrest of Lenny Bruce (see the Appendix, Signatories to a "Petition Protesting the Arrest of Lenny Bruce" (1964)), Hepburn's physical features have been described as angular. "I strike people as peculiar in some way, although I don't quite understand why. Of course, I have an angular face, an angular body and, I suppose, an angular personality, which jabs into people." Quoted in Caryn James, "Katharine Hepburn, Spirited Actress, Dies at 96," *New York Times* (June 30, 2003). Hepburn, for whom angularity is a mark of otherness, describes her angularity making a gesture which moves abruptly into another person's space, not unlike the voices in a tangled texture.

[35] A reference to Katharine Hepburn is conspicuously absent from the writings I consulted on Nichols and May. This may be due to lacunae in my sources. It is also possible that Nichols and May's Jewishness had something to do with the omission, if it was such. Or perhaps critics felt anxious about the uncanny likeness between the two duos.

Figure 3.1 The drive to work in *Adam's Rib* (1949), arguably the quintessential example of Hepburn and Tracy's tangled textures. Screen shot by the author. Both speakers appear on screen together. Each actor has their own equivalent space in the windshield. The filmmakers perform a reversal of stereotyped gender roles: Hepburn sits behind the wheel. Promotional materials for the film showed Tracy in an apron and asked, "Who wears the pants in your family?"



Desk Set depicts, as all of the Hepburn and Tracy pictures do (cf. Figure 3.1), the triumphant making of supposedly more modern, egalitarian gender relations.[36] When knowledge

[36] The name "Hepburn and Tracy" has become synonymous with tangled egalitarian romantic relationships between men and women. When the female lead in *The Sopranos* hears her husband dismiss the suggestion that he prevented her from pursuing a professional career, she scoffs, "Who knew all this time you wanted Tracy and Hepburn?" David Chase, Robin Green, Mitchell Burgess, and John Patterson, "Whitecaps," *The Sopranos* Season 4, Episode 13 (originally aired December 8, 2002).

workers of different genders began meeting one another as relative equals gathered under a single corporate umbrella—or at least as equally subordinated to upper management—the office became a convincing setting for a romantic comedy. While Bunny (Hepburn) performs "women's work"—every employee in her division is a woman—her form of women's work is esteemed as "knowledge work," not because it requires more knowledge, although in the film it does, but because she and her colleagues appear from the standpoint of the capitalist as the gatekeepers to a world of information.[37] Their workplace could not have existed in its particular form without the mammoth corporation, in this case a national broadcasting network. That workplace thus appears distinctively "modern." By contrast, the network heads, all of them men, come across as a farcical old guard, particularly when they speak to intellectually superior women in patronizing tones. The women show their adaptability to changing circumstances when they prove themselves indispensable even after the installation of EMERAC, a computer operated by only one woman.[38]

As with all of Hepburn and Tracy's films, *Desk Set* presents a more egalitarian form of gender relations as desirable, its gradual establishment over the course of the film as a triumph of modernity. But *Desk Set* is exceptional in that the problems facing Bunny are so complex that nothing short of a *deus ex machina* can sort things out in the end. At the climax of the film, it suddenly and inexplicably turns out that the reason the company had made astronomic

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[37] The term "knowledge work" as it is used today is not defined by the character of the work, but by the name of the commodity—so-called "knowledge"—this work produces for the capitalist. Whether they themselves can "think" in any meaningful sense of the term, or whether they possess as much knowledge as a machinist or a domestic, is immaterial from the standpoint of the capitalist.

[38] The name EMERAC alludes to ENIAC (Electronic Numerical Integrator and Computer), the military's "Giant Brain" announced to the public on Valentine's Day, 1946.

investments in state-of-the-art technology was not so that it could downsize its staff, as had reasonably been feared, but merely because it wanted to make working life easier for employees.

The love story is more compelling than the saccharine John Henry narrative.[39] Bunny seems content in her role as a successful career woman in New York City, the head of an in-house reference library. But the distinction between her happy working life and her troubled personal life has dissolved, exposing both domains to mutual corrosion. With signs of an advancing middle age already creeping into her face, she has been engaged for seven long years to one of her corporation's rising stars.[40] Yet now that her fiancé's long awaited promotion has finally appeared on the horizon, she discovers for the first time that he expects her to quit her job to become his boring housewife—worse: his boring Californian housewife.[41] Whatever dubious separation of working life and personal life remains in her society is maintained only by confining married women to the home. As so often happens in love, or at least in romantic comedies, a faint glimmer of hope appears in the guise of an ominous portent. Richard (Tracy), a

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[39] The classic illustration of this principle is *Don Quijote*, where the hero's deliverance from madness is either entirely forgettable or, since it is also deliverance from the condition that had made so many joyous adventures possible, perhaps a little melancholy. Either way, the deliverance immediately precedes the hero's death.

[40] "And Jacob served seven years for Rachel." Genesis 29:20 (KJV). Like Jacob, Bunny ends up with a different spouse than the one she had been waiting for.

[41] Bunny's situation would have been recognizable. Wage or salary earning women in the postwar years were married more often than ever before, whereas in the past women whose labor was paid tended to be unmarried and married women's labor tended to be unpaid—one thinks of "The spinsters, and the knitters in the sun/ And the free maids that weave their thread with bones" in *Twelfth Night*, or of the highly sexualized *herscheur* in Zola's *Germinal*. The story of the women who programmed ENIAC is illustrative. See Janet Abbate, *Recoding Gender: Women's Changing Participation in Computing* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012), 36; Paul E. Ceruzzi, "When Computers Were Human," *IEEE Annals of the History of Computing* 13, no. 3 (July–September 1991), 237–244; Jennifer S. Light, "When Computers Were Women," *Technology and Culture* 40, no. 3 (July 1999), 455–483.

brilliant "efficiency expert"—forerunner of the modern "consultant"—enters the office space from somewhere outside the corporate structure. As the potential problems his efficient computer is expected to create for Bunny are magically resolved, Richard learns to regard her as an equal, even a healthy rival. Only then can he truly regard her as a lover.

Alongside this "modern" depiction of gender relations and office life, *Desk Set* is characterized by a deliberate, somewhat anxious effort to establish Bunny as a working person. We learn that her parents were both schoolteachers, a profession that continued to be stigmatized as low paying and degrading even where teachers' actual living and working conditions were otherwise indistinguishable from those of the rest of the proletarian middle class.[42] In case audiences failed to make the association, Bunny makes sure to tell Richard that her family never had much money. Yet she also praises her parents for having instilled in their beloved child a keen appreciation of the value of a good education. Her success in life is apparently undergirded by precisely one privilege: that of having parents with a good character, a character that was strong because it was well suited to what was emerging in the contemporary imaginary as the college-educated professional's "service economy."[43] In other words, Bunny's life story serves as a transparent narrative of upward mobility in the postwar United States—better: of upward mobility from one piously humble yet dignified station to another. She is extremely good at her

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[42] "Many of the motives for this aversion [to the teaching vocation] are rational and so familiar to you that they need not be treated here. Thus above all there is antipathy toward the regimentation that is imposed by the development into what my friend Hellmut Becker described as the administered school. Material motivations also play a role here: the notion that teachers hardly earn a bare subsistence is evidently more tenacious than the reality." Theodor W. Adorno, "Taboos on the Teaching Vocation [1965, 1969]," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 177–178.

[43] See chapter two.

job—her memory is preternatural—and her talents are appreciated by all of the women in her division and even by a few of the men upstairs. At the same time, this particular upward mobility moves within clearly defined boundaries. For all of the satisfaction that comes with a successful career in New York City, she finds her work exhausting and feels that she is modestly remunerated, like her parents before her. Moreover, she and her coworkers live with the presentiment of human redundancy in a computer age.

What we have here amounts to an explicit attempt to develop one kind of class consciousness. Bunny's modest yet adequate success in life comes from being smart and hardworking, not from any kind of immoral privilege. Whatever problems she faces can be attributed to the fact that the world around her is only gradually becoming as developmentally evolved as she is—the computer has not yet been installed, the old boys' club remains patronizing. She is the representative of a class that, simply by shaking off the trappings of the old world and embracing the technologies and working conditions of the new, will eventually establish a modern, egalitarian society. Her problems can be handily resolved simply by finding a man whose sensibility is more evolved than that of her erstwhile fiancé.

The use of the tangled texture in *Desk Set* is exceptional. In *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), tangled textures appear in Hepburn's first scene, presumably both because they are one of Hepburn's trademarks and also so that we can learn something about the character she is portraying. In *The African Queen* (1952), where the finely wrought, almost decadent texture sounds out of place in a secluded jungle—and where the "native" congregants in the thatch-roofed Methodist church form a kind of undifferentiated mass, with children wandering aimlessly from adult to adult, making the level of definition expected of Hepburn's delicate

Figure 3.2 Bunny's recitation in *Desk Set* (1957). Screen shot by the author. All three speakers appear on screen together.

tangles impossible—the texture appears only once: in the opening scene, almost as if Hepburn were obliged to squeeze it in and get it out of the way in a narrative where it otherwise doesn't fit. All the other examples I consulted feature the tangled texture by at least their midpoint, usually with Hepburn's first appearance on screen. *Desk Set* is different in at least two ways. First, the tangled texture is withheld until the climax of the film, the John Henry scene where Bunny and her coworkers beat EMERAC at its own game (see Figure 3.2). Second, when tangles do begin to appear, their durations are exceptionally long. Bunny can sustain the tangled texture because, unlike all but one of the other examples,[44] she seems less than fully engaged in conversation with the other characters; she speaks to them more than with them, and only as she recites a poem, Rose Hartwick Thorpe's *Curfew Must Not Ring Tonight* (1867).

Withholding the tangled texture until late in the film establishes Bunny as well-grounded rather than aloof or flighty, as Hepburn's wealthier characters with their carefree tangles often

[44] The other exception is *The African Queen*, discussed in a footnote above.

appear. Likewise, the poem Bunny recites gives her an opportunity to prove that her memory is just as comprehensive as EMERAC's—in the diegesis of the film, the poem is said to have "about eighty stanzas to it." Yet it also plants her squarely within a kind of democratic, egalitarian, post-emancipation, and impeccably all-American—not to say middlebrow—culture.[45] Finally, the sheer duration of the tangle allows the filmmakers to weave a dense choreography. When Richard, apparently resigning himself to hearing Bunny's recitation, tells EMERAC's incompetent operator to "listen," Hepburn whips around imploringly and hollers precisely the right line of the poem at precisely the right moment, "She HAD listened!" snapping her fingers under the exasperated operator's nose on the word *had*. By emphasizing the word "had" where no such emphasis is called for by the poem itself, Bunny adapts the poem to her surroundings, using it to gainsay Richard. If at first she appears to be retreating inside her labyrinthine mind, indifferent to her flustered adversaries, it turns out that she is so thoroughly in command both of her corpus of knowledge and of her workplace that she can make herself heard, no matter how dense the context.

Here as in all of the Hepburn films I consulted, the hero asserts her personal autonomy yet places all speakers on the same flat surface. If Hepburn is more masterful than others in her weaving of tangles, that is because of who she is as a person. The surface itself is neutral, transparent, available to all. Typically in a Hepburn and Tracy picture, Hepburn's character goes a little too far and is a bit unfair to Tracy's character, as if in exerting the tremendous amount of energy needed to level the playing field after millennia of inegalitarian gender relations, she is

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[45] Thorpe's verse is unmistakably "popular" in its appeal. Viewers who had already read the poem, though they might have recalled that it has only ten stanzas to it, would certainly have remembered how a sixteen-year-old girl rose to national prominence when her thriller was published in the *Detroit Commercial Advertiser*.

prone to exceed her proper bounds.[46] The level surface is always there to set things aright; its fleetingly excessive inscriptions appear as part of the fun.

3.3 The Freudian self

To appreciate the narrative problem in Nichols and May's "Cocktail Piano" as I will describe it, an entirely different way of thinking about a character's personhood is needed. "Cocktail Piano" does not speak on its own terms or furnish its own theory of personhood. May and her contemporaries might have turned to Freud for a thought of the self as divided.[47] To put it briefly, she could easily have read almost any of the same texts, often in the same translations,

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[46] Once again, the quintessential example appears in *Adam's Rib*, in this case the scene where Tracy's character teaches Hepburn's character and her effeminate male friend a lesson with a licorice firearm. The point is abundantly clear: the genders are placed upon an even playing field in a common effort, but with their distinctive identities maintained. In contrast to the effeminate friend, Tracy's character is impeccably manly, perhaps to a fault—the licorice gun serves as a prop in an extremely cruel trick; but there is nothing behind it, it is only licorice, and so ghastly behavior can seem fairly charming.

[47] Some of Freud's writings can be set aside. It is hard to imagine an impulsive person like the Elaine May who emerges in Coleman's account tracking down more obscure essays like "Fetishism" (1927) or "The Splitting of the Ego in the Defensive Process" (1938), as interesting as these essays would have been to a discussion of a divided subject. If May was working in English, these essays would only have been available to her at that time, so far as I can tell, through Joan Riviere's translations for the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* or through the heavy multi-volume collections published by Hogarth and the Institute of Psychoanalysis. Freud, "The Splitting of the Ego in the Defensive Process," *Miscellaneous Papers, 1888–1938, Collected Papers* (London: Hogarth and Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1924–1950), 5:372–375. "Fetishism," to my knowledge, did not appear in translation until 1961: see "Fetishism," *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* 21 (London: Hogarth and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1961), 147–157. Given May's personal connections through the Compass to the University of Chicago, these resources would not have been out of her reach, but there is no reason to depend upon them for the purposes of the present argument; there were plenty of other relevant sources available to her. See also Hale, "The 'Golden Age,'" 276–299.

as inquisitive young people with access to libraries or the internet read today.[48] I can sketch only one possible pathway through these texts, but among the writings available to May, those most relevant to my reading include excerpts published in a standard anthology, *A General Selection from the Works of Sigmund Freud*: the pivotal "On Narcissism" (1914) and the increasingly explicit treatment of a divided subject found in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) and *The Ego and the Id* (1923).

What might May have found in these texts? Freud is not an aphoristic writer, in fact he is difficult to read at all without following his larger arguments even as he ambles down what begin

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[48] The only question is where to begin. There were the twenty-eight lectures in the authorized translation, by G. Stanley Hall, of Freud's *General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* circulating in increasingly affordable editions since the 1920 Boni and Liveright publication. With a brand new copy of the 1952 Pocket Books mass market paperback edition purchased for 95 cents, May could have read an extended discussion of narcissism, the theme later interpreters, including Peter Gay and Jacqueline Rose, have described as the harbinger of Freud's late-period theory of a subject divided against itself. Gay, *FR*, 545; Rose, *Sexuality*, 170–183, 195. Or perhaps May started with the *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-analysis*, first published in English in 1933, which included seven lectures numbered XXIX–XXXV, indicating that they were meant to follow the twenty-eight of the *General Introduction*. Two texts there could have caught May's eye: lecture XXXI, "The Dissection of the Psychical Personality," which explains Freud's theory of irreconcilable divisions in mental life, and lecture XXXIII, "Femininity," which includes an extended meditation on the ambivalent role of narcissism in gender relations—May could have appreciated the comic potential of the narcissistic woman who is simultaneously the most desirable of all women and the one least prepared to enter into a fulfilling romantic relationship. Then there was the standard anthology, *A General Selection from the Works of Sigmund Freud*, available to May in more than one affordable edition. The *General Selection*, ed. John Rickman, had been published as such in the English-speaking world in at least five different editions before *Improvisations* was pressed: in London in 1937, 1953, and 1957 (Hogarth), and twice in New York in 1957 (in editions by Doubleday and by Liveright). It had also been published as volume 54 of the *Encyclopædia Britannica's Great Books of the Western World*, a triumph of the proletarian middle class first printed in 1952. The "Great Books" as an idea had a prehistory stretching back to the early twentieth century, but the 1952 publication was a product of postwar prosperity in the U.S. See Joan Shelley Rubin, "Classics and Commercials: John Erskine and 'Great Books,'" *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 148–208.

as main avenues and wind up as cul-de-sacs. Clever images and turns of phrase, the sorts of materials which might otherwise make for excellent quotations, work for a moment but disintegrate as the argument unfolds. This is not the place for a close reading of Freud, and what follows is not that. Even a superficial reading of my sources will show that I have ignored important aspects of Freud's exposition, including the distinction between the conscious and the unconscious which Freud, in *The Ego and the Id*, draws across the ego itself. What I am looking for is a ground for my close reading of "Cocktail Piano." But if what follows is not a close reading, neither can I simply refer to any isolated proof texts for a given thesis. What will become important in section 3.4 is less the divisions of the self in themselves as the involvement of the self in a field structured by those divisions. To appreciate the character of that involvement, I will briefly follow one of Freud's lines of argument.

Freud's initial depiction of the ego and the id speaks of a rider on a horse. This may seem to suggest that he merely divides the subject between higher (mental/human) and lower (bodily/ animal) faculties. And yet the reader of the English translation cannot make it past a semicolon without the image being revised: "[In] its relation to the id it [the ego] is like a man on horseback, who has to hold in check the superior strength of the horse; with this difference, that the rider tries to do so with his own strength while the ego uses borrowed forces"—borrowed, that is, from the id.[49]

The Ego and the Id is a principle source for Freud's map of the individual's divided psychic life. The details of the map cannot be discussed here, but what Freud gradually produces is a picture of an ego that is both a conqueror—psychoanalysis "is an instrument to enable the

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[49] *FR*, 636.

ego to achieve a progressive conquest of the id"—and a "poor creature owing service to three masters and consequently menaced by three dangers: from the external world, from the libido of the id, and from the severity of the super-ego."[50] Indeed, as a ruler, the ego described by Freud most closely resembles a modern politician. "In its position midway between the id and reality," and constantly harassed by a cruel super-ego or ego-ideal, the ego "only too often yields to the temptation to become sycophantic, opportunistic and deceitful, like a politician who sees the truth but wants to keep his place in popular favor."[51] The ego's very senate seat, without which it ceases to be the esteemed Senator Ego, is constantly threatened by its own constituents. And while senators can at least go home after work, the ego desperately needs to be loved by and lives only in and through its unruly constituents. When the id loses one of the objects it has "cathected," or charged with desire, it is inconsolable; the best the ego can do is replace the cathexis without causing harm to the self or anyone else. Whenever possible, the ego would prefer to do so by filling the empty space itself, assuming the features of the missing object and gaining the love of the id. "When the ego assumes the features of the object, it is forcing itself, so to speak, upon the id as a love-object and is trying to make good the id's loss by saying: 'Look, you can love me too—I am so like the object.'"[52] The ego does not simply control the id. It is beholden to it and longs for its affection.

What begins as an image of a higher faculty directing the lower gradually appears as an ego dependent upon the id for every aspect—high or low—of its own being. "Often a rider, if he is not to be parted from his horse, is obliged to guide it where it wants to go; so in the same way

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[50] *FR*, 656.

[51] *FR*, 657.

[52] *FR*, 638–639.

the ego is in the habit of transforming the id's will into action as if it were its own."[53] The ego as the seat of the self finds itself wrapped up with the id as its object of desire and devoted executor.

And yet it remains a troubled rider for one very simple reason: unlike the id, it hears the truth. It wears a "cap of hearing," and it wears it "awry," almost like a cavalier rider jostled by a wild horse.[54] The outside world appears before it, and it realizes that to survive it must divert the id's forces down less harmful avenues. The ego, the only player in the game pitifully torn between three conflicting forces, is also the only part of psychic life that knows it has a stake in learning to navigate a conflicted field; reality, the id, and the super-ego are not even aware of themselves as such, let alone of one another or the outside world.

The "higher side of man," Freud begins, has to be formed out of "the lowest part of the mental life."[55] In Freud's account, the child's deeply libidinal love and admiration for its parents is gradually transformed into an identification with those parents as an ego-ideal or super ego. "The ego ideal is therefore the heir of the Oedipus complex, and thus it is also the expression of the most powerful impulses and most important libidinal vicissitudes of the id."[56] This is at least one reason why pragmatists, hedonists, and moralists all resemble one another: all three privilege one and only one gruesome appendage of psychic life as the essential good in life. The pragmatist warns us to face facts and not let our loftier ideals or unruly passions get in the way. The hedonist would like to believe that we could live better lives if only our supposed bodily desires were liberated from repressive ideals or petty pragmatic concerns. And the moralist

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[53] *FR*, 636.

[54] *FR*, 635.

[55] *FR*, 642–643.

[56] *FR*, 643.

imagines that our highest ideals will reign over our bodily desires and teach us to navigate daily life wisely. Freud rejects all of these positions when he suggests that our mundane experiences, our deepest desires, and our highest ideals are already wrapped up with one another in our experience of selfhood, so that no single one of them could be allowed to govern the others without the arbitrarily selected governor itself being damaged. Only the ego, as a self divided through and through, would be equipped to lead such a menagerie.

The ego privileged by Freud is divided in itself, not separated from the rest of a psychic life comprised of reality, the id, and the super-ego. By listening to the real world through the tilted cap of hearing, the ego does not subordinate itself to a social context so much as it differentiates itself from the id for the first time. It comes into being as an entity "modified by" (Freud's term) its encounter with the outside world,[57] by its own libidinal desires, and by its libidinal desires as formed through an encounter with the outside world into an ego ideal. The Freudian ego never has any existence except as divided subject, beholden to the conflicting forces of the self which it mediates and which mediate it. It finds its own existence only in its capacity to go on dealing with the very forces that threaten to destroy it.[58] Psychoanalysis, seen in this light, cannot provide the ego with any final solutions—face reality! give free rein to your libidinal desires! get thee to a church! It can only help the ego to map out the territory where it

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[57] *FR*, 635.

[58] Someone might object that the ego's choice of life over death is as arbitrary and moralizing as the false choices between higher and lower faculties or between the reality principle and the pleasure principle now appear to have been. But this objection, however clever it may sound, means nothing to a living being, for whom the choice between life and death is totally unlike that between chocolate and vanilla. Your money or your life—it isn't even a choice, let alone a moralizing choice. Furthermore, there is a key difference between choosing to live and choosing a pathway: even having embraced life, nothing falls readily into place for the ego.

will live dangerously or not at all. Where characters like those portrayed by Hepburn assert their place in the world, a Freudian self moves across itself in a differentiated territory partially involved in an outside world.

3.4 "Cocktail Piano"

"Cocktail Piano" can appear as an extremely dark treatment in miniature of the same social problems symbolically resolved in Hepburn and Tracy's *Desk Set*.[59] Both texts are about gender relations and the ethical difficulties that arise as personal and professional lives are blurred in the modern office. Ms. Lehmas, just out of "school," has landed a job in the offices of "GAA&P." Over cocktails, the new "girl's" lecherous, unnamed "boss" praises her superior mimeograph skills and invites her to come listen to a new Andre Kostelanetz record on the "great big hi-fi" in his "big empty apartment" while his wife and children are away on vacation "up in the mountains."[60] It is not difficult to ascribe a unified character to the boss: he is a man whose every statement is guided by the singular desire to have sex with the new mimeograph girl. He has no redeeming qualities, but to be fair, he has only one quality. The anonymous boss in the faceless corporation—May pronounces the double-A in GAA&P with a fluttering monotony, and perhaps there is a kind of pun: the place of work as a gaping hole—is as mediocre as the "semi-classical" or, as he abbreviates it, "semi-class" music he puts on his record player. While the

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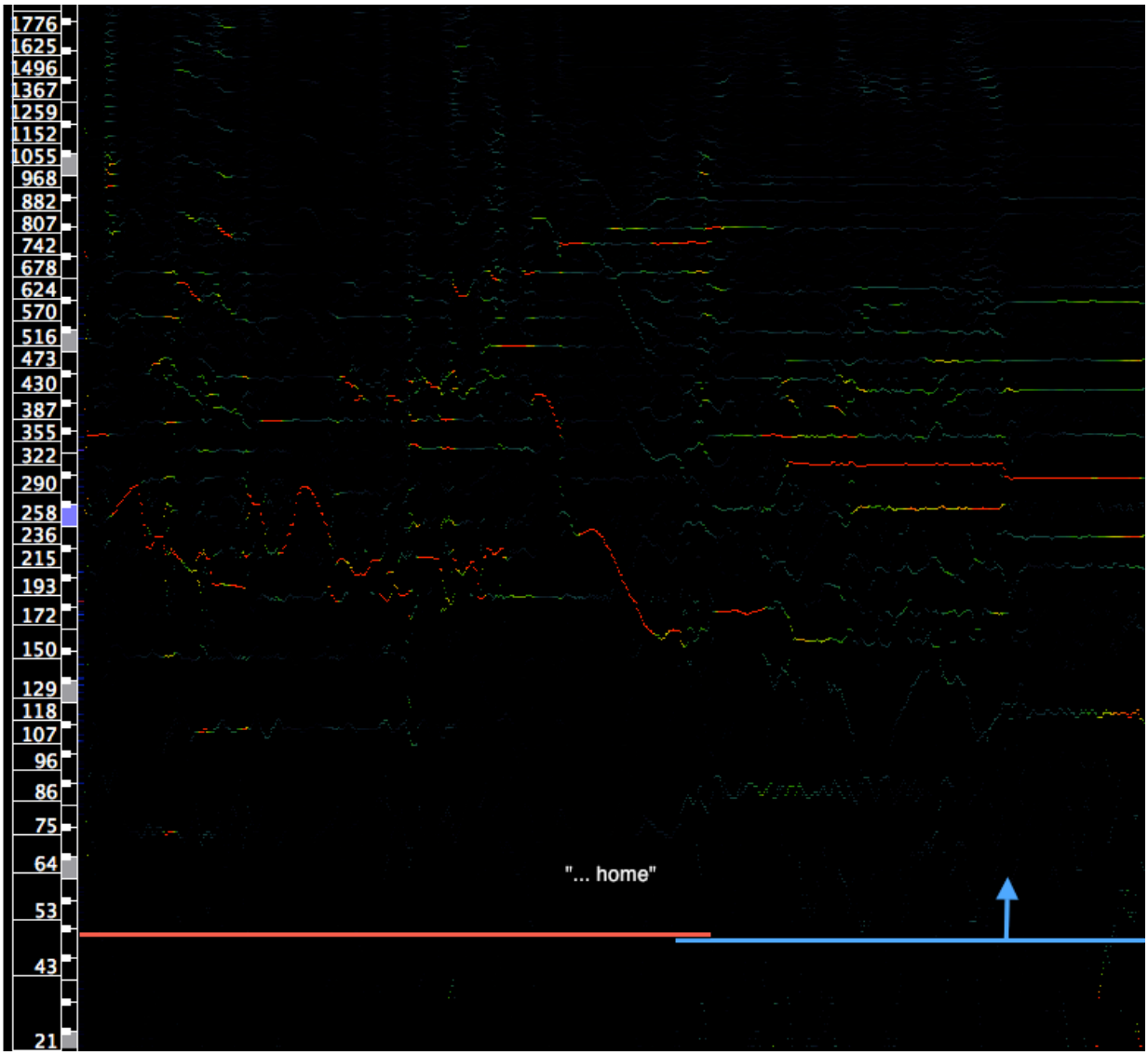
[59] On symbolic resolution, see Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 81–82 and passim.

[60] Except where otherwise noted, the quotations in this section come from "Cocktail Piano." The term "boss" comes from the liner notes to *Improvisations to Music*. The timings come from a digital copy of the LP I made for myself, and so they will not correspond precisely to any publicly available recording. But they should serve perfectly well as a rough guide to the recording.

mousy Ms. Lehmas may be a bit more sympathetic than her pushy, loudmouthed boss, she hardly has the kind of triumphant personality which makes Hepburn's characters heroic. She never sticks up for herself; it is not even clear that she has much of a self to defend. Heard in this way, as simply a variation on the model established by Hepburn and Tracy, "Cocktail Piano" sounds darker because there is, as if quantitatively, less spirit to lighten the mood. As in a pure farce, the characters are what they do, and in this case all they do is get tangled up together absently.

Yet if we try to pursue this reading, what can be made of the highly animated way Ms. Lehmas, telling her boss how she feels in the sterile offices of GAA&P, speaks the phrase "so at home" (see Figure 3.3)? Given the inane, rambling conversation about repeatedly inking mimeograph machines which precedes this phrase, Ms. Lehmas's claim is preposterous, and in that sense the line has to be heard as satirical. And yet it feels misguided to try determining whether the expert mimeograph girl is a reasonably self-aware person putting on a show or a chattering fool who really believes the things she is saying. No matter what kind of inner state we ascribe to Ms. Lehmas, May's pronunciation of the word "home" is much too much, even if only by reference to the audible surface which surrounds it. The word leaps out of the surrounding texture at least as vividly on the recording as it does in the spectogram reproduced as Figure 3.3. Compared to its surroundings, it has a higher dynamic level, a clownishly elongated descending contour, and a brighter timbre. These characteristics make it seem stylistically heightened, as if we can hear the abstract rules which determine it (louder, brighter, elongated). In the next moment, however, Ms. Lehmas's interlocutor weaves her back into the texture by faintly echoing her descending "home" over an ominously narrowed range: when he responds to her call at a fading dynamic level and with a flatlined melodic contour low enough to

Figure 3.3 "... so at home." *Improvisations to Music* (1958). Peak frequency spectogram (Sonic Visualiser). The scale refers to hertz. May's voice is underscored in red, Nichols's in blue. I have indicated the approximate onset of the word "home." The blue arrow points to the moment of Nichols's drop in pitch, slight yet visible in a red part of the spectogram.



yield droll glottalizations, he allows his pitch to dip slightly on his final syllable. Whereas in the call a descending syllable had sounded like an ambivalent settling or sinking, in the response, melodic descent becomes a pat, affirmative note ("Oh, I'm glad you do, sweetheart, I really

am"). A pocket of tangle appears at the center of this excerpt where the boss leaps in to make sense of her utterance, or to prescribe a sense for it. May's bright, looping, erratic speech gets absorbed into the droning speech of the boss. There is a stark difference between the left and the right sides of the spectogram reproduced as Figure 3.3. And yet still, May's character hardly makes for a shining light like Bunny's. Farce is grim, but it is grim as a whole, not because we sympathize with one of the individuated characters, all of whom are equally one-dimensional. What would it mean to say that Ms. Lehmas is a more sympathetic character than her boss?

She is not sympathetic because of anything apparent in her centered, innermost character. A recurring gag governed by the rule of three in this scene involves three unfinished sentences, each creating a gap where some bit of information about her private thoughts could have been communicated. The stakes mount with each one. "This is very good," she says of the Canadian Club and ginger ale her date seems to be pouring down her throat. "It's, uh … " Well. It's good anyway. "Oh yeah," she responds to an unseemly invitation. "It's just really … " Here it matters immensely from an ethical standpoint what she has to say. Is it really late, surprising, inappropriate? And when she asks him, moments later, if that is his foot under the table, her incomplete sentences become exasperating. "I thought it was … " What did she think it was? His foot? A mouse? Odd? Unpleasant? Nice? Creepy? As comforting as it would be to fill in the blank, the listener doesn't even know for sure what *sort* of "it" is involved here, let alone what "it was." More importantly, it's not clear whether Ms. Lehmas knows. Perhaps more than one of these things at once.[61]

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[61] A prejudiced listener could fill in the blanks. My point is that the scene appears to be crafted in such a way that it rewards the listener who does not jump to inferences. In that sense, it appears productive of a sensibility which stays on the surface of things.

What we can say for sure is that the last syllable in this final incomplete statement reverberates like a snap in an echo chamber. The cocktail piano has mysteriously faded out of the background, and the boss says nothing. What is dreadful about this moment is not that Ms. Lehmas is heard to be all alone. It is that, as her voice reverberates across the surface of the tape, we hear that she can never be alone, not even with herself. Whatever she has to say will need to be able to work with echoic circumstances. We seem to hear her hearing herself.

Even Ms. Lehmas's deeply personal, embodied sexuality becomes a texturally elaborate surface phenomenon. The scene is peppered with little nonverbal vocalizations. She pants, gasps, moans, sighs, glottalizes, inhales sharply, and giggles all across the piece, even letting out the occasional subdued exclamatory, "Oh!" The boss makes no comparable sounds. At the end of the scene, a listener can hear all but her bosom heaving up and down as the boss rushes to pay the check after taking what sounds as a noncommittal observation—"I think I would like listening to some music"—as a finished sentence and an acceptance of his invitation.[62] High-fidelity aficionados who had purchased expensive "obscene phonograph records" out of car trunks and back storerooms already knew that the sounds of the female body in ecstasy made for titillating

[62] In the context of the scene, where the question being asked is not whether she would like listening to some music but whether she wants to come up to the apartment, the phrase sounds as the preface to an interrupted statement.

proof of how rewarding fidelity could be.[63] May seems to have thought carefully about her delicate sounds: she organizes them according to a clear temporal form. During the first three minutes—the discussion of the mimeograph machine is by far the longest beat in the scene—she scatters a few nervous giggles and sharp inhalations here and there. The sprinkling gets heavier only after the boss abruptly shifts the conversation from office life to personal life, rudely interrupting her with a loaded inquiry at about 2:50—"You like Andre Kostelanetz?" In whatever way these delicate sounds are enumerated, there is something like three times as many of them in the two minutes after the boss poses the question as there had been in the nearly three full minutes leading up to that pivotal moment.[64] Ms. Lehmas is aroused, but whether her arousal is sexual or of some other nature is not clear. When excerpted from the scene, the delicate sounds will appear lewd to any listeners inclined to hear them as such, including libidinous hi-fi

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[63] Jacob Smith, "33 1/3 Sexual Revolutions per Minute," *Spoken Word: Postwar American Phonograph Cultures* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 79–121. Smith recounts that some records sold for as much as $50, indicating both how wealthy the audiences for these records were and how seriously they took these purchases. "The liner notes explain that [*Erotica: The Rhythms of Love* (Fax Records), one of the LP records involved in the 1966 federal obscenity trial of a man named Joe Davis,] was 'the culmination of more than two years of research, utilizing today's most advanced electronic techniques and the talents of sound engineers who have pioneered a host of technical achievements.' The notes go on to explain that a portion of the record was made 'on a Magnecorder PT6AH, using an RCA 77DX microphone, and taped at 15 ips (inches per second),' with the help of an 'Ampex 300 tape recorder.' Perhaps these esoteric technical facts were included to fend off obscenity charges by demonstrating that the record held some kind of scientific merit. But reference to such minutiae also suggests an address to a certain type of audience: male hi-fi audio enthusiasts." Ibid., 82.

[64] I see no benefit to being technical about what constitutes a delicate sound, where one begins and ends, and whether they should be counted in clusters or individually. The difference is stark however a listener adds it up. I hear delicate sounds at 0:29.5–0:32.5, 0:56.5–0:57.5, 1:30, 138.5–1:40, 2:11.5–2:14.5, 2:23. From there until Ms. Lehmas, wittingly or otherwise, accepts her boss's invitation, fidgeting delicate sounds can be heard every few seconds: 2:52–2:54, 2:59, 3:02.5, 3:04.5–3:08.5, 3:12–3:13, 3:28.5–3:31, 3:32.5–3:35, 3:43–3:46, 3:48–3:49, 3:50, 3:53, 3:57, 4:01.5, 4:04, 4:08, 4:12, 4:16, 4:22, 4:28–4:32, 4:34, 4:41.

aficionados. But of course Ms. Lehmas might feel uncomfortable for other reasons. Her protestations ("I have to be home early") and questions ("Wouldn't your wife mind?") suggest that she understands as well as the listener what it will mean if she accepts her boss's invitation, perhaps better than the listener what it will mean if she does not.

All that can be said with certainty, and it is an indefinite thing to say, is that May's delicate sounds in the middle of the scene appear as sounds of frustration. Gasps, glottalizations, and grunts are all sounds that, both in their production and in their associations, involve constrictions and blockages. Ms. Lehmas grunts by forcing a burst of air through a stoppage, gasps by inhaling rapidly through a narrow passage (her teeth or esophagus), and glottalizes by holding her vocal folds together so that they flutter rapidly. Moreover, as May creates each of these individual sounds, she moves her breath abruptly and tersely in only one direction or the other. She does not breathe easy. Her voice appears on the record in fits and starts. All of this changes as soon as the boss calls for the check and Ms. Lehmas begins breathing heavily in and out, interrupted only by occasional shivers and her own trembling speech. Although technically speaking some kind of restriction in her vocal apparatus is still needed to make her breath audible,[65] by comparison with the grunts, gasps, and glottalizations of the middle of the scene, she is breathing freely, if not easily. Yet while this communicates that she has made it past the blockage preventing her from accepting the invitation, it does nothing to resolve the ambiguity of her delicate sounds. Ms. Lehmas never explicitly accepts the invitation. Her penultimate statement is comically out of place given the direction the couple has taken: "I've heard a lot

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[65] Vocalists and players of wind instruments know that it is possible to inhale heavily without making a sound. Inhalation, no matter how rapid, is only audible if air is being forced to move in a sufficient volume through a narrowed portion of the vocal apparatus.

about him—Andre Kostelanetz."[66] In some ways she seems prepared to head up to the boss's apartment. In others, there seem to be parts of her which have not yet been spoken, which chatter about a semi-class conductor, and which worry about the wife. May walks the listener through a clearly defined temporal form—from prelude, to blockage, to release—yet without the final release actually revealing a coherent inner life. In a sense, the piece moves forward meaningfully at the level of form without revealing much of anything at the level of *ethos*.

In various ways, listeners were directed to pay careful attention to the duo's intricately textured sounds. Just as the critic quoted in section 3.1 encourages listeners to think of the duo's duets in the context of monologues in the tradition of Ruth Draper or Joyce Grenfell, Nichols and May's microphonic practice encourages listeners to hear Ms. Lehmas as the central character. May's voice sounds at a close and even distance from the microphone throughout the entire scene. Her clearly enunciated utterances can be heard at the same distance as the considerably quieter, smaller sounds of her agitated body. Nichols's voice, by contrast, moves along an extreme range of distances from the microphone. For about the first minute of the piece he manages to stay on approximately an even plane with May, but at 1:09, he falls back away from the microphone and then gradually leans back in as if he were reentering the conversation without knowing what had happened in his absence ("Yeah, I know it. Crys– This was just crystal clear"). From here on out it is difficult to predict where, in terms of dynamic level and microphone distance, he will appear in the total sound space.[67] The tangled texture is produced as

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[66] Apparently Ms. Lehmas's interpolation into "semi-class" society is still at the stage of hearsay: she has heard a lot about Kostelanetz, but she has yet to hear him.

[67] On a "total sound-space" see John Cage, "Experimental Music [1957]," in *Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 9. See also chapter two.

the boss appears to buzz around Ms. Lehmas's head, in and out of the microphone's ear, his simpering chatter scrawling across her voice. Similarly, although the piano remains at an even distance from the microphone, it too fades out of view for one climactic moment. Precious inscriptions radiate outward from May, yet none of them seem to express any centered personality. Her delicate sounds do not tell us more about her inner state than the fading of the piano or the boss's winding chatter. Unlike the tangled textures woven between individuated characters in Katharine Hepburn's film which reveal the characters as real individuals, all of the most intricate textures in "Cocktail Piano"—from May's delicate sounds to the pockets of tangle she weaves with Nichols—appear as purely superficial etchings.

We are therefore still left to ask why we sympathize with Ms. Lehmas. Her position at the microphone's focal point does some work in this regard, but there seems to be more to it than that. To the extent that we identify with her—undoubtedly many listeners simply feel alienated when they listen to this kind of humor, but these are not the listeners who felt that the duo was "enlarging our experience to the dimension of art"—we identify with her as a person who acts with her circumstances in an animated way.[68] Her charm lies less in what she does than in how she does it. However much the duo was praised for its subtleties, their humor is largely that of the clown expending far more energy than is appropriate for the task at hand; the scale is one of subtleties, but the humor is still that of clownish exaggeration.[69] Why take pleasure in this? Why

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[68] The quotation appears in *Theatre Arts*, December 1960. See also Wool, "Mike & Elaine"; ad for *Nichols & May Examine Doctors* in *The New Yorker*.

[69] "Our answer to the question as to why we laugh at the movements of a clown would run: because they appear disproportionate and impracticable." Sigmund Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. Joyce Crick (New York: Penguin Classics, 2003 [1905]), 183.

not merely be annoyed—or frightened—as we can well imagine some people have been?[70] Not because we would do the same thing in her circumstances.

It seems to me that any sympathy we feel has to do with nothing more than Ms. Lehmas's clownish weaving of fantasias through her circumstances, circumstances which included her gangling self. Hepburn and Tracy learn to be themselves, to become who they always were without knowing it, and to build a cozy home for themselves. With Ms. Lehmas, there is also cause for a kind of optimism, but for a considerably more precarious optimism, an optimism which has to be continuously renewed through every fleeting moment of speech. Ms. Lehmas is active at least, even hyperactive. We take pleasure in the way she speaks the word "home" not because it tells us the truth, in her delicate sounds not merely because they arouse our prurient interests, and in the tangles she threads with her boss not because they foreshadow a world based upon any "democratic attitude," but simply because everything she does—she speaks, makes delicate sounds, and weaves tangles—she does on an excessively ornamented surface. The distinction between the "unconscious," the "pre-conscious," and the "unconscious," so important for Freud in *The Ego and the Id*, did not figure into my reading of Freud because I cannot ground it anywhere in May's performance: where Freud's psychoanalysis was inseparable from

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[70] "Except that now, fully awake and armed with audio, I saw that the movie was entitled Terms of Bereavement and it was actually a comedy," recounts Casi, the hero of Sergio De La Pava's *A Naked Singularity*. "But not a good comedy where witty people trip and wear funny outfits either, rather one that relied principally on the smug knowingness of its audience. A comedy in name only, neither divine nor vulgar. A comedy in error, full of irony and self-reference and signifying an empty nil." Sergio De La Pava, *A Naked Singularity: A Novel* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 485. With the necessity of the audio track, the association with an upper class ("smug knowingness"), the association with a middle class ("neither divine nor vulgar"), the irony, the self-reference, and the meaninglessness, Casi—like De La Pava, the son of Colombian immigrants—could almost be describing a Nichols and May performance. De La Pava seems to be depicting the annoyance which a certain kind of entertainment intended for affluent classes can provoke.

psychoanalytic practice, from the search for a "cure" to deep-seated problems—from the ego's "progressive conquest of the id"—May's performance seems to have more to do with what appears, in all of its excess, on a flat surface with no definite connection to any underlying processes. She seems to be already involved in a self with no single center, a self illuminated only by superficial, clownish gestures.

According to Freud's book on jokes (1905),[71] the joke as a "contrivance" is independent of its *Gehalt*, a term which can mean "content"—as does *Inhalt*—but which is also spelled and pronounced in the same way as the ordinary German word for "salary."[72] The joke's workings are separate from the content it pays out. In Freud's account, the *Gehalt* is ethically preeminent. In the case of "tendentious jokes" on taboo topics, the contrivance, otherwise harmless, yields only a small amount of pleasure by itself; this small amount of pleasure is most important as a "fore-pleasure," a catalyst allowing the true payload—delight in the joke's repressed content—to break through layers of repression.[73] A mildly funny contrivance is just enough incentive for individuals to allow themselves to laugh deeply at something that otherwise could not be said out loud, perhaps not even be consciously thought. Freud generally speaks as if all of this were more or less beneficial, in a pecuniary sense, for the individual. Repressed desires, Freud had risen to fame arguing, can produce debilitating neuroses.[74] The joke, he argued a few years after publishing his landmark dream book, provides a kind of escape valve. Foreshadowing the darker tenor of his postwar theory, Freud illustrates his theory with a gruesome collection of anti-

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[71] Freud, *Joke*.

[72] Freud, *Joke*, 9–10, 87.

[73] Freud, *Joke*, 131.

[74] Freud, *Joke*, 96–98.

semitic jokes.[75] The techniques that could be used to rebel against authority could be directed against "inferior and powerless figures."[76] If it is true, as Freud suggests, "that the *very reason* we are compelled to pass on our joke to someone else is *because* we are unable to laugh at it ourselves,"[77] then we can find a point of origin for totalitarian states in the very same mechanism used to release repressed libidinal passions. The ethics of the joke has to do with its content.

The reverse seems to be true in "Cocktail Piano": the superficial contrivance appears as everything. Neither Ms. Lehmas nor her boss seem debilitatingly repressed by any taboos. A theory of humor grounded in bourgeois experiences of *fin de siècle* Vienna can end up extremely misplaced in discussions of the comedy beloved by affluent middle-class audiences in postwar New York. The toddler who laughs at a joke without understanding its content might still be able to take pleasure in some aspect of its workings, perhaps in some cases the better part of its workings. A political or ethical theory of humor can speak of humor's role in the "release" of "repressed" desires as only one corner of a universe of possibilities. Talk of the musicality of Nichols and May might have served as a means of calling attention to the contrivance itself.

Strictly speaking, I laugh neither with Ms. Lehmas, as if we were both in on the joke, nor at her, as if May "relied principally on the smug knowingness of [her] audience."[78] Instead, I hear the phrase "so at home" as brilliantly, suddenly, and luxuriously illuminating aspects of the self which cannot be fully separated yet which cannot be brought into perfect harmony because

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[75] Joyce Crick observes that an early translation of the joke book used materials "suited to a gag from a minstrel show" as equivalents to Freud's anti-semitic jokes. Joyce Crick, "Translator's Preface," *Joke*, xxxviii.

[76] Freud, *Joke*, 100–101.

[77] Freud, *Joke*, 149 (emphases in original).

[78] De La Pava, *Naked Singularity*, 485. See my footnote on this passage above.

each has its own way of being. I hear her involved in the weaving of a self which already appears as a complex situation in its own right. Her way of dealing with her situation is no more exemplary than her character is admirable. But through a comic mode, her clownish involvement in her own extended self appears precious.

Conclusion

Elaine May's delicate and tangled textures might have accomplished a specific task for the affluent observers who found the entertainment they most esteemed dismissed by other affluent audiences as a cheap effort to cash in on mass-media success. From the standpoint of a person who understands their own self as divided, "Cocktail Piano" neither represses the libidinous desires undergirding the decadent glamour characteristic of middle-class entertainment nor gainsays criticisms of that class and its contradictory conditions. As Ms. Lehmas and her boss rush for his big, empty apartment, Rubenstein's cocktail piano swells in triumph. It is indeed a triumphant moment, for someone at least. Yet outside the standpoint of the Id, personified by the boss, it also appears as a moment of failure. The piece's contradictions remain unresolved. In this sense, I cannot disagree with the reading which would have it that the scene functions as a kind of training for banality—the audience, recognizing itself in Ms. Lehmas, learns to content itself with an appreciation of the humorous aspects of its degraded working life.[79] I can only say that the scene might have helped people produce contradictions for themselves. What they did with that consciousness or how they developed it further is another

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[79] I associate this sort of reading most with Adorno. See, for example, the essays on popular culture collected in Theodor W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

matter. Just as Carter advocated for a "democratic attitude," so "Cocktail Piano" fosters a particular way of producing ethical problems aesthetically.

My reading of the psychoanalytic literature with an eye for a particular theme, that of the divided self, has allowed me to make a distinction between different texts in a literature of tangled textures. The cover art for *Improvisations* encourages audiences to hear the album's tangled textures as yet another instance of what could have been heard already in *Adam's Rib* and *Desk Set* (compare Figure 3.4 with Figure 3.1). Had there been more space to discuss Hepburn, Capra, Welles, and Albee, I could have drawn further instances into additional affinities and oppositions. Nevertheless, May's aborted sentences and delicate sounds disappoint a reading of the texture as inherently a portrayal of coherent individuals repressed by external circumstances. Hearing performances by a duo as monologues makes sense in relation to May's contribution to the literature of tangled textures: whatever personality Ms. Lehmas can be said to have is not some germ expressed in her individuated voice, but a diffuse sound etched all across a surface shared with the boss. To precisely the extent that Ms. Lehmas gets lost in the texture she weaves with her boss, this texture becomes the only place where she can appear. Whereas Hepburn and Tracy's tangled textures sound as though they are produced by definite, pre-established voices entering into conversation, the voices in "Cocktail Piano" are in every respect contingent upon the texture they themselves weave into existence.

To the extent that Hepburn and Tracy's tangled textures perform a charming world of desire and cultivate something not unlike Carter's "democratic attitude," they continue to work for us in important ways. However, at the moment that they make social problems into something external to noble souls—for example, at the moment where the arbitrary rule of the

Figure 3.4 Cover art for *Improvisations to Music* (1958), scan by the author. Perhaps significantly, and not unlike the gendered relationship seen in Figure 3.1, Nichols appears to look lovingly at May while she smiles off into the distance.

capitalist is defined as a problem which can be resolved by the benevolent arbitrary rule of the capitalist—the character of the type of problem which Hepburn and Tracy are capable of symbolically producing and resolving becomes apparent. Their balancing of gender relations is

only satisfying to observers who see democracy not as an unresolved ethical problem but as an infinitely flat, contentless, transparent surface. It is no accident that the heroes of Hepburn and Tracy's films, though indignant at their trespassing neighbors, are essentially content with their own portion in life—and with good reason; it is always an ample portion. But in a capitalist society where one tiny class struggles to retain the power to individuate members of the entire proletariat, such an attitude seems more blithe than "democratic."

Nichols and May's textures leave the cultivation of such a "democratic attitude" aside and instead produce something more like the peculiar feeling of insideness discussed in the last chapter: although Ms. Lehmas's triumphant claim to be "so at home" has none of the self-certainty of Bunny's recitation, its clowning appearance in the piece's texture nevertheless acts as a fleeting indication that Ms. Lehmas retains the capacity to remake herself, and with herself aspects of a more diffuse texture. That in exercising this capacity she finds no way out of the texture only serves to demonstrate how fraught the conditions of selfhood actually are.

"To attack something vicious viciously," Elaine May was quoted remarking in 1959, "is nothing. Criticism requires compassion."[80] Our "compassion" for Ms. Lehmas is dependent upon precisely the object of our criticism: Ms. Lehmas's most ridiculous aspect, her clowning gestures. We do not need to understand the reason for her actions, nor do we need to subordinate our judgment to an urbane, indifferent attitude. Between the literature of tangled textures and the literature of psychoanalysis, Elaine May could have forged a comic mode characterized by a critical compassion. By reading these literatures comparatively, we can learn to read the workings of that mode and to better appreciate an exceptional voice of the New Comedy.

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[80] Wershba, "Daily Closeup," *New York Post*.

Chapter 4 Archiving Motion on Jimmy Lynch's *Tramp Time Volume 1*, 1967–

> Some adult party albums are poorly recorded. A few are nothing but curse words. And some are so ethnic that outsiders not only can't figure out the jokes, they can barely figure out what's being said. Jimmy Lynch often combines all three problems on his La Val discs.
>
> —Ronald L. Smith (b. 1952), author of a series of comedy discographies, 1996[1]

> I is done been to college, and I am somewhat eddycadid. Yes I are.
>
> —That Funky Tramp in a Nite Club, recorded in Battle Creek, MI, fall 1967[2]

The 1967 LP record *Tramp Time Volume 1: That Funky Tramp in a Nite Club* (La Val LVP 901) has often been regarded as an early example of the genre of blue records or "party records" by black comedians—"FOR MATURE ADULTS ONLY," "RATED XX"—which took shape after the release of two iconic albums on the Kent label in 1970: *The Rudy Ray Moore Album: Eat Out More Often* (KST 001) and *The Second Rudy Ray Moore Album: 'This Pussy Belongs To Me'* (KST 002).[3] For many observers, and for a long time, the album's earliness has

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[1] Ronald L. Smith, *Goldmine: Comedy Record Price Guide* (Iola, WI: Krause Publications, 1996), 216.

[2] Jimmy Lynch, *Tramp Time Volume 1: That Funky Tramp in a Nite Club*, La Val LVP 901, LP, 1967. The spelling of "eddycadid" is Lynch's own; ibid. For more on this particular quotation, see section 4.3.

[3] For example, an insert found in Lynch's *Tramp Time Volume 4* (early 1970s) establishes a six-item collection, one which collectors could complete for themselves at a savings of $2.00 per record: four volumes of *Tramp Time*, Al Sparks's *I Heard It at the Barber Shop!*, and blues singer Chick Willis's *Stoop Down Baby ... Let Your Daddy See* ("One and one is two./ Three and three is six./ I ain't so good looking,/ but I gotta *long* time to live"). See section 4.2. On blue records, see Jacob Smith, "33 1/3 Sexual Revolutions per Minute," in *Spoken Word: Postwar American Phonograph Cultures* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011), 79–121.

been one of its most salient characteristics. When asked about his debut album in the 1990s, Jimmy Lynch—born October 13, 1937 just outside of Birmingham, Alabama, also known as the Funky Tramp, Mr. Motion, and the Lover, a "versatile singer, dancer, drummer, impersonator, and a comedian," as he was referred to in a 1968 publicity piece, or "comedian, singer, dancer, emcee, band leader, actor and […] TOTAL entertainer," as he bills himself on his website today —remembered recording it 1961.[4] He does not appear to have maintained this memory, and even if the album was not recorded on September 10, 1967 in "the famous El Grotto bar in Battle Creek, Michigan at one of its fabulous Sunday afternoon matinees," as has been suggested, the contents of the album rule out any recording date prior to 1966.[5] Nevertheless, I see little reason to doubt that Lynch was faithfully reporting his own sense of the historical position of *Volume 1*. The record evidently seemed early already even when it was first released: La Val Records and Productions, a black-owned Kalamazoo-based production company, envisioned a multi-volume

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[4] "Rudy Ray Moore Official Website," http://www.shockingimages.com/dolemite/albumst/lynch1.php (accessed March 14, 2015).

[5] LP records were not regularly published with printed dates during the 1960s, and Lynch's debut LP has not been adequately cataloged by the New York Public Library or the Library of Congress. Sonya Bernard-Hollins states that the recording was made on September 10, 1967. See *Here I Stand: One City's Musical History* (Kalamazoo, MI: Fortitude Graphic Design & Printing, 2009), 74. Since she appears to be working with the same collection that I consulted—La Val Records archive, private collection, cited here as LVA—I assume she is citing a clipping found there: "Recording Session at El Grotto," *Focus* (Kalamazoo), September 1967. "A live recording session will take place at the El Grotto, Battle Creek, Sunday, September 10, from 6 to 10 p.m. The Jimmy Lynch Review will feature the Soul Twisters and Mr. Lynch, known to his fans as 'Mr. Motion.'" Ibid. This is almost certainly the Sunday afternoon matinee referred to by Mr. Vic. The most conclusive evidence for the album's *terminus post quem* can be found in the Tramp's use of the song "Tramp" written by Lowell Fulson (1921–1999) and Jimmy McCracklin (1921–2012). *Volume 1* cites no particular recording, but the earliest version of which I am aware is the one made by Fulson himself, released by Kent Records under the name Lowell Fulsom sometime in 1966 or 1967.

Funky Tramp series and an indefinite LVP 900 comedy series from the beginning.[6] And yet as far as I can see the second album in both series, *He Do's It Again: Tramp Time Volume Two* (La Val LVP 902), did not appear until Christmas 1970, a full three years after *Volume 1*, though only shortly after Rudy Ray Moore's Kent hits.[7] "We advise you to hang on to this record, it could become a collectors item," read the liner notes to *Volume 1*. The author of these notes, La Val's owner Victor Taylor (d. 1998, age 79)—also known as "Mr. Vic" or "Vic La Val" (sometimes spelled "Vic LaVal")—was already expressing the feeling that an emergent collection would eventually structure the space where an early album could become collectible.[8] For as long as the forecast had yet to be fulfilled, its precise meaning would have remained open to interpretation.

This chapter argues that between 1967 and the early seventies historical shifts in the modes and bodies of knowledge involved in the field of observers gathered around *Volume 1* both shaped and obscured historical changes in the album's apparent earliness. According to the

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[6] Evidence suggests that *Volume 1* was released not long after it was recorded. A promotional poster digitally archived in LVA and reproduced in La Val Records & Productions, "Jimmy Lynch – That Funky Tramp in a Nite Club (from La Val Records)," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x05XyBJkIXA (accessed March 17, 2015), cited hereafter as LVYT, advertises a La Val presentation of the Funky Tramp at the National Guard Armory in Kalamazoo on November 22, 1967. The event would have served nicely as a promotional date for an album recorded on September 10th.

[7] Lynch's website dates his first three LPs to the "1960's." "Jimmy Lynch – Mr. Motion," http://www.cultcollectibles.com/jimmylynch/ography.php (accessed April 8, 2015). But La Val advertisements published in *Ebony* in April, May, and July 1970 (volume 25, nos. 6, 7, and 9) mention only *Volume 1*. By contrast, ads published in *Jet* in December 1970 (December 10 and December 24, volume 39, nos. 11 and 13) read as follows "ENJOY YOUR HOLIDAY PARTIES WITH THE *NEW* [emphasis in original] JIMMY LYNCH TRAMP TIME VOL. II *HE DO'S IT AGAIN*." The success of Rudy Ray Moore's 1970 LPs might have prompted La Val to promote *Volume 1* in the spring and summer of 1970 while preparing a new holiday release.

[8] Earlene McMichael, "Local starmaker: Vic LaVal's record company launched major black acts," *Kalamazoo Gazette* (February 27, 2002).

rough outline of this argument, distinct sensibilities produced the earliness of *Volume 1* in different ways with different points of reference for diverse, aging observers. People learned to listen in changing ways as they both imagined contemporary society and acted in a manner they deemed suitable given their imaginings.

Just as observers saw hegemonic "liberals" of the early sixties focusing on a printable "vernacular" of their own making,[9] so too does one way of looking at *Volume 1* focus on dirty words. I will describe this sensibility as "whiter" in the sense of the comparative adjective used in 1963 by Amiri Baraka, known as LeRoi Jones during part of the period discussed in this chapter (for simplicity's sake and because it seems to be a respectful alternative, I will simply refer to "Baraka").[10] This sensibility seems proper to a professional middle class "whitened" by its peculiar dependence upon capital—and capital, according to more than one contemporary and unlike the professionals, was not predominately or "disproportionately" but rather exclusively white.[11] This whiter sensibility or something like it, I will suggest, was progressively established

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[9] See chapter one.

[10] Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones), *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1999 [1963]), 130, 135–138, 142.

[11] Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones), *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1999), 129–130. The "new Negro middle class," E. Franklin Frazier wrote in the 1962 Preface to his *Black Bourgeoisie* (*Bourgeoisie Noire*, Paris: Librairie Plon, 1955, first published in English in 1957), "was comprised almost entirely of wage earners and salaried professionals," and "so-called Negro business enterprises amounted to practically nothing in the American economy." *Black Bourgeoisie* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks 1997 [1957, 1962]), 5. Whitney M. Young Jr., writing for *Ebony* in September 1963 made a similar point in different language: "The Negro population has no upper class in the accepted sense of the term. Upper-class Negroes are really middle class by conventional standards of income, education, housing, etc. The Negro upper class is comparable socially and economically to the white middle class. Upper-class society as such is however fast disappearing from the American scene." Whitney M. Young, Jr., "The Role of the Middle-Class Negro," *Ebony* 18, no. 11 (September 1963), 69. See also Nat Hentoff, *The New Equality* (New York: The Viking Press, Inc., 1964), 92.

in Lynch's social circles after 1967 and especially after 1970. The encounter of the black owner of an independent, west-Michigan record label with an itinerant Midwestern performer can be read as one aspect of the progressive establishment of a sensibility. Taylor, as a traveler and promoter, might have had a strong appreciation of Lynch's perspective. As an entrepreneur, rather than a professional, he might not have seen "middle-class" society as fully his own. But if we are going to interpret the actual making of the party record under the hegemony of the professionals, something like the broad strokes I have outlined here will be helpful.

The audience recorded on *Volume 1* seems to have been prepared to listen for musical aspects of Lynch's performance practice. If afterward they bought copies of the album, they could have heard as essential what the later, whiter sensibility made into mere noise obscuring a printable content—"poorly recorded" aspects, and aspects "so ethnic that outsiders can barely figure out what's being said." The most prominent referents throughout *Volume 1* belong to a musician, James Brown, and the metrical and harmonic practices I described in section 4.3 will already be familiar to anyone who has heard one or more of Brown's late-sixties recordings.[12] Lynch's debut LP, I will argue, weaves between the musical and extra-musical. Instead of craning their ears to listen through noise for language, some listeners in 1967 might have appreciated Lynch's production of "not-now-audible" voices and songs—the voice heard wavering at the edge of the microphone's range, the recognizable song taking shape without having yet been sung. A listener can yearn for what is hidden in *Volume 1*'s spatiotemporal depth without what is hidden appearing more true, real, or practicable than what is present on the surface. Yet in much the same way that an ear for printable words made Bruce's Jewishness into mere fuzziness,

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[12] Lynch evidently admired James Brown: one of his La Val singles was a cover of "There Was a Time" (LV 869, 45, circa 1970).

Lynch's play of surface and depth could also have been heard as mere noise. The "common words used by the common people every day," as Mr. Vic refers to them in the liner notes to *Volume 1*—the terms "black," "colored," and "negro" do not appear anywhere on the album's packaging—were not the essential truth about Lynch's performance as Mr. Vic describes them. Lynch's performance as it appears in Mr. Vic's description is mediated by a deep field of characteristics, some of which cannot be pressed on vinyl at all: "You would really have to see him perform to appreciate him." The vanishing of that deeper field of characteristics could have been felt in and through fleeting moments where something surfaces—to take two examples: where a voice emerges and recedes on the horizon of the microphone, or where the anticipation of a coming song begins to well up as Lynch quotes lyrics or slips in and out of the groove established by his backing band.

The shift in sensibilities I am describing can be interpreted as one aspect of broader changes in the kinds of political programs which might have seemed viable to different people at distinct historical moments. Like other anti-colonial struggles, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s was often seen as a "middle-class" movement, one which was struggling to convince "poorer, blacker Negroes" (Baraka's term) that they had something to gain from the development of a more affluent, whiter professional class.[13] Ambivalent representatives of the negro middle class such as Baraka and the civil rights leader Whitney M. Young Jr. (1921–1971) had prominently criticized the ways in which their own class, embodied by the "whiter Negro," sought "assimilation" rather than "adaptation" to white society.[14] At least one anonymous

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[13] Baraka, *Blues People*, 130.

[14] Young, "The Role of the Middle-Class Negro," 69. The quotations in this sentence are excerpted from Baraka, *Blues People*, 130, 135–138, 142.

representative of the laboring poor deprived of or liberated from the "education" which might have made assimilation seem viable described the middle-class movement as senseless "hollering over integration" with no meaning or relevance for those irrevocably condemned to lifetimes of menial labor.[15] As the professional's powers of consumption waxed strong and as the capacity to flee the inner city for the suburbs became the surest marker of "success" in middle-class society, the "social gap," as Young called it, between the negro middle class and what Baraka called "the rest of the Negroes living in the U.S." was growing socially, economically, and geographically.[16] Yet the very rigidity of the intertwined exclusion from and interpolation into whiter society of the "deepest blacks of Southern Negro culture" or "non-middle-class Negroes"—to continue using Baraka's apt and varied terms—might have put the non-middle

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[15] "All this hollering over integration don't mean nothing to me. […] All them Negroes who are doing it hope to git something for themselves. All this stuff don't help people like me. I'm going to be working in a laundry all my life and there's no way to git out of it." A "Negro laundry worker" in Harlem quoted in Layhmond Robinson, "New York's Racial Unrest: Negroes' Anger Mounting," *New York Times* (August 12, 1963). For an illustration of the white liberal's attempt to solve the problems of the civil rights movement by advocating for improved education, see Eric Sevareid, "A Plain, Painful Truth for White Americans," *Eugene Register-Guard*, June 16, 1963.

[16] Baraka, *Blues People*, 136. Cf. also Young, "The Role of the Middle-Class Negro," 69. The fact that the problem I am citing here is being reported to us by two prominent members of the middle class, Baraka and Young, should alert us to the fact that the desire for a "Negro 'low' comedy," as Baraka referred to it, was being felt by certain members of the middle class at least as far back as the early 1960s. Baraka explicitly invokes mass media in expressing his desire: "And I hope that Negro 'low' comedy persists even long after all the gangsters on television are named Smith and Brown." Baraka, *Blue People*, 84. Whether the "conventional way of looking at general social class divisions," as Young called it, held true for any social group at the time, Young does not say. What we do know is that both the highest and the lowest income groups saw a decline in their share of the national wealth during the 1960s. Herman van der Wee, *Prosperity and Upheaval 1945–1980* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986 [1983]), 253–254, 257. In this sense, the U.S. of the 1960s was increasingly a "middle-class society." See also chapter two in this dissertation.

class in a better position to imagine, in its comic practice, impracticable worlds of desire.[17] Far from adopting a purely satirical attitude, these impracticable imaginings, I will show, even found something peculiar to desire in middle-class pomp. As middle-class disillusionment with the trappings of its own class position progressed, the interest of middle-class observers in non-middle-class "outsiders" was understandably piqued.[18] The blue record as genre can be read in part as the cultural form which resulted from a meeting of the middle class with its own non-middle class—in 1970, La Val advertised Funky Tramp LPs in overtly middle-class periodicals;[19] whether and to what degree this reflected actual middle-class interest in Lynch or expressed Taylor's own hopes for the national reach of middle-class society is, as far as I know, an open question. I will be concerned with producing an appearance which might have been especially important to Lynch and the audience recorded on *Volume 1* and which seems to have been generally lost on whiter professionals.

Contemporaries were living through a peculiar shift in U.S. class society as race society during the fall of 1967. Sometime around 1965, the capitalist world economy had shifted from a period of material expansion characterized by enormous investments in "variable capital"—that is, so-called "human capital"—to a period of financial expansion characterized by proliferating

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[17] Baraka, *Blues People*, 41, 128, 136.

[18] While I am not aware of a systematic study of this process, Grace Elizabeth Hale's study of parallel processes in the white middle class should prove of some use to researchers: *A Nation of Outsiders: How the White Middle Class Fell in Love with Rebellion in Postwar America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Baraka's desire for "Negro 'low' comedy," cited in a footnote above, may have appeared to some as a whiter desire.

[19] La Val advertisements were published in two Johnson Publishing Company periodicals in 1970, *Ebony* and *Jet*. See my footnote above.

financial instruments.[20] These financial instruments helped finance investments in "fixed capital," including the machinery and technologies of communication and transportation which helped make vastly more exploitative forms of production viable. Where capital had previously been able to exploit an enormous number of workers, each relatively only a little, it was beginning to exploit a shrinking number of workers, each "more efficiently," often in ways which seemed to benefit those within the shrinking number of the employed. As anyone vaguely familiar with U.S. history could have predicted, the first workers to suffer the most debilitating effects of this shift were also the last workers to have benefited from postwar material expansion: black workers.[21] Financial instruments were furthermore used to harness surplus value without engaging in any sort of productive activity whatsoever, as for example in the case of the predatory lending which began making headlines in the last two decades of the twentieth century as one ostensibly "sovereign" nation-state after another began defaulting on its loans, paving the way for an IMF-backed "new imperialism."[22] The invention of increasingly varied specialty markets, represented in this chapter by Taylor's involvement in the discovery or invention of the seventies blue record, can be read in part as one way of producing newly competitive positions in an increasingly crowded, "thriving," over-heating marketplace.

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[20] On this shift from material to financial expansion, see Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power and the Origins of our Times* (New York: Verso, 2010 [1994]).

[21] Edna Bonacich, "Advanced Capitalism and Black/White Race Relations in the United States: A Split Labor Market Interpretation," *American Sociological Review* 41 (February 1976), 34–51.

[22] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalim* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 98–115.

Capital, by definition, has scant tolerance for "free-market" competition of this or any other sort.[23] Turning from material to financial expansion was a way of disciplining labor and limiting access to the mushrooming minimum amount of capital needed to finance viable entrepreneurial ventures. Laboring people, increasingly in danger of being made "redundant," had reason to abandon hopes, at least in the short term, of wresting state power from capital or of escaping into some "separate" state of their own making. If the utopia of the professionals seemed no more viable than before, the alternatives seemed newly out of the question.[24] La Val Records and Productions did not survive the centralization and concentration of capital which characterized the last third of the twentieth century.

This does not in any way mean that laboring people or their representatives abandoned all hope. The last five decades have seen the proliferation on a global scale of a variety of "identitarian" or "corporatist" strategies suited to the "realm of representation," that is, strategies

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[23] On capitalism as "anti-market," see Arrighi's reading of Fernand Braudel in *Long Twentieth Century*, 20–21.

[24] Christopher Jencks and David Riesman observed that young black people expected a four-year college degree to provide access to a "profession" which, unlike a job in business or an entrepreneurial venture, "could be practiced behind the wall of segregation." See *The Academic Revolution* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968), 423. They also pointed out that federal funding available in 1965 for controversial programs which might have helped negro colleges revolutionize "the terms of the competition" had dried up by 1966. Ibid. 461–462.

which attempt to gain formal recognition from the state for a definite group of people.[25] "The governed," as they have been referred to by an important theorist of such strategies, have revised, adapted, and adapted themselves to the language of the administrative elite—the advent in the 1970s of terms like "First Nations" and "African Americans" can be read in this light.[26] The conditions where these sorts of strategies could become effective were already taking shape in the United States well before Lynch recorded *Volume 1*.[27] Taylor might have read the winds of change and accurately forecasted the advent of a collection. But whether the forecasted

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[25] Manning Marable speaks of a "multicultural universalism" in retrospective revisions of Malcolm X's political thought. See Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (New York: Viking, 2011), 8–9. Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004). See also Stuart Hall, "Race, articulation and societies structured in dominance," in *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism* (UNESCO: Bernan Associates, 1980), 339–343. As Hall points out in the selection I just highlighted, class under modern capitalism is not simply "colored" by race; at one level at least, class relations produce race. Of course, race is relatively independent of class in the sense that, to borrow one of Baraka's points, black people can only become so much "whiter." But the reason Baraka can use his comparative adjectives—whiter, blacker—is because blackness is mediated by the production of blackness by capital. Racism is not something added to capitalism after the fact; capitalist societies are racist societies for the same reason that no society based upon the exploitation of one group by another will ever be free of racism. For an illuminating contemporary case study, see Arlene M. Dávila, *Barrio Dreams: Puerto Ricans, Latinos, and the Neoliberal City* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004). Ruth Wilson Gilmore makes use of the term "realm of representation" in something like the sense I have in mind in *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 170. See also ibid., 104.

[26] Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed*.

[27] Marable points out that by the fall of 1963—with the apparent inevitability, for some observers, of Malcolm X's split with the Nation of Islam as a kind of catalyst—the waning of McCarthyism together with emergent divisions inside the Black Freedom Movement over the political effectiveness of the March on Washington had set the ground for a coalition of "independent, radical, and black nationalist groups." Marable, *Malcolm*, 263–264. Malcolm X's split with the Nation of Islam seemed inevitable to at least one outside observer by November 10, 1963, weeks before his infamous "chickens come home to roost" remark and his consequent silencing by Elijah Muhammad. Ibid., 265. Malcolm was apparently not so prescient, and in this he was not alone. Ibid., 325.

collection meant to him in 1967 what the established collection meant to him in 1970 is more difficult to say. Whereas the blue record as genre seems to belong squarely within the 1970s, *Volume 1* appears to occupy a moment of transition.

In sum, people listening to comedy LP records in the late 1960s were doing so amidst changing forms of political organization, and we can learn about both changing ways of listening and changing forms of political organization by considering their interdependencies. There is no space here for a systematic critique of the multivalent "identity politics" which took shape in the seventies; the diverse strategies we might interpret as "identity politics" have meant different things to different people in different historical "moments."[28] Instead of moralistically announcing that "identity politics" as an abstract "thing" was good in some ways and bad in

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[28] Malcolm X was still sometimes speaking of "revolution" as a fight for "land" and for the establishment of a separate black state. Marable, *Malcolm*, 235–296. Many among the black, urban "grassroots" Malcolm addressed were hoping for something of that nature. Ibid., 388–389, 428. The radical middle-class leaders of an emergent coalition might instead have had in mind something like the "managerial authority over the nation's Negro problem"—Kenneth W. Warren's term—recently denounced by Adolph Reed Jr. as the "class politics" of "the black professional-managerial stratum." Kenneth W. Warren, *So Black and Blue: Ralph Ellison and the Occasion of Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 27. Adolph Reed, Jr., "From Jenner to Dolezal: One Trans Good, the Other Not So Much," entry posted June 15, 2015, www.commondreams.org/views/2015/06/15/jenner-dolezal-one-trans-good-other-not-so-much (accessed November 26, 2015). Reed cites Kenneth Warren, *What Was African American Literature?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012). Certainly the white, right-wing advocates of corporatist strategies wanted something more along those lines: when William F. Buckley's star acolyte, Garry Wills, called for a "newly articulated community" with "indigenous"—this is the adjective Wills used to describe people confined to ghettoes!—"leaders with appropriate leverage on society as a whole," he could not have expected readers to ask who would decide what kind of leverage was "appropriate." Garry Wills, *Nixon Agonistes: The Crisis of the Self-Made Man* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1970), 598–601. Wills may have been breaking somewhat from the orthodox charlatanism of Buckley's circles, but his newly articulated communities would only have provided new categories for the administration of the natural order of things as this evidently appeared to him, that is, for the administration of capitalism.

others, I would like to develop a better understanding of the ways in which changing shapes of the political became involved in lived experiences. Both middle-class and non-middle-class black people had greater incentives, in the form of both carrots and sticks, to find ways of building formally recognizable alliances between classes (middle and non-middle) or between segments of a class (the proletariat): the waning of material expansion meant that those hoping for racial uplift could no longer look for a general "rising tide," and the realm of representation could reasonably have seemed like a promising territory once the extreme right began expressing interest in "newly articulated communities."[29] The story to be told here is in part about how a particular form of outsiderness came to be absorbed or dissolved into the politics of the proletarian middle class—in this case, how middle-class and non-middle-class Negroes alike became the "black people" recognized today by middle-class politics. It is also a story about what "funky" comedy, the term used in the 1967 liner notes, or "Negro 'low' comedy," Baraka's term in 1963, might have accomplished prior to its production as "BLACK COMEDY," the term used in the liner notes to *Volume Two*.[30]

This chapter involves three main sections. Section 4.3 furnishes a close reading of *Volume 1*. It is focused on the opening minutes culminating in Lynch's performance of "Tramp," a song written by Lowell Fulson (1921–1999) and Jimmy McCracklin (1921–2012) and recorded at least twice between 1966 and the summer of 1967 (see section 4.3.5). Musical ways of listening to *Volume 1*, I will show, can produce a compelling kind of motion through spatiotemporal depth. In some respects, this section stands alone and would have been long enough by itself to constitute its own chapter. But it mostly neglects the properly historical question: why might

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[29] The term "newly articulated community" is Wills's, discussed in my footnote above.

[30] Baraka, *Blues People*, 84.

motion have been important to Lynch's audience at the end of 1967, or what might it have meant for them? This question appears to be especially important when we recognize that motion was the central motif in a variety of black cultural texts of the sixties and seventies.[31] I would not say that Lynch engaged in motion as a kind of activity for the sake of activity; considering that some of my colleagues advocate for that sort of activity,[32] I need to take the time to be specific about what I would say instead. To better appreciate what motion might have meant for Lynch and for many in his audience, section 4.1 describes his motion as an itinerant performer through a set of changing routes and places. Section 4.2 then provides evidence for my contention that motion on

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[31] Charles Kronengold has written beautifully about walking as a prominent activity in the 1971 film *Shaft*, indeed as "the master trope of performative identity" in black action films as a genre. See "Identity, Value, and the Work of Genre: Black Action Films," in *The Seventies: The Age of Glitter in Popular Culture*, ed. Shelton Waldrep (New York: Routledge, 2000), 81–82. That same year, men could also be seen marching over great distances, alone or in groups including women, in *Sweet Willie Rollbar's Orientation,* a film—recently restored by Brent Hayes Edwards—by Julius Hemphill, K. Curtis Lyle, and Manlinke Elliott, members of the St. Louis-based Black Artists Group (BAG). The downtrodden Hamburger Pimp in *Dolemite* (1975) is given an unforgettable shot in which he perambulates down the sidewalk in chaotic triumph after procuring his daily hamburger. Movement is also an insistent refrain in Baraka's *Blues People*. See Baraka, *Blues People*, 62, 65, 71, 83–84, 91, 95–96, 105, 112, 123, 127, 133, 138, 143, 158. Baraka generally refers to motion as an activity engaged in by men. "Most of the best-known country singers were wanderers, migratory farm workers, or men who went from place to place seeking employment. In those times, unless she traveled with her family it was almost impossible for a woman to move about like a man. It was also unnecessary since women could almost always obtain domestic employment." Ibid., 91. But it also appears through *Blues People* as an entire race's most characteristic and consequential activity.

[32] For some of the classic critiques of "activity for the sake of activity," see: Adorno on "pseudo-activity" in "Free Time," *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 167–175; or Benjamin on "expression" in "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," in *Selected Writings*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 3:120–122. I don't think I need to name names; readers should have no difficulty finding their own examples of contemporary academic texts advocating for this sort of activity.

Volume 1 may not have been especially important to the middle-class observers who later saw Lynch as an early contributor to the seventies blue record as a genre.

4.1 Changing routes and places

Whether for recreational, folkloric, or commercial purposes, singularly or in combination, white audiences in the United States—middle-class white men especially—had expressed an interest in dirty performances by black entertainers long before 1970.[33] After the World Wars, black entertainers found important places in a modern "vernacular" shaped by a "liberal," white middle class.[34] It seems plausible that part of Rudy Ray Moore's sudden commercial success with party records in the early seventies was due to the patronage of an affluent, white or at least "whiter," middle-class audience with "no qualms about" observing "the rougher" or "less dignified" black performers, as Baraka had described an assemblage of patrons and performers

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[33] George M. Fredrickson, "Uncle Tom and the Anglo-Saxons: Romantic Racialism in the North," *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1971), 97–129; Eric Lott, *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[34] "Press release" by the Committee on Poetry, June 13, 1964, Box 4, Lenny Bruce Collection, Brandeis University. See also chapter one. Doug Clark and his Hot Nuts had specialized in performing "the dirty dozens" and other bawdy rhymes at white fraternity parties at least as far back as the 1950s. Elijah Wald, *Talking 'Bout Your Mama: The Dozens, Snaps, and the Deep Roots of Rap* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 113–114. The folklorist Robert "Mack" McCormick (1930–2015) had recorded a performance of the dozens by Lightnin' Hopkins in 1959, released with other "unexpurgated folk songs of men" on a 1960 LP of that name. Ibid. "Various – The Unexpurgated Folk Songs of Men," http://www.discogs.com/Various-The-Unexpurgated-Folk-Songs-Of-Men/release/2715884 (accessed March 21, 2015). And Kent records was, after all, a white-owned label, founded in the late 1950s by the Bihari brothers, of Hungarian Jewish descent.

from a slightly earlier era.[35] Certainly the liner notes to *Volume 1* read like the comments of a man with the means to influence a dominant white society's image of a "common people."

But if whiter interest in blacker vulgarity was not new, Taylor's particular activities and the particular situation where those activities became effective during the late sixties were. The black middle class had evidenced a liberalizing tendency throughout the postwar decades, albeit one of a sort different from that of the white middle class discussed in chapter one. Baraka remembered hearing his grandfather describing "rent parties" no longer as "sinful" but rather as "vulgar."[36] As the "sinful" became the "vulgar," standards of class proprietary would have been secularized and given a material foundation—the other term Baraka attributes to his grandfather is "wasteful."[37] Although these new standards were no less moralizing or ideological than their older counterparts, the category of the "vulgar" did belong to a more liberal modernity. It therefore carried with it at least the potential for new ways of "romancing" the vulgar social classes.[38]

That potential was actualized at least in part through a rapidly changing market for LP records by black comedians. As late as December 1961, at least one critic was still bracketing off "Negro comics" who had "suddenly come into prominence" as belonging to a "unique situation" outside mainstream comedy—he might have had in mind Jackie "Moms" Mabley (1894–1975) and Dick Gregory (b. 1932), both of whom were looking back that winter on "crossover" years

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[35] Baraka, *Blues People*, 128–129.

[36] Ibid., 122.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

brokered in part by Hugh Hefner.[39] That critic's whole way of speaking—if not yet the description of black comedians as "Negro comics," then at least the segregation of those performers to a "unique" situation—must have seemed hopelessly out of date within a matter of years. By 1963, a blockbuster series of Warner Brothers LPs was swiftly inaugurating Bill Cosby (b. 1937) as the most acclaimed American comedian since Groucho Marx. By the seventies, many of the comedians who, like Mabley, had been traveling during the early sixties somewhere along the fading pathways still sometimes referred to—if only by middle-class nostalgics—as the "Chitlin Circuit" had found success in another sort of mass market, the one for blue records, a market sometimes presumed to have been comprised of a predominately or even exclusively black audience.[40] Within the space of only about ten years, black comedians, prominent or otherwise in 1961, had begun participating in at least two different kinds of mass markets for LP records, neither of which had existed in the same form in the 1950s. In one, black comedians rose to "prominence" when seen from the standpoint of white critics. In the other, they did not, or rather, they became household names in white society through their involvement in movies, sitcoms, and game shows—as did Godfrey Cambridge (1933–1976), Julius "Nipsey" Russel

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[39] Nathan Cohen, "Nichols and May," *Toronto Daily Star* (December 7, 1961). Gregory had crossed a notable color line on March 23rd after agreeing to appear on *The Tonight Show*—as many negro comics before him had—under the condition that he be invited after his routine to join host Jack Paar in conversation on the prestigious "sofa."

[40] The sources I have cited which use the term "Chitlin Circuit" were not written by the people moving through the clubs where Mabley and Lynch performed. I cannot say whether the term was used by those people or whether it was imposed on their circles, perhaps retroactively, by middle-class nostalgics. For the uses of the term I have consulted, see Scott Saul, *Becoming Richard Pryor* (New York: Harper, 2014), 108–115; Preston Lauterbach, *The Chitlin' Circuit: And the Road to Rock 'n' Roll* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012). Ice-T says of *Eat Out More Often* and *'This Pussy Belongs to Me'*, "These were records that white people ain't never gonna see." Quoted in Wald, *Talking 'Bout*, 111.

(1918–2005), LaWanda Page (1920–2002), Redd Foxx (1922–1991), and even Richard Pryor (1940–2005)—but less often through their work as standup comedians.[41] This distinction could also be stated in terms of record labels: on one side were the older major labels like Warner Brothers (Cosby), Chess (Mabley), and Columbia (Gregory); on the other were newer independent labels like La Val (Sparks, Lynch), Kent (Moore, Lady Reed), and eventually Laff, the self-appointed leader in the field of party records and the home at one point or another to Skillet and Leroy, Page, Foxx, Pryor, and, after his contract with La Val ran out in the mid-seventies, Lynch himself.[42]

There was a time when this opposition still needed to be formed. Kent, the oldest label on the other side, did not even exist before 1958, and I see no sign of any activity in the market for blue records by black entertainers from La Val until 1967 or from Laff until the early seventies.[43] Even Rudy Ray Moore (1927–2008), older and better established than Lynch, got a fresh start in 1970. *The Second Rudy Ray Moore Album* is the second because it is preceded only by *Eat Out*

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[41] Although he is now considered to be one of the two greatest "standup comedians" in the history of standup, and although he had been an A-list celebrity since at least his appearance on *Wattstax* in 1973, Richard Pryor's standup does not appear to have been especially well known to whiter audiences until the mid seventies—*Live in Concert* did not appear until 1979, and by then the medium was video. By that point at least one contemporary felt that a different era of standup comedy had already emerged: see Bergman quoted in Frederick C. Wiebel, Gregory J.M. Catsos, and Chris Palladino, *Backwards into the Future: The Recorded History of the Firesign Theatre* (Boalsburg, PA: BearManor Media, 2006), 50–51.

[42] Lynch released two LPs on Laff, *The Return of the Funky Tramp* (LAFF A179, 1974) and *Nigger Please!* (LAFF A194, 1977).

[43] La Val's comedy LVP 900 series begins with Lynch's 1967 debut (LVP 901). Laff released far more comedy LP records than La Val—the majority of them by white performers—and I have not been able to reliably date all of them. But the A-140 series which includes LPs by Pryor, Skillet and Leroy, and LaWanda Page (spelled La Wanda) begins with *Johnny Otis Show, Live! That Ain't My Finger* featuring Mantan Moreland and Livingood (Laff A–140), which a contributor to *discogs.com* dates to 1971 or 1972.

More Often. Kent released the pair of 1970 LPs as KST 001 and KST 002. No account is given of *Below the Belt*, Moore's considerably earlier album, recorded in his living room, released sometime around 1960 on a label famous for a series of Redd Foxx LPs from the fifties and sixties, Dooto Records.[44] Nor is there any reference to his former "second LP," as his 1964 album *A Comedian Is Born* (Comedians Inc., CIS 1002, 1964) had been designated in its liner notes, nor to the "Kent Personality Series LP entitled 'THE BEATNIK SCENE' [Kent 3006, 1962]," referred to as Moore's first LP in those same notes.[45] Moore wiped the slate clean at least twice: *Below the Belt*, *The Beatnik Scene*, and *Eat Out More Often* had all been Moore's first LP, each in its time.

TOBA, the Chitlin Circuit's organizer (Theater Owners Booking Association) and exploiter ("Tough on Black Asses"), had collapsed during the Great Depression.[46] One of the youngest (1940–2005) among the itinerant Midwestern black performers of the early sixties, the one destined to become the most acclaimed comedian ever yet to have emerged from Cosby's epochal shadow, had spent at most a few treacherous months hitchhiking his way along routes maintained in the absence of their institutional basis.[47] Despite having grown up in Peoria, Illinois' entertainment district—his family had owned various brothels and taverns there since the 1940s—he spent those months as an outsider: his clothes were stolen by fellow travelers, he was ripped off by club owners, and he found himself screaming in frustration at a hostile

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[44] Smith, *Spoken Word*, 102–106.

[45] Warren Lanier, liner notes to *A Comedian Is Born*, reproduced on "Rudy Ray Moore is Dolemite! Official Website – Album Gallery: Comedian is Born," www.shockingimages.com/dolemite/albums/comedianisborn.php (accessed January 26, 2016).

[46] Jones, *Blues People*, 89.

[47] Saul, *Becoming Richard Pryor*, 111–115.

audience, "[In] a couple of years I'm gonna be a star, and you dumb niggers will still be sittin' here!"[48] In the cold early months of 1963, he promptly abandoned the Circuit once and for all after reading in *Newsweek* about Cosby's road, unprecedented for a negro comic, through "hip cafés in Philly and New York City" to national success.[49] As if unsure about Cosby's new world, his first stop was the Apollo Theater, an independent theater, but one which in other respects might have seemed only a few upward steps removed from the world he had just left behind—most of Lynch's audience could have heard the first words on *Volume 1* ("Are you ready for Star Time?") as basically the same as the first words on James Brown's *Live At the Apollo* (King Records 826, 1963). The wearied booking agent up on 125th Street who pointed downtown in the direction of Greenwich Village unwittingly assigned the traveler, barely twenty-two years old and just off a bus from the train station, the arduous task of "becoming Richard Pryor," to borrow an apt phrase from Scott Saul's intricate account.[50] The young comedian's raging prophecy would prove exactly half true. Pryor became a star. But by that time the "here" where he had condemned his erstwhile audience to perpetual immobility was already disintegrating.

Residents of the Hamblin neighborhood, home of Battle Creek's "famous El Grotto bar," would have had vivid memories of a vanishing of routes and places. During the first half of the twentieth century, Battle Creek, once the base of operations for Sojourner Truth and an important piece of the Underground Railroad, had witnessed the growth of a thriving black community centered around—more or less informally segregated to—the Hamblin neighborhood or "the

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[48] Saul, *Becoming Richard Pryor*, 38–45, 111–112.

[49] Ibid., 111–116.

[50] Ibid.

Bottoms" south of the Kalamazoo River.[51] During World War II, a wave of emigrants, black and white, arrived from the southern United States. Black workers found jobs in industry as "machinists, foremen, electricians, cookers," on the local Army base as both recruits and civilians, in the "Civil Service," in local healthcare facilities, and in various "menial occupations" as janitors, shopkeepers, and housekeepers.[52] One chronicler claimed in 1952 that "World War II helped to change the policies of some [though not all] factories" in ways which were perceived as favorable to black people eager to show their "merit."[53] In 1946, Battle Creek Public Schools gradually began hiring black teachers.[54] "Two girls who are able to 'pass' are working as waitresses," the chronicler noted.[55] There were in addition a number of black-owned businesses and a few black professionals in town.[56] Black residents created their own spaces for social, cultural, religious, and recreational activities, and in theory at least—often in practice as well—the city's largest establishments and institutions, with the notable exception of some golf courses, were integrated.[57] It is easy to understand why Battle Creek might have appeared as a desirable destination for many black migrants at the time. According to local storytellers, a fairly rapid downturn began around noon on Holy Saturday, April 5, 1947 when a catastrophic flood

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[51] Marie Dusenberg, "A History of Negroes in Battle Creek" (Battle Creek: Willard Library, 1952), digitized and available online through the Hathi Trust Digital Library.

[52] Dusenberg, "Negroes in Battle Creek," 8–9.

[53] Ibid., 9.

[54] Ibid, 10.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Ibid., 10–15.

washed through the Bottoms.[58] By itself, this "natural disaster" could not have destroyed the Hamblin neighborhood. It was the "cleanup" conducted under the auspices of a federally funded "Cement River Project" which paved over the community: residents were compelled to leave their homes, and their neighborhood was rezoned for industry. It might be hyperbolic to say, as the account I am citing does, that the Bottoms then promptly "vanished" on September 30, 1961 when the new cement channel failed to prevent another flood. The El Grotto still stood on the north-west corner of Hamblin and Kendall—indeed, to this day an abandoned nightclub opened in 1993 called "Colors on the Corner" still rests amidst weeds and gravel in the very same short, rectangular, windowless one-story building with its plain, shallow pilasters ornamenting concrete sides.[59] Nevertheless, some among Lynch's audience in 1967 might have been able to reminisce about a black neighborhood which had seen its material basis ripped out from underneath it by a federally mandated, funded, and enforced wave of "industrial" progress.

Taylor's choice of Sojourner Truth's place of death as the birthplace of the bullshitting Tramp's first LP salvo was fitting. Black emigrants from the deepest south, like Lynch, would have been equipped with mobile cultural tools suitable for grappling with violent passages. After the deadly summer of 1967, they had a new political tool as well: the destruction of the Hamblin neighborhood could be articulated to postwar liberalism's federally funded, dystopian "model

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[58] My information on the 1947 and the 1961 floods is taken from "Memories From Hamblin: The Making and Unmaking of Battle Creek's African American Community," www.heritagebattlecreek.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=155&Itemid=73 (accessed January 28, 2016).

[59] "Clubs and Entertainment in the Bottoms," *Memories From Hamblin: The Making and Unmaking of Battle Creek's African American Community*, www.memoriesfromhamblin.org/entertainment.html (accessed January 28, 2016).

cities."[60] By way of the emerging Interstate Highway system, Battle Creek was the midpoint on the main route between Chicago and Detroit. By the networks of black migrants, Detroit was an exceptionally short one hundred and twenty-odd miles away.

According to a biography in a La Val publicity piece dated 1968, Lynch, three years older than Pryor, established a set of pathways different from those of either Pryor or Cosby.[61] He organized a "singing group" called the Kings in high school, and the group headed north for Pittsburgh after graduation, presumably sometime around 1955. There they found some success in nightclubs, even appearing once on television. Before long, however, three of the Kings were drafted into the military. Lynch, apparently able to escape this scourge of more than one generation of the predominately black laboring poor,[62] joined another group called the Mellowtones and decided to settle in Pittsburgh. He was on the move again by 1957, this time settling about three hundred miles straight west in Fort Wayne, Indiana. If he were planning on beginning a career as a traveling performer, Fort Wayne, roughly equidistant from Indianapolis, Toledo, Battle Creek, and Gary, would have provided a suitable home base. But the 1968 biography suggests that "there wasn't much going for him" in Fort Wayne and that he spent three forgettable years in "a spiritual group" known as the Angelic Harmonizers. In 1960—at about the time that Cosby, born a mere three months before Lynch into a Philadelphia housing project

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[60] Sidney Fine, *Violence in the Model City: The Cavanagh Administration, Race Relations, and the Detroit Riot of 1967* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2007).

[61] "Original 1968 Jimmy Lynch Write Up," uncredited, undated typescript, LVA. Taylor was a professional publicist and is credited with all of the credited writings published by La Val which I have seen; it seems safe to assume that he was the author of this biography. See also LVYT.

[62] Wallace Terry, *Bloods: Black Veterans of the Vietnam War: An Oral History* (New York: Random House, 1984). Milton J. Bates, *The Wars We Took to Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

nearly a thousand miles from Birmingham, was on a track scholarship at Temple University—Lynch "decided to go back to the night club as a single singer and dancer to deliver soul to the people." He began his journey in small clubs scattered across modestly sized Indiana towns. Evidently the only thing making these clubs appear as pieces of a "Chitlin Circuit" was the fact that performers like Lynch, and presumably a few audience members as well, moved between them. If Pryor's experience is any indication, Lynch may have believed that if he stayed in the Midwest he would either spend the rest of his career earning a difficult livelihood tramping out the routes he was already following or live to see those pathways be absorbed into some new geography.

The 1968 biography describes Lynch as reticent about recording his act. Taylor might have found materials for a persuasive argument in his own record-industry experience, garnered in part through a partnership beginning in the late fifties with his brother Brad Taylor (1915–1999), owner of the San Francisco based Bay-Tone Records (see Figure 4.1).[63] Certainly the Taylor-Lynch partnership benefited Lynch in at least one tangible way. The 1968 biography claims, "Jimmy has performed in the past two years from coast to coast and in Canada" with "great demand for his performance on the west coast [… and] mid-west […] now spreading nationwide." The story to be told from the promotional posters I have consulted, all featuring the La Val name, is a little more subdued: they advertise one performance each in Kalamazoo, Flint, Cleveland, and Hattiesburg (MS), all within Lynch's core region, and three shows in Oakland,

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[63] On Bay-Tone Records, see Opal Nations, "Bay-Tone Records: The Story of a Record Label," *Rock & Blues News* (February/March 1999), 9–13; ead., "Louis Madison: The Fleetingly Famous Flame," http://opalnations.com/files/Louis_Madison_Fabulous_Flames_Now_Dig_This_252_March_2004.pdf (accessed April 8, 2015).

Figure 4.1 The Taylor brothers with a Bay-Tone artist. Left to right: Brad Taylor, Alvin Thomas, Victor Taylor. "Brad Taylor and Vic La Val with Alvin Thomas of Romancers," digital file, LVA.

inside Brad Taylor's Bay Area.[64] It is possible that the posters document Lynch's travels only incompletely. Regardless, if the Oakland gigs—two in the summer of 1968, one in the summer of 1969—provided the occasion for a young man's first trips to the West Coast, Lynch could easily

[64] LVA and LVYT feature digital reproductions of posters for shows at: the National Guard Armory, Kalamazoo, MI (November 22, 1967), the Showcase Lounge, Oakland, CA (August 9–11, 1968), 5319 Grove Street (now M.L.K. Jr. Way), Oakland, CA (August 23–25, 1968); the Motor City Club, Flint, MI (October 18–20, 1968); the Showcase Lounge, Oakland, CA (May 30–June 1, 1969); the Coliseum Party Center in Cleveland, OH (December 21, 1969); and the Hi-Hat Club in Hattiesburg, MS (November 24th, 1971).

have had the feeling that his horizons were rapidly expanding. La Val Records and Productions helped structure the pathway that led him to a feature appearance in *The Human Tornado*, a film in which a group of young black men flee the deep south and seek out their associates in Los Angeles.

The development of the blue record as a genre might have looked different had La Val never intervened. Vincent Taylor, Victor's son and former accountant, remembers having received an entire shipment of unlabeled records in discrete, plain white covers to be stamped with the simple title *Eat Out More Often* and distributed across La Val's own network of distributors, "one stops" (small-scale distributors), independent record shops, "rack jobbers" (wholesalers who supply large retail outlets), and jukebox operators stretching from Lake Michigan down to Louisiana.[65] Evidently La Val had created a core market overlapping with the routes laboring black civilians and soldiers of Lynch's generation followed as they moved northward in the direction of a region which, by 1965, was already well on its way to becoming the nation's "rust belt."[66] Los Angeles provided Moore with the population density needed to support a modern nightclub scene, but an LP record needed a geography of a different sort: a distribution network. In an age of opaque transnational corporate structures and incredible fantasy-narratives about the World Wide Web as a space of immediate connection, it is easy to forget that in all cases, networks have to be laboriously built and maintained, no matter how

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[65] Vincent Taylor, conversation with the author, April 7, 2015. La Val's extensive networks, or substantial portions of them, are meticulously documented in three different folders, one each for "Wholesalers," "Clubs," and "Radio Stations" (LVA).

[66] Van der Wee, *Prosperity and Upheaval*, 250.

effectively capitalists hide the actual labor process from view.[67] Throughout the entire period discussed here, Taylor seems to have acted as the gatekeeper for a valuable, extensive, relatively anarchic network structured, from his perspective, by the paperwork stored in his office.[68]

In sum, exclusion was not giving way to inclusion so much as forms of interpolation were changing, comprehensively, yet not in any universally desirable way and not in the same ways for all involved. On his 1961 debut LP, *In Living Black and White* (Colpix CP 417), Dick Gregory observed white America's changing taste for black entertainment—their taste for Gregory himself as a "black Mort Sahl"—with an appropriately sardonic wariness: "The way things are going, ten years from now you'll have to be my color to get a job." Such a forecast

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[67] María Zuazu and I have argued that narratives of immediate connection on the internet seem unbelievable even to the people who narrate them. See David McCarthy and María Zuazu, "A Gaga-World Pageant: Channeling Difference and the Performance of Networked Power," in *The Oxford Handbook of Sound and Image in Digital Media*, ed. Carol Vernalis, Amy Herzog, and John Richardson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 535. Management, with good reason and every right, strives to keep actual labor processes hidden from view. Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1990), 279–280.

[68] On the anarchic as "without center," see Arrighi, *Long Twentieth Century*, 31–32. Taylor guarded a gateway stored in his own proverbial rolodex and grounded in his reputation as a reliable businessperson. But he did not occupy the position of "central management": any of the parties with whom he did business could have cut ties with him without necessarily losing their ties with other actors in his network, just as he was free to refuse service to any customer. Vincent Taylor tells a story about a distributor who failed to pay for a shipment. The distributor came back to Victor seeking a second shipment, and Victor said he wouldn't send more records without payment on the first invoice. The distributor sent a check and waited for the second shipment. When the check cleared, Victor got the distributor on the phone and put the conversation over the PA system at La Val's Burdick Street offices. He informed the distributor that he had decided not to send a second shipment of records, and the distributor responded with a torrent of profanities, to the unforgettable amusement of La Val employees. Vincent Taylor, conversation with the author, April 7, 2015. The story paints a loving portrait of a man whose combination of business savvy and facility with modern technologies allowed him to gain a favorable position, for the benefit of those closest to him, in a relatively flat network of independent actors. It therefore also illustrates the fact that "flat" networks are structured by power relations.

plays on its own absurdity while perhaps also mocking paranoiac white fantasies involving just such a takeover by a tiny, exploited, subjected minority. White audiences desired new forms of black involvement in white controlled circles, and Gregory had turned these changing desires to his own advantage. But the idea that delighted white audiences could or would eventually hand black performers a monopoly on jobs was silly. More importantly, if white audiences were in fact capable of wielding such power, benevolently or otherwise, that would be worse still. The joke indicates that in 1961 it felt as though white acceptance were expanding without approaching any sort of absolute openness. Gregory's place, for example, depended at least in part upon his intelligibility as a "black Mort Sahl."

Thus there is nothing surprising about the difficulty of finding a word for what Moore and Lynch were doing in the 1960s as opposed to in the 1970s. "In our previous notes found on the back of Mr. Moore's initial Kent Personality Series LP entitled 'THE BEATNIK SCENE,'" say the 1964 notes to *Comedian Is Born*, "we stated that [Moore] was not the male version of Moms Mabley, nor was he the threat to Dick Gregory, two of the foremost recording comedians of the era"—one year after Cosby's Warner debut, two years back already seemed like a bygone era! "RUDY RAY MOORE is not satisfied just being an accepted funny man or comedian, content to record saleable albums and accept bookings into night clubs throughout the country," the notes continue. "[His] talents won't allow him to follow the aforementioned route." What route Moore planned to follow, however, is not clear.

> He's alive with drive and ingenuity, and he wants the whole wide world to know it; so he applies himself in related fields of endeavor… results being that Mr. Moore is a comic,

> choreographer, dancer, producer, talent coordinator, and, too, a vocalist, as you, the listener of this LP, will discover.[69]

Both these notes and the 1968 biography leave the impression that revue performers like Moore and Lynch found no way down any "aforementioned route" at all. The long lists of vocations—actor, bandleader, choreographer, comic, dancer, drummer, emcee, impersonator, producer, singer, talent coordinator—are delightfully boastful. They might also be empirical. If a single performer constituted the better part of an entire evening's entertainment in a smaller city like Battle Creek,[70] club owners and patrons would have expected each performer to play many roles. The lists of vocations make an extraordinary claim. These performers do not appear as big fish in little ponds. What they "do for self" makes them too big to find a suitable place anywhere in the world as they find it. Small wonder that they stayed in motion.

4.2 Listening for language and the making of the blue record as genre

There is a sense in which Nichols and May's audience was able to listen in the way that it listened; no one was listening over its shoulder. Even the critics who placed the duo beneath "the theatre" did not portray them or their audience as members of a separate social class. On the

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[69] Lanier, liner notes.

[70] The advertisement for a live "Recording Session at El Grotto" refers to no opening acts. It does, however, indicate that the event was scheduled to last from 6:00 to 10:00 pm, leaving several hours for activities which did not appear on *Volume 1*. The Soul Twisters may have performed a set, and other unadvertised performers, perhaps a local act, may have appeared. It is also conceivable that Taylor set aside some time to give the audience instructions or to record multiple takes of crucial events, such as the emcee's introduction. Furthermore, there are places on *Volume 1* where the recording seems to have been abridged. A four-hour performance seems doubtful, but on the basis of my sources it is impossible to say how Lynch and his associates used the time.

contrary, it was precisely because they belonged to middle-class society that their bad taste appeared as a worrisome threat.

Jimmy Lynch raises a different set of problems. When Mr. Vic writes, "This LP contains some of the common words used by the common people every day and we do not intend for them to be obscene in any way," we are obliged to ask: to whom is such a statement directed? Not to a member of some self-contained "common people" unaware of its status as a subjected people. The reader would need to somehow already know that the common people speak in a field where their "common words" can be heard as "obscene." Lynch's audience cannot be named at all without referring to its exclusion from middle-class society. All of the terms used without the aid of scare quotes in Baraka's *Blues People* refer to that relationship: "non-middle-class," "poorer Negroes," "deepest blacks of Southern Negro culture," "the rest of the Negroes living in the U.S."[71] It is one thing for Mr. Vic to make a defiant claim about intentions; it is something else for a subjected minority to contest the capacity of a dominant majority to decide in advance what can and cannot be intended. We are dealing with a fractured observer, an observer who is able to say "we do not intend" only while remaining obliged to make this claim out loud. It would be unjust to merely take Mr. Vic at his word: the word "obscene" is not necessarily his word to begin with, leastwise not in any simplistic sense; he only uses it at all by way of negation. When we think of the obscene not in the moral sense referred to by Mr. Vic, the sense of the "obscene" as "bad," but in the term's spatial sense—the "ob-scene" as "out of place"—we find that Mr. Vic's best intentions have little say. The question is not, "is" *Volume 1*

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[71] Baraka, *Blues People*, 41, 114, 128, 135, 136. All the terms Baraka places in scare quotes either obscure the relationship between middle and non-middle classes—as with "impoverished masses" (125), "Southerners" (126), and "low-type coons" (142)—or make that relationship sound fixed around an abstract standard, as in "lower-classed Negroes" (132).

obscene?—in which case the answer would be "yes, certainly"—but rather, what was *Volume 1* doing in a scene that it was not fully able to establish for itself? What might obscene words have accomplished as "common words?"

The interpolation of *Volume 1* into the blue record as genre seems to have been accomplished by means of a particular way of listening to language. Lynch's recollection of a 1961 recording date, cited in the introduction to this chapter, was complemented by his reported claim that *Volume 1* was the first album ever to use the word "fuck" without a musical accompaniment.[72] Such a remark seems almost anxious to establish the album's extra-musical character. Similarly, the very same author who, in my epigraph, described Lynch's records as "poorly recorded" also wrote in another place, "Perhaps some day critics may dig these records up and decide that Lynch, and others like him, have created evocative ethnic comedy even more scintillating than the work of Eddie Murphy or Lord Buckley, and that the use of language here is a kind of poetry."[73] Despite their otherwise divergent attitudes, Ronald L. Smith and his hypothetical future "critics" share a common logic. Smith's "critics" appear to have more liberal tastes than Smith himself to the extent that they are willing, for the sake of recovering the expression of an "ethnic" other, to listen past the noise on a poorly recorded album, to dig their way down toward an essential content—in this case, to "curse words" made legible as "language" and "poetry." As if they were that much more "progressive," they occupy a future. Yet neither Smith nor his critics question the idea that *Volume 1* is poorly recorded and that a listener can strip away its poorly-recordedness—a term I use to refer both to the state of being

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[72] "Rudy Ray Moore Official Website."

[73] Ronald L. Smith, *Comedy on Record: The Complete Critical Discography* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1988), 388 (emphasis mine).

poorly recorded and to the aggregate of sounds characterizing that state—as noisy excess surrounding an essential linguistic content ("nothing but curse words"). Someone might object that this commonality is due to Smith's own lack of imagination—Smith himself hypothesizes his critics into being. But the making of the blue record as a genre evidently encouraged a mode of perception which can be formally related to those of both Smith and his hypothetical critics. Lynch spoke to something like that mode of perception when he boasted about saying "fuck." The liner notes to *Eat Out More Often* open with a dramatic apposition: "Rudy Ray Moore, the world's first comedian to take a bold approach at comedy using the many expressions of the ghetto in great monologues, thus making these expressions a form of art." Lynch, Smith, Smith's hypothetical critics, and the author of the *Eat Out More Often* liner notes, Wayne Boykin, all seem to agree that an ethnic language—the expressions of the ghetto—might be used to elevate the contents of a blue record to a higher status.

There are, however, important differences between Boykin's argument and the one made by Smith's hypothetical critics. The form of the apposition—"Rudy Ray Moore, the world's first"—heightens the style of Boykin's initial pronouncement: it places Moore in a dramatic center with his acclamatory title spreading out beneath him. Whereas for Smith's critics, the mere "use of language" simply "is," as if automatically, "a kind of poetry" waiting to be redeemed as such by the critics themselves, for Boykin, "the many expressions of the ghetto" are such, but when they are used "in great monologues," they are also elevated to the status of "art." Lynch's only possible greatness for Smith's critics resides in the "scintillating" character of his comedy. Boykin's description of Moore's monologues unfolds with an alacritous variety: "The Great Titanic" tells "a tale about the great shipwreck during the turn of the century"; "Pimpin'

Sam […] gives you a very good picture of one of the forms of night life around the world today"; and the album's opening track is said to have been "delivered" with such "dynamics" that Boykin can say with confidence, "I'm sure you'll place it among your favorite monologues." All of this—including a quotation from Moore himself: "All my jive is original, Jack,/ If you hear it somewhere else,/ Somebody's a copy cat"—is stated in less than two hundred words. Boykin cheers, "Do your thing, Mr. Moore." Smith's hypothetical critics rescue Lynch from their own moral order by interpolating him into two established categories: that of "scintillating" comedians and that of an "ethnic" other. Boykin similarly grounds Moore in "the ghetto." But he also locates Moore's greatness in his own particularity as made visible in and through a universal context. Hearing his greatness requires an ear for narrative, form, and dynamic delivery open to hear monologues from all around the world. Rudy Ray Moore: the world's first.

Boykin apparently struggled to make his claims using a set of terms and rhetorical forms which may not have been entirely his own. There is a palpable incongruity—a charming incongruity lending the notes their verve, but an incongruity nonetheless—between the way Boykin frames his claims about an originality grounded in the ghetto and the way in which he refers to a universal backdrop made up of forms from all around the world, or between his dramatic opening apposition and the subdued statement which follows: "I think Mr. Moore is to be commended for his presentation of this first album." Signs of an ongoing struggle to find a satisfactory way of interpolating low comedy into a larger order can still be detected even here, in 1970. But wasn't this struggle being resolved in a particular direction? Could the satisfactory interpolation have been judged satisfactory without having been judged as such in and through the classificatory schemes of whiter professionals?

4.2.1 *Volume 1* and the later blue record

The interpolation of *Volume 1* into the blue record as genre by means of a rhetoric of "language" and "expression" was not easily accomplished, as is evident from La Val's attempt during the early 1970s to capitalize on the new vogue for blue records. An insert found in Lynch's *Funky... & Funny: Tramp Time Volume 4* (La Val LVP 905, early to mid-1970s) establishes a six-item collection, one which collectors could complete for themselves at a savings of $2.00 per record: four volumes of *Tramp Time*, Al Sparks's *I Heard It at the Barber Shop!*, and blues singer Chick Willis's "shag record" *Stoop Down Baby ... Let Your Daddy See* ("One and one is two./ Three and three is six./ I ain't so good looking,/ but I gotta *long* time to live").[74] One of these things is not like the others (see Figure 4.2).

The album covers alone—indeed, the album covers as poorly reproduced on a black and white insert printed on orange paper alone—make the incongruity apparent. Five of them are uproariously crowded, usually with multiple persons and props, always with varied fonts arranged in bending, winding, or diagonal lines. *Volume 1* is sparse. Its horizontal lines of letters, all written with the same square font in barely three different sizes, and the oblong, full-length, grainy, black and white photo of that solitary figure with a hobo bag slung over his shoulder appear to have been dropped into what otherwise remains uninterrupted white space. *Volume 4* is the only other cover to feature the lone figure against a white backdrop, and the spirit of that image is completely different. Each unit of textual information appears in a different font, the white space is interrupted, and the Tramp, dressed in some kind of messy tarp with an angrily

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[74] On Chick Willis (1934–2013), rock & roll legend Chuck Willis's cousin, see Opal Louis Nations, "Chick Willis: Before 'Stooping Down': The Early Years," *Blues & Rhythm* 215 (Christmas 2006), 10–13; Chick Willis and Brett J. Bonner, "Chick Willis: Stoop Down," *Living Blues* 147 (September/October 1999), 22–31.

Figure 4.2 Insert from *Tramp Time Volume 4* (early 1970s).

distended cigar hanging morbidly from his jaw down to his neck, appears from the belly up, filling most of the image himself.

The difference would have been even more conspicuous for collectors with all six LPs already at home. Five of the covers are stunningly colorful. What in the black and white

reproduction looks like a relatively tame *Volume 4* is in fact a sea of purple, red, teal, pink, salmon, yellow, rust, maroon, magenta, and at least four different shades of green all shimmering into one another in the Tramp's jacket and hat, as if these had been woven from the scales of some funky sea creature. Neither of the two printings of *Volume 1*—one in black and white with the price printed only on the back, the other, reproduced on the black and white insert, in harlequin green and white with the price printed on the front cover—is nearly so colorful. If the black and white cover is the original 1967 edition (I will explain below why I believe that it is), then the harlequin green edition would have appeared as a last ditch attempt to bring the 1967 Tramp into a newer color scheme. Either way, the shift is abrupt: if the Tramp and his three fawning young female companions were not fully clothed, *Volume Two* could almost pass as a post-1970 Rudy Ray Moore album;[75] with or without harlequin green, *Volume 1* could not.

The strongest evidence that the black and white edition was released before the one in harlequin queen is found in the two different portraits featured on their respective back covers. Lynch wears a cardigan sweater in the one, a Nehru collar in the other: of the La Val posters I consulted, all those promoting shows scheduled through the fall of 1968 feature the cardigan sweater, whereas those promoting shows from the spring of 1969 onward feature the Nehru

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[75] I have in mind especially the cover of *'This Pussy Belongs to Me'* with Moore and three women, all naked, sitting on a tiger skin.

collar.[76] An earlier *Volume 1* with Lynch in a cardigan sweater would only have added depth to the distinction I have already made. The cardigan portrait gives Lynch another face, one in sharp contrast to his Funky Tramp persona and one which could easily be read as a portrait of a young middle-class black man. Its collegial quality conrasts with the spirit of the Tramp's bit about an "eddycadid" black man to be discussed in section 4.3. By contrast, the Nehru jacket, along with the gaudy medallion Lynch wears in that portrait, unerringly locates the performer within a hip counterculture. The earlier portrait, if it is such, remains relatively unmarked. It is an image of a black man, but of a black man who dresses the part of an American in photo shoots outside his staged performances. The later portrait, if it is such, instead gives Lynch a distinctive, countercultural place in contemporary life: the outfit is more stylized, modeled after an "outsider" fashion.

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[76] Lynch wears his cardigan sweater in posters for shows at the National Guard Armory, Kalamazoo, MI (November 22, 1967), the Showcase Lounge, Oakland, CA (August 9–11, 1968), 5319 Grove Street (now M.L.K. Jr. Way), Oakland, CA (August 23–25, 1968), and the Motor City Club, Flint, MI (October 18–20, 1968). He wears a Nehru collar in posters for shows at the Showcase Lounge, Oakland, CA (May 30–June 1, 1969), the Coliseum Party Center in Cleveland, OH (December 21, 1969), and the Hi-Hat Club in Hattiesburg, MS (November 24th, 1971). LVA; LVYT. It is possible that La Val used the Nehru collar portrait in the later posters but in the earlier edition of *Volume 1*, but it is reasonable to narrow our focus to the historical possibilities grounded in an earlier cardigan sweater and a later Nehru collar. The remaining evidence is equally circumstantial, but convincing in the aggregate. Like the later La Val albums by Al Sparks and Jimmy Lynch, but unlike the black and white *Volume 1*, the cover of the harlequin green edition is printed with both a price and a disclaimer: "LAW FORBIDS THIS RECORD BEING SOLD TO MINORS OR BEING SOLD UNSEALED." It is hard to believe that the statement was excised from the later edition yet appended to all the later La Val albums. The disclaimer appears more as an advertisement, one which locates *Volume 1* within a genre of "adult" party records. The black-and-white edition is exceptional in the LVP-900 series in that its price is printed on the back cover. But both editions of LVP-901 are marked as $5.95, suggesting that the one was released only shortly after the other. Furthermore, the LVA collection I consulted includes a sizable stack of the harlequin green editions, but, as far as I could see, only one copy of the black and white edition. This would make sense if the black and white edition had been the smaller, earlier release replaced by a later edition which never sold out.

The advertised contents of the albums can be read for an equally apparent difference in tone. Here, chronologically, are the seven titles listed under volumes two through four:

THAT BIG DICK SISSY
SPORT YOU BLACK SPORT S.O.B.
APRIL FOOL MOTHER FUCKER
PEACH-PUSS-SAY
ALLIGATORS EATING NIGGER
DADDY AIN'T GONNA GET NO PUSSY
WOMAN SITTING ON A DICK

The titles become increasingly graphic as we proceed on down the list (cp. the noun phrases in "BIG DICK SISSY" or "SPORT YOU BLACK SPORT S.O.B." with the use of gerunds in "WOMAN SITTING ON A DICK" and "ALLIGATORS EATING NIGGER"). Although only one appears in Carlin's "Seven Dirty Words"—perhaps the vulgarity Carlin helped to produce as a white man with extensive experience in network television was more an artifact of opposition to bureaucratic regulation than was the vulgarity produced by La Val, grounded as it was in the geographies of racial segregation—DICK, SISSY, S.O.B., FUCKER, NIGGER, PUSSY, and presumably also PEACH-PUSS-SAY are all institutionally regulated. If we had to try our best to get one title past a censor, we would skip over all of these and choose the only one listed under *Volume 1*: "Where the TRAMP ..... SOCKS IT TO THE GORILLA!"

Volume 1 tends less than the other titles toward the recreational or the commercial than the folkloric. It resembles a classic 1960 compilation album produced by a white man named Robert "Mack" McCormick (1930–2015) entitled *The Unexpurgated Folk Songs of Men*. That earlier album was sold in an unmarked white cover with the track titles listed only on the disc

labels.[77] The performers and the record label were not identified (the label simply reads *UFSOM*), and a fourteen-page booklet adorned in plain black letters in horizontal lines provided commentary alongside a disclaimer stating that the recorded material had been collected for scholarly purposes. McCormick sought protection from the real threat of obscenity charges as a scholar. But whereas McCormick could set himself up as an impartial collector of folksongs, Lynch, with Taylor's aid, was in the process of archiving his own self. The record is described as intended "for personal and party use," not scholarly use; the packaging of *Volume 1*, adorned with a melancholic photograph of the Tramp, is not a transparent container for self-contained content to be used with the detachment of a scholar. If Lynch's *Volume 1* is marked by a feeling of loss, that feeling seems personal, not merely antiquarian or folkloric: it seems like both an archived record of a vanishing world and a sober attempt to establish a new collection and a new field of observers for itself. In 1967, Lynch was living in what might have already begun to feel like the past—he later remembered it as a more distant past than it could have been in calendrical time. Lynch and his producers were reckoning as archivists with Lynch's own vanishing even as they produced a new commercial form.

4.2.2 Obscenity's functions

The later LPs, at least as far as they appear in the *Volume 4* insert, are more colorful and graphic. This does not mean that *Volume 1* is any less "vulgar" or any more "clean" than its successors, any less likely to be heard as "obscene." The advertised "gorilla" bit on *Volume 1* involves a group of white circus managers—one of whom speaks in what could easily pass as a

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[77] "Various – The Unexpurgated Folk Songs of Men," http://www.discogs.com/Various-The-Unexpurgated-Folk-Songs-Of-Men/release/2715884 (accessed March 20, 2015).

Truman Capote impersonation[78]—who spend an entire day driving all over town "looking and looking and looking and looking and looking and looking" for someone to "mate" with their sexually frustrated female gorilla. "So on their way back, they drove through the colored section of town, down near skid row. And the proprietor say, 'I'd like to have a beer'—he didn't know where he was. So they got out and went in this colored tavern." There they met "one of us c-c-c-colored boys" drinking and bellowing, "My name is Tommy Wang and I can do it to any god-dog thang!" It takes some convincing, but Tommy Wang ultimately agrees "to do it to it" for one thousand dollars, although he stops counting out his payment at ten when he discovers with astonishment that there is "as much a money as I got on my fingers!" The triumphant punchline comes when Tommy Wang and the gorilla, locked in the throws of passion, become so amorous that he asks to have her steel muzzle removed so that the new couple can kiss. Love triumphs over all. I know of nothing on any of the later blue records which would exceed this bit in terms of the sheer lewdness of the scenario, the heinousness of the racist stereotypes being referenced,

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[78] Capote may have been Lynch's referent. The writer was at the height of his celebrity in 1966 with the publication of *In Cold Blood* and the celebrated Black and White Ball, and he narrated an adaptation of his own "A Christmas Memory" for *ABC Stage 67* in December of that year. Either way, Lynch is apparently performing a whiteness structured as effeminate. I therefore can't neglect to point out that this gendered structure tends to cast gayness as effeminate and as a white malady. This is especially notable in *The Human Tornado*, where Dolemite and his crew make no secret of the fact that they find the gay white man they kidnapped insufferable. However, it is also important to remember that nothing about the Dolemite pictures or Lynch's LPs suggests that what we are hearing and seeing is something that "is" or that "should be." If rumors that Moore was gay are true, it would seem that the prejudiced behavior of Dolemite and his associates could be part of a performance of a masculinity that was somehow desirable at the level of fantasy without being perceived as being in anyone's interests in actuality. The Dolemite movies establish a world of fantasy desire; they do not establish an actual goal for a political program. Furthermore, since there are many different ways of being "gay," if Moore can be read as mocking a particular form of gay behavior, it does not follow that he was mocking gay men in general. On rumors about Moore's sexuality, see Keenan Higgins, "New Doc Reveals Details of 'Dolemite' Actor Rudy Ray Moore's Sexuality," http://www.vibe.com/2012/11/new-doc-reveals-details-dolemite-actor-rudy-ray-moores-sexuality/ (accessed April 8, 2015).

and the graphicness of the imagery—"boy, when he dropped down that third leg," quips the Tramp.

Yet what predominates throughout this scene is not shock value at all but rather an incongruous coupling of the grotesquely ludicrous scenario and the quaint boyishness of the dirty words and phrases—"god-dog," "third leg," "do it to it." The routine is so obscene, so permanently out of place, that the relatively innocent aspects come across as all the more absurd. Tommy Wang minces his curse words and concludes the scene with a relatively innocent symbol of love, the triumphant Hollywood kiss. This is a domain of impossible desire where the storyteller prizes less the obscenity of obscenity than the absurdity of the obscene, a world where the "boy" can love a gorilla in much the same way a child might. Astonishingly, there is something almost wholesome about the bit. What makes this domain thrilling, rather than sentimental, is that it makes for a repulsive world of desire. This is a large part of what makes the bit seem wholesome: if there is an overturning of a moral order in this scene, basic standards of decency are never in question—the bit is not subversive in that sense. This production of the thrilling works in at least two ways. First, instead of finding a way out of the horrible job the white men have assigned him, Tommy Wang beats his employers by enjoying his work, an impossible yet weirdly desirable outcome. That this triumph necessarily provokes as much horror in the white employers as it would in anyone else is only part of what makes it so desirable. The lowly colored boy, Tommy Wang, falls in love, disturbs his employers, and manages to get paid somewhere between ten and a thousand dollars to do it. Second, Tommy Wang triumphs precisely as a "boy" still capable of anthropomorphizing cuddly animals. This term, "boy," is arguably the most vicious racist epithet used by white men in

Rudy Ray Moore's first two films, *Dolemite* (1975) and *The Human Tornado* (1976).[79] Baraka had bitterly remarked in 1963 that "the 'childlike' qualities of the African must have always been amusing to the American."[80] Lynch's use of childlike innocence in a spectacle of grotesque horror is brilliant: in an impossible reversal, the treatment of men as boys becomes an abomination for the exploiter, a desirable condition for the exploited. What is especially crucial to the interpretation I will elaborate in section 3.3 is that this condition only becomes desirable because of what Tommy Wang himself actually does in and through it. The abhorrent conditions are overturned by the obscene spectacle they stage.[81] No one could do what Tommy Wang does in real life; his is a fantasy triumph. And it is as fantasy that observers can share in that triumph.

Of all the titles found in the *Volume 4* insert, the title listed under *Volume 1* is by far the most euphemistic: its referent is exceptionally obscene yet its reference is exceptionally indirect ("Where the TRAMP ..... SOCKS IT TO THE GORILLA!"). The insert fails to cover over a difference, not a difference between the more and less vulgar, but between the obscene as obscene and the obscene as absurd, between obscene words as proof of their own obscenity and the obscene center to an absurd game. In the case of *Volume 1*, obscenity is often presented indirectly or euphemistically, not out of modesty, but out of playfulness. By contrast, obscenity

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[79] In *The Human Tornado*, when Dolemite seduces a villain's "girl," she experiences delirious fantasies where she appears in a playground full of oversized children's toys and four doll-like black men. In this narrative, it is not just the hostile white men but also the lustful white women who regard black men as less than men; this prejudice provides the condition for the sexual exploits of four black men, but it would be ridiculous to suggest that these exploits are portrayed without a marked ambivalence.

[80] Baraka, *Blues People*, 83.

[81] My reader will recall, from a footnote in the introduction to this dissertation, that this is roughly the narrative Malcolm X used when he described the worst conditions in the South as the best conditions for revolt. Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, with Alex Haley (New York: Ballantine Books, 2015 [1965]), 276, 381.

in the *Volume 4* insert has been displayed on a stylized, immediately recognizable surface. The collection is advertised as purple. The cover of *Volume 1*, by contrast, is sparse enough that it provides only a few clues about a performance which, in any case, you would really have to see to appreciate.

4.3 Surface and depth

Spoken routines, each culminating in a brief moment of song, comprise the bulk of *Tramp Time Volume 1*. A backing band elsewhere identified as "the Soul Twisters" plays continuously during these routines,[82] either accompanying moments of song or vamping on an ostinato derived from "Tramp," the Fulson and McCracklin song featured in the Tramp's first moment of song. The emcee, the audience, and Lynch all speak in the form of measured "breaks"

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[82] "Recording Session at El Grotto." Another band named the Soul Twisters recorded a pair of 45s on Romat in 1967, and it was presumably for this reason that the band heard on *Volume 1* also went by the name of the Soul Sockers. Three contracts made between the "Soul Twisters or Soul Sockers" and La Val in 1967—on September 13, September 18, and October 1—are archived in a folder labeled "Soul Twister" (LVA). From these it can be seen that the leader of the group was Willie "Pooch" Johnson (1937–2010), later a professional blues musician based out of Columbus, OH (see T.C. Brown, "Willie Pooch 1937–2010," *Columbus Monthly*, May 2010). One of the contracts (October 1) is a standard "A.F.M. [American Federation of Musicians] Exclusive Agent-Musician Agreement" lasting from October 1, 1967 to October 1, 1970. The other two are for briefer engagements. The September 13 contract, a Columbus Federation of Musicians contract, is the most detailed. It puts the ensemble in the Club Lou-Villian at 2210 W. Broadway in Louisville, KY from September 18 to September 24, 9:00–2:00 am nightly, at a "Wage" of $750, with the "Vocalist" Jimmy Lynch "included in price." Payment was to be made in the sum of $4,750 "by midweek draw and balance ending each week," with the "Employer" (Lou Villian c/o Betty Gross) withholding 10% for the Agent (La Val) each week. This would seem to indicate that the group was paid $675 a night for seven nights with the total ($4,725) rounded up to $4,750 and with the first payment made at midweek. The September 18 contract names Willie Johnson as the "Orchestra leader" and Jimmy Lynch as the "Professional Name." The same folder also includes undated advertisements for "Roland Mitchell and the Soul Twisters" at the Shasta Lodge No. 254 on 901 Divisadero Street in San Francisco and for "The Soul Twisters" at Long Island on 4546 Third Street in San Francisco.

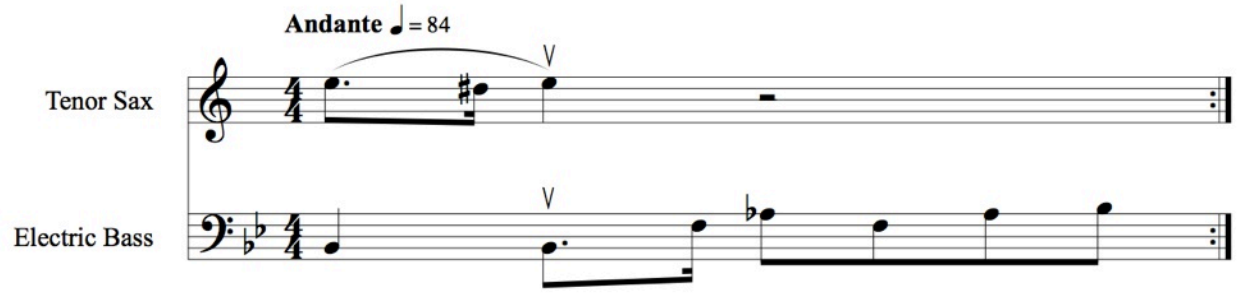

Figure 4.3 Ostinato from *Tramp Time Volume 1* (La Val LVP 901, 1967).

or "small solo-like statements" (Baraka's phrase) interpolated into the gaps, also called "breaks," where the saxophone rests and the texture of the ostinato thins (see Figure 4.3).[83] Performing "in the breaks" is typical of the vast field of practices Baraka calls "Negro music" or "blues."[84] In Table 4.1, textural openings (breaks) are numbered in the first column and solo-like statements (breaks) are transcribed in the fourth column. The ostinato's breaks are spacious: the Soul Twisters play at a slower tempo between upbeat moments of song, and the saxophone, with its clipped second beat, takes up only a little more than one of the measure's four beats. Occasionally one of Lynch's breaks overlaps with the beginning of a new statement of the ostinato, as for example in the spelling of "eddycadid" discussed in section 4.3.1. But there is rarely any ambiguity regarding the correspondence between each break and its break. In this respect, phrasing on *Volume 1* appears regular at a deep analytic level; by transcribing breaks as lines in verse—separating them with slashes or placing them on consecutive lines of text—I have made this deep level visible.

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[83] The double usage of the term "break" is Baraka's. See *Blues People*, 70, 156.

[84] Ibid., passim.

Table 4.1 The opening routine on Jimmy Lynch's *Tramp Time Volume 1* (La Val LVP 901).

The letters O, E, R, and D refer to the microphonic dimension:

O = overblown (the speaker is so close to the microphone that the tympanic membrane's vibrations are distorted)
E = even (the speaker appears where neither microphonic distortion nor spatial reverb are prominent)
R = reverberant (the speaker is far enough away that the room's reverb can be heard prominently)
D = distant (the speaker is heard in the distance)

A dash (-) between letters indicates that the voice moves between positions during the utterance.
A slash (/) between letters indicates that the utterance is spoken roughly between two positions.

Break	Phrase	Harm.	Break
i	a1	I	(E) Ladies and gentlemen, I don't know what this is coming down through the audience
ii	a2	”	with all those bad looking clothes on and that
iii	a3	”	oversized hat and raggedy clothes and all this sort of thing.
iv	a4	”	What look like, just came out of the basement.
v	b1	”	Oh, I forgot, ladies and gentleman. We have the star of the show this evening
vi	b2	”	The one and only:
vii	b3	”	Jimmy Lynch.
viii	b4	”	Well this evening, ladies and gentlemen, he look like he *been* Lynched.
ix	c1	”	He's coming out, ladies and gentlemen.
x	c2	”	The one and only, The Tramp.
xi	c3	”	
xii	c4	(a one-beat rhythmic reset on a I chord can be heard in the place of this measure)	
1	A1	(I)	
2	A2	”	
3	A3	”	(electric guitar doubles bass, D)
4	A4	”	
5	B1	”	(man, D) Tramp!
6	B2	”	Hey Tramp!
7	B3	”	Tramp!
8	B4	”	Tramp!
9	C1	”	
10	C2	”	(Tramp, O) What did you call me? (Man, D) 'Tramp'
11	C3	”	(Tramp, E) You just a damn lie, I ain't no tramp
12	C4	”	
13	D1	”	(E-R) I'm wearing the mod look, momma. Can you dig it?
14	D2	”	
15	D3	”	(E) And this fool back here got the nerve to call me a tramp
16	D4	”	
17	E1	”	(E) You ain't hip, baby.
18	E2	(I)	This is the mod look.
19	E3	”	(Woman, D) I'll look for it.
20	E4	”	(Tramp, E) Tramp!
21	F1	”	You can call me that!
22	F2	”	
23	F3	”	(E-R) I don't wear continental clothes.
24	F4	”	(E) That damn shit too tight anyhow.
25	G1	”	
26	G2	”	(E) I don't wear a Stetson hat.

Table 4.1 (continued)

Break	Phrase	Harm.	Break
27	G3	”	(E-R) Ain’t got enough brim on it baby
28	G4	”	
29	H1	”	(E) Don’t wear no Stetson shoes either
30	H2	”	(Woman, D) Why? (Tramp, R) They hurt my roasting heels,
31	H3	”	better known as corns.
32	H4	”	
33	I1	”	(E) But just because I wear the mod look,
34	I2	”	(R) don’t you think that I ain’t hip momma.
35	I3	”	(O) I is done been to college.
36	I4	”	
37	J1	”	(O/E) And I am somewhat eddycadid.
38	J2	”	(E) Yes I are.
39	J3	”	(R-E) You want me to spell eddycadid, I know:
40	J4	”	(E/O) E-D-D-Y-C-A-D-I-D.
41	K1	”	(E) Eddycadid.
42	K2	”	Now that’s right
43	K3	”	(E/O) Four long years I went to college
44	K4	”	(R) To get my eddycation.
45	L1	”	
46	L2	”	(E) Don’t be laughing at me. I got my degree, baby.
47	L3	”	I got my B.S.,
48	L4	”	my bullshitting degree!
49	M1	(I)	And I wanna tell everybody!
50	M2	”	(R/E) Don’t worry about me
51	M3	”	(E) I belong to a sorority club too, can you dig it?
52	M4	”	
53	N1	”	(E/O) I belong to the U.H.A.
54	N2	”	(E) United Hustlers Association
55	N3	”	
56	N4	”	But before I go too far, I wanna tell all you ladies
57	1	”	What I really are.
58	2	”	(E, Tramp sings) I’m a lover! (accelerando into first moment of song)
59	1	IV	
60	2	”	My momma was
61	1	I	My great granddaddy was,
62	2	”	and the one before him was,
63	3	”	and the one before him was.
64	O1	”	So why can’t I
65	O2	”	got to be like my daddy,
66	O3	”	got to be like my momma,
67	O4	”	got to be like my daddy?
68	1	”	Wow!
69	2	”	(sax attack) (Tramp) Wow!
70	3	”	
71	P1	V	(O) I’m the only child.
72	P2	IV	(E) Love is all I know how to do.
73	P3	I	Wow!
74	P4	”	(lentando) (Lynch returns to speaking) Let me tell you something:

The interplay between a spoken surface and a deep musical structure determined by sequential breaks can be taken as one of several illustrations of what I will be describing as an interplay between or dialectic of surface and depth. I speak of a "dialectic" because the surfaces and depths I will describe all involve one another: the surface of a routine, for example, appears irregular, but only in relation to a regular structure of breaks beyond that surface. My central contention is that the earlier or blacker way of listening alluded to above listened for something like this dialectic of surface and depth. Here as always, a distinction must be drawn between original experiences and knowledge of those experiences. The term "dialectic of surface and depth" describes a phenomenon observers might have experienced. Referring to a dialectic of surface and depth not only allows me to make sense of numerous aspects of *Volume 1* but also provides a single point of reference as I attempt to draw connections between extremely varied socio-cultural activities. If motion is the central motif of *Tramp Time*, as I have already begun to argue, a dialectic of surface and depth can be used to describe the peculiarities of a figure's motion across its particular ground.

The obverse point—that at least some whiter observers have watched for pure surface—can quickly be demonstrated. "When he bothers to tell a joke," Ronald L. Smith complains, "Lynch usually pads it to run four or five minutes."[85] In point of fact, to take the excerpt transcribed as Table 4.1 as an illustration, only about two-and-a-half minutes elapse from the time Lynch first speaks (break 10) to the time he concludes his opening routine with a song (breaks 58–74), and that brief period is filled with numerous jokes in rapid succession. But Smith was not alone in feeling that there was a problem with Lynch's temporal unfolding. "My father

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[85] Smith, *Goldmine*, 216.

and Jimmy didn't always see eye to eye on his career," Victor Taylor's son, Tico Taylor, later recalled. "Jimmy wanted to be a singer, but he was better at telling jokes. He would break up his routine after a joke with a song and dance. People just wanted to hear jokes when he came out and his singing broke the momentum as far as my father was concerned."[86] Whether or not Tico's comments accurately portray his father's sensibility, the fact that Tico can make these comments tells us for certain that such a sensibility was imaginable for at least one person within the field of observers gathered around Lynch's debut LP (Tico). Both Smith and Tico Taylor, each for his own reasons and by reference to his own experiences, see Lynch failing to place one joke shortly after the last. For Smith, padding creates insufferably long periods. For Tico Taylor's Victor, intermittent songs disrupt the momentum. The song anticipated by Lynch's entire opening routine is somehow supposed to break rather than produce Lynch's peculiar momentum.

Such a listening seems worse than inadequate from the standpoint of anyone who can feel the peculiar anticipation characterizing Lynch's performance. The whiter and blacker ways of listening I will be describing are not merely different ways of listening, each one valid in its own way. A listener focused on pure surface will not be able to appreciate what *Volume 1* has to offer. The whiter way of listening is an inferior way of listening not because of what it indexes (e.g., whiteness), but because of what it actually does. In the Conclusion of this dissertation, I will return to ask why whiter professionals have adopted such a degraded way of listening. For now the more important task is to learn a better way of listening.

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[86] Quoted in Bernard-Hollins, *Here I Stand*, 75.

4.3.1 Surface and depth in metrical and microphonic practice

Table 4.1 transcribes and analyzes eighty-six consecutive measures comprised of eighty-five breaks and a one-beat measure numbered as break xii. It begins with the album's first complete statement of the ostinato and ends with a loose adaptation of the song "Tramp." The letters O, E, R, and D refer to general areas in the microphonic dimension.[87] O (overblown) indicates that the speaker is close enough to the microphone to cause distortion; E (even) that the speaker is at a distance where neither microphonic distortion nor spatial reverb are prominent; R (reverberant) that the speaker is close enough to be heard in the microphone's head space yet far enough away that the room's reverb sounds prominently in the mix; and D that the speaker can be heard only in the distance. A dash (-) between two of these letters indicates that a voice moves from the first position to the second over the course of a single break, a slash (/) that a break appears roughly between two positions. I am supplying transcriptions, not transductions, and so even when I refer to Table 4.1, my reference may not always perfectly agree with it. By using a dialectic of surface and depth to draw an analogy between metrical and microphonic practice on *Volume 1*, this subsection (4.3.1) orients my reader to the general shape of my argument.

About three minutes into *Volume 1*, one minute after Lynch's voice is heard for the first time, the Funky Tramp sets aside a reasoned defense of his "raggedy mod look"—"I don't wear a Stetson hat;/ ain't got enough brim on it, baby"—and begins discussing scholastic matters (breaks 33–34). "Don't you think that I ain't hip, momma," he cautions. Lynch speaks this transitional line at a distance from the microphone (R) where his voice appears shrouded in the

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[87] No matter how many microphones are actually involved in production, a monophonic album like *Volume 1* is heard as if through only one microphone. I will thus speak of "the microphone," despite the fact that the producers of *Volume 1* must have used a microphone array involving at least two microphones.

reverberant room where he speaks. That room is crowded with anonymous voices: an emcee, a motley audience, and a backing band with a saxophone overpowering the mix were all heard long before the Tramp's first interjection (cf., e.g., breaks i–9), and voices other than Lynch's assume minor speaking roles throughout the album as they emerge and recede at the outer range of the wobbling microphone, calling out to the Tramp with questions (e.g., break 30), interjections (e.g., break 19), and monosyllabic epithets (e.g., breaks 5–8). When the Tramp sounds reverberant, he and the anonymous voices seem to share a common textural space. Yet abruptly, at the next break (35), Lynch's voice seems to gride the surface of the track, not by speaking at a higher volume but by suddenly moving closer to the microphone, almost as if reaching inside to set the tympanic membrane shrieking. "I is done been to college," he announces (break 35), "and I am somewhat *ed*dycadid," an accent on his term's first syllable (break 37). Then, at a more balanced distance (E), close enough so that the timbral characteristics of his voice can be heard clearly yet far enough away that little or no microphonic distortion is produced, he continues, "Yes I are" (break 38).

If the phenomena described in the preceding paragraph seem accidental, as they do to me, they can nevertheless be heard. In that sense they are effective—they have an effect on the ear. Like all effects, they can be interpreted. We can tacitly assume that Lynch neither intended them nor meant anything by them without ignoring the fact that they might still have had effects peculiar to particular observers. Whether or not they mean anything to my professional academic reader tells us nothing historically about the experiences of Lynch's first audience. Readers should be able to follow my argument whether or not they are immediately inclined to approve

of my first steps—in this case, my decision to describe effects which many readers will be inclined to dismiss as mere noise.

Lynch's metrical practice seems more deliberate, if no more or less effective. "You want me to spell *ed*dycadid," the Tramp continues (break 39), again placing an accent on the first syllable of his term. As if to make certain that the literate character of the Tramp's illiteracy will not be missed—he spells two additional terms before the album is finished, "Yu York" and "Whit" (pronounced "wheat")—Lynch enunciates each letter with a measured rubato: "E-D-D-Y-C-A-D-I-D." The first and last of these nine syllables—the E and the final D—each appears near the and-of-two in consecutive statements of the ostinato; Lynch articulates the first four syllables at a rate a little slower than that of the ostinato's eighth-notes, the last four a little faster, so that nine syllables seem loosely fitted to nine eighth notes.

The complete rhythmic effect of this spelling can be described as that of a "bend." I use this term to describe a place in a measured text where some otherwise recurring correspondence between a definite pattern in the text and a definite pattern in the metrical setting is offset in a particular instance by a duration smaller than that of either definite pattern. Enjambment, for example, is a type of bend, but not every bend constitutes enjambment.[88] In this case, one of the solo-like statements being fitted to sequential breaks bounded by the end of a saxophone line and the beginning of a new measure bends across the beginning of a new measure. Lynch grabs hold

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[88] In the third stanza of Dickinson's poem, "I should have been too glad, I see," the phrase "I should have" begins the first line of the first and second stanza, but the third line of the third stanza. The form cannot be described as enjambment, but the effect—like that of the speaker looking back over their shoulder absently—is related to that of enjambment in that both constitute forms of bend.

of the Soul Twisters' groove by speaking in a loose synchrony with the subdivisions of their ostinato and bends himself lackadaisically across their bar line.

Thus Lynch's microphonic and metrical practice both involve a kind of "depth" mediating an audible "surface." *Volume 1* appears suspended in space and time as if between two points, an audible surface here and now and a "not-now-audible" depth. The spelling of "eddycadid" could be said to have a pure surface appearance devoid of any experience of bend—Smith or Tico's Taylor might have heard it that way. Bend becomes audible when one hears that same surface mediated by metrical depth. Likewise, if it is true that an early LP seemed to archive something that was already vanishing, then a microphonic practice which accentuates the workings of the microphone itself could only have contributed to what was already felt as loss (see also section 4.3.4). As Lynch glides into a halo of reverb (R), he seems to slip out of the surface plenitude of the balanced microphone (E) and toward an underworld (D). If this appears as poorly-recordedness or noise, it might also have appeared as a record of passing away.

If it can be shown that a dialectic of surface and depth was likewise important for the experience of other aspects of *Volume 1*, then we can say that the importance of a record of passing away would have been that much more concrete, that much more firmly grounded in the coherent set of circumstances I am describing as a dialectic of surface and depth. Any single one of the aspects I discuss here might seem unimportant or noisy in itself. But taken together, they form a pervasive mood. If we believed they were intended, we would say they formed a "compositional logic"—that is the term I will use in discussing the Firesign Theatre. When we critically compare what we assume to be a mood with what we assume to be a compositional logic, we do so at the level of an aestheticizing formalism; at that level, the question of intention

disappears and we are left with aspects of appearances. This aestheticizing formalism is crucial. For a genuine aesthetic pluralism, it is not enough to simply listen to many different artifacts. We have to learn *how* to listen. If we already know what is essential and what is mere noise, we might learn what something sounds like from the standpoint of a particular mode of perception—that of the professional academic, for example—but we we can't reasonably expect to learn a new way of listening. On the contrary, academic methods largely exist as a guarantee that certified professionals will never find themselves sidetracked by false leads.

4.3.2 Rhythmic surface and depth

The Tramp bends his nine letters across the first two beats of the next measure and concludes like a child in a spelling bee by cramming a restatement of the difficult word into the next break (break 41): "eddycā-*did*." The accented syllable, now the final syllable, barely precedes the saxophone attack initiating the next statement of the ostinato. Through the two beats of the saxophone's undulant figure, the Tramp waits, as if admiring his handiwork; then he affirms, "Now that's right" (break 42). Over the next three statements of the ostinato (breaks 43–45), however, evidence mounts that he himself finds his spelling, along with his grammar and education, far from "right." In the first break, he cries out in lamentation, "Four long years," each syllable elongated, and continues with a rapid, mechanical articulation at a bitterly rigid pitch level, "I went to college— " (break 43). The saxophone sounds again at the start of the next measure, and the Tramp concludes with a punchline, "to get my eddycation" (break 44). If the act of spelling had lent the term "eddycadid" a comic legitimacy, Lynch uses that legitimacy as

the basis for grim absurdity when he introduces the noun form of his neologism—how is "eddycation" spelled?

Accentuating the punchline's despondency, the Tramp falls silent over the entire third measure (break 45). A staccato organ sting follows on the next downbeat (the downbeat preceding break 46). The last time an organ sting of this sort had been heard was on the downbeat of the measure containing break 33, the beginning of phrase I1. In each instance, the audience is left to laugh with abandon over an empty break (32 and 45) preceding an organ sting. A "stinger" on a downbeat punctuates the temporal unfolding and seems to call the Tramp back from the abyss for a fresh start.

These organ stings—it seems as though they are accumulating—also help to foreshadow the moment of song yet to come. Even an audience unfamiliar with the particular song Lynch is getting ready to sing will feel some sort of song welling up as the Tramp teases his way in and out of the breaks. Such an audience finds itself "in the thick of things," which in this case is another way of describing a dialectic of surface and depth. Each time Lynch speaks in a break, his speech seems heightened stylistically; he seems to follow a rule: sing in the breaks. Consequently, he seems to approach both "song" in general and, in these opening minutes, the song which most directly grounds the Tramp persona. The organ stings add another level of musical depth to this thickness by producing a repeatable structure over a span of several measures—in this case over the thirteen measures between I1 and L2.

The presence of large architectonic song forms hidden in the depths is suggested in other ways. As Table 4.1 illustrates, the emcee, the audience members, the backing band, and Lynch can all be heard speaking in sequential four-bar periods. Seventy-six of the eighty-six breaks in

Table 4.1 can be analyzed as one of four phrases in one of nineteen four-bar periods (lettered a, b, c, A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L, M, N, O, and P). This does not mean that Lynch, his band, or his audience thought in terms of four-bar phrases.[89] The gap between the organ stings on I1 and L2, for example, lasts for thirteen measures, not twelve. Still, if Lynch and his audience weren't counting, a span of thirteen measures would have felt similar to a span of twelve, especially if the form was rounded out by clear groupings of two to four bars each. Although Lynch does not rigorously follow any rule of the four-bar phrase productive of a transparent and uninterrupted series of four-bar phrases, something very much like four-bar phrasing is still perceptible. The form of a standard twelve-bar blues with its three four-bar periods is alluded to at least twice in the opening minutes of *Volume 1*: the backing band performs two choruses of a twelve-bar blues immediately before the first break and the beginning of my excerpt, and Lynch's entire opening routine reads as a twelve-bar blues with sections on the I chord elongated (see Table 4.2)—listeners familiar with James Brown's hit, "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag" (1966), would have heard that sort of tonic prolongation before. In what follows, I will concern myself not with the nature of the level or levels of experience where the rule occurs—I

[89] The periods in Table 4.1 may have been an unintended byproduct of a feel for two-bar rather than four-bar periods: measures 57–58 and 59–60 can be broken down into two consecutive two-bar phrases, and many setups and punchlines appear distributed across consecutive measures (cf. measures 23–24, 26–27, 29–30, 34–35, 37–38, 39–40, 43–44, 47–48, and 53–54). It could be that Lynch had a tendency to think in terms of one-bar setups and one-bar punchlines (cf. F3–F4, G2–G3, H1–H2, K3–K4, L3–L4, and N1–N2). There are also places where the phrasing seems productive of an asymmetry between consecutive units of two bars each rather than between units of one bar each (cf. measures 13–16, 17–20, and 33–36), meaning that Lynch may have felt comfortable working with periods of varying lengths. Besides which, there are occasional phrases with an odd number of breaks, as in breaks 61–63 and 68–70—although both of these examples occur during the moment of song, almost as if the heightening involved in song compensates for the laxity of a three-measure phrase in the context of a song otherwise structured by two- and four-bar phrases.

Table 4.2 The harmonic progression of Jimmy Lynch's first routine (Table 4.1) compared with that of a standard twelve-bar blues

							total number of measures
harmonies in sequence:	I	IV	I	V	IV	I	
standard twelve-bar blues (number of measures):	4	2	2	1	1	2	12
the Tramp's first routine (number of measures):	58	2	10	1	1	2	74

am not concerned with "cognition," and I will take it for granted that listeners can "know" something like Lynch's four-bar phrasing in diverse ways—but with the character of the games Lynch plays with it. For whatever reasons, by whatever means, and intentionally or otherwise, it appears that Lynch planned his performances in a manner productive of loosely sequential four-bar phrases.

If the mechanisms involved in his preparation are hidden, the results are plain to see. His emcee (periods a–c), his backing band (A), and his assistant in the audience (B) all appear to participate in four-bar phrasing—if anything, periods a, b, c, A, and B seem even more deliberately shaped than Lynch's C–N; they may have been heard as stylized and preparatory to the looser or more rhythmically complex performance they precede. Four-bar periods appear as the rule more than the exception: sixteen four-bar periods appear in an essentially continuous sequence (a–N) beginning with the first complete statement of the ostinato (break i). Even if the one-beat rhythmic reset is heard interrupting that sequence, this still leaves a two-period sequence (a–b) followed almost immediately by a thirteen-period sequence (A–N). And whether one counts a sixteen-period or a thirteen-period sequence, a lengthy sequence is interrupted for the first time only at the moment when Lynch first slips into song (measures 58–59). The prevalence of four bar periods (O and P) within this sixteen-measure song (measures 59–74) only

goes further to suggest that the four-bar period in itself is somehow important to Lynch, even if a rigorous sequence of four-bar periods is not—four-bar periods are the rule even if the sequencing of those periods is not. Furthermore, each of the nineteen four-bar periods in Table 4.1 frames a unified content clearly distinguished from that of its neighbors: the emcee wonders what that is in the bad looking clothes (a), he remembers Jimmy Lynch and cracks a joke about lynching (b), he introduces the Tramp (c), the backing band begins with a four bar phrase rounded out by the electric guitar's interjection on phrase A3 (A), a man shouts "tramp" four times over four consecutive breaks (B), and the Tramp responds indignantly (C), explains that he is wearing the mod look (D), scoffs at the man who shouts "tramp" (E), jokes about continental clothes (F), jokes about a Stetson hat (G), jokes about Stetson shoes (H), transitions from sartorial to scholastic matters (I), jokes about being eddycadid (J), introduces the term eddycation (K), jokes about his B.S. (L), jokes about his sorority club (M), jokes about the U.H.A. (N), sings a clear four-bar phrase as part of his first moment of song (O), and sings the last four bars of a standard twelve-bar blues (P). Every time a definite punchline appears in one of my four-bar periods, exactly one appears: "I'm wearing the mod look" appears in D, "damn shit too tight" in F, "ain't got enough brim" in G, "my roasting heels" in H, "my eddycation" in K, "my bullshitting degree" in L, "I belong to a sorority club" in M, and "United Hustlers Association" in N.

There are at least two different ways in which Lynch can be described as playing on an extra-musical "surface" with four-bar phrasing as a "deep" musical structure. First, four-bar phrasing can only be heard through a feeling for or a remembering of a process which takes a fairly long time to transpire. Each four-bar phrase is about twelve seconds long, meaning that it takes no less than twenty-four seconds to hear the shortest possible sequence of phrases. Thus

Lynch's four-bar phrasing can be described as deep temporally. Second, four-bar phrasing is not immediately apparent on the textural surface of *Volume 1*. Lynch speaks in different parts of each of his four-bar phrases: on lines 1 and 3 (D), 2 and 3 (C and G), 1, 2, and 3 (E, H, I, and M), 1, 2, and 4 (N), 1, 3, and 4 (F), 2, 3, and 4 (L), and 1, 2, 3, and 4 (J and K). Of the possible three-line combinations, all are accounted for (123, 124, 134, and 234). Of the possible two-line combinations, two (13 and 23) of the six (the remaining are 12, 14, 24, and 34) are accounted for, and this despite the fact that Lynch speaks over two breaks in a four-bar phrase exactly twice in my excerpt. Although he leans more heavily on some phrasings than others (1234 and 23 each appears twice, 123 four times), sequential repetitions of the same phrasing are separated from one another three times out of five: 123 appears over the fifth (E), eighth (H), ninth (I), and thirteenth (M) phrases, 23 over the third (C) and seventh (G), 1234 over the tenth (J) and eleventh (K). Of the two out of five cases where the same phrasing appears in consecutive four-bar phrases (123 appears over H and I, 1234 over J and K), one is rhythmically exceptional in another way (see my discussion above of the spelling of "eddycadid" over J4 and K1). Lynch's rhythmic practice is so fluidly varied that its relationship to an underlying four-bar phrasing is not nearly as transparent as my analysis makes it seem. His four-bar phrasing can be described as deep in the second sense that the structure does not appear to be identical to the appearance it structures—there is a depth of field, a musical shape beyond the audible shape which first appears on the surface. Four-bar phrasing appears deep both temporally and texturally: memory provides a deep field for a shape in time, and that shape is only ever incompletely present on the textural surface.

4.3.3 Rhythmic surface and spatial depth

A number of rhythmic events in the two-minute introduction to *Volume 1* create an impression like that of events occurring in three-dimensional space. Just as the Tramp bends his way across the ostinato, so a number of voices use rhythm and meter to present something like a differentiation in space which a microphone cannot hear. A rhythmic surface appears as a spatial depth.

Directly before the first complete statement of the ostinato (break i), the Soul Twisters play an ecstatic twelve-bar blues at roughly twice the tempo of the ostinato, concluding in the middle of bar eleven of the second chorus. Where beat three in the twelfth bar of the twelve-bar blues might otherwise have sounded, the snare drum attacks the second beat of the ostinato. The bass begins on the same backbeat, suggesting either that this transition was planned in advance or that a producer cut the recording somewhere between the end of the blues and the start of the ostinato—either way, one or more parties seem to have been concerned with maintaining forward motion. The saxophone's statement on the ostinato's downbeat appears for the first time only after the bass's four eighth notes have unfolded at roughly the tempo of the quarter notes in the twelve-bar blues (see Figure 4.3). It is almost as if the inaudible beats one and two of the missing twelfth bar had become the eighth note subdivisions of a missing downbeat.

There are at least two reasons why this feels less like a smooth transition—something like an extremely simple "metric modulation"—than like a cinematic cut characterized by a dialectic of continuity and discontinuity. First, we enter the temporality of the ostinato *in medias res*: the ostinato sounds for the first time without its first beat and characteristic saxophone figure. Second, not only is the feeling of the twelfth bar not given time to "round itself out," and not

only does the ostinato begin with the drum and bass on beat two rather than with the saxophone on the downbeat, but the band's use of the unfolding beats in the twelfth bar of the aborted blues creates an underlying rhythmic continuity grounding the abrupt discontinuity between two pieces (the blues and the ostinato). The drum and bass attack on beat two seems to enter from nowhere, or from somewhere with a temporality outside the metrical division of the structured temporal unfolding it interrupts. Had the feeling of the old meter been allowed to dissipate, even if only over a second or two, we would have been able to feel as though we were getting a fresh start. Instead, the ostinato begins on the basis of the old divisions, as if otherwise disproportionate pieces had been fitted to one another as consecutive pieces of an audible collage.

What we are hearing is less like a metrical modulation than like a cinematic superimposition; the ostinato appears to be oriented by the beats of the fading twelve-bar blues, yet the ostinato and the twelve-bar blues seem like wholly distinct musical images. The relationship between the end of the blues and the beginning of the ostinato has no more to do with the fact that the beats of one initially synchronize with the eighth notes of the next—the synchronization is in any case elusive since the ostinato's tempo rapidly decelerates—than with the feeling that, for one thick moment, we can hear both meters at once, as if we could see an afterimage of the blues over the beginning of the ostinato.

Better yet, the effect I am describing is less that of a clever, composerly event than of a continuous yet incompletely perceptible groove underlying the entire performance. I say this is a better description because continuity of groove underlies both the analogy with metrical modulation and that with a cinematic cut. Throughout the opening minutes of *Volume 1*, there seems to be an overriding preoccupation with maintaining that continuity: just as the ostinato

begins before the introductory twelve-bar blues has dissipated, so Lynch enters the moment of song via an anacrusis (break 58), and so the last measure of the first moment of song is also the first spoken line of the second routine (break 74).Tramp Time remains uninterrupted.

If one of the historical riddles of black music in the late sixties concerns the turn from "swung" eight-note rhythms to "straight" sixteenth-notes, as has been suggested elsewhere,[90] a clue might be sought in the very same logic which makes funk music and dance appear as richly woven fabrics composed of independent, "multilayered" lines and "patterns."[91] A continuous division by halves—whole notes, half notes, quarter notes, eighth notes, sixteenth notes—might have seemed more desirable from the standpoint of that compositional logic. In duple-simple meter, each element can be evenly nested inside any other and every rhythm can be repeated on a faster or slower scale because every division seems to repeat the divisions heard on every other scale: the scene cuts from a song moving at one tempo to an ostinato already moving at exactly half the song's tempo. Like a reliable terrain, ever present, the ostinato can be heard in hindsight structuring all of the Tramp's movements.

A similar appearance of rhythm as spatial ground is effected in the first complete statements of the ostinato (breaks i–x).

> Ladies and gentlemen, I don't know what this is coming down through the audience
> with all those bad looking clothes on and that
> oversized hat and raggedy clothes and all this sort of thing.
> What look like—just came out of the basement.

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[90] Alexander Stewart, "'Funky Drummer': New Orleans, James Brown, and the Rhythmic Transformation of American Popular Music," *Popular Music* 19, no. 3 (October 2000), 293–318.

[91] Adrian Piper, "Notes on Funk, I–IV" (1983–1985), in *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Volume 1, Selected Writings in Meta-Art, 1968–1992* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996), 195–196, 213–214.

> Oh! I forgot. Ladies and gentlemen, we have the star of the show this evening.
> The one and only:
> Jimmy Lynch!
> Well, this evening, ladies and gentlemen, it look like he's *been* lynched.
> He's coming out, ladies and gentlemen.
> The one and only: the Tramp.

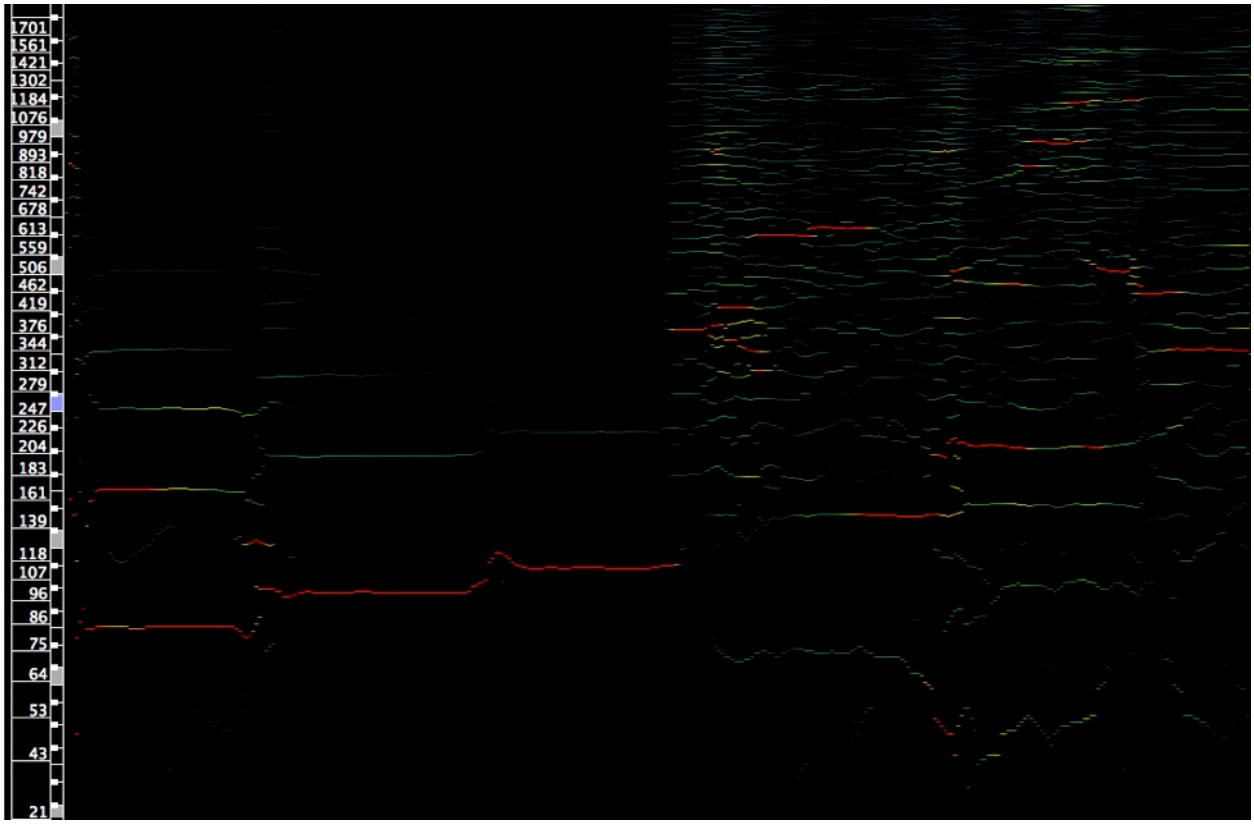
The emcee concludes his introduction with a second apposition (the first one is "The one and only:/ Jimmy Lynch!"), this one squeezed in over only one break (x). It appears as though the emcee, known as he is only through his measured speech, were getting smaller, diminishing into a receding point more and more commodiously fitted to the ostinato as frame. We can almost hear him take a step back into an imaginary curtain, preparing his departure even as he cranes his neck and balances his speaking head before the microphone. None of these gestures can be heard by the microphone itself. Our experience of time structured by events on *Volume 1* appears in the imagination as an experience of space structured by points.

By the time the emcee finishes speaking in break x, the complete trio has been introduced: Mr. Motion was introduced before the ecstatic twelve-bar blues, and Jimmy Lynch and the Tramp are referred to in breaks vii and x. This order appears as part of a movement toward the spatiotemporal depth called *Tramp Time*. Mr. Motion is, without a notion, the star of Star Time, and his actual entrance begins to shape that time. He enters as a disturbance from below (from "the basement") and works his way "down through the audience" without the emcee being able to recognize him—the question is not who but rather "what" could be the thing comprised of "all this sort of thing." The emcee stumbles over his words as he searches for an adequate description of what he is seeing ("What look like—just came out of the basement"). Ultimately he remembers and, with a dramatic pause straddling two statements of the ostinato,

introduces the star: “The one and only:/ Jimmy Lynch!” But he follows up immediately with a cruel parenthetical pun: Jimmy Lynch looks as though he has been made the victim of murderous, racist violence, and yet we will observe him with the aestheticizing detachment of “ladies and gentlemen”—we will even chuckle at jokes about his gruesome appearance. The Tramp has still not been heard, but there is the feeling that our gaze is focusing in on him as the emergent figure continues “coming out” (break ix) and as the emcee gradually fits his delivery to the contours of the ostinato.

After the emcee’s introduction, the unflagging backing band plays another complete statement of the ostinato (break xi). But at the moment where the next downbeat would otherwise have appeared, the snare drum strikes an unexpected, emphatic attack, effectively resetting the ostinato (break xii). The very next beat turns out to be the actual downbeat of the next statement of the ostinato; one dislocated beat (labeled break xii) has been interpolated between two measures (breaks xi and 1). In precisely the same instant, the audience suddenly becomes newly audible. A one-beat opening between measures accentuates a synchronic cut between one microphonic space and another (see Figure 4.4). At the instant of the snare drum attack, the listener is abruptly moved from a microphone oriented by the emcee’s voice to a microphone oriented by the excited sounds provoked in the audience by the Tramp in motion: the instant before the snare drum attack, the microphone hears the band at one distance with one reverberant shape; the instant after, the audience can be heard milling about the microphone. The emcee bows out after making his final introduction, the backing band interrupts its measured temporal unfolding, and the microphone jumps from one place in the El Grotto to another. Thus

Figure 4.4 One microphonic space on the left, another on the right. *Tramp Time Volume 1* (La Val LVP 901, 1967). Peak frequency spectogram (Sonic Visualiser). The units are in hertz.



the emcee, the backing band, and the microphone all participate in one single cut occurring at the overarching level of the LP's audible form.

However this effect was produced, the sound is that of a person at the mixing board adjusting the microphone array at the precise instant of the snare drum's lonely attack. The sound was produced by a deliberate action effected at the level of sound reproduction technologies, whether or not all of the effects of that action were intended. And these effects were mediated by something like the peculiar relationship of space and rhythm I have been discussing. The cut between microphonic spaces appears to be synchronized with the ostinato, if only because every

event appears oriented by the ostinato. It seems to cut through the entirety of a spatio-musical fabric.

4.3.4 Textural surface and ethical depth

The first sound heard on *Volume 1* is that of an emcee addressing an audience: "Ladies and Gentlemen, are you ready for Star Time?" The audience's response—"Yeah!"—is both straightforward and, in other respects, complex (see Figure 4.5). Its appearance at the beginning of the album helps establish a peculiar ethical space for Star Time. Because the emcee's question sounds like a direct quotation of *Live at the Apollo*,[92] the peculiarities of that space might have seemed important not only as an appearance of the small audience recorded on *Volume 1* but also as an appearance of the diverse mass of non-middle-class, "country" Southerners then traveling through Northern cities. "Yeah!" sounds splintered into a small number of distinct voices. A woman's voice (marked "A") cuts through the texture almost like a horn, rising in the manner of a lilting question, as if saying something like, "Yes, I'm ready. But—what is 'Star Time?' do I need to get ready? do *you* think I'm ready? do you really think that's the kind of thing we need to get ready for? or don't you know we've been ready?!" At least two male voices appear as well: one falls downward affirmatively (B), and the other follows an arching contour (C). All three voices appear as clearly in the spectogram as on the audio track. What cannot be seen or heard is the sound, so familiar to listeners accustomed to midcentury popular entertainment, of a

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[92] If Lynch was the only performer at the El Grotto that night, and if James Brown was preceded by one or more opening acts, the question posed by Lynch's emcee might have had a greater incantatory character than that posed by the emcee at the Apollo. Star Time at the Apollo would have been prepared by a series of entertainers; Star Time at the El Grotto on a Sunday afternoon might have been summoned out of something more closely resembling everyday life. But see my footnote above on the advertised four-hour "recording session at El Grotto."

homogeneous audience.[93] The recording sounds as sparse as the spectogram looks, leaving ample dark space for the audience's heterogeneity to shine through. Although the collective voice appears as a block, with all three voices participating in the same activity and beginning and ending at roughly the same time, the homogeneous voice is distinctly composed of exactly three separate voices. The excerpt gains a framed, imagistic quality from the singular task undertaken, so that the listener at home is able to hear, as if through a one-second embrasure, a small, motley group of finely drawn individuals crowded together on the microphonic dimension. While these aspects may have appeared as the accidental effects of an unprofessional poorly-recordedness, they may at the same time have seemed important to observers familiar with a breadth of contemporary representations authored by black observers of the ghetto as an extremely diverse realm of contrasting characters.[94]

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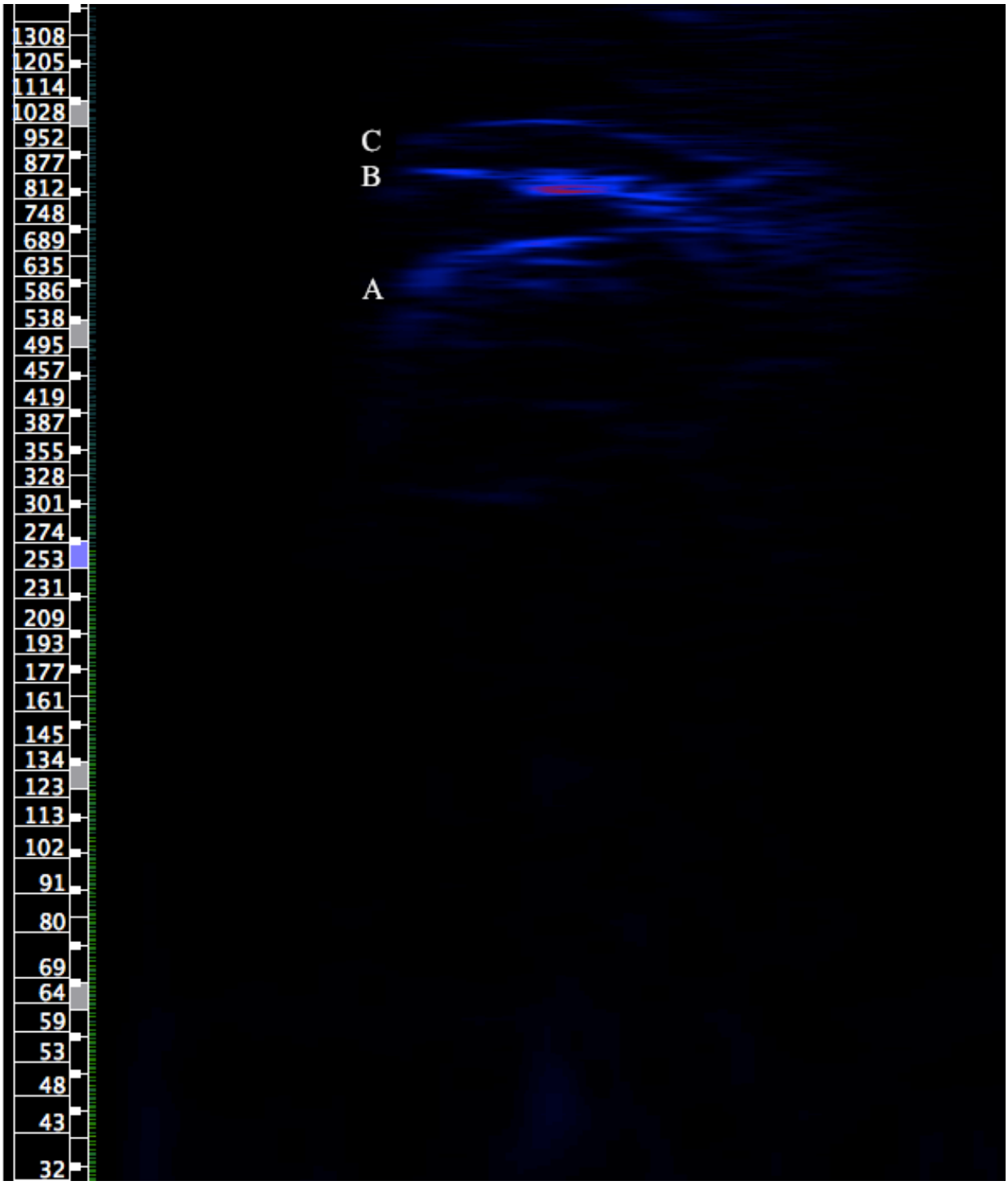
[93] One circumstance of Mabley's success is too easily ignored in hindsight as nothing but a generic characteristic of comedy LPs. Mabley's breakout Top-20 album, *Moms Mabley at the 'UN'* (Chess, 1961), was recorded not in just any Chitlin Circuit venue, but in the 2,040-seat Uptown Theater in Philadelphia. In contrast with early comedy LPs by Lenny Bruce, Mort Sahl, the Smothers Brothers, and Phyllis Diller, to cite a few examples, individual audience members on the record are all faded by the cavernous auditorium into a homogeneous voice, that of "the audience." *Moms Mabley at the 'UN'* thus emphasizes the unity of the setting—the "United Nations." In this respect, the LP sounds entirely unlike, for example, *Below the Belt*, an album Smith reports was recorded sometime around 1960 in Rudy Ray Moore's living room. Smith, *Spoken Word*, 102–106. Along with the "General American" accent and reedy timbre of the male emcee who introduces Mabley—evidently dubbed in over the beginning of the original recording, perhaps in the place of a very different sort of voice—this audience voice helps to create a generic frame for the star personality. There would have been scant audible evidence that the audience in the auditorium differed racially from the audience listening at home.

[94] The eight people on the cover of Moore's *Dirty Dozens Vol. 1* (1971) are posed in a manner which exaggerates their diverse shapes and sizes. Similarly, although all of the main characters in *Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids* (1972–1985) are black, each of them appears with an extremely distinctive shape and size. The importance of these images could not have been lost on all contemporaries. Marable, for example, quotes the recollection of one of Malcolm X's closest associates: "Normalcy is something that is not highly regarded in the ghetto[. …] Everybody got a story." Marable, *Malcolm*, 196, 523n196.

Figure 4.5 The audience's first "Yeah!" *Tramp Time Volume 1* (La Val LVP 901, 1967). Three voices: a woman's (A), a man's (B), and another man's (C). Melodic range spectogram (Sonic Visualiser). The units are in hertz.



A particular splintered texture becomes audible and a particular experience of ethical life becomes abstractly possible. If these are Mr. Vic's "common people," they also appear as distinct individuals. No master listener has succeeded in filtering them into their places as equivalent pieces of a blended whole. As in a piece of chamber music, to paraphrase an epigraph from a preceding chapter, each individual voice retains its distinctive character while participating in a common project, with the key difference that in a Carter quartet each individual voice appears in all of its plenitude rather than as the remains of something poorly recorded.[95] The sounds of numerous conversations can be heard at almost any point on *Volume 1*, most of them just out of earshot. To the extent that these conversations appear as noise, we listen past them to hear the star of the show as the essential speaker. But even as we do so, this noise appears as poorly-recordedness, and we are left to overhear barely audible voices as glittering diamonds each peeking its way into the surface. The aura of *Volume 1* as an "early" album is grounded in a surface appearance heavy with an imagined depth.

The rest of the introduction, up to the first statement of the ostinato, can be heard as a development of this same motley appearance. The emcee repeats his question, and the same three voices repeat their answer. This time, apparently freed of whatever reservations shaped her interrogative ascent, the woman's voice (marked "A" in Figure 4.6) sustains her utterance until after the rest of the group has already completed its syllable. As her voice grows hoarse, she allows her pitch to fall, inverting the contour of her first statement. Because the audience is irregularly varied internally, its discrete statements can be varied expressively. This is far

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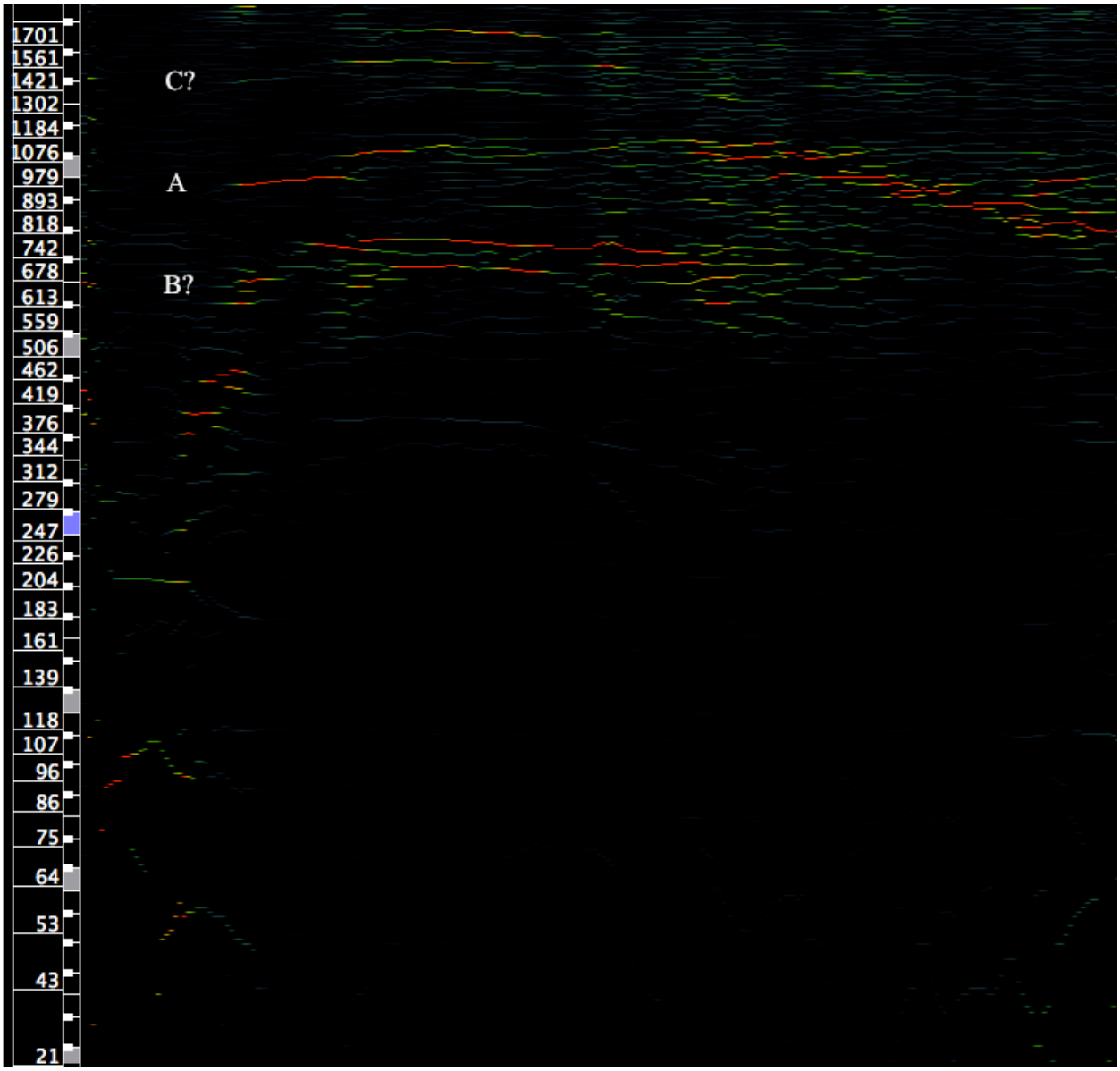
[95] See my brief description of Carter's textural practice in David McCarthy, "Textured Voices and the Performance of Ethical Life in the Case of the Laff Box (1966)," *Twentieth Century Music* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2016), 110.

Figure 4.6 The audience's second "Yeah!" *Tramp Time Volume 1* (La Val LVP 901, 1967). Three voices: a woman's (A), a man's (the same as B in Figure 4.5?), and another man's (the same as C in Figure 4.5?). Peak frequency spectogram (Sonic Visualiser). The units are in hertz.



removed from a situation where a Laff Boy as discussed in chapter two could season an otherwise homogeneous audience with titters and snorts. When the audience shouts, "Yeah!" it says many things. Rather than merely decorating some general background coherence, three

distinct voices shape the whole. The audience does not even speak as "the audience" in the sense in which that term could be applied to the homogeneous audience.

Satisfied, the emcee wastes no time. He begins speaking in sentence fragments interspersed with the backing band's block chords, another direct quotation from *Live at the Apollo*. "Alright let's bring to the stage," he begins, and the band responds abruptly with a triad. Like the audience, the Soul Twisters' chord appears tattered. It begins with the subdued sound of an electric organ playing a C major triad in the middle register for well over a tenth of a second, not a short duration in a musical fabric.[96] Then the snare drum attacks. And then, roughly a twentieth of a second later, the tenor saxophone appears playing the A in its upper register, middle G in concert pitch and the fifth in the harmony. The electric bass enters a fraction of a second after the saxophone. Perhaps there is even a fifth instrument masked by the others or hidden somewhere beyond the range of the microphone—later, during the Tramp's procession, we will briefly hear an electric guitar playing an octave transposition of the ostinato's bass line (see break 3 in Table 4.1).

Whereas the challenge in the El Grotto would have been to make the saxophone audible over the considerably louder drums and electrically amplified instruments, the band as it sounds on the recording is vastly overpowered by the saxophone, a recorded effect which might have been the direct result of someone's attempt to overcome the challenge in the El Grotto. As the C major triad is sustained, the saxophone's A gathers a harmonic centrality relatively independent

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[96] I make my approximations with the aid of Audacity. To put my claim in perspective, a sixteenth note at 120 beats per minute lasts an eighth of a second, while the human ear is said to be capable of hearing variations of about one ten-thousandth of a second. See Arthur C. Ludwig Sr., "Music and The Human Ear," http://www.silcom.com/~aludwig/EARS.htm (accessed May 7, 2015).

of the actual harmony, almost as if it were being tonicized outside the broader texture. Consequently, the electric organ, sustained after the rest of the ensemble's release, sounds almost out of place playing the very C major triad it had established at the outset. Even something as essential as the basic harmony being played begins to disintegrate into its own contingencies.

The tension mounts: the emcee shouts, "without a notion," and the backing band answers with a Db major triad; "the one and only," D; "the fast man," Eb; "without a notion," E.[97] By the time the band reaches this climactic final chord, signaled by the emcee's dramatic repetition of the phrase ("without a notion") anticipating the obvious rhyme ("Mr. Motion!"), the saxophone has climbed its way up to its C# (concert B, the fifth of the E major triad), a notoriously flat note on a saxophone, especially a tenor saxophone blown loudly. The resulting harmony sounds less as something out of tune than as a tone cluster with a demonic tritone taking shape between the root in the electric bass and the tenor sax with its drooping fifth. It not only complements the exciting chromatic ascent—as the pitch rises, the harmony becomes more gruesome—but also further serves to indicate that what the individual voices in this space do can exceed the planned form: we have both the sound of a block chord rising chromatically, as planned, and the sound of a cluster taking shape without the major triad.

Everywhere we look in these introductory seconds, an intelligible order—"these are chromatically ascending triads," for example—mediates the album's surface. So much is felt to be beyond the range of the perceptible—the three audience voices recede into an inaudible background, the backing band is masked by a blazing saxophone—that everything audible seems

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[97] This call and response, with the emcee speaking in broken phrases and the backing band answering with discrete, chromatically ascending block chords is basically the same as the call and response heard at the beginning of *Live at the Apollo*.

damp with what is not now audible. Smith is right to observe that in some places "outsiders […] can barely figure out what's being said." What makes that observation seem so bizarre from the standpoint of my own description is that it suggests that some insider somewhere could figure it all out. If we detect an imputation of evil in Smith's charge of hermeticism, it is in part because we find it impossible to believe that he grants a genuine existence to the "insiders" opposed to his bewildered outsiders: "outsiders" in his statement refers to "us," and "we" seem to be on the only side worth considering, the side of right. Smith does not sound disappointed to find that he can't figure out what's being said. He evidently suspects that what is being said is tantamount to a lie, as if someone were falsely claiming to be saying something where in fact nothing is being said. The more urbane alternative to Smith's contempt would be to simply act as if in fact nothing is being said. Everything I have just described then appears as mere noise distracting from the generic content any professional ethnomusicologist knows how to recognize even amidst the noisiest contingencies. But isn't it instead the case that *Tramp Time* repeatedly gives the lie to its every coherent statement? Doesn't the album itself demonstrate the incompleteness of its surface without appearing to withhold a hidden truth?

There is a logic, a rhythm, and a pattern to the album's choreographed introduction, but as the players follow the rules, they end up producing something grounded in their own unpredictable particularities. The ascending block chords become, by the intervention of a particular instrument with a particular shape playing a particular note in a particular way, a descent into a level of complexity bordering on chaos; yet they remain ascending block chords. The saxophone's particularity is added to the prevailing order, and it changes that order, but only relative to what remains the prevailing order—we still hear ascending block chords. The truth

about the saxophone lies in its deep relationships rather than deep down inside itself. It cannot be out of tune all by itself.

What is at stake here is not a matter of some kind of esoteric political-theoretical meditation on the whole and the part. Nor am I advocating for this appearance of ethical life as a politically desirable appearance. Reading and thinking about "ethical life" has helped me to produce knowledge of a historically possible experience, but my aim is to produce that knowledge of a determinate thing. I am trying to say how particular historical observers might have heard *Volume 1* and to explain why that appearance might have mattered to them. For observers who found themselves on the one hand excluded from the hegemonic order and, on the other, interpolated into some "unique situation," hearing particular people involve themselves in an order comically—in a manner which illuminates both the individual participants and the order they strive to produce—might have served as a way of hearing their exclusion as a form of interpolation and hence as a ground for effective action. The woman heard shouting could later have recognized herself on the record and could expect her friends to recognize her as well. Such a listening would have served as no cure for the active dismantling of the Hamblin neighborhood. It would not have put the means of recording a funky comedy album in the hands of the people who had been attending Sunday afternoon matinees for many years. It would not have provided a guide to effective, desirable political action. But it would have put familiar voices on record as participants in a distinct shape of ethical life. If we dismiss this as cheap compensation for active exploitation and as grounds for vacant nostalgia, we overlook the fact that active exploitation was all the residents of Hamblin had to look forward to if they could not

see themselves as people with their own rich and peculiar activities. As historians, we try to understand people without first deciding whether they did what we wish they would have done.

From Smith's standpoint, the fact that the album's poorly-recordedness results in a kind of phenomenal richness might appear paradoxical. From the standpoint of the professional ethnomusicologist, the album's poorly-recordedness sounds like mere noise to be stripped away from the essential "standard features of African-American performance."[98] But there is no paradox in, and there is no reason to ignore, the fact that what we hear can include the sound of not having heard something.[99] *Tramp Time* is damp with sounds that cannot be heard and which cannot be extrapolated from the rule we infer from what we do hear. The audience says "yeah," but there is no telling what that statement would begin to mean if we could continue hearing one new voice after another. The band follows a regular pattern, but there is no telling what they will do until they have followed that pattern through particular conditions—through the wonky curvature of a saxophone for example. If Lynch's blacker audience would not have described these effect in these terms, they might have experienced something like them nonetheless. An

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[98] On professional academics and their representations of the Other as involved in generic activities with standard features, see Martin Scherzinger, "Negotiating the Music-Theory/ African-Music Nexus: A Political Critique of Ethnomusicological Anti-Formalism and a Strategic Analysis of the Harmonic Patterning of the Shona Mbira Song 'Nyamaropa,'" *Perpectives of New Music* 39 (2001), 5–117; Victor Kofi Agawu, *Representing African Music: Postcolonial Notes, Queries, Positions* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

[99] This point should be self-explanatory, but, for the sake of illustration: in responding to his accuser, the Tramp at one point says, "You [there is a skip in the recording] just a damn lie." (The skip is present on at least two different copies of the LP, the one I own and the one uploaded to YouTube by La Val Records & Productions, "Jimmy Lynch – That Funky Tramp in a Nite Club (from La Val Records)," entry posted May 13, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x05XyBJklXA (accessed December 4, 2015).) The backing band loses about half a beat, leaping from beat four in one statement of the ostinato to beat one in another statement; I cannot say for sure whether these are consecutive statements. No one could claim that anyone who hears the Tramp as saying "You just a damn lie" is listening very carefully.

actual appearance might have mattered to them as a particular appearance, not merely as a generic example of standard features.

We could reasonably say that *Volume 1* is poorly recorded in some kind of "objective" sense. Casey O'Callaghan has argued that sound reproduction technologies provide us with an "impoverished" experience of the "original sound," in the sense that, "in critical spatial and temporal respects," that original sound ceases to be mediated in the way it had been originally.[100] Professional sound engineers typically conceal the lack in recorded sounds by creating recordings which seem more real than life itself.[101] When diverse voices slip in and out of the range of the microphone, the rigid limits of the microphone become noisy precisely where the "more professional" sound engineer would prefer to make them silent. The microphone seems sequestered from the sounds it is supposed to capture; the observer on the far side of the

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[100] Casey O'Callaghan, *Sounds: A Philosophical Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 144, 157, 161–162. When we hear the sound of a friend's voice on our voicemail, O'Callaghan claims, we are hearing the sound of our friend's voice—not merely the sound of our voicemail—but we are hearing that voice only as it was already heard by the microphone in our friend's telephone.

[101] Cinema has one way of accomplishing this task. The ears which can hear, from the vantage point of a camera located hundreds of yards away, the speech of characters in a movie are undoubtedly far richer ears than the ones we must rely upon in real life. What Lev Manovich calls "databases"—"collections of individual items"—have another way of accomplishing much the same task: they allow "the user" to "perform various operations—view, navigate, and search." Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), 218–219. A recent episode of the sitcom *Community* brilliantly demonstrates the illusory nature of the sort of vastness created by the "database." A character becomes overwhelmed by his seemingly awesome capacity to manipulate "worlds within worlds" within the confines of a virtual reality system. It turns out that he is essentially moving file folders between file folders. But the illusion of vastness is so great that he has to be carefully acclimated to the real world through an exercise in which he moves folders around on the desktop of a laptop computer. "Lawnmower Maintenance and Postnatal Care," *Community*, Season 6, Episode 2, https://screen.yahoo.com/community/lawnmower-maintenance-postnatal-care-070001912.html (accessed May 7, 2015).

microphone feels absolutely removed from the motley audience. The way a human listener listens does not resemble the way a microphone listens, and this is nowhere more apparent than when we hear something that has been poorly recorded. If we were in the microphone's position, we might have listened more deliberately. *Volume 1* seems poorly recorded in the sense that it makes loss audible as such. But loss is precisely what Mr. Vic invokes in his liner notes.

With a vanishing space already established, everything the Tramp does necessarily includes the richness of a space beyond the range of the microphone. As the emcee reaches the ecstatic conclusion of his buildup—"Mr. Motion!"—one lonely man somewhere far away crashes through the inaudible audience, sounding almost lost, hollering the third statement of the audience's characteristic phrase: "Yeah!" The shape of an entire ethical life suddenly changes its shape through the intervention of a solitary figure; the incongruity between the relatively small action and its pervasive effects seems comic. The band then performs two choruses of an uptempo twelve-bar blues in C major, the saxophone hammering out syncopated rhythms on the tonic, its own ebulliently sharp middle D. Then the band begins playing the ostinato. And then the emcee returns to narrate what he describes as the Tramp's passage "out of the basement" and "down through the audience." We have already heard a lengthy intro, nearly a minute long, but it will be more than a minute yet before the Tramp is finally heard speaking. By that point, it will long since have ceased to be sensible for a listener to hear the Tramp as if he were the one essential voice surrounded by mere noise. In other words, *Volume 1* begins by taking the time to establish a textural space where that sort of listening makes no sense.

Nine breaks (breaks 1–9 in Table 4.1) and a full thirty seconds elapse between the isolated snare drum attack and the Tramp's first audible utterance. To put this in perspective, a

quarter of the record's first two minutes is devoted to a procession which cannot be seen, which is not narrated, and which cannot be heard except in the poorly recorded effects it has on the audience. In moments where there is a change in a microphone's relationship to a recognizable set of sounds, as for example in the transition transcribed as Figure 4.4, motion in a three dimensional space can be inferred, although even then the amount of information is extremely sparse by comparison with what a camera would see—with a silent background, all we can say is that the microphone and the backing band have moved in relation to each other, not in relation to any inaudible objects. Indeed, as more information is included—the audience heard after the snare drum attack is considerably more dense than the one heard responding to the emcee at the very beginning of the album (compare Figures 4.4, 4.5, and 4.6)—an audible text can begin to sound noisy rather than detailed. The sounds of the audience, appearing as they do on a plane structured by only one dimension, tell us fairly little about the Tramp's actual procession. We do not even hear him approaching: at the moment of his first audible utterance, he is already directly in front of the microphone.

And yet these thirty seconds seem to be well worth hearing as a record of the people disturbed. Anonymous voices play various roles throughout *Volume 1*. The emcee narrates. A man shouts, "Tramp!" In break 19 of Table 4.1, two women speak in synchrony with the ostinato: one lets out a crescendoing "whoop" with an ascending contour lasting from beat one to beat two; the second hollers four syllables, the first two appearing as consecutive sixteenth notes on beat two, the next two syllables in the same position on beat three. It sounds as though the second woman says, "I'll look for it [the mod look]." Whatever she says, she can be heard alongside other audience members keeping time for Lynch. They all seem to be in on the act,

musically and diegetically: all speakers speak in the breaks, the emcee sets the stage, the shouting man shapes a four-bar phrase (B), and one of the women evidently promises to keep an eye out for the mod look, knowing that this will require some imagination. When the Tramp reflects sarcastically—"Tramp!"—near the and-of-three in the very next statement of the ostinato (break 20), he already has the audience laughing with him and at "this fool back here."

Reciprocity between the performer and his El Grotto audience is established likewise through metrical phrasing. From the claim "I'm wearing the mod look, momma!" to the exclamation "Tramp!" there are eight breaks (13–20) divided into four two-bar phrases (D1–D2, D3–D4, E1–E2, E3–E4). Whereas the Tramp's parataxis in the beginning ("I'm wearing the mod look, momma! Can you dig it?) only loosely fits inside the first two-bar phrase—beginning as it does in the first break yet casually extending itself well into the next statement of the ostinato—the same paratactic structure is snuggly fitted to the the third phrase: both "You ain't hip, baby" and "This is the mod look" are placed inside their respective breaks (17 and 18). Consequently, a symmetry emerges between the first and third two-bar phrases (D1–D2 and E1–E2), a symmetry highlighted by the recurrence of the term "mod look" and perhaps also by their common position within sequential four-bar phrases (D and E). Indeed, E1–E2 appears as a more evenly measured repetition of D–D2, as if the Tramp were becoming more metrical and in that sense more musical. Considering that the second two-bar phrase had already built rapport by excluding "this fool back here" from the communal fold (D3), the audience might have felt that an underlying rhythmic symmetry obliged them to offer a polite response in the fourth two-bar phrase (E3–E4) or in the third line of the second four-bar phrase (E3). What is extraordinary is how two women, on the spur of the moment, not only furnish such a response but do so skillfully,

idiosyncratically, and musically. If this facility seemed ordinary to the patrons of the El Grotto, it might have seemed special on a record of vanishing motion.

Taylor might have found the Tramp's performances especially compelling in part because Lynch was able to get so many thickly varied effects out of what was evidently already, for at least several people in the room, a standardized performance practice. Something as simple as the placement of the exclamation "Tramp!" on the and-of-three in phrase E4 achieves several interdependent things at once. It rounds out an eight-bar period with an attack preparing the downbeat of a new period. It provides a counterbalance to the statements made by the women at the opening of the final two-bar phrase, complementing their less syncopated statements on beats two and three with his syncopated interjection on the and-of-three by distinguishing or separating itself from those statements, as if making a parenthetical aside.[102] It seems haunted by the same interjection as made by Fulson on the and-of-four in the fourth bar of the four-bar introduction to his own recording of "Tramp" (see section 4.3.5). And, in doing all of these things at that precisely measured instant, it speaks an inside joke amidst a moment of transition. The Tramp scoffs as he turns a corner, winking at the listener who knows how to listen before the next downbeat has passed.

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[102] Africanists might detect traces of the asymmetrical timelines or clave rhythms found in various parts of the African diaspora. See Jay Rahn, "Asymmetrical ostinatos in sub-Saharan music: Time, pitch, and cycles reconsidered," *In Theory Only: Journal of the Michigan Music Theory Society* 9, no. 7 (1987), 23–37.

Whatever its winking quality means or however it is heard,[103] the utterance ("Tramp!") sounds as if it belongs where it is—it seems fitting—and we are delighted to find that we can somehow or other hear the rhythmic sense at work.[104] The listener is made to feel as if they have been accepted into the traveler's confidence by the very rhythm which scoffingly dismisses "this fool back here." Between the effects of the insider's corpus of knowledge (the Tramp, escaped from a song, is not what he appears to be) and those of metrical reciprocity, Lynch quickly establishes a formalized milieu where knowing what to do and having someone with whom to do it provides a satisfaction relatively independent of any definite content. The LP cannot replace the nightclub, but it can speak to listeners with a knowledge of the nightclub's milieu.

To summarize, the people folded through the depths of the splintered texture and into the borders of the diegesis matter. At the level of what is merely heard, relatively little information can be garnered from the thirty seconds of the Tramp's procession. But within the album's thickly variegated depth, each of the individual sounds seems more precious than a mere background or even a scarce spatial point of orientation. And this is largely because the listener does not occupy the position of plenitude. Something is happening in the space of the revue far beyond anything that has been recorded: "You would really have to see him perform to

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[103] The winking quality of this gesture might "mean" different things to different people. The fool does after all have good reason to call the Tramp a tramp, but if the white hipster can righteously scoff at the "square," it is much harder to say that Lynch's fool is especially foolish for failing to be "hip." Or they call the Tramp a tramp, but we can anticipate that he will declare himself a lover in the moment of song yet to come.

[104] The winking gesture might be heard simply as an affirmation of a newly established rapport: an attack on the and-of-three in a four-beat measure is a standard means of preparing an attack on the next downbeat, and whether or not they produced "knowledge of" this metrical "sense" as I have here, listeners can "get the sense" that they share an insider knowledge with the Tramp, a knowledge structured by a measured setting.

appreciate him." We hear every moment of the Tramp's performance with a feeling of irrevocable loss.

4.3.5 Surface motion through a depth of bullshit

Yet at the same time, *Volume 1* establishes a peculiar contemporaneity for itself. Lynch worked with borrowed material.[105] Two versions of Fulson and McCracklin's "Tramp" appeared as *Billboard* charting hits in 1967: the first, recorded by Fulson himself and released as Kent 456 (under the name "Lowell Fulsom"), was cited in most issues of *Billboard* published between December 17, 1966 and April 1, 1967, the second, recorded by Otis Redding and Carla Thomas and released as Stax 216, in most issues between April 29 and July 29.[106] Both made it at least as high as the top five in the R&B charts. The first words out of the Tramp's mouth are almost identical to those spoken by Redding at the beginning of Stax 216, and many of the lines Lynch uses as setups are based on lines spoken by the tramp himself on Kent 456—similar lines are spoken by Carla Thomas's character on Stax 216 as invectives directed against her lover. Both versions of the song feature the instrumental vamp which the Soul Twisters slowed down and

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[105] There is circumstantial evidence that Lynch worked with stock material. His joke about Chesterfields which "satisfy" is basically the same as one told by the Blues Brothers on their recording of "I Don't Know" (1978). John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd might have heard the joke on Lynch's LP, but it is at least as easy to believe that it was part of a standard repertoire known to them through some third source unknown to me.

[106] Kent 456 initially appeared under the "R&B Spotlights" column on December 17, 1966 and maintained a spot on the R&B chart from January 7, 1967 until April 1. It also appeared "Bubbling Under the Hot 100" at 106 on January 7, broke the Hot 100 on January 14th, and remained on that chart until February 18th. Stax 216 was first cited under the "Spotlight Singles" column on April 29, 1967. It appeared on the Hot 100 from May 6 to July 1st and on the R&B charts from May 13, 1967 until July 29, 1967. Fulson's recording reached #5 and #52 on the *Billboar*d R&B and Hot 100 charts respectively, Otis & Carla's #2 and #26.

reduced instrumentally to create the *Tramp Time* ostinato.[107] As the emcee withdraws from the scene, a contemporary song expands into a diegetic world. The Tramp's entire opening routine establishes him as a vagrant, but in the song anticipated by that routine, a man explains, not altogether ironically, why he cannot adequately be described as a tramp—not altogether ironically: Carla's complaints may be legitimate, but Otis's love is triumphant. The audience could have expected Lynch to sing, as Fulson and Redding had before him, "I'm a lover." Mr. Vic reported that Lynch answered to both names, Tramp and Lover. The relationship between the Tramp as tramp and the Tramp as lover, I would suggest, is key to understanding the relationship between *Volume 1* and its vanishing present, rather than merely its vanished past.

The usage of a contemporary popular song adds yet another aspect to the transitory character of *Volume 1*. The song had only recently appeared floating on the airwaves, yet by September its iterations on the radio were appearing further and further apart. Mr. Vic's hopes for a future collection notwithstanding, Lynch and his El Grotto audience may have had their minds set more on a vanishing present than on a projected future. Lynch might only ever have intended his routine as a temporary illumination of a current hit. He seems to have dropped the Tramp character almost as soon as the initial wave of blue records had run its course—in his cameo in *The Human Tornado*, he plays an extremely funky James Brown-like character named "Jimmy Lynch." As far as I know, his Tramp never appeared on screen,[108] and although Lynch's last LP (1977), the second Laff album, is advertised under the "Funky Tramp" moniker, its cover shows a dapper Jimmy Lynch sweeping up an anonymous tramp—"CLEAN-N-UP-BUT-STAY-N-FUNKY" reads the tagline. As presentiments of autumn descended during that first Sunday

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[107] Some version or another of the ostinato appears in all of the Tramp's LP appearances.

[108] A performance film exists in LVA, but it was never published and has not yet been digitized.

evening after Labor Day, the audience could easily have felt nostalgic hearing one of the summer's hits swell into a fantasy world. They might have felt that they were in possession of a current and aging corpus of knowledge. Those with the most intimate knowledge of the origins of *Volume 1* could have felt its aging qualities most keenly.

But these aging qualities are offset by anticipation. Presentiment wains as he departs from the original song lyrics during the eddycadid bit. It waxes again as he specifies the nature of his eddycation. "Don't be laughing at me, I got my degree, baby./ I got my B.S./ My bullshitting degree!" Lynch delivers the punchline ("bullshitting degree") in an open, throaty voice, cooing in laughter. He receives a huge, prolonged laugh and has to raise his voice to be heard in the very next break (49).

> And I wanna tell everybody:
> don't worry about me.
> I belong to a sorority club too.
> Can you dig it?
> I belong to the U.H.A.
> United Hustlers Association

Having just presented himself as a certified bullshitter, it makes no difference that a man cannot belong to a sisterhood. Within its paratactic frame, the absurd statement "I belong to a sorority club" comes first, its corresponding question second, as if the audience were being asked if they saw what the Tramp just did. If it is true that what makes the bullshitter rather than the liar especially dangerous in ethical life is that, while the liar wishes to conceal the truth, the bullshitter disregards any question of truth altogether,[109] then it is also true that the bullshitter, as opposed to the liar, can be a player. The Tramp takes enough interest in his audience to ask

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[109] Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 55–56.

whether they see the game he is playing. There is an imagistic quality to the Tramp's claim that he belongs to a sorority, and the meaning of the statement has something to do with that imagistic quality. Yet the Tramp is not necessarily saying that he in fact surrounds himself with young women. He is suggesting that at the level of his bullshit at least, he wants to join a sorority, that if it were possible to imagine hustlers united, he would like to be a part of that union. And these lines recall the song: "I'm a lover." In this sense, the moment of song comes closer even when it seems furthest away. "But before I go too far," the Tramp continues, as if the two and a half minutes since his first appearance had been nothing more than a preamble, "I wanna tell all you ladies/ what I really are." The phrase "what I really are" is set apart in its own break (57). When he speaks in the next break (58), he is singing an anacrusis to the downbeat of his own rendition of the song's hook: "I'm a lover!" The band, as if rolling into another twelve-bar blues, kicks the harmony up to an Eb chord, the IV in Bb. The ebb and flow of anticipation finally breaks, the audience roars in ecstasy, and Lynch sings.

The line "what I really are" frames the moment of song in at least two ways. First, as the song's anacrusis (break 57), it hearkens all the way back to the beginning of the eddycadid bit (break 38), the only other place in the routine where the Tramp uses the "are" conjugation with the first-person pronoun. By bringing things full circle, by condensing the entire opening routine into a preamble one instant before the anticipated moment of song, Lynch creates a thick context for the "I are" construction. He distinguishes the repetition from its original. The first time the Tramp used the construction, the nature of the usage was uncertain: the Tramp could have been pulling the audience's leg by playing the part of a character who uses such an unusual construction; or he could really be just such a character. As the routine gives way to song, any

lingering ambiguity is resolved: we now know for sure what he is doing, but what we know does not satisfy the search for truth. The Tramp as bullshitter is saying what he really is, but he is doing so as a bullshitter. To listen to the Tramp for the truth is to miss the point entirely, something inexcusable for a participant initiated into the Tramp's badinage. Second, Lynch sets a rhythmic stage for the song by preparing an apposition within one of the ostinato's breaks. The line "what I really are" leaves the listener expectant, all the more so because Lynch speaks it as the second half of a couplet. The sentence "But before I go too far, I wanna tell all you ladies/ what I really are," is rounded by its alignment with a two-bar phrase (breaks 54–55). The resolution of a complete phrase seems to conclude the preamble, thereby indicating that the anticipated moment of song is arriving. If we are aware that the anticipated song speaks suitably within its recollected frame—that it will indeed, at one level or another, tell us what the Tramp "really are"—we will be that much more expectant.

If we ignore the frame, we will not know what the Tramp is doing at all. He is bullshitting, no doubt. But like Cecil Brown's Mr. Jiveass Nigger, he seems to know that there is "nothing under the sun that [is] really phony if it [is] functional."[110] The Tramp's bullshit becomes functional in and through a deep musical structure composed of rhythmic, metrical, and social shapes and referents. Lynch's performance does not propose a viable political program, but neither does it merely lament the vanishing of the past. The performance, in more than one respect, is about making something, however fleeting out of decay. The Tramp becomes the Lover.

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[110] Cecil Brown, *The Life and Loves of Mr. Jiveass Nigger: A Novel* (New York: Ecco Press, 1996 [1969]), 22.

The relationship between the two could be described as a relationship between phases of a perpetual becoming. The Tramp describes himself in negative terms, according to what he lacks. In performing his act of transvaluation, the Tramp reads his own lack from another standpoint, one in which the Stetson hat, impeccable symbol of rugged American masculinity, itself lacks "brim."[111] That lack of brim appears not merely from the standpoint of the Tramp, but from that of the Tramp becoming Lover. Similarly, when the Tramp claims that he is eddycadid, he works with the dominant society's chief mode of interpolation ("education") but shows his lack of belonging by his spelling. That lack of belonging then becomes an asset from the standpoint of a situation favorable to the bullshitter. "I wanna tell all you ladies," he says, "what I really are." The verbal construction ("I are") is revealed at this juncture as bullshit. But if we have been listening this long, it is because we expect his bullshit and have found that there is something to gain from it. His lack can be transvalued as the positive, overbrimming character of the Lover. And yet he becomes the Lover only through the characteristics of the Tramp, characteristics which are known as such only as they continue to be defined as lack.

Conclusion

Lynch's preoccupation with whiter, middle-class society seems grounded in a comic rather than a satirical impulse. The eddycadid bit makes light of middle-class society's farcically

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[111] The obvious question to be asked of Lynch's "brim" is how it relates to a broader range of subcultures or countercultures in which men of color wear "oversized" clothing. Although I cannot answer that question within the confines of this dissertation, future researchers might compare my argument here with Octavio Paz's essay, "El pachuco y otros extremos," in *El laberinto de la soledad* (New York: Penguin, 1997 [1950]), 29–49.

predominate mode of interpolation.[112] The gorilla bit contrasts Tommy Wang with a "whit man" —spelled W-H-I-T, pronounced "wheat," apparently a reference to a fair-skinned black man.[113] And a bit about the Reverend James Whitmore—more whit?—tells the story of a prominent community leader who resents being repeatedly mistaken for James Brown. In all of these routines, some aspect of the dominant, whiter culture prepares the triumph of something rejected by that culture. A B.S. prepares the Tramp to bullshit. Tommy Wang gets a job and finds love. The progress of the Reverend encapsulates several of the themes I have been discussing. Lynch introduces the Reverend Whitmore as a walker. "Boy, that cat was step 'n' jam./ Looked more like a pimp to me!" The Reverend is proud to be a minister and wants to be seen as such; but his pride in his reverend position is expressed in a manner of step which makes him seem more like the minister's direct antithesis—since religious observance tends to be gendered as feminine in modern industrial societies in general and among black Christians in particular,[114] the pimp appears as the minister's antitype. The Reverend's pride is known both through his resentment at being mistaken for someone whose lifestyle is far removed from his own reverend position (James Brown) and through a manner of step unbecoming of a minister (James Brown's). As

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[112] See my footnote on "education" above in this chapter.

[113] On Africans and their descendants in the whiter United States, see Baraka, *Blues People*, 11, 41, 87, 130, 135, 137–138, 142. The Tramp on *Volume 1* implicitly compares "one of us c-c-c-colored boys" with the "wh-wh-wh-whit man" when he stutters the two and only the two terms. I have not been able to find another contemporary use of the term "whit man," but "wheat" as a racial designation was not without precedent: *trigo*, for example, is among the scores of terms used to describe color in Brazil.

[114] Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "The Black Church: A Gender Perspective," in *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 1–18. The figure of the clergyman as sexual predator will of course be immediately recognizable to all of my readers.

more and more people mistake the minister for a "very prominent young man in the field of rock 'n' roll," the strut becomes ever more audacious.

> That Reverend went on back to walking.
> This cat's stepping harder than he ever stepped before.
> I think he began to feel like he *was* James Brown.
> Oh, this cat was walking.

When in the final scene a hotel attendant gives the Reverend the key to the singer's hotel room, a naked woman there asks him if he is James Brown, whereupon he bursts into song—"I feel good!"—complete with backing band. In a situation where material acquisition unadulterated even in the imagination by any kind of moral uprightness could be regarded as the sole determinate of class standing,[115] the stately step of a revered community leader could become an entertainer's ecstatic dance. There is a seamless transformation from the minister to the pimp as from the audacity of the professional class to that of the rock 'n' roll star.

Becoming, as such, is the point of interest—"I think he began to feel […] ." Throughout *Volume 1*, the obscene joke serves less to expose or satirize hypocritical social mores than to take unjust, abhorrent circumstances, whatever these may be, and to make them absurdly desirable as the conditions of motion. The Reverend is already a terrific walker before he is first mistaken for James Brown. His unacknowledged pride in being mistaken for the popular singer has a prior basis. The pretensions which deliver him from bourgeois strictures are pretensions grounded in his pride as that most characteristic representative of the black bourgeoisie, the minister. The overturning of social relations does not exactly release primal passions from civilized strictures, as it would from the standpoint of a whiter psychoanalysis where both the primal passions and

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[115] Amiri Baraka, *Blues People*, 129–130, 142–143.

the civilized strictures are already one's own and the cure is merely a matter of the appropriate balance. The reverend looks like a pimp from the very beginning, and within a fantasy Tramp Time at least, that is not such a bad thing.

Listening for language has evidently served as a means of hearing words as an expression of something outside polite society. Whether this way of listening condemned those words as vulgar or elevated them as a vernacular was a matter of valuations, not of basic beliefs about words and their place in a shape of ethical life. Either way, polite society appears as one domain, a "unique situation" as another. Certain words spring from that "unique situation," and as such they can be condemned, celebrated, or set aside for the moment, depending upon one's more or less liberal disposition. The listener who listens for language as expression may grant that historical conditions change, and with them the expressions of a race; they might piously confess that race is "socially constructed." But in the meantime—"for now"—those expressions appear far more as expressions of a racial essence than anything else.

The argument I have elaborated here is not so much about exaggerating stereotypes until, unaccountably, they have been transcended, as suggested with a prudent note of caution by a

vaguely bemused *New York Times* obituary for Rudy Ray Moore.[116] Rather, it is about moving through a deep field of circumstances in ways that could be desirable, even if, outside of the comic world, the circumstances remained deplorable and the comic movement impracticable. Exaggerating the stereotypes might have served as a means not of transcending the conditions where activity would unfold, but of producing a cartoon landscape for zany action. Lynch and his audience could have involved themselves in a comic, transitory transvaluation of the horrors of being locked inside society, in this case, of being subordinated to and negated by whiter society. For the laundry worker who was quoted in the summer of 1963, "I'm going to be working in a laundry all my life and there's no way to git out of it"—a worker for whom the Civil Rights Movement appeared as a movement for those who, unlike the worker, reasonably expected to secure citizenship for themselves and their children—Lynch's world of desire did not need to appear as a realistic destination.[117] It needed to appear as a space characterized by comically desirable motion.

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[116] Douglas Martin, "Rudy Ray Moore, 81, a Precursor of Rap, Dies," *New York Times* (October 22, 2008). At least one contemporary, without referring to transcendence, frankly observed that heinous stereotypes could be cited in complex ways. "There is another question, a more complex question, which we can only raise, without answering. Who is Sweetback [of *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971)]? Is he a white stereotype, the Black Everyman Stud of the white man's dreams? Or is he a black fantasy figure, the internalized other of the white man's projection? Who is this man? The question can be asked in another way. Is Mr. Van Peebles [the writer and director] putting us on? Or does he accept the white stereotype of the black stud? There is a third possibility: Mr. Van Peebles started out to make a fun thing, a satire probably, and somewhere along the way the game became serious and he had to back it with philosophy. It is entirely possible, indeed it is highly likely that all three possibilities are true at the same time." Lerone Bennett Jr., "The Emancipation Orgasm: Sweetback in Wonderland," *Ebony* 27, no. 1 (September 1971), 116.

[117] Robinson, "Racial Unrest."

By 1967, it may have been a little too late for Taylor to convince himself that non-middle-class black people were about to acquire greater purchasing power. Even if he did hope for the widening of the high-consumption professional class, he might have shared Baraka's forebodings about the assimilation of "black" people to "whiter" society. His hopes for the coming of a profitable market or a new collection built around a performance such as Lynch's might therefore have been grounded in his political desires for the changing tastes of the whiter middle class itself. And yet having made an LP record, there was no guarantee that even the most progressive members of whiter society would hear much more than "curse words," however they valued those words. In this sense, the very circumstances which made something like the seventies blue record seem like a viable form also seems to have made important characteristics of a performance like Jimmy Lynch's appear as mere noise.

This chapter has made use of a few terms which could be adapted to formalistic descriptions of other audible appearances: surface and depth; the microphonic dimension; rhythm as space and metrical framing or staging; sequential versus architectonic time; the not-now-audible as distinct from the merely inaudible; anticipation and vanishing; spatiotemporal depth and the play of surface and depth; the splintered texture and its heterogeneity by sparseness; poorly-recordedness as distinct from noise; the edge of intelligibility, the surface characterized by lacunae, and the rule mediated by contingency; the cinematic cut; and the current yet aging contemporaneity of popular song. It has identified a few apparent themes in *Volume 1* as a complete text: tramping as a desirable if not always practicable activity; the grotesque as sympathetic within a conflict between the exploiters and the exploited; the absurdity of obscenity.

It has also called attention to particular aspects of Lynch's charm. The moments of transitory triumph I have emphasized are all actualized through his capacity, affirmed by a participatory audience, to make something fleetingly desirable out of deplorable circumstances. What the Tramp weaves out of bullshit is still more bullshit, and his motion remains structured throughout by the continual divisions of an ostinato. *Volume 1* forecasts no ultimately desirable destination, nor does it pine for a restoration of some lost golden age before everything went to shit; if anything, it is the Mr. Vic of *Volume Two* who cleaves to the past: "BLACK COMEDY should remain BLACK"—he had reason to fear that it would not. If *Volume 1* appeared to involve some kind of hope for "historical progress," that hope must have been nourished by the album's overt, melancholic archiving of vanishing motion. Such a hope could have found in that archiving a thought of the political where history, whether it progresses, regresses, or stagnates, only transpires in and through an actual world where living touches ground in mortality.

Chapter 5 The Firesign Theatre and the Temporalities of Radiophonic Density, after 1968

Paul Should it happen [i.e., the apocalyptic race war Peter predicts will come within five years]?
Peter Well, if it happens, then it should happen. I feel that, I really feel that I cannot do anything but really try to make myself as good as possible and at the same time observe this thing called history. Because it really is rolling.
Paul How about helping to change the course of it?
Peter Well I do help to change the course of it. By every second and breath and look and thing that I do, Paul!
Paul Okay. If you do that, that's good.

—from a broadcast of *Radio Free Oz* (KPFK, Los Angeles), August 1966[1]

It seems like it's been the Sixties forever.

—from an article in *Esquire*, August 1966[2]

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[1] Peter Bergman and Paul J. Robbins, "Radio Free Oz #1 August 15 & 17, 1966," accession number AZ1323.01, CD 1, Track 7, Pacifica Radio Foundation Audio Archive, Los Angeles, CA (PRF). Bergman and Robbins premiered the late-night call-in radio program *Radio Free Oz* (*RFO*) in the summer of 1966. Robbins departed from the program in the fall of that year following conflicts over the program's format—the personality conflicts which made the duo's dialogue so compelling seem to have played a role—and Bergman carried on alone through the spring of 1967. Various revivals of the program followed in later years. Fragmentary broadcast recordings have been preserved and digitized by the PRF. The program discussed music, poetry, current events, organizational strategies, criticism as a practice, free will and determinism, and sin. Features included a reading of *Beowulf* and an attempted two-hour continuous station sign-off by a group identified as "the Hollywood chapter of [a Dutch countercultural group known as] the Provos." Further studies of these extraordinary pieces of mid-sixties ephemera are sorely needed. Most of my background information comes from Paul V. Dallas, *Dallas in Wonderland: The Pacifica Approach to Free Radio* (Dallas in Wonderland, 11168 Santa Monica Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90025, 1967), a copy of which is available to researchers at the PRF. I have been unable to find much information on Robbins. Bergman remembers his partner as a "poet and film critic" who moved to northern California and disappeared from Bergman's life. In Bergman's mind, Robbins felt that Bergman's *RFO* "was too show-bizzy." See Frederick C. Wiebel, Gregory J.M. Catsos, and Chris Palladino, *Backwards into the Future: The Recorded History of the Firesign Theatre* (Boalsburg, PA: BearManor Media, 2006), 43–44.

[2] David Newman and Robert Benton, "Remember the Sixties?" *Esquire* (August 1966), 109–113.

The sixties can be known today less as a completed period than as a contemporaneity felt to be present in its contained apocalypses and exhausted promises. This final chapter deals with productions of the feeling of living "after 1968" and with conflicts over what is to be done in a world inflected by such a feeling. Specifically, it discusses those productions and conflicts as they involved what I will refer to as a tetralogy of LP records by a Californian comedy troupe known as the Firesign Theatre: *Waiting for the Electrician or Someone Like Him* (Columbia CS 9518, 1968), *How Can You Be In Two Places At Once When You're Not Anywhere At All* (Columbia CS 9884, 1969), *Don't Crush That Dwarf, Hand Me the Pliers* (Columbia C 30102, 1970), and *I Think We're All Bozos on This Bus* (Columbia C 30737, 1971).[3] My focus will be on the period bracketed by presentiments of burnout, beginning with the premature absolute decline of employment in the U.S. "secondary" or "industrial" economy in 1965, and by initial attempts,

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[3] The group's first four LPs form a recognizable unit in Peter Bergman's mind: "The first four albums were tightest. *Not Insane* [Columbia KC 31585, LP, 1972] was an album in disarray, and then they did the *Best Of (Forward Into the Past)* [Columbia PC-34391, LP, 1976]. Then we went into our second series of albums for them, and I like them. I like *The Giant Rat of Sumatra* [Columbia KC-32730, LP, 1974], *In The Next World, You're On Your Own* [Columbia PC-33475, LP, 1975], and *Everything You Know Is Wrong* [Columbia KC-33141, LP, 1974], but they're different really than the first four." Bergman quoted in Wiebel, et al., *Backwards*, 50–51, 81. Among other differences, the last three original Firesign albums under the Columbia contract were, according to Bergman, "Proctor and Bergman records." Ibid., 50–51. Bergman also expresses the feeling that, sometime shortly after *Bozos*, "the comedy market, the comedy album market, was changing." Ibid. The four albums of the tetralogy are also the four albums represented in Philip Austin, Peter Bergman, David Ossman, and Philip Proctor, *The Firesign Theatre's Big Book of Plays* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1972). Although the *Big Book* seems to be intended more as a collection of scripts than as a set of rigorous transcriptions of the original LPs, I consulted this resource and found it generally helpful in preparing my transcriptions.

amidst the crises in the capitalist world economy of the late sixties and early seventies, to grapple with the sudden failure or containment of the global springtime known as "1968."[4]

One way that we as historical observers have of comparing and contrasting someone's feeling of living after 1968 in 1970 with someone else's expression of the desire for the end of the runaway sixties in 1966 or someone else's for a return to the progressive politics of the sixties in the buildup to the 2016 U.S. Presidential election is by producing those feelings relative to a multivalent "feeling of living after 1968."[5] The same month that Lenny Bruce died (August 1966), *Esquire* "benevolently" announced "that the Sixties are over"—benevolently: it seems almost as though the white, professional, male reader of *Esquire* was already expected to

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[4] On "1968," see Jeremi Suri, *The Global Revolutions of 1968* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007); Alain Badiou, "We Are Still the Contemporaries of May '68," in *The Communist Hypothesis* (New York: Verso, 2010), 41–100. Bergman, quoted in 2006, expresses something like Badiou's sentiment (that we are still the contemporaries of '68): "There's no doubt that what we did from 1968 through 1976, or through *Fighting Clowns* [Firesign/Rhino RNLP-018, LP, 1980] and 1982, was in some way responsive to the culture, and the world situation. The truth is that the culture hasn't changed all that much and neither has the world situation." Bergman, quoted in Wiebel, et al., *Backwards*, 50. The "secondary" or "industrial economy" in the U.S. had long been declining relative to the booming "tertiary" or "service" economy, but the absolute decline in 1965 was premature in the sense that it preceded Western Europe's by about a decade. Herman van der Wee, *Prosperity and Upheaval 1945–1980* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 250. On the squeeze on the capitalist world economy in the late sixties and early seventies, see also David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 9–15, 39–44, 55–58.

[5] Presumably other related comparisons could be made instead. I am using the term "the feeling of living after 1968" in the most open-ended sense to describe any feeling expressed regarding the passing of the sixties as an era of epochal historical change, desirable or undesirable, however diverse, antagonistic, or internally contradictory various expressions or productions of that feeling may otherwise appear. Not all expressions of that feeling speak of "1968" in the way we might—those expressed before 1968 certainly do not, and 1968 is an especially important landmark for college-educated professionals. I could have created the illusion of neutrality by speaking of "the feeling of living after the sixties," but "after 1968" serves well for us precisely because it specifies what is at stake: the feeling of living after the sixties can be felt as that of living after our own contemporaneity's most monumental political revolution. See Badiou, "Contemporaries of May '68."

feel that the liberalizing movements he had once proudly championed had sped out of control in the hands of women, students, and people of color.[6] Four years later, a contributor to the *Village Voice* named Susan L. Pansey seems to have been intent on reviving an obstinate "revolutionary" position, as she named it, following the demoralizing setbacks of '68.[7] Her argument was presented in the form of an ambivalent review of a pair of LP records—*Waiting for the Electrician* and *How Can You Be In Two Places*—then popular among "the dormitory debauchee set," as one appalled reviewer put it, or among the first students to attend college after the aborted global springtime of their own virtual *Stand*.[8]

As a writer who identified herself with a revolutionary position, Pansey had grounds for misgivings regarding those first two records by Phil Austin (1941–2015), Peter Bergman (1939–2012)—the same Peter of *Radio Free Oz* (*RFO*) cited in my epigraph—David Ossman (b. 1936), and Philip Proctor (b. 1940). Beginning with the release of their debut LP in January 1968—well before any of the goriest events of that year, though after Bergman's prophecy of apocalyptic violence—the Firesign Theatre was pointedly critical of mysticism, drug use, enthusiasm for contemporary popular music, and interest in American Indians, all of which were articulated to

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[6] Newman and Benton, "Remember," 109–113. When an artifact seems for us to be expressive of a "general mood," it is not because we are sloppy enough to read a homogeneous zeitgeist into an isolated quotation, but rather because it is easy to see, as if immediately, how the moods expressed or produced by an artifact could have made sense of a particular confluence of conditions. J. Hoberman, for example, reads the *Esquire* quotation thusly: "Lenny Bruce was dead of a drug overdose; Bob Dylan broke his neck in a motorcycle accident. The economy, too, was showing signs of exhaustion. Inflation surged while stock prices sagged." J. Hoberman, *The Dream Life: Movies, Media, and the Mythology of the Sixties* (New York: The New Press, 2003), 153. Hoberman's self-explanatory and coherent narrative almost seems to spin itself: Lenny Bruce, Bob Dylan, the economy, exhaustion, stagnation.

[7] Susan L. Pansey, "A vest has no sleeves," *Village Voice* (June 18, 1970), 46.

[8] Heywood Gould, "The bozos on the bus miss the boat," *The Press* (New Jersey, April 7, 1973).

one another by way of this pointed criticism as aspects of some sort of white progressivism embraced by all four men in other aspects of their own lives.[9] 1968 appears as a landmark in the struggle against whiter middle-class society by white people interpolated through the university into that society, and Pansey was writing for a white, liberal, middle-class periodical. She had good reason to read the Firesign Theatre's satires as criticisms of her own revolution. Austin looked back from the Reagan era with incredulity at the interpretation of his troupe as a "counterculture institution."[10] The way of relating to a whiter sixties progressivism which Austin heard involved in the troupe's LPs could not have been one of unqualified "identification." To the extent that an article like the one in *Esquire* had helped to make masculine expressions of

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[9] *Waiting for the Electrician* is especially pointed, relative to later Firesign albums, in its criticism of the "counterculture." The album portrays the fascination of white students with American Indian "culture" as forming yet another episode in a long history of white supremacist atrocities; it features a "guru" who leads a meditation on "the pure white light of stupidity" involving the recitation of saccharine lyrics from a song by the Beatles ("The Word," 1965); and it depicts a dystopian future where the implicitly racist authorities ("All spades are groovy," approves one police officer) subject people who are not "groovy" to "re-grooving" ("Oh! You took my stash from me: this is a frame-up!" objects an elderly woman stopped by the police) and where children rebel against their (baby-boomer?) parents by going to school. The depiction of the white-supremacist student—voiced by Bergman—who expresses an interest in American Indians is a transparent parody of Bergman himself: he had produced a segment in Hopi-land for *RFO* in 1967. Wiebel, et al., *Backwards*, 66–67; Dallas, *Dallas*, 72; Austin, et al., *Big Book of Plays*, 135. Bergman also remembers Ossman being "very serious about the American Indians." Wiebel, et al., *Backwards*, 47. Before 1968, when *Electrician* was still in production, it might have appeared as though the counterculture, already long since embraced and in large measure codified by corporate advertisers, was ascendant as a hegemonic "culture." See Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997). When Pansey reviewed *Electrician* in 1970, appearances may have changed: Frank, for example, notes a backlash against "hip consumerism" as early as the mid-sixties. Ibid., plates 18 and 19. Pansey's remarks might be read as a part of this backlash and as an expression of nostalgia for a remembered hip revolutionary before co-optation. On the narrative of co-optation, see Phil Ford, *Dig: Sound and Music in Hip Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 36.

[10] Phil Austin quoted in Harold DeMuir, "Three Guys Feeling an Elephant: An Interview with Firesign Theatre," *The Aquarian Weekly* (October 24, 1984), 40.

exhaustion into charming, knowing expressions of disillusionment—as charming or smug as the man who puts on the evening wear of white liberalism while winking at the anachronistic formality of it—Pansey's annoyance (her term) would have been understandable.[11]

What "attitude toward history" (Kenneth Burke's term) Austin or his bandmates heard on the four records they released between 1968 and 1971 is inherently a more complicated question.[12] This chapter produces some such way of relating as a historical possibility grounded in the Firesign Theatre's tetralogy, in comments made by members of the troupe, and in contemporary claims about what was sometimes referred to as the "radiophonic." I borrow this term from my primary sources to describe anything characterized by stylized practices productive of an appearance of radio as a broadcast medium, however this may appear for whomever.

The aspect of the historical possibility produced here which especially interests me concerns a dialectic of the antiquated and innovative. I speak of a "dialectic" in this case because antiquated aspects of the radiophonic can appear innovative and innovative aspects antiquated. This will require some explanation (see section 5.2). It becomes important when we think about the Firesign Theatre as involved in a composerly practice: the troupe's compositions, I will argue, are grounded not in some eternal present, but in a temporality structured by the

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[11] Pansey described the Firesign Theatre as "somewhat annoying." Pansey, "A vest," 46. See section 5.4.

[12] Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984 [1937]). It is always easier to say that something is not something else than it is to produce a particular object as a historical possibility, to say "this is not that" than to say "this works in a particular way." "This" and "that" can both be taken as abstractions; but particularity is sprawling and can never be produced in all of its plenitude.

involvement of the present in the "Future" (the capitalization is the troupe's).[13] The antiquated, through its definite involvement in a happening present, appears innovative.

The compositional "principle" shaping what I will be producing as the Firesign Theatre's composerly attitude toward history concerns a peculiar sort of density characteristic of the troupe's "layered textures": for the way of listening encouraged by this chapter, a channeling of voices and a complex layering of channels form the most recognizable aspects of the Firesign Theatre's stylized compositions.[14] Where the tangled texture sounds tangled, its various threads gathered together on the same one-dimensional surface, and the splintered texture appears shattered as if by an event which occurred somewhere outside its own materials and temporalities, the layered texture cleans things up by placing voices within their own more or less discrete "channels"—in a loose sense of the term—yet complicates things by bringing those channels to bear upon one another in the particular ways I will be discussing. The channeling of voices in itself, as I am describing it, is effected in a variety of ways: voices are located in distinctive areas of a microphone's range, assigned to one side or the other of the tetralogy's stereo array, distorted by sounds not affecting other voices, structured by the *ethos* of a narrative or the texture of a musical excerpt, and subjected to super-potent sound-reproduction

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[13] "Only the Future would tell." Austin, et al., *Big Book of Plays*, 21–22.

[14] "'We keep people confused,' says Ossman, 'we layer our records with different tracks. It's like trying to be in two different places at one time.'" Ossman quoted in Pansey, "A vest," 45. It would be harder to find a contemporary record which wasn't layered with different tracks than another one which was; obviously Ossman's description has an importance to him which is not immediately transparent.

technologies.[15] Some of these means of channeling will sound more radiophonic than others; I will take an interest in anything which might be described, however metaphorically, as a channeling of voices and a layering of channels. Jacob Smith has already helpfully commented upon the importance for the Firesign Theatre of channel surfing or "channel switching" (Smith's term), the sound of flipping through a radio or television dial and producing what Proctor, cited by Smith, referred to as "incredible synapses" between discrete streams of information.[16] But Smith provides nothing like the close reading of the textural layering of channels which this dissertation is prepared to produce. The "incredible" thing about the "synapses" Proctor observed as he sat at home flipping through channels—stranded without a private automobile by the egregious civic neglect of public transportation in Los Angeles's "affluent society"—was the

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[15] Voices occupy and move between distinct areas of a microphone's range: in the student assembly scene on "This Side" of *Dwarf*, Principal Poop, appearing large in the microphonic space, transcribes obscenities shouted by distant students, small in the microphone, in a high school assembly; he leans away from the microphone to provide his drummer with instructions; he is heard shouting obscenities back at the students as he departs from the microphone at the end of his address. The voice of Mrs. Arlene Yukamoto, in a passage discussed in detail in section 5.3.2, is channeled stereophonically into the right speaker. Voices are rarified or made to sound as though they are being transmitted over sound reproduction technologies: "And how do I make my voice do this?" Nick Danger asks while providing a "voice over" as if speaking over a disintegrating speaker. See side two of *Two Places*. In the Firesign Theatre's tetralogy, characters are given hierarchically differentiated locations within the *ethos* of the narrative: a commander speaks to his swarming troops on "The Other Side" of *Dwarf*; Principal Poop, in the place already cited, speaks to his students in an assembly. On the "ethos" of a narrative, see Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 52. Frye uses the term in a neo-Aristotelian sense to describe the "character" both of the individual actors and of their setting. The voices of men and women are separated into different music-textural threads in their performance of "Hymn 1517," discussed in section 5.3.2. Voices on *Dwarf* are subject to an unseen observer's sometimes ineffectual use of a television dial to switch between channels. I will use the term found in the *Big Book of Plays* and transcribe the sound of this television dial as "*TV* Click!"

[16] Jacob Smith, *Spoken Word: Postwar American Phonograph Cultures* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 178–182.

way in which the connections he was drawing effected a surreal mobility: not merely mobility within a static, preexistent space, but a mobility which continuously reproduces space in and through the synapses effected by channeled voices and channel-switching observers.[17]

Either this continuous reproduction can be read as an essentially static state of homogeneous flux—channel switching effects change between undifferentiated channels but produces no particular effects worth speaking of—or it is worth our while to examine particular events productive of that reproduction in detail.[18] I will be arguing for the latter. Smith contextualizes the troupe's interweaving of threadlike streams of information by citing the channelling of voices in contemporary films by Robert Altman.[19] This contextualization produces channel switching in the Firesign Theatre as a singular thing essentially like a similar thing. Such a reading shows erudition, but it is not clear to me that it helps Smith better describe

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[17] Contemporaries evidently considered what I am describing as "civic neglect" to be far from benign. See Cliff Slater, "General Motors and the Demise of Streetcars," *Transportation Quarterly* 51, no. 3 (Summer 1997), 45–66. Slater's purpose in this article is to challenge what he dismisses as an "urban myth" according to which streetcar systems like L.A.'s were dismantled by greedy automobile manufacturers with the complicity of public policymakers. For my purposes, the meaningfulness of the ostensible urban myth for various observers is of more interest than the correspondence of that myth to Slater's facts. My question is not, "When has GM engaged in illegal and illicit activities?" It is, "When people look at their so-called 'government,' do they see the rule of law, or do they see a state which serves as an instrument of capitalist exploitation?" Slater's argument is critiqued in three articles published in *Transportation Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (Winter 1998): Christopher Zearfoss, "Rebuttal to 'GM and the Demise of Streetcars,'" 15–23; Brian Cudahy, "General Motors and Mass Transit ...Again," 24–26; Peter Cole, "Revisiting the Demise of Streetcar Systems," 27–29.

[18] A stone falling down a well moves continuously, but in lieu of any contingencies complicating things, the continuously changing position of the stone can easily be graphed using a single function. A boxer fighting in a match moves continuously, but even though the boxer is rigorously trained to fight in a highly regulated ring, there are so many contingencies involved in a fight that no mathematical function, however complex, could ever graph the boxer's pathways in advance.

[19] Smith, *Spoken Word*, 181.

what channel switching might have accomplished for the Firesign Theatre or for Altman. I hope to furnish an alternative contextualization by reading some particular performances productive of a few of the Firesign Theatre's dense, layered, mutable radiophonic spaces. If the making of those sorts of spaces became involved in the making of the late 1960s in any way for anyone—if LP records are themselves effective rather than merely expressive of something else (of a sensibility, culture, category, or zeitgeist, for example)—then one of the best ways to discuss a troupe's "context" is to begin by speaking of their texts.

This at least is the understanding of "historical context" which I am claiming is implicit in the Firesign Theatre's work. When Paul, quoted in my epigraph, pressed the question—is history merely something to be observed or something to be engaged?—Peter promptly replied that his every second, breath, look, and action was already involved in history. In Peter's estimation, what he called an "inside feeling"—a feeling of being inside history—was a prerequisite for any effective "politics" (his term).[20] Peter illustrated his understanding of historical efficacy by describing the production of waves: one must change one's "innermost center" in order to effect change in history for the same reason that a rock makes its biggest wave when it first makes impact.[21] In other words, one's innermost center is where one first makes impact in actuality; from the "center" on out, the wave cannot be separated from the water. Bergman's analogy—every second and breath becomes effective in history just as each stone

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[20] Bergman and Robbins, "Radio Free Oz #1 August 15 & 17, 1966," CD 1, Track 7.

[21] Ibid.

becomes effective in water—is not especially original when read as a description of history.[22] It becomes important for my purposes because it can be used to ground as a historical possibility one way of hearing the radiophonic sounds Bergman spent much of his professional life producing.

The sources I have used to ground particular radiophonic appearances as historical possibilities are eclectic, but I have tried to be resourceful by drawing much of my material from an archival collection which might at first appear to be one degree or more removed from the Firesign Theatre: the Daphne Oram Collection at Goldsmiths, University of London. Oram (1925–2003) enters into my picture here through a connection she and Bergman share with a sound and music department at the BBC known as the Radiophonic Workshop (1958–1998).[23] In the early sixties, at about the time that Bergman—then traveling abroad in London as a recent graduate of Yale (class of 1961)—met and drew inspiration from Spike Milligan (1918–2002) of the BBC radio comedy program *The Goon Show* (1951–1960), Oram was already an erstwhile early participant in a workshop she had fleetingly hoped would produce a distinctly British contribution to Continental and U.S. forms of electronic music. The Oram Collection was worth

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[22] The narrator of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871–1872), for example, describes the "unhistoric" in terms of water set in motion by the center of an individual's "spirit." "Her finely touched spirit had still its fine issues, though they were not widely visible. Her full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth. But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts." George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (New York: Penguin, 1994), 838. The term "unhistoric" has to be read as somewhat ironic in this place because the key term is obviously "history": if "the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts," this only shows the inadequacy of "history" to the task it sets for itself.

[23] Louis Niebur, *Special Sound: The Creation and Legacy of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

mining for two reasons, one practical and the other historiographical. Because the archives of the BBC—like those of many, presumably all, major networks—are generally closed to academic researchers, primary source material on postwar radiophony has to somehow be gleaned through back channels. Oram's private collection provided one practical channel. And in terms of historiography, many extant descriptions of radiophony in the circles surrounding the Firesign Theatre seem to "resonate" with descriptions in the circles surrounding the Radiophonic Workshop, making the Oram Collection useful for producing historical possibilities. There is never any guarantee that any two people have "made sense" of the same "thing" in the same way. But as in "convergent evolution"—whereby two species "make sense" of similar ecologies in similar ways without sharing the same lineages—so too in human relations can we say that two similar descriptions of the same "thing" provide us with more material with which to produce as one historical possibility a sort of common logic involved in what appear biologically as individuated sense-making activities. Oram and Austin appear biologically as two absolutely separate individuals. Yet when we find them saying similar sorts of things about the radiophonic, we find more material with which to talk about the work radio "in itself" might have performed for each of them. A reading for historical possibility of this sort allows us to make more imaginative use of the limited resources at our disposal.

5.1 Radio and the historical imagination

Both Oram and Austin described themselves with pride as living the life of a "pretty standard," "middle-class," appropriately humble yet ambitious, relatively independent

craftsperson or "working stiff."[24] For both Oram and Austin, this apparent middleness was expressed in part through claims about their own senses of humor.[25] Austin, for example, felt that his position in class society had given him a peculiar aestheticizing valence on his contemporary soundscape:

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[24] "We're all pretty standard, college-educated middle-class Americans who come from a weird lower-middle-class artistic background. We've always been a fairly blue-collar organization […]. We're working stiffs. A friend of mine said that if we were in Japan, we'd be made a state preserve, like a swordmaker. [Would this be a desirable state for Austin or his friend?] We've always hand-crafted our work, whether it's high art or sappy entertainment. We've always put a good deal of work into it." Austin quoted in DeMuir, "Three Guys," 41. Oram had her own way of saying similar things. After requesting the forgiveness of scientists for not being scientific enough in her work, Oram balanced this request by remarking, "we will also need to ask the forgiveness of the composer if we attempt to bring down to earth some of his difficult aesthetics." Daphne Oram, *An Individual Note of Music Sound and Electronics* (London: Galliard Ltd., 1972), 7. "By composing […] music for Television, the Theatre, and the Cinema I have augmented my personal savings sufficiently to be able to purchase (or have specially built) the bare necessities for such a studio." Daphne Oram, "letter of application to the Gulbenkian Foundation," October 27, 1960, Oram 1/2/002, Daphne Oram Collection, Goldsmiths, University of London (cited as DOC in this chapter). "I do not want my studio to become a 'Factory for Noises,'" Oram remarks—but isn't the subtext that this would be the danger for a humble worker who also wants to avoid an overly haughty or "difficult aesthetics?" Ibid. Oram claimed proprietary rights to her work with numerous applications for patents and trademarks. See Oram 1/3 "Patents and Trademarks," DOC. Of course it takes a conspicuous degree of self-involvement or myopia for exceptionally affluent people like Oram and Austin to think of themselves as "pretty standard." Austin had a long-term record contract with Columbia, and *Dwarf* alone, released when he was not yet thirty, sold over 325,000 copies. Smith, *Spoken Word*, 175. Oram resigned a position at the BBC to work as a freelance composer for film, television, and theatre. In 1960, when she was only in her mid-thirties, she reported having had enough money in her personal savings to purchase the "bare necessities" for an expensive electronic music studio. Oram, "letter of application." Outside of the hegemonic ideology of an affluent proletarian middle class, neither Oram nor Austin could have been construed as average workers. But my goal is to critique experience, not to gauge how closely experience reproduces some sort of external reality.

[25] "[Oram] believes firmly […] that every kind of music should have a sense of humour, and is rather sad that a lot of modern music is getting away from that." David Douglas, "Miss Daphne Oram: Maker of Electronic Music," *The Glasgow Herald* (September 6, 1961).

> We [the Firesign Theatre] deal in a Babbitt-like existence, but we have no pejorative point of view about it because we're very much like that ourselves. We're not trying to put ourselves above the things we're laughing at, because we're very much a part of that world. We've all done a good deal of advertising work, so we know what we're talking about, and we know *exactly* what's funny about it. And, hopefully, we're not snobs about it.[26]

Austin is nothing if not eager to get inside what he recognizes as a famously disdained existence.

Radiophony may have seemed well-suited to middleness and the perspectives it grounded. When something called "radiophonic sound" was first introduced to the British public in the late 1950s, audiences were told that the BBC's new sound and music department produced something functional, rather than something like the purposeless autonomous art found in Continental *musique concrète*.[27] Describing her plans for a "radio music" which would become "a new art form equivalent to that […] in the sister world of the film," Oram approvingly remarked, "Light music seem to be leaps ahead in this field [the field of radio music]."[28] Austin

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[26] Austin quoted in DeMuir, "Three Guys," 41, emphasis in original.

[27] "Its functions [radiophonic sound's] are quite different from those of what is usually termed '*musique concrete*,' and although some of the techniques are similar radiophonic sound is not an art in itself—it is used to provide an additional 'dimension' for radio and television productions." "BBC Opens Britain's First Radiophonic Workshop," *Sound Broadcasting News* (May 27, 1958), Oram 3/2/055, DOC.

[28] "The Broadcasting of Music," uncredited typescript, presumably by Daphne Oram, Oram 3/2/025, DOC. I say that this source is "presumably by Daphne Oram" not only because it appears in her collection, but also because it reads in her voice and expresses ideas very similar to those found elsewhere in her work. Cp. one of Oram's lectures on electronic music in which she discusses means of attaining precise control over "pitch, volume, durations, rhythms and tone colours" and suggests that "it is in these spheres that electronic music could be said to be paving the way for the future." Week 14 General Overseas Service, *Monthly Music Review*, pre-recorded Tuesday, March 28, [no year is given with this source, but March 28th fell on a Tuesday between 1951 and 1966 only once: in 1961], p. 6, Oram 3/2/006, DOC.

associated the radiophonic with some sort of uniquely American brand of the egalitarian and innovative.[29] The articulation had been effected similarly by others in the past.[30]

Somewhat surprising is the fact that more than one member of the Firesign Theatre claimed to have found something especially contemporary about an egalitarian, innovative, and American radiophony. Austin contextualized the troupe's work relative to a newfound respect for

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[29] Austin calls attention to the normality of the sounds involved in his troupe's work. "One of the things that we use constantly is the normal kind of salesmanship-patois of America. We never really sit down and talk about this, but to me that's one of the most important things about the language structure of this country. It seems very odd to Englishmen or Australians who look at us, but we do a lot of serious communicating through what seems to be absolute *pap*." Austin quoted in DeMuir, "Three Guys," 41. Austin's remarks suggest that, in America at least, even the most banal recorded sounds convey more "pure information" than the most prestigious print materials. "If you're an American, used-car salesmen and tv preachers are telling you more in terms of pure information than *The New York Times*." Ibid. And Austin wants this "pure information" to become meaningful, rather than sounding merely "crazy." "We don't look at a used-car salesman's language as if it's crazy. What we've always done is point out that this kind of thing is going on 24 hours a day on every radio and television station in the country and in normal conversation between people. The whole idea of advertising yourself, and displaying yourself in cute and clever ways, is something that's sincere and unique about Americans. [¶] Where I think most people make a mistake in satirizing American advertising institutions is that they *hate* them too much. Our point is that we *don't* hate it; we're real interested in it as a language. We see an awful lot of human interactivity in some schlemiel trying to sell you shoes over the radio." Ibid. I can't say how carefully Austin was choosing his words, but the schlemiel in Yiddish theatre is the character who can't do anything correctly and who, consequently, tends to mess things up for other characters (the schlemiel spills soup in the schmuck's lap, for example). The effectiveness of the schlemiel becomes visible in the deleterious consequences for others of his own incompetence. Although I have not had the space to develop this theme, I think the interested reader would profit from reading section 5.3 below with an eye for various sorts of schlemiels.

[30] Neal O'Hara, "Radio Has Broadcast Some Elegant Ideas and Poor Men Will Soon Be Out Speeding in Their Own Home Made Sedans," *Boston Traveler* (May 14, 1924); "[Robert A.] Millikan Hails Radio as Leading Mankind to Democratic Ideal," *New York Times* (May 23, 1931); "The Story of American Efficiency: The Radio Industry," February 14, 1938, Series 14, Box 145, folder 3, GHC. Outside the U.S., radio was similarly seen as democratic, egalitarian, and innovative, if not as uniquely American. For example, Daphne Oram, in the guise of a pedagogue, promoted her "radiophonic" music among schoolchildren. Daphne Oram, "How to Make this 'New Music,'" *The Tape Recorder* 1, no. 5 (June 1959), 213.

"popular culture" among tastemakers in the 1960s,[31] and Proctor remarked upon the apparent immediacy of the "religious," integrative powers he detected in the "structuring"—as opposed to the verbal meaning—of the "rhythm" and "numbers," of "the American Salesman."[32] In these statements, the troupe appears to perform an "ideology of the radiophonic": radio serves not only as an analogy but as a model and foundation for a particular, ostensibly desirable way of living among others. Austin and Proctor claim to listen with respect or even reverence for a shape of life mediated by radiophonic sounds, and they suggest that in doing so, they are participating directly in their contemporaneity. Austin was explicit: "We're not as interested in making fun of the world we live in as we are in taking all the crude stuff about the world we live in and making it into something we hope will last."[33] Here we have a plain example of what I have already referred to as the Firesign Theatre's "composerly" attitude toward "the world we live in."

To my knowledge, there has been no systematic study of the place of radio in postwar historical imaginaries.[34] I can only offer a few general observations here. As at least one contemporary critic observed, the Firesign Theatre's radiophony blurs the distinctions between all "media involving sound (movies, radio, television, stage, real life)."[35] But the common

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[31] Austin quoted in DeMuir, "Three Guys," 41. On tastemakers' taste for pop culture, see chapter one.

[32] Proctor quoted in Austin, et al., *Big Book of Plays*, 37.

[33] Austin quoted in DeMuir, "Three Guys," 41.

[34] Readers interested in pursuing such a study should consult Susan J. Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), including its useful chapter on "Radio Comedy and Linguistic Slapstick" (100–123). See also the sources collected in Douglas Kahn and Gregory Whitehead, eds., *Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992). However, both sources give marked precedence to the decades before the ascent of television.

[35] Ed Ward, "Through Tirebiter's Television," *Rolling Stone* (October 15, 1970), 26–27.

denominator remains “sound,” and to judge from the contents of the tetralogy, this evidently implied, for the group itself, an insistent return to radio—unsurprisingly given that the troupe’s own name pays homage to “the Golden Age of Radio” and the President’s “fireside chats.” This is even less surprising when we consider that all four members, born between 1936 and 1941, were just the right age to be able to remember a childhood when television was presented as the logical continuation of radio rather than as a brand new medium—“radiovision” after radio—and when radio and “Radionics” were articulated to promises or warnings of a postwar utopia or

dystopia, a veritable "Radiocracy," as one commentator put it with apparent ambivalence.[36] All four members of the Firesign Theatre were born a decade or more after Lenny Bruce (1926–1966), and as far as I know none of them narrated their own interpolation into American society

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[36] Cartoons from the late thirties showed television monitors mounted atop radio sets. Series 169, Box 400, Folder 2 (1924–1947), George H. Clark Radioana Collection, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian (GHC). A company calling itself the Schmaltztron Co. of America advertised a "Radiovisionbed." Series 169, Box 399 (1916–1949, 2), GHC. Early television producers placed television closer to radio than to cinema by remarking that "the words […] in television drama," captured by "the 'high definition' recording[, …] are of paramount importance." "Television Drama: Live or 'Canned'?" *BBC Staff Association Bulletin* 67 (December 1955), 156. Radio was articulated to social engineering in general and to the administration of a coming society in particular. Remarking on advances in radio, one commentator wrote: "'What will men be doing with electricity twenty years from now!' This question, punctuated with an exclamation point rather than an interrogation mark, has been directed to me many times. But I am far more interested in a question which I have never heard anyone ask; 'What will electricity be doing with men twenty years from now?'" Undated typescript (ca. 1930s), presumably by George H. Clark, Series 14, Box 146, folder 3, GHC. In 1943, the president of RCA wrote: "The old frontiers of the world were frontiers of geography. The new frontiers are those of science. The covered wagon of the present day is the research laboratory. […] In most industries the emphasis is on bigness. Radio science is built on minuteness. […] The science of putting electrons to work in tubes is known as Electronics. Some radio men prefer to call it Radionics. […] In terms of results, we can say that [radio-electron tubes] are able to hear, see, feel, taste, remember calculate and even talk." David Sarnoff, "Post-War Horizons" (February 4, 1943), Series 14, Box 146, folder 2, GHC. In other words, radionics promised not only new frontiers but also new workers. RCA forecasted a day when people would be able to bake bread "inside out (with the crust on the inside, if that's where you want it)" using "radiothermics … serviced by radio men." Ad in the *Radio Service-Dealer* (May 1943), 9, Series 189, Box 402, Folder 2, GHC. Another clipping dated October 9, 1943 anticipates the use of "high-frequency radio waves" to "cook a roast of beef in six seconds." Robert Fontaine, "Home is Where You Press a Button," clipping, October 9, 1943, Series 189, Box 402, Folder 2, GHC. One cover of a publication called *Radiocracy and Electronitwits* (Christmas-New Year, 1944) depicts a flying "POST-WAR RADIOTRONICAR." An editorial by Hugo Gernsback entitled "Radiocracy" in this same publication explains: "Democracy means Government, or rule by the people, Radiocracy means the ruling power of radio. Radio and its newest satellite electronics, will soon be one of the world's most powerful influences. Nor will it be confined to a single country. It will literally make a deep imprint on the entire civilized world. Already radio, through broadcasting, has broken down old boundaries and imaginary geographical lines. Soon, with actual *power* added, radio energy may be taken out of the skies for the use of all mankind." The magazine is filled with prognostications of this sort. A copy can be found in Series 169, Box 399 (1916–1949, 2), GHC.

using any images reminiscent of Bruce's little "cathedrallike" radio.[37] But all of them belonged to a generation which could have read the evolution of postwar society relative to two narratives: one determined by transformations in postwar radiophony—including a seemingly emergent expansion across the domains of human experience, from "radio" to "radiovision" and "radiothermics" on to full-blown "Radiocracy"—the other by biographical developments unfolding over the course of their own childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. If one way of reading the passing of the sixties is in terms of a narrative of premature aging, such a narrative may have had special urgency for the generation born shortly before World War II. In 1968, theirs was the youthful generation in the prime of life, the aging generation about to be, in the words of the proverb, "over thirty"—old enough to lead the '68 movements (seven of the "Chicago Eight" were born between 1936 and 1941), but almost too old to be trusted.[38] There may have been more than a little of the quest for the fountain of youth in Austin's middle-aged, Reagan-era remembering of a desire to make something that "will last" out of the "crude stuff" of his world; certainly there is a degree of faith in at least some aspects of postwar society. It is crucial that these meritorious aspects are effected as such through a transvaluation of what might otherwise appear, especially to those not familiar with America's ostensibly egalitarian middle-

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[37] See chapter one.

[38] The phrase "don't trust anyone over thirty" is said to have entered popular culture through a remark made by Jack Weinberg, born in 1940, when he was a twenty-four year old leader of the Free Speech Movement at the University of California, Berkeley. Suzy Platt, *Respectfully Quoted: A Dictionary of Quotations* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1989), 343 (entry 1828). On generational conflicts and alliances in the "university college" of the late sixties, see Christopher Jencks and David Riesman, *The Academic Revolution* (New York: Anchor Books, 1969), 35–50.

class society—Austin refers to bewildered "Englishmen or Australians" from distant reaches of the Anglophone world—as what Austin calls "absolute *pap*."[39]

Participants in both *RFO* and the Firesign Theatre expressed an overarching preoccupation with the composition of historical and cosmological narratives.[40] Smith notes that from *Two Places* onward, the troupe "developed the theme that events of the 1940s were at the heart of ongoing social issues in the 1960s and 1970s."[41] I would add that in *Dwarf,* this theme is made more explicit than perhaps anywhere else when a narrative of the forties at the heart of the sixties and seventies is explicitly linked to the unfolding of a human life. George Tirebiter, the hero of that album, apparently inhabits some kind of universe parallel to our own as a child actor during wartime, a hungry twenty-something in "the hills" (perhaps the Hollywood Hills) during something like the present (ca. 1970), and an old man watching reruns of himself in an unhappy

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[39] Austin quoted in DeMuir, "Three Guys," 41.

[40] Peter prophesied race war and engaged in a debate with a frequent caller named "Wally" about whether their "young world" was mediated by an "old cycle" or a "new cycle." Bergman and Robbins, "Radio Free Oz #1 August 15 & 17, 1966," CD 1, Tracks 7 and 9. Paul remarked, "It's a very strange time we live in, and the times are somehow convergent." Bergman and Robbins, "Radio Free Oz #8 and #9 September 13, 14, 18, 19," Disc 11. Throughout the tetralogy, temporalities are explicitly depicted in spatial terms, often with reference to a shape which would normally be outside the temporality being spatialized. For example, one character in "The Further Adventures of Nick Danger," a radio show described on the back cover of *Two Places* as being "From the Archives of The Original Firesign Theatre Radio Hour, As First Broadcast December 6, 1941," tries to find where he is in a narrative by leafing through his script and listening to the other side of the record backwards. Another character in that same radio show prepares to travel "forward into the past." In his old age, the hero of *Dwarf* participates in a game show in which the host instructs him, "turn your back and get ready for this 'Stab from the Past!'"

[41] Smith, *Spoken Word*, 177.

(or does it turn out to be happy?) future.[42] The emergent stagnation of the 1970s is linked to what is thereby forecasted as the protracted middle age of a generation born just before the baby boomers; the forecast of an old age saturated with moving images of the past is equally prescient. "Remember those good old days when your Daddy and Mommy were fighting the war that made you possible?" asks an announcer on the troupe's 1969 single, "Forward into the Past" (Columbia 4-4505, 45). The question would seem more flatly satirical and less roundly comical if it didn't ring so true. Its ambivalences are thoroughgoing: living after 1968 appears as a renewed confrontation with the contradictions of the postwar "Pax Americana." The youthful rush of the sixties has its own ancient history; birth itself appears as conditioned by the most atrocious acts of war. If I were to produce the question to which the Firesign Theatre as I describe it here responds, it would be: how does one live through appalling contradictions such as these?

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[42] Austin later enumerated five ages of George Tirebiter: Tirebiter the Child, called Peorge or Peorgie; Tirebiter the College student, called George Tirebiter Camden; Tirebiter the Soldier, called Lt. Tirebiter; Tirebiter the Actor, called Dave Casman; Tirebiter the Old Man, called George Leroy Tirebiter. See Austin's liner notes to the 1987 Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab release of *Dwarf* (MFCD 880, CD). Tirebiter's name changes as he ages, as if an entire ideological order with Tirebiter in it is changing through and through as Tirebiter ages. Austin's interpretation does not seem totally adequate. For example, where in these five ages is the middle-aged George Tirebiter who runs for public office, perhaps as a Governor Reagan type figure? It is not clear to me that the five-part sequence Austin supplies accounts for the album's complex temporalities. But it at least provides one kind of ground for one or more possible interpretations.

5.2 The antiquated and innovative in history

At least some of the troupe's contemporaries suggested that a text sounded more antiquated the more it sounded radiophonic.[43] I do not have space to determine what in particular might have made a particular text sound "more" radiophonic to each of the particular observers cited here—the only particulars I have time to consider are those of the Firesign Theatre's LP

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[43] "'Not a masterpiece—not even a minor one,' is Donald McWhinnie's frank evaluation of 'Private Dreams and Public Nightmares,' which he will produce in the Third Programme on Monday, October 7, [1957] at 8:40 p.m. [¶] But he goes on: 'I hope you won't dismiss this work. Nothing has come out of your loudspeaker before quite like this serious first attempt to find out whether we can convey a new kind of emotional and intellectual experience by means of what we call radiophonic effects. […] It has been put together inch by inch, not to prove how clever we are, [nothing so pretentious!] but because we believe in the continuing possibilities of radio. […] This particular text attempts to create the world of a dream, haunted by the world of events. It is an obvious theme, but a useful one for an early exercise." BBC Press Service, "Radiophonic Poem (Third Programme, October 7[, 1957])," Oram 3/2/017, DOC. Something like a dialectic of the antiquated and innovative can be produced even in the case of the earliest days of radio. See, for example, George H. Clark, "A Twenty-Five Year Old Infant," typescript, May 26, 1924, Series 14, Box 145, folder 2, GHC. McWhinnie's remarks also intersect with more widespread attitudes toward electronic and computer music. When an interviewer asked Peter Zinovieff in 1968 whether his computer music was "meant to last," Zinovieff responded, "Certainly. Oh, it's the beginning of music which will last." *World At One*, interview with Peter Zinovieff, January 12, 1968, digitized recording, Oram DO176, DOC. Elsewhere Zinovieff was quoted saying, "I know our music is bad sometimes, but this is still an early stage and I wish people would be more forgiving sometimes." Unmarked clipping, Oram 6/6/023, DOC. "Electronic music still awaits its Beethoven," Oram remarked in 1960. Quoted in Alan Freedman, "Oramics: Is this the music of the future?" *Manchester Evening News* (July 11, 1960). "It seemed evident that on the whole the composer's technical reach far outstripped their artistic grasp. But these are early days." Eric Mason, "Tunes on a computer," undated clipping, Oram 6/6/024, DOC. One critic rendered the politics of these sorts of primitive novelties transparently: new music could only be justified as a primitive first attempt to make something which would be acceptable to adult society as it exists both now and forevermore. "In an article in this month's *Musical Times*, Tristram Cary, one of the composers represented last night, says 'not only do we not wish to replace instrumental music, we want to co-operate with it, live with it, and create with it. We are not trying to destroy an old dimension but to add a new one.' That un-brash, un-arrogant, adult attitude was on the whole borne out by the works we heard, which varied greatly in effect and apparent musical value but (though some were dull) were not pretentious." Ronald Crichton, "Electronic music," undated clipping, Oram 6/6/026, DOC. Better boring than pretentious!

records—but two generalities should be helpful. In the first place, something which seems radiophonic seems especially so either when it seems especially stylized or when it seems especially well-suited to the unique properties of radio—again, however these "unique properties" may appear for whomever. Second, these two variables seem complementary: if an object (*Gegenstand*) seems "more" stylized the more it seems as though the rules governing or shaping that object's appearance can be inferred from the object's own appearing, then a radiophonic object can appear more stylized the more it seems to have been conditioned, and in that sense regulated, by the unique properties of radio.

Whatever these unique properties may have been for whomever, contemporaries remarked that they could be heard with much greater clarity thanks to two technologies ascendant in the postwar era: magnetic tape and FM broadcasting. The two technologies were complementary: the higher fidelity of FM made the transition to tape from the older vinyl "discs" seem like a necessary progression.[44] As one writer reported in 1957, greater clarity only made radio seem that much more "ludicrous"—or "cornier," as another writer put it in 1962.[45] Since more aural information could be heard, it was easier to make inferences regarding the techniques being used to produce standard radiophonic effects.

Evidently there was something comic about the perspective which could hear effects mediated by incongruous, old-fashioned techniques: as Smith points out, the Firesign Theatre

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[44] "The Simulation of Open-Air Acoustics in the Studio: A Possible Method of Improvement," undated typescript, Oram 3/2/029, DOC; "The Cologne Studio Centre of Westdeutscher Rundfunk," report on visit made August 14–18, 1957, perhaps by Oram or by J.N. Borwick, Oram 3/2/037, DOC.

[45] "Cologne Studio Centre," 8–9; Letter from Beryl Stevens (W.M. Larkins & Co. Ltd), June 4, 1962, Oram 8/46/001, DOC. See also Review of *A Winter Journey*, March 1, 1958, Oram 6/6/027, DOC.

explicitly referenced more than one radiophonic technique in their narratives.[46] Primitive novelties seemed to be inherently ludicrous, corny, or comic. Presumably a comedy troupe would have found these effects more desirable than would, say, a serious composer.[47]

For Oram, the goal for the "future" of "radio music" was clear—I am quoting Oram's terms.[48] The delimited conditions of radio had to be escaped, "blatant techniques" had to be expelled, and the solitary composer as "mastercraftsman"—craftsperson, not artist—operating "within strict limits and with restraint" had to acquire absolute control over the most "subtle effects."[49] Anything less than that might "prove of interest to some our listeners" as a "novelty," but never as "a new art form."[50] Oram as predecessor of the future master craftsperson is caught between her regrettably hokey novelties and her desire for something more serious. Although she does not explain what makes a technique seem "blatant," I don't think my inference is too reaching: something is done blatantly when it is not only "bad" in itself, but when it is done

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[46] Smith cites allusions to cellophane "fire" and cornstarch "snow." Smith, *Spoken Word*, 176. An emphasis on the incongruity between a sound effect and its antiquated means of production can be observed elsewhere. In the letter to Oram dated June 4, 1962, just cited, Beryl Stevens remarks that "the type of sound I have in mind could be corny in its way, too, without being so much so as the xylophone and swanee whistle." Does the reference to the "swanee whistle" function as an allusion to Stephen Foster's quaint American racism?

[47] "The laughter that electronic music once provoked," one critic remarked, "is now dying away before its increasing recognition as a new art form." A.T.R., "Daphne Oram: Profile of an Electronics Pioneer," *Tape Recording and High Fidelity Reproduction Magazine* 3, no. 10 (May 1962), 39.

[48] "Broadcasting of Music"; Week 14 General Overseas Service, *Monthly Music Review*, 6.

[49] "Broadcasting of Music." On the distinction between "artist" and "craftsman" in modern discourses, see Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780–1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), xv, 30–48.

[50] "Broadcasting of Music."

openly, for all to see. Like the Laff Boy with the "lighter touch,"[51] Oram's master craftsperson leaves no visible record of their fine craft. Good effects are too subtle to divulge the techniques which effect them; the novelty, by contrast, rudely advertises its own mechanism.

What is at stake here is not merely an attitude toward "the future" as some kind of universally recognized thing but a particular way of shaping historical time and with it of understanding where, relative to the present, the future "is." The belief that one's radiophonic experiments are still early relative to the masterworks of a future master craftsperson depends upon an undifferentiated "rectilinear time," a time which unfolds in a straight, homogeneous line.[52] For this conception of time, people in the future desire exactly what we desire in the present because nothing ever changes, except that people more and more completely master an eternal, external empire of necessity. There is a direct line never once interrupted by any unexpected developments structured by separate temporalities stretching from the "early" experiment to the works of the master craftsperson.[53] The future goal is already present today in the form of a goal in the early present for the future, and we are consigned to move toward that goal by passing away. We can enjoy the cheap, "light" pleasures of novelties, but the weightiness of our experiments must be borrowed from the future; and this weightiness can indeed be

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[51] See chapter two.

[52] On "homogeneous, empty time," see Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," *Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938–1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 389–400. On "rectilinear time," see Octavio Paz, *Corriente Alterna* (Mexico: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1967), 147–223.

[53] As noted above, Oram observed that "light music" was "leaps ahead" in the field of "radio music." It does not apparently occur to her that this prompts an obvious question: if "light music" has already made progress, why should Oram begin with early experiments? Evidently a corollary of her homogeneous, empty time is the belief that the shape of her present is grounded in an eternal social order: light music is here, serious music is there, and the one cannot affect or effect the other.

borrowed from the future precisely because we occupy one eternally undifferentiated stream of time—the future is the same as the present, only better and not yet. From this standpoint, the composer who whittles away her life producing a forgettable body of work appears as the fulfillment of a prophecy.[54] We appear as the dead but are compensated for our decay by a glimpse from the mountaintop of the master craftsperson at work.[55]

Precisely because it denigrates the living, this particular thought of history makes for an easy target or straw man for people who claim that "history," in general, serves ordinary people poorly and who advocate instead for an alternative thought of history which believes itself to have established an eternal present unmediated by any thought of history at all—we can call this alternative concept an ahistorical thought of history.[56] This is not the alternative which interests

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[54] I am not able to report that Oram's historical imaginary served her well either aesthetically or politically. In 1990, amidst her autumn years, Oram sounded frustrated. Oram, "Looking Back." Here too she is looking to the future: the subtitle is "to see Ahead." But by this time she has learned to concede that certain forms of collectivity—in her case, a collective composed of "women"—may be necessary to establish the conditions where individual composers can master their crafts. In this sense she had learned something like the logic of the "identitarian" or "corporatist" politics—the "politics of the governed," as Partha Chatterjee puts it—which I discussed in chapter four. Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

[55] The parallel between Oram's "mastercraftsman" and the skilled labor of the Laff Boy discussed in chapter two is obvious. We could ground these figures in an "ideology of the skilled laborer": precisely at a time when workers were being deskilled and affluence was being severed from any connection to skilled labor, an imagined bygone era's skilled laborer appeared as a heroic figure.

[56] Ford, *Dig*, 223–225. Ford both studies expressions of the ahistorical thought of history and advocates for it. I associate this thought of history most with Schopenhauer. See Volume II of *The World as Will and Representation*, especially chapter XXXVIII, "On History." Nietzsche too acknowledges that "history" can become an unnecessary, demeaning burden for people trying to live, and he explicitly states that it would be better not to study history at all rather than to carry this burden. However, he also recognizes beneficial "uses" for history. See Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," in *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 57–123.

me here. The Firesign Theatre too orients itself relative to some kind of "Future," a future where the truth about a strange present could finally be observed.[57] But whereas observers in Oram's circles described a desirable radiophonic future where artists have overcome the "ludicrous" and achieved a serious, high art with "subtle effects,"[58] the Firesign Theatre seems to have been more intrigued by the contradictory novelty, as such, of antiquated sounds. And this appears to be due less to the substitution of some alternative goal—ludicrous sounds rather than subtle effects, for example—than to a completely different way of understanding the relationship between the present and the future. Whereas Oram defers to the future as the seat of her own ideals, the Firesign Theatre looks to the future precisely because, they claim, they do not yet know what they are doing.[59] Instead of present actions being important because of what they anticipate, the future becomes important as a place mediated by the past. A record of present actions finally becomes legible when it effects a composition for the future observer.

This distinction matters for observers who read reality not as flat but as contradictory, as involving "things" which are neither separate from nor reducible to their circumstances. Oram's master craftsperson is master of their radiophonic universe. Early attempts at radio music are such in that they are still bogged down by pesky matter. This state can be gauged because the entire universe is legible relative to one cardinal point of orientation, the triumphantly subtle work of the master craftsperson. Members of the Firesign Theatre, by contrast, repeatedly speak of composition as mediated by the materials found at hand. Those materials survive as artifacts,

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[57] Austin, et al., *Big Book of Plays*, 21–22.

[58] Review of *A Winter Journey*; "Simulation of Open-Air Acoustics"; "Cologne Studio Centre," 8–9; Letter from Beryl Stevens; A.T.R., "Electronics Pioneer," 39.

[59] Austin, et al., *Big Book of Plays*, 21–22.

but not without having been worked on. As noted above, Bergman describes his "inside feeling" using the image of a stone making waves in a body of water: if the stone in this metaphor is an individual's "innermost center," as Bergman calls it, none of the personal effects of that individual, beyond perhaps the innermost center itself, can be separated from the water in and through which the stone becomes effective.[60] Rectilinear time only has any bearing in a flat universe; if actuality itself appears to be contradictory in that it is only known by an observer who observes distinct, irreducible levels or moments, then there is no guarantee that a time traveler will be able to get from one historical moment to another by moving in a straight line. For a dialectical historian, the future—like any other historical moment—is known in and through the peculiar shape of the materials defining it for particular observers. The future is an important historical moment for people living in the present not because they see themselves only as the primitive ancestors of sophisticated future peoples, but because the materials determining the future have been given their peculiar shape in part through present activity. Observers "inside" history care about the future not because they are moving toward it, but because they are making it.

5.3 Weaving radiophonic density

There is a moment in the student assembly scene centered microphonically at a principal's podium on "This Side"—side one—of *Dwarf* where someone's voice can be heard hollering angrily at the dark edge of the microphonic space, "What is reality?" The phrase is spoken more in the manner of an epithet than a question. On one level, it reads simply as the

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[60] Bergman and Robbins, "Radio Free Oz #1 August 15 & 17, 1966," CD 1, Track 7.

outburst of a frustrated student demanding explanations in a school that has plainly failed him.[61] For the purposes of this chapter, I'll call this the diegetic level: within the context of "the scene" defined as narrowly as possible, this is what the line "means." It seems that the phrase is meant to be heard as equally legible on at least two additional hermeneutic levels.

The most obvious second level involves the listener's own observation less of the "reality" of the pep rally than of the weaving, as such, of that reality. I'll call this the "ethical" level because it concerns the making of relationships among people on the relative small scale of a pep rally. Whatever the reality of the pep rally "is" in this scene, it is gradually being made, and one actor in particular has an especially potent role to play in that making. A stammering Principal Poop repeatedly uses his privileged position at the microphone—thus at the center of the one-dimensional microphonic space structuring the pep rally as such—to revise the exclamations of a hollering student or group of students. "Fuck you!" shouts a student. "Thank you," answers Poop. "Eat it!"/"You bet!" "Eat it raw!"/"Rah, rah, rah! That's the spirits we have here!" The student's distress is especially understandable in this context because the question "what is reality?" is heard across from brief glimpses behind the appearances woven rather shabbily by "the Pooper"—the affectionate nickname Peorgie, the George Tirebiter character in this sequence, uses to refer to Poop. Reverb channels the principal's voice into two separate spaces: when his voice appears bathed in reverb, he can be heard managing a rally in a

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[61] "We made this one [*Dwarf*] at the time of the Kent State murders [of May 4, 1970], so naturally we wrote about schools." Ossman quoted in Austin, et al., *Big Book of Plays*, 59.

reverberant space; without reverb, he can be heard behind the scenes giving instructions to a rowdy backing band.[62]

A third level seems to be opened by the slip of the tongue in Poop's commentary on his own revised version of the "eat it raw" exclamation—"That's the spirits we have here!" The assembly scene is not only about the faltering manufacture of a pep rally, but also about the failed manufacture, effected in and through that pep rally, of a vast ideological space. The phrase "that is the spirits" calls attention to that manufacture by exposing a fracture in the zeitgeist: in the place designated as that of one "that," one homogeneous spirit, we have many unruly "spirits." I'll call this the "ideological level" because it articulates interpersonal relationships to a thought of totality.

Poop's various failures as a demagogue can be read on this ideological level. In a transparent satire of the contradictory relationship between the proletarian middle class and the administrators who are supposed to be selected from within and elected by that class, he refers to his "fellow kids."[63] He not only blurs the distinction between distinct "ideological state apparatuses" or ISAs (Althusser's shorthand), in this case the schools and the military, but demonstrates an inability to conceal the ultimate beneficiaries of those ISAs: "Line up, sign up, and re-enlist today because we need more schooling for more students for Morse Science

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[62] When Principal Poop speaks into the podium microphone, distant reverberations can be heard echoing off the walls of the assembly hall. When he turns to shush his unruly drummer, his voice is purified of any involvement in a reverberant space.

[63] A related joke appears on *Electrician* when a white man addresses a group of American Indians as "my fellow redskins." The later version (on *Dwarf*) is an improvement: if white men never appear as American Indians, the managerial class does indeed appear to be as childish as it causes the social classes it manages to appear—this is part of what allows the managerial stratum to legitimate its authority as "egalitarian" (we are all overgrown children, so if some of us get treated that way, it is no great injustice).

High"—what "we" need we need for the sake of the self-legitimating ISAs themselves.[64] For the edification of students enveloped in microphonic darkness, he quotes "the words of the foundry, er, founder of Morse Science High School, Ukaipah Heap"—precisely as 'umble as Uriah Heep, no doubt—a man who "pressed the first bricks with his own hands." "'Knowledge for the pupil —the people,' he said. 'Give them a light and they'll follow it anywhere.' We think that is a fair and wise guy, uh, rule to be guided by." Moments after Poop inadvertently refers to the wise guide as a gangster (a "wise guy"), the student shouts the ontological question cited above. The light of knowledge itself does its work by keeping its followers in the darkness. Social reality on this third level is less what is hidden in the shadows and revealed in the light than the play of light and shadow itself as manipulated by administrators.

All three of these levels might be divided into two dialectically intertwined moments: the making of space and the locating of speakers within that space—"dialectically intertwined" in the sense that the two moments refer to one another. On the "ideological" level, for example, the Pooper's failed production of an ideological space appears alongside questions about the location of speakers within that space. The liminal state of the obscene student lends the Pooper's microphone the sort of porous boundary which an ideological space is not supposed to have: ideological space is supposed to be self-contained, not surrounded by outsiders who, through their involvement—in this case, their audibility—contradictorily become liminal insiders; the

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[64] Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards an Investigation," in *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 85–126.

liminal in the ideological appears as some sort of accident.[65] The Pooper is supposed to represent his "fellow kids." Since he cannot, the question of their presence can only be addressed with an obscurely differentiated geography extending far beyond the narrow microphonic space. From what subject position do the voices speak? Not from the position they are assigned by the Pooper's revisions and exegeses. Space has to be made, and its various events and participants have to be located within the manufactured space produced in part by events and participants themselves.

With these distinctions in mind—three levels with two moments each—it is possible to produce numerous places all across the Firesign Theatre's tetralogy where an observer might apply the question not so much of what reality "is" as that of how reality is produced and what the consequences of the production of reality are for people involved in that production. Everything audible on the tetralogy becomes involved in the production of "reality" for the listener: the audible surface is identified with a differentiated or multi-layered, multi-channeled yet ultimately singular "reality" appearing in part, or in some aspect, for an observer. Administrators do not stand in a higher realm producing reality as a predetermined context for everyone else. Authority figures in the tetralogy may have superior access to tools of domination, such as the Pooper's microphone, but they have no final say in what "is." Poop himself is

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[65] Hegel remarks that "the rabble," the most destitute and desperate, are produced by society—by "modern society in particular," he adds—and yet his discussion places that group outside society without naming the glaring contradiction: modern society produces misery, yet bears no responsibility for it. G.W. F. Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. T.M. Knox (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 221–222 (paragraphs 244 and 245, with the addition and the remark). To put it in more current terms, the rabble has an abstract existence as a group of "outsiders" but an actual existence as a population produced in and through the citizenry's "mainstream" society. See Frank Ruda, *Hegel's Rabble: An Investigation into Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (New York: Bloomsbury Studies in Philosophy, 2013).

obliged to work with materials hurled at him from the edge of the microphonic space. His departure from the podium and entry into the liminal shadow realm inhabited by his fellow kids is made audible in his receding final words: "Fuck you too!" As he enters a vernacular of his own making—the space of his fellow kids—Poop's lack of self control betrays his ultimate lack of control.[66]

5.3.1 Making space

The dialectic of the antiquated and innovative discussed above furnishes one of the most prevalent means by which the making of radiophonic space appears to become audible. We can imagine we hear the making of radiophonic density when we see a radio show described in the album liner notes as being "From the Archives of The Original Firesign Theatre Radio Hour, As First Broadcast December 6, 1941," or when we hear a recording which sounds primitive stylistically or worn-out in its recording medium abruptly spliced into the album track, or when the finished recording sounds as though it were still trying out the basic parameters of a technology—as, for example, when the microphonic dimension becomes audible in an assembly's distant ring of shouting students or in a long, narrow bus filled with a receding line of

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[66] Incidentally, this phrase—"Fuck you!"—appears again on the distant edge of the microphonic space on "The Other Side" (side two) of *Dwarf*. Here again it is directed towards an authority figure standing at a kind of podium. General Klein attempts to start a bidding war for his uniform with an auctioneer's cry: "How much do I hear?" Far in the distance, a voice responds, "That's metaphysically absurd, man! How could I know what you hear?" A second voice in the distance joins in: "Yeah! Fuck you!" General Klein, perhaps adopting something not unlike Principal Poop's managerial strategy, responds, "I don't hear that."

honking clown noses.[67] In all of these illustrations, the antiquated appears not so much as something belonging to yesterday's fashions as something highly stylized according to an exceptionally basic set of rules or conditions: the 1941 radio show becomes a period piece grounded in a definite, easily recognizable milieu; the primitive musical excerpt uses the basic building blocks of a musical system, while the scratchy recording seems to make the basis of sound reproduction "itself" audible; the performance which makes the microphonic dimension audible as such betrays the presence of essential technologies which, "ideally," would be transparent.[68] The audibility of fundamental music-stylistic and technological mechanisms makes it seem as though basic units—"every second and breath and look and thing that I do"—are becoming visible not merely as effects but also as effective. It is as if, by hearing the mechanism "in itself," we are getting all the way back to something like Bergman's "innermost center"—I say "all the way back" because, as we saw, Bergman speaks of the innermost center as the essential starting point for historical effects. The antiquated effect makes the innovative effect appear in a particular way for an observer prepared to read this dialectic of the antiquated and innovative as such, an observer not unlike the one I grounded as a historical possibility in the artifacts discussed in section 5.2.

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[67] "The Further Adventures of Nick Danger" is described on the back cover of *Two Places* as being "From the Archives of The Original Firesign Theatre Radio Hour, As First Broadcast December 6, 1941." The adjective "further" places the show in a series receding into a past preceding December 6, 1941. The worn-out and stylistically primitive recording I allude to is transcribed as Figure 5.1. The student assembly on *Dwarf* was just discussed. The sound of honking noses receding along a narrow bus appears on *Bozos*.

[68] On sound reproduction technologies as "ideally" transparent, see James Lastra's remarks on the "invisible auditor" in *Sound Technology and the American Cinema: Perception, Representation, Modernity* (New York: Columbia, 2000), 159–167.

Both the listeners who hear and the characters and events heard quickly get disoriented spatio-temporally on the tetralogy. One character in "The Further Adventures of Nick Danger"—the program described on the back cover of *Two Places* as being "From the Archives"—leafs through his script and listens to the other side of the record being played backwards as he tries to find where he is in the unfolding of a narrative, a narrative within and through which he himself plays a constitutive, dynamic part.[69] At the end of *Two Places*, a voice is heard saying, "Scene three, take 600." That there is evidently no way of knowing what this statement has to do with anything seems irrelevant: whatever it refers to, the statement produces an imagined numbered scene involving six hundred takes occurring somewhere outside the temporality of the scene "itself." It produces an imagined spatiotemporal density comprised of at least six hundred trials recorded one before the other, and *Two Places* acquires that density simply by concluding with the free-floating fragment—perhaps the troupe felt the statement gave the audience a taste of their own feelings regarding an album they must have labored over with some intensity.

Similarly, the fleeting orchestral excerpt which abruptly sounds at the conclusion of "This Side" makes its own motion through metrical and harmonic space about as obscure as possible within the predictable limits of a "rigid stereotypology," to borrow an apt term from Adorno (see Figure 5.1).[70] As seen in the transcription, the excerpt appears as a definite harmonic progression: an imperfect authentic cadence in F major, with a vii$^{\circ 7}$ chord serving as a passing chord between the V and the I and a sixth scale-degree (D) added to the I chord. But the tonal

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[69] A peculiar temporality is crafted for this "show": these are the "further" adventures, and they have supposedly been in the "archive" since World War II.

[70] Theodor W. Adorno, "On Jazz" [1936], *Essays on Music*, trans. Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 472.

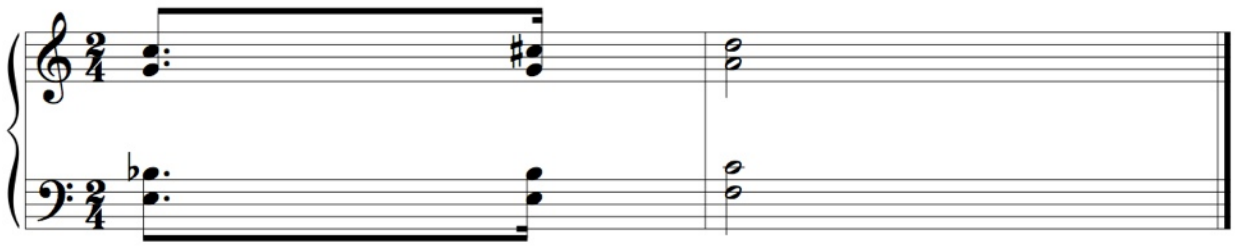

Figure 5.1 Reduction of a fragmentary orchestral excerpt heard at the end of "This Side" of *Don't Crush That Dwarf, Hand Me the Pliers* (1970).

relationship between this excerpt and the music which precedes it, the melodic motion, the meter, the harmonies, and the position of the fragment on the LP as a whole all serve to make one of the least ambiguous cadences in tonal music sound inconclusive. A few seconds before the fragment sounds, an orchestra is heard playing a two-octave chromatic descent in sixteenth-notes over a duple-simple meter from a high C through a middle C to a low C, with the high C and the low C sounding on downbeats.[71] Looking back from a fragment in F major, one might try to hear this descent from C through C to C as establishing the note which might later be heard as the dominant in an authentic cadence in F major. But the actual effect is more jarring than that. As the final seconds of "This Side" play out, it sounds as though a tonal center previously established by repetitions and metrical accents suddenly, without any preparation, becomes a dominant. As for the melodic motion in this excerpt, while I cannot say for sure that I hear all the voice leading and octave doublings characterizing the grainy orchestral recording, the basic effect for me is the same as that of the "reduction" I've supplied in Figure 5.1: all voices appear to move in only one direction, upward by steps and half-steps; what goes up never comes back

[71] **<u>C</u>**, B, Bb, A, **Ab**, G, Gb, F, **<u>E</u>**, Eb, D, Db, **C**, B, Bb, A, **<u>Ab</u>**, G, Gb, F, **E**, Eb, D, Db, **<u>C</u>**. If these notes are passing as sixteenth-notes in a 2/4 meter, all three Cs appear on beats (highlighted in bold), the first and last Cs on downbeats (underlined).

down. Likewise, metrically, the excerpt sounds as an anacrusis followed by an arrival on a downbeat. But the arrival comes with a sense of incompleteness in the sense that a completed measure can only be heard, if at all, in the next two beats, not included in my reduction: a rapid glissando upward in the high strings on one beat is followed by a "stinger" on the tonic on the next beat. Without a prior statement of the measure to contextualize or ground these two events (glissando and stinger), they sound more like ornamental flashes of light than like clearly defined events to be "projected" across preceding events as "meter."[72] And considering that these are the last sounds heard at the moment before "This Side" ends, leaving the listener to flip the record over for "The Other Side"—these are the terms the troupe used to name the two different sides of this particular LP—anything inconclusive about what we hear is exacerbated by the knowledge that we are in a moment of transition.

We can well imagine how this fragment of recorded sound might have sounded within the continuity of the recording from which it has apparently been excerpted. This is highly stylized music in the sense that the "rules" can be inferred from the brief excerpt itself: play dotted rhythms, move chromatically between unmistakable diatonic scale-degrees, and add schmaltzy chord extensions. We can infer that the rest of the excerpt's piece would tell us very little extra: it is almost as though the excerpt serves as an epigrammatic impersonation of itself.[73] There is nothing stylistically unusual about this excerpt; that is half my point.

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[72] On "Meter as Projection," see the chapter of that name in Christopher Hasty, *Meter as Rhythm* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 84–95.

[73] On the "epigrammatic impersonation" as opposed to the "thorough impersonation," see chapter one. Of course, in this case the excerpt is the actual recording "itself," making it absolutely "thorough." But because the excerpt is so rigidly stereotyped, the thoroughness seems wasted. The excerpt sounds like a parody of itself.

Once the excerpt has been interpolated as the final audible seconds of "This Side," however, the fragment does not sound as we assume it would have as part of some homogeneous whole. It sounds not only as an excerpt in an antiquated style—antiquated not because a historical musicologist would necessarily assign it to a particular era, but because it sounds highly regular, its stylistic rules transparently displayed in the excerpt itself—but also as a relic from a temporality outside that of *Dwarf*. It is not the case that we have the temporality of *Dwarf* and within that predetermined temporality a neatly framed recording appears as if on the white space of a gallery wall. What we might think of as the final seconds of "This Side" are inseparable from the fragment which constitutes those final seconds. The transition sounds as something finished (V to I), half-finished (up not down), and just beginning all at once (up not down, with nothing preceding it). In these final seconds, the point of interest is the complex, contradictory temporality itself as woven through a misplaced fragment, a fragment misplaced within the space which it itself helps to constitute.

The making of the troupe's spatial spaces calls attention to itself in analogous ways. One "blatant" radiophonic effect can be found in the sound of honking noses receding along the length of a bus on *Bozos*: lining up a series of events along the full length of the microphonic dimension in a diegetic space like a bus which we both hear and imagine as narrow sounds not expansive, but rather limited, almost claustrophobic. Minutes later on the same album, when the tourists make their way through "The Path of Science," what we hear is less the material we need to imagine a space beyond the microphonic dimension than the sound of the techniques themselves used to create that material: the tour guide is muffled by a filter here, bathed in reverb

there, surrounded by sound effects there.[74] Whereas in *Tramp Time Volume 1* the splintered texture seemed to carry with it a loss of depth (see chapter four), in "The Path of Science," the materials which allow us to imagine a space beyond the microphonic dimension convey not information about what has been lost in the act of recording, but about what has accumulated over the course of composition; in this sense, the Firesign Theatre's effects seem more "intentional" and stylized. We have just heard the microphonic dimension vividly defined by honking noses; hearing it then layered with effects only helps us to hear just that: the microphonic dimension layered with effects. Two comic events are mediated by the moment when the hero of *Two Places* fades in amplitude as he rushes into thick reverb hollering "There's a vacancy!" One is the dreamlike pun: moments after the hero disappears into a gaping hole, he emerges in a hotel lobby to find a room available. The other one is the kind of observational humor involved in commenting on the radiophonic situation itself: before the phrase celebrates the availability of a room, it revels in the composition of a cavernous radiophonic space. There is a vacancy! Do you hear it?

5.3.2 Locating events

The hero bathed in reverb who remarks upon the presence of a vacancy can be heard as baptized into that vacancy. His "location" at the diegetic level is a fairly transparent matter, even if the subsequent pun—there is a vacancy in the hotel—abruptly changes that location. At this level, our knowledge of the speaker's location draws upon the same information used to produce our knowledge of the vacancy he inhabits. In some ways, the hero's reverberant voice and the

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[74] A similar kind of journey through radiophonic effects can be heard on *Two Places* where Ralph Spoilsport shows a customer around the shop.

reverberant vacancy inhabited by that voice do not seem to separate into distinct gestalts in the way that a flower can be distinguished from a vase.[75] The reverberant voice depends upon both the voice and the reverberant space where the voice becomes reverberant, a space which becomes audible in a particular way through the reverberant voice. Someone might attempt to argue from this that sound's distinctive properties have made it an especially suitable medium for the sort of performance of relationships between people I have been describing. This is debatable,[76] but such an argument could find one possible ground in Bergman's illustration of the historical as composed of waves.

At the ethical and ideological levels of the troupe's audible texts, the dialectical separation of the moment of making and the moment of locating can be heard as explicitly woven through the narrative. When an automated interlocutor in *Bozos* botches the name of a man named "Clem," previously unseen aspects of the narrative's *ethos* are suddenly illuminated. It is not merely that Clem's hesitant statement—"Uh, Clem"—becomes the machine's "UHCLEM" for the remainder of the narrative.[77] That simple fact appears comic because it betrays the way in which the machine "knows" names; it abruptly illumines the workings of the machine, rapidly expanding our knowledge of the totality of an ethical situation. Clem's own recorded voice is played back to him each time he is addressed, as if the machine can barely

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[75] Against descriptions of reverberant spaces as awash with sound, however, Casey O'Callaghan argues convincingly that we hear sounds as "events" with definite locations, not as waves bouncing off surfaces. Casey O'Callaghan, *Sounds: A Philosophical Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). Still, I think it is safe to say that there is a lack of "definition" to the reverberant voice.

[76] See my citation of O'Callaghan above. Readers interested in this question should consider Peter Doyle's *Echo and Reverb: Fabricating Space in Popular Music, 1900–1960* (Wesleyan University Press, 2005).

[77] Austin, et al., *Big Book of Plays*, 105, 116.

mimic elementary behaviors characteristic of human relations. Whatever the machine knows about Clem it knows in and through a mode and body of knowledge where speech disfluencies are smoothed out into an undifferentiated stream of information. Clem's act of naming himself is played back for him and for his benefit. His capacity to produce his subject position in a shape of ethical life sounds like an echo in a machine world which can only articulate a displaced fragment to an invisible set of ones and zeros.[78] And what is menacing about all of this is that the machine's incompetence, as it appears from a human standpoint, becomes an emblem of power: Clem is allowed to retain his voice, but what he says becomes a mere ornament for a shape of ethical life largely determined according to a logic belonging to an order of "intelligence" unlike human intelligence.

This last illustration puts one of the Firesign Theatre's basic comic mechanisms on display: a piece of relatively isolated information seems to sprout illumined roots radiating across an increasingly complex ethical situation (the machine's naming of Clem tells the observer something extra about the inner workings of the machine). Often the troupe uses this mechanism to exploit uncertainty and innuendo. When "comedian Mrs. Arlene Yukamoto of Pine Barren, NJ" appears in a hidden-camera commercial on "The Other Side" of *Dwarf*, phrases of her speech have been spliced together so tightly that occasionally a phoneme vanishes altogether —an effect which listeners had recognized as characteristic of the radiophonic since at least the

[78] The *Big Book of Plays* transcribes the machine's speech in all capitals, as if the machine has not learned the rules for capitalization, a creepy situation familiar to anyone whose name is spelled with unusual capitalization.

1930s.[79] "No, it's true," she says, beginning in medias res. She continues with a train of thought which does not necessarily form a non sequitur: "You see, my husband is a policeman, and you wouldn't believe how dirty he gets my clothe— I mean it: it's unbelievable." It might only be that the fibers needed to weave a continuous thread out of this statement are missing. Has she already said, for example, that her husband wears her clothes on undercover missions? The thought might occur to a listener listening to a man impersonating a woman. As in the case of the orchestral excerpt, the displacement of a recorded fragment from some prior continuity is foregrounded by both the printable text and the radiophonic effects: Mrs. Arlene Yukamoto is first heard responding to an unheard interlocutor; the sibilant in "clothes" is cut from the track at the precise moment where the pitch of her voice abruptly leaps from low-pitched glottalization on "clothes" to a high-pitched "I" (see Figure 5.2). The listener can hear that the word "I" had already begun to sound before it was spliced into the track. In Figure 5.2, that splicing is rendered visible by a distinct crease running vertically down the right half of the spectogram. As we search for the dirty secret illuminating her speech from behind, the question of who effected this audible displacement and to what ends becomes more urgent. Perhaps an unseen editor is making Mrs. Arlene Yukamoto speak in innuendo. Perhaps her husband does sometimes wear women's clothing, but she has no misgivings about it herself. Perhaps the editor, in trying to make her speech suitable for a "clean" advertisement, is failing to conceal a dirty secret. Or perhaps there is some perfectly licit reason why her husband gets her clothes dirty, but the abrupt cuts in the vocal track are, without any prior intentionality, producing a fleshiness which makes

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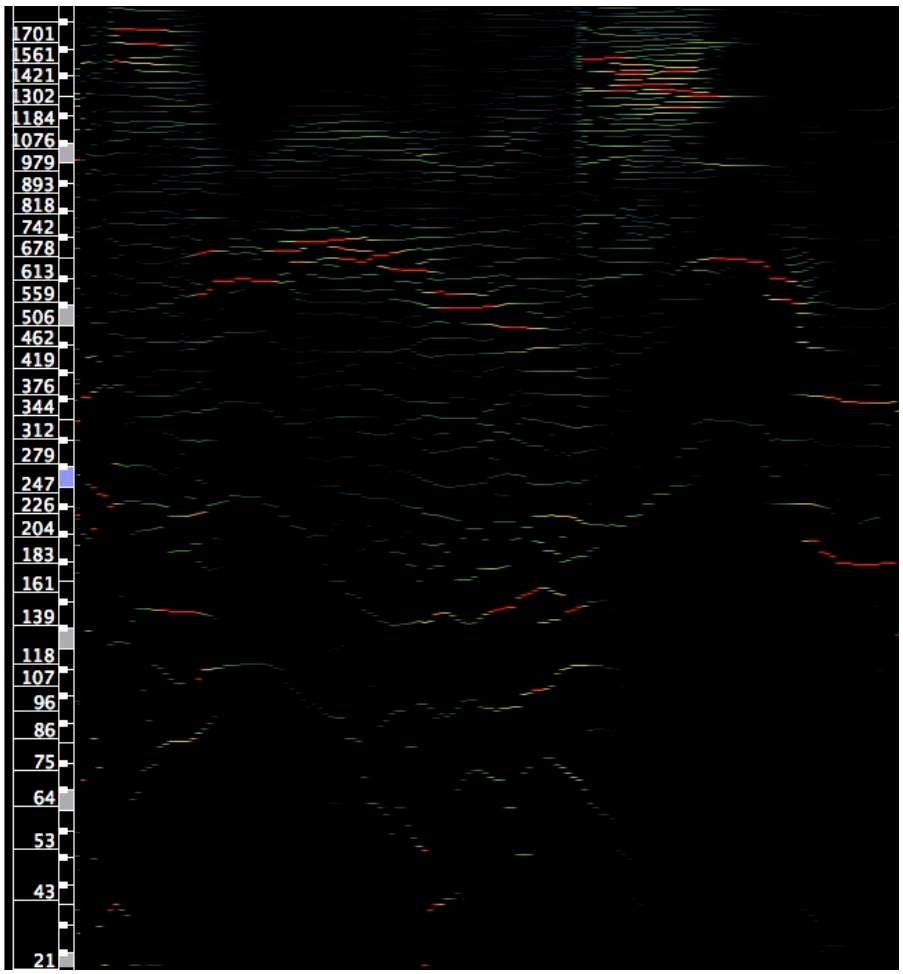
[79] "I'd make radio actors (or is it the directors?) on a dramatic show—realize that a pause is worth a dozen lines." Walter Winchell, "If I Were the Roosevelt of Radio," *Daily News* (New York, February 27, 1934). Or is it the directors?—Winchell already has in mind a conflicted ethical life which shapes the radiophonic track without itself becoming audible.

Figure 5.2 Mrs. Arlene Yukamoto, "The Other Side," *Don't Crush That Dwarf, Hand Me the Pliers* (1970). Peak frequency spectogram of right channel only (Sonic Visualiser). Mrs. Arlene Yukamoto, heard in the right channel, does not quite finish saying "clothes" (left side of spectogram) before the word "I" (right side) is spliced into the track. The crease visible near the top of the right side of the spectogram is where "I"—severed from the onset of Mrs. Arlene Yukamoto's own pronunciation of the word—has been spliced into the track.



the recording as a whole sound dirtier than it would have otherwise—an effect all the more noticeable in that the voice being spliced is that of the mustachioed David Ossman doing a crass

impersonation of a middle-aged woman.[80] The shape of ethical life involved in the manufacture of this hidden-camera commercial becomes visible as a vividly defined yet hollowed-out structure. We don't know what is happening, but we do know a great deal about where it is happening and about what might happen in an ethical situation shaped like this one. We don't know who is doing what, but we do see the determinate relationships between various actors—Mrs. Arlene Yukamoto, her husband, the producers of the commercial, the hidden microphone, the hidden editing room, and the listener amused by innuendo.

Much the same thing happens in at least one of the troupe's musical arrangements: a starkly differentiated whole seems to comment upon itself without producing any definite subject position for an unseen commentator. In the first sequence on *Dwarf*, a religious group apparently devoted to eating food meanders through a militaristic "Hymn 1517" with lyrics made up of parallel yet otherwise disconnected phrases, each one reminiscent of "evangelical"

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[80] I say "fleshiness" because when sound reproduction technologies produce a vocal leap which exceeds the capacities of the "body itself" in this excerpt, the effect makes it sound as though Mrs. Arlene Yukamoto's body itself is being examined: her body itself cannot do what it is heard doing when engineered by sound reproduction technologies, and in the excess we seem to get closer to the body itself, much as if we were looking at it under a microscope. Another example of this same "fleshy" phenomenon could be taken from a sex scene in *Dolemite*: the titular hero and his lover go to bed and get under the covers; we perceive one abrupt cut in the film when the camera and the objects on screen move very slightly, and then the hero and his lover emerge from the covers satisfied. I find it difficult to believe that the lewdness of this effect could have been unintentional. Letting the camera drift away from the bed before the cut would have seemed more modest; filming the entire lovemaking scene continuously would have been less modest, but at least the act of lovemaking would have become part of the film and in that sense subordinated to the continuity of the film. As the scene was actually shot, the presence of the camera becomes palpable and the viewer is left standing awkwardly in the bedroom as something private happens in excess of the film's publicity. The effect seems lewd and fleshy, even though, or in part because, we "see nothing."

phraseology.[81] Stylistically, the arrangement seems primitive both aesthetically and ethically (see Figure 5.3). There are exactly two vocal parts, both strictly monophonic, one for a group of men and one for a group of women. With a few fleeting and sometimes seemingly accidental exceptions (not included in my transcription), the two parts sing either in octave doublings (not seen in my transcription) or in separate sections without any overlapping—terse accents on downbeats, as seen in Figure 5.3, allow the men to stop singing one instant before the women's voices enter. Parallel yet disconnected phrases in the lyrics are complemented by variable, repeatable modules in the musical composition. Figure 5.3a and Figure 5.3b transcribe parallel phrases: both constitute the last four measures of a stanza, both share a basic melodic contour and harmonic progression, both conclude with a refrain ("the flaming fjord!") sung by the women. But within the rigid parameters enforced by these easily recognizable, assertive parallels, there is a kind of maximal musical and semantic variation. A melodic accompaniment in the piano is transposed up an octave on the occasion of its repetition. The men repeat the melodic contour of a phrase but vary its rhythmic contour. A cymbal crashes in the anacrusis to one stanza; a bell rings in the same place the next time around. The only thing which appears totally unchanged on its repetition is the one thing which makes no sense in a context reshaped

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[81] The first stanza begins: "We're marching, marching to Shibboleth/ with the Eagle and the Sword./ We're praising Zion 'til we're dead,/ until we meet our last reward, our Lord's reward." The second stanza begins: "Oh, we'll go marching, marching to Omaha,/ with the buckram and the corn./ You'll hear us [I cannot decipher the phrase here], ha ha!/ As we cross the final fjord, the flaming fjord!" It is hard to say what is more confusing, the relationship between the two stanzas or the train of thought as it moves from one word to the next. But as with the hidden-camera commercial, what we have is a starkly defined form filled with vague or indefinite content. The lyrics as transcribed in *The Big Book of Plays* are different from the ones in the transcription I created on my own, but I see no reason to take them as a more reliable guide to original LP. I also have nothing substantial to say about them, and so I will not reproduce them here. See Austin, et al., *Big Book of Plays*, 62–63.

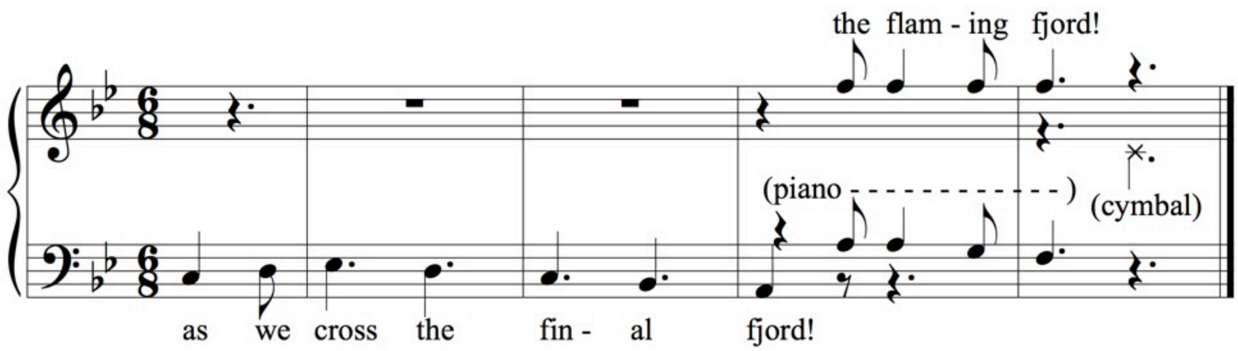

Figure 5.3a Excerpt from "Hymn 1517" as heard on "This Side" of *Don't Crush That Dwarf, Hand Me the Pliers* (1970).

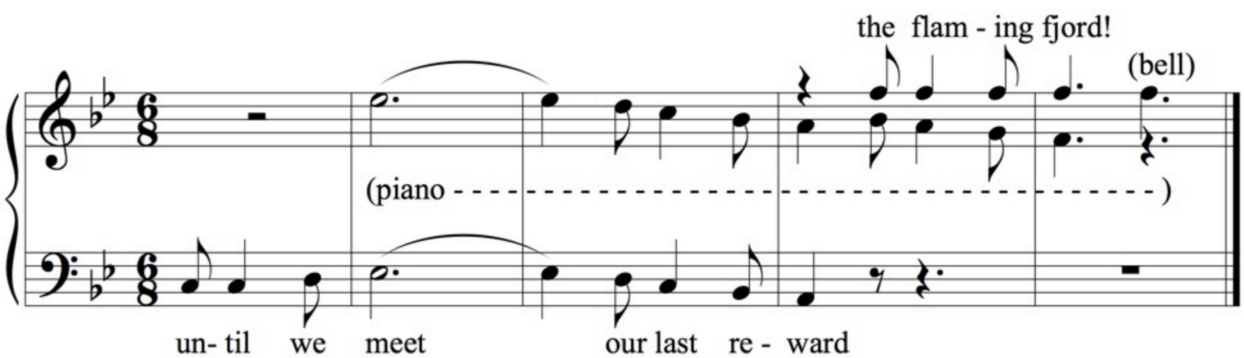

Figure 5.3b Excerpt from "Hymn 1517" as heard on "This Side" of *Don't Crush That Dwarf, Hand Me the Pliers* (1970).

by variations! Whereas in Figure 5.3a the women's interjection ("the flaming fjord!") echoed the men, in Figure 5.3b the exact same phrase makes it sound as though the congregants are waiting anxiously to be sent straight to hell. There is a kind of dialectic of continuity and variation here which makes the excerpt sound as though its various modules—a melodic accompaniment, a melody with a rhythm, a percussion attack on an anacrusis, a refrain—are falling apart into misplaced units. When the bell sounds in the place of the cymbal, it almost sounds as though the musical texture as a whole or some tiny piece of that texture is having a moment of

enlightenment. The effect is exacerbated by the fact that for this one beat, the rest of the texture is completely silent—only the bell can be heard. The moment is woefully fleeting; immediately a new stanza begins: "Zion! Oh, righteous Zion! There is no one to blame!" But isn't there? Isn't there a composer weaving a commentary on the text through the musical setting?

A musical module enters the scene, finds a place for itself by distinguishing itself from the goings on there through an apparent misplacement, and consequently seems to comment upon its own modularity and its own misplacement in the scene, a scene which it itself helps constitute. In this particular case at least, the Firesign Theatre's layered texture seems to work less by allowing two essentially equivalent layers to act upon one another than by allowing layers to detach themselves from the whole ("the flaming fjord" appears as a module precisely because it can be repeated even in places where it doesn't belong), to split themselves into parts (the stanza falls apart into voices which do not fit together), or to converge in unpredictable ways ("the flaming fjord" comes to serve as a "last reward"). The troupe's radiophonic universe is not a homogeneous field of equivalent, self-contained channels. The composition of a channel is itself subject to the textural totality of relationships determined by the channels themselves. The point of interest for the listener is not merely in the meeting of line A and line B, but in the way way that both the lines and the textural wholes those lines compose are constantly being redefined—often indefinitely redefined—by their own complex, unreliable interdependencies.

This principle holds true even where no linguistic text appears to ground things. Perhaps the plainest illustrations of this point can be found in the tetralogy's various "meandering accompaniments." I use this term to describe places where some kind of musical accompaniment —a soundtrack or a voice in a musical texture—follows a kind of "internal" logic until it either

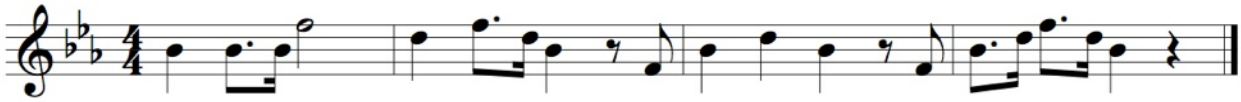

Figure 5.4 The meandering bugle at the end of a performance of "Yankee Doodle" in Eb on side one of *How Can You Be in Two Places at Once When You're Not Anywhere at All* (1969).

loses the logic which made it cohere with the rest of the situation or establishes a new logic for that situation as a whole.[82] For sake of space, a straightforward example can be taken from a performance of "Yankee Doodle" by an ensemble composed of a vocalist, fife, drum, and bugle on side one of *Two Places*. As the ensemble, playing in the key of Eb, appears to approach the end of the patriotic song's first stanza, the bugle begins outlining a Bb major triad (see Figure 5.4). At first the bugle seems to be providing a dominant preparation for a return to the tonic. It

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[82] Arguably the quintessential examples of the "meandering accompaniment" appear in two parallel sections on "The Other Side" of *Dwarf*, each one featuring a lengthy monologue of roughly thirty seconds accompanied by a piano playing something in the spirit of "non-diegetic" or "incidental" music. The first of these begins when George Tirebiter's father announces, "Right, son. Now I am the people." The second begins about five minutes later with the onset of General Klein's inquisition: "Are you impugning, sir, that this uniform […] ?" I suspect these sections would repay careful semiotic analysis, but there is no space in the context of my present argument to provide such a reading. The point I am making should be clear on a first listening: the piano's musical accompaniment sets a "mood" for the monologue only to wander off through the internal logic of the musical accompaniment itself. One of the consequences of this is that what should have been an "unheard melody," to borrow Claudia Gorbman's term, becomes a focal point. By following its own internal logic, the "pit music" in the scene deserts its assigned post and rises to the same layered textural plain as the monologue. Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987). For the term "pit music" applied across diverse media, see Michel Chion, *Audio-Vison: Sound on Screen*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 80. Citing these sources and speaking of the "relations between images and [non-diegetic] film music," Amy Herzog observes that "in most commercial cinema we can speak of an empathy between the two; the music stabilizes the image and secures meaning while remaining as unobtrusive as possible." Amy Herzog, *Dreams of Difference, Songs of the Same* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 5–6.

"fits" into the ensemble as a whole. But as it continues circling its Bb major triad, without giving any sign of stopping, it emerges as a voice locked inside its own internal logic. The bugle almost seems to say, "I am the bugle which follows one very simple rule: play the notes of a Bb major triad." The Bb major triad "means" one thing in the key of Eb: it "is" the dominant of that key. But if it cannot follow through on the consequences of that meaning, if it cannot serve as the dominant leading to the tonic, it begins to mean something else, something almost but only almost homophonous: a triad as dominant does not sound entirely the same as "the same" triad as tonic. The longer the bugle remains locked inside its own logic, the more it begins to sound like a piece of a whole which it itself has transformed through and through. What began as a performance of "Yankee Doodle" in Eb becomes, through a composerly logic, an Ivesian improvisation on the disintegrating elements of a standard tune in the American patriot's basic repertoire. And with the disintegration of a hierarchical musical fabric, the location of the bugle changes: where it had started life playing one role, that of the dominant preparation for a return to the tonic, it ends up serving as a detached Bb major triad in a flat texture comprised of equivalent fragments.

I hear this not as a performance of any kind of democratic, egalitarian utopia, but as one way of hearing something like Bergman's historical efficacy or agency. If there is something jubilant about the bugle's assertion of its Bb major triad, there is also something demonic about the way the heterogeneity of the ensemble degenerates into a homogeneous jumble of equivalent sounds—and this beside the fact that we are hearing a patriotic tune in the midst of the satire of white-supremacist chauvinism which appears on side one of *Two Places*. The voices who shout "Fuck you!" from the dark edge of the microphonic space sound pusillanimous and impotent, not

heroically defiant or dissenting.[83] Nor does the Firesign Theatre's compositional practice always produce an anarchic texture such as the one which emerges at the end of their rendition of "Yankee Doodle." On the contrary, the performance of the Georgie/Peorgie Tirebiter theme song by a female vocal trio elsewhere identified as the Android Sisters on "This Side" of *Dwarf* has a kind of extreme unity whereby each voice is assigned a definite place in an absolutely homorhythmic, harmonically unambiguous texture (see Figure 5.5).[84] Each of three voices seems to be showing itself to the listener as the full ensemble rapidly switches between unisons, triadic fragments (thirds, fourths, and fifths), and complete triads, always with all three voices articulating the same attacks and releases (see Figures 5.5 and 5.6). The music sounds antiquated in that the basic structural features are plainly displayed: there are three voices, they sing in triadic harmonies or unisons, and they all follow the exact same rhythmic contour. And yet the very primitiveness of the arrangement only makes the distinctive shape of the performance that much more plain. In the same way that Pop's Sodium Shoppe as Norman Rockwell scene makes

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[83] In addition to the two appearances of the phrase "Fuck you!" on the dark edge of the microphonic space discussed in the body of this chapter—that of a student in the assembly and that of Principal Poop as he recedes from the podium—there is also the voice on "The Other Side" who shouts the same phrase at General Klein (see my footnote above).

[84] The Android Sisters, as they are named in the *Big Book of Plays*, are listed on the Firesign Theatre website as "Pomona, Covina and La Verne, featuring 'Little Bubbles' on tenor sex, all under the direction of our Mr. Procmer." "Firesign Media: Don't Crush That Dwarf, Hand Me The Pliers," firesigntheatre.com/media/media.php?item=dctd-In (accessed December 22, 2015). "Little Bubbles" could only be the voice of Peorgie heard responding to the trio of female voices. Presumably "Procmer" is an alias for Proctor. I do not know the identity of the three women. The *Big Book of Plays* gives credit to the four men and a "coupla gurls" named "Tiny" and "Annalee." Portraits of the two women equivalent to those of the four men are included, suggesting that the troupe was being "ironic" or "cute" in its decision to leave the women essentially unidentified—they apparently considered the women deserving of a kind of credit which, on at least one level (that of the portraits), was equivalent to that given the men. But the irony does nothing to diminish the fact that the women who were involved in the production of the tetralogy are essentially uncredited.

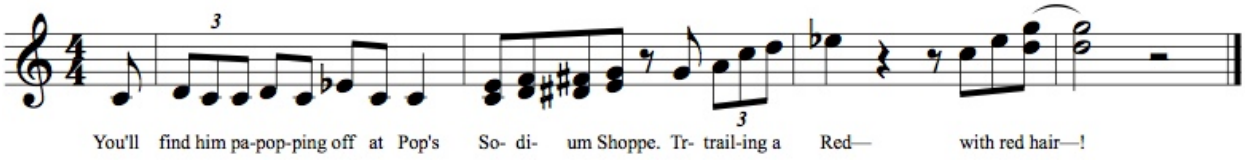

Figure 5.5 Excerpt from the Georgie/Peorgie Tirebiter theme song as performed by a female vocal trio on "This Side" of *Don't Crush That Dwarf, Hand Me the Pliers* (1970). All three voices sound at all times (the monophonic lines are sung in unison by three voices; where the voices split into dyads, two voices double the upper note, while one voice supplies the lower note). The "old-timey" spelling of "Shoppe" is that of *The Big Book of Plays*.

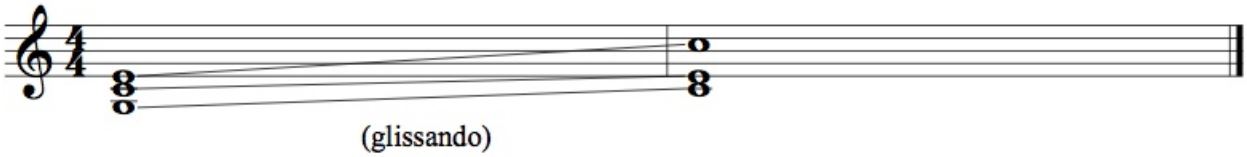

Figure 5.6 The last two harmonies in the Georgie/Peorgie Tirebiter theme song as performed by the Android Sisters on "This Side" of *Don't Crush That Dwarf, Hand Me the Pliers* (1970).

the absurdist innuendo seem that much more obscene (out of place)—the "Red" has "red hair," as if the term "Red" was not a name for a red-haired woman as human being, but simply a name for some kind of pursuable thing, this one with red hair—so the transparency of the orderly arrangement makes the corporeal basis of the a cappella arrangement appear nude. The Android Sisters sound as though they are coming apart at the seams as they conclude their performance with a glissando upward from the second inversion to the root position of the tonic triad: what music theorists call "similar motion"—all voices move in the same direction, though without maintaining the intervals between them—sounds fairly dissimilar as the upper voice races over the span of a sixth, the middle voice slowly crosses a mere third, and the bottom voice splits the difference by traversing the fourth between scale-degrees 5 and 1 (see Figure 5.6). The voices do

not therefore sound more "free" or possessed of a more autonomous "will." But they do seem more distinct; their disparate movements have an effect on the overall texture. What they do as particulars appears to be effective at the level of the whole. And because they continue to be governed by a rigid, primitive order, this apparent efficacy seems all the more apparent: they are, after all, simply traveling from one inversion of the "home" triad to another.

5.4 Politics, history, and the comic

If the Firesign Theatre's tetralogy has a utopian dimension, it is not because either an orderly vocal trio or a disorderly drum, fife, and bugle corps sounds ideal or desirable. Indeed, while the anarchic military ensemble may lack a single center, it turns out to be not so disorderly after all; it is only that one set of rules unexpectedly replaces another—the bugle playing the dominant in a tonal piece instead plays one of two tonics in a bitonal piece.

The utopian dimension of the tetralogy instead concerns the way in which the ensemble makes agency apparent—agency as in "efficacy," not "will." By bounding the audible object with the primitive stylistic rules transparently governing that object's own antiquatedness, the composer is able to show with greater clarity how that particular object becomes involved in a more complex composition. The tetralogy seems productive of something like what Kenneth Burke calls the "comic frame" whereby people become "observers of themselves while acting."[85] Whether or not the bugle hears what it is doing—and whether or not it has any choice in the matter—the tetralogy's audience might have learned to hear the bugle as constitutive of the composition where its essence appears. Wherever its essence appears, it appears in and through a

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[85] Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 166–174, 344.

texture which it itself helps to weave: the essential thing about the bugle is that it outlines the dominant triad in an Eb major performance; or the essential thing about the bugle is that it outlines the Bb major triad in a bitonal performance. What observers see when they look through a comic frame might be disheartening—the bugle's behavior hardly provides a model for political action. And I am not suggesting that it is possible for anyone to really be an observer of themselves. I am suggesting that the Firesign Theatre produces an appearance of a utopian impulse's object of desire, an image of the vision desired.[86] The tetralogy looks something like what observers who imagine they are looking through Burke's "comic frame" want to be able to see.

Not everyone thought this desire to be in two places at once, acting while observing, was appropriate given the circumstances.[87] For Pansey—the author of the album review I cited at the beginning of this chapter—the Firesign Theatre's way of relating to history constituted an alternative she did not make sense of, or which she claimed made no sense. "If politics is where everything comes down," she explains, "it's where the Firesign Theatre reaches an extreme of ambiguity that is not only meaningless but somewhat annoying."[88] Since I have argued against and in that sense worked with something like her set of objections throughout this entire dissertation, it is worth pausing to quote her at length:

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[86] Burke makes the utopian impulse animating his pursuit of the "comic frame" explicit. "We have advocated, under the name of 'comedy,' a procedure that might just as well have been advocated under the name of 'humanism.'" Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 237. "Presumably we selected 'comedy' because, for one reason or another, the word 'sounded better' to us. And when the author selects one word rather than another because it 'sounds better' to him, his choice is guided by 'overtones' that may not apply to his auditor at all." Ibid.

[87] Pansey, "A vest," 46.

[88] Ibid.

> Getting to be in two places at once may be a good creative ideal, but I for one don't happen to think it's possible and/or desirable when those two places are revolutionary and counter-revolutionary, at once involved and standing aside laughing. [… Culture] does need humor[. …] But the particular function of humor in a culture that is gasping from burdens of social and moral contradictions is a more complicated question. Humor reflects culture, offers a fresh funny view of things and some sweet moments of escapism. [… The Firesign Theatre is] an experiment into new definitions of form, but in their search for that expansive, ethereal freedom, their humor is so often hung up in a pretentious, irrelevant intellectual network that their purpose—and their freedom—becomes obscure.
>
> 'There are no endings,' says Ossman. 'Everything is a continuation of changes.' Maybe. And the Firesign trip is fun. But again like Woodstock, it's only at its best when it's on earth.[89]

The first thing a reader of my dissertation should be prepared to notice at this point is the attitude toward history or the "mood" implicit in some of Pansey's self-explanatory phrases. The culture is gasping. Some say there are no endings, but this claim can be regarded with skepticism. The "revolutionary" position can be directly equated with involvement. And involvement as such is so absolutely grounded "on earth" that it totally excludes and is directly opposed to "standing aside laughing." These are the remarks of a person who is anxious to get back "inside" history before its openings are closed.[90]

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[89] Pansey, "A vest," 46.

[90] "In those early years of the sixties there was a scent of change in the air, a sense of things opening up, of new possibilities. This was not without its dangerous side, for, by the iron law of rising expectations, forces were aroused in society that soon overshot their prescribed bounds. The New Left and the civil rights movement did not develop under Eisenhower, when things were at their worst, but under Kennedy, when inchoate promises and possibilities were in the air. And they died under Nixon, who recreated an atmosphere of utter futility and himself embodied the vengeful spirit of middle-American backlash (as if the election of 1960 were at last undone, the sixties rolled back)." Morris Dickstein, *Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1977), 95–96. I have not been able to learn anything about Pansey's background, but as a contributor to the *Village Voice* writing in 1970, she might have traveled in circles overlapping with Dickstein's. Pansey seems as concerned as Dickstein with the "closure" of the late sixties.

Pansey also repeats a tripartite description, all three parts of which should already be familiar to my reader, of the "function of humor": comedy "reflects," offers a fresh perspective, and provides an escape. I have already challenged each of these claims separately.[91] All three aspects of Pansey's description assume some kind of eternally relevant and external ground or "earth" which can be reflected, commented upon, or escaped by way of humor qua mechanism. Humor deals with reality, in this description, without being able to touch it; indeed, flashes of wit

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[91] Nichols and May's performances could seem like clownish cartoons more than vivid mirrors (chapter three); Lenny Bruce may just as well have been preaching to the choir as offering any sort of fresh perspective, at least as far as his printable "message" was concerned (chapter one); and Lynch's performances seem to have more to do with triumphing in and through a situation determined by contradiction than with escape—if anything, Mr. Motion's triumph is heightened when the situation through which he moves becomes increasingly abhorrent (chapter four).

escape from the earth like sparks flying up into the darkness.[92] Political involvement, by contrast, requires gravitas.

The tale Pansey weaves is oriented vertically by humble light and haughty darkness: "politics" happens "down" on "earth," beneath the harsh light which reveals "complicated" questions, under the "burdens" of a contradictory society. Down there on earth, no one has any use for the "irrelevant" and "meaningless," "intellectual" and "ideal" ambiguities of flights upward into an "obscure," "expansive, ethereal freedom" located in lofty "form." Knowledge is revealed, not produced; there is no dialectic of thought and matter, only a balance, a meaty earth appropriately seasoned by a little whimsical eternity. For those grounded in the light of day, too much dreamlike darkness, whether of the "pretentious" bad people or the "creative" good people,

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[92] Pansey's theory of humor reminds me of Kant's edict: "Laughter is an affect that arises if a tense expectation is transformed into nothing." Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment: Including the First Introduction*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 203. What I find as odd in Pansey as I do in Kant is that their illustrations hardly show jokes coming to nothing. Pansey's reading of the Firesign Theatre is inconsistent in this regard. In one place, the troupe is at once involved and standing aside laughing, in another it is climbing into an experimental, ethereal, intellectual, obscure intellectual network. Her complaint nevertheless seems clear: the appropriate balance between involvement and detachment is off kilter, with the troupe being too involved to justify their lack of involvement. Thus all of their involvement comes to nothing, or at least comes to less than it should. Kant refers to something like this nothing as something explicitly: the expectation must be transformed into nothing, he says, but "the joke must contain something that can deceive us for a moment" so that "when the illusion vanishes, […] the mind looks at the illusion once more in order to give it another try." Ibid., 204–205. The outright lie, which Kant acknowledges is not at all funny, also contains "something that can deceive us for a moment." Obviously the joke must "contain" something or be characterized by something. Kant does not explain what that something might be—perhaps he recognizes that it can be a very different thing from one example to the next. But he gets somewhere, I think, when he remarks that "the mind looks at the illusion once more in order to give it another try." It does seem to me that our delight in humor has something to do with "trying something out." A joke somehow makes sense on one level without necessarily making sense at the level of "real life," or it makes sense for an order of knowledge which is not concerned with "reality" but which is not therefore concerned with nothing actual. The humorous mechanism remains.

can be "somewhat annoying." But no one can impeach Pansey's magnanimity: she regards this admixture of good and bad with an appropriately stern—rather than an "extreme"—ambivalence. Humor has its place in culture. It is just that it ought to stay there. The only thing in Pansey's description indicating that humor might somehow be involved in the production of an actual world for her is that she indicts the Firesign Theatre's humor for being too far removed from politics. In her scheme of things, even to do something as innocuous as stand aside laughing is to be counterrevolutionary! Her remarks are worth taking seriously as one aspect of a narrative being woven about her present: everything comes down to earth in politics, and those who do not make it down to our serious revolutionary involvement are against us.

If we juxtapose Pansey's argument with Austin's Reagan-era recollections, what is initially striking is not Austin's alternative description of the "function of humor," but its unrelated way of shaping the total situation where humor becomes functional. Austin's shape of the political is not a universe of discrete positions (e.g., revolutionary, counterrevolutionary). His remarks do not so much identify his troupe with a particular, self-contained location as they describe a complex social space composed of "associations." "A lot of the adulation we got was from people who had an emotional stake in making us into a counterculture institution," he explains—Pansey's criticism expresses something like that emotional stake, but without the success in the making of a countercultural institution which might have led to adulation.

> Then they could say, 'I understand these guys [or I don't] and I'm part of the counterculture, therefore the counterculture is understandable and these guys are in it [or they aren't].' In reality, we're just entertainers, like musicians or ballplayers or whatever, and we're more closely associated with the institutions of the entertainment world than we could ever be to any political or social movement. From the very beginning of our

> lives together, we were working within institutions. We were with Columbia Records for nearly 10 years, and that's about as institutional as you can get.[93]

The distinction I am trying to draw here is between the political as a structure composed of definite positions and the political as a structure curved continuously along a differentiated, multidimensional form. For Austin, "counterculture institution" appears as an oxymoron: the "institutional" belongs to the corporate world which the counterculture opposed. Pansey's revolutionary is a revolutionary, identifies as a revolutionary, and—to use Austin's term—can "understand" the entire universe by subordinating all things to definite categories. Austin does not identify himself as a representative of the institutions of the entertainment world, but neither does he have any misgivings about acknowledging that he and his fellow entertainers were "more closely associated" with those institutions than with anything else. Whatever they did in the world could not be separated from that close association. "I didn't go out and become an activist," Bergman explained. "I didn't express myself on the street. I didn't really express myself on the street until I really got on the stage. The streetiest thing I ever did was getting in The Firesign Theatre."[94] Streety, streetier, streetiest: Bergman's activities on stage can be associated by degrees with those of the activist in the street. Position matters—Bergman goes out of his way to affirm that he "didn't go out and become an activist"—but so do activities and associations.

Austin remarks that the "flaws" involved in looking for "a realization of the dream" that the counterculture would become "a coherent culture with principles and everything else" were

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[93] Quoted in DeMuir, "Three Guys," 46.

[94] Quoted in Wiebel, et al., *Backwards*, 61.

"constantly" criticized in the troupe's work.[95] What he describes instead are "*counter-individualists*" who do not exist as absolutely autonomous outsiders, do not so much resist or dissent from or oppose or subvert any sort of coherent culture, but who instead move "counter" to a prevailing culture only in and through "associations" with the the menacing institutions of that culture.[96] Austin and his colleagues knew better than most how important such associations could be: for better or worse, the group's work was never the same after Columbia declined to renew their long-term contract in 1975.[97]

Austin's remarks become less transparent when he claims that rock and roll, and apparently comedy as well, have "nothing to do with culture or politics."

> We just happened to emerge in an era that was strongly political, and in which people had a great stake in believing that there was a counterculture and that it would last forever. In fact, it's rock and roll that's gonna last forever, and *that* has nothing to do with culture or politics. Comedy is more important to us than any label that anybody could put on us.[98]

But if rock and roll has nothing to do with culture or politics, what then does something like comedy—as fully associated as rock and roll with the cultural or the political—do for Austin? Bergman recalled that "the classic Firesign Theatre," the Firesign of the tetralogy, "is extremely political."[99] However he also suggests, in the same place, that his politics is not at all recognizable for "most" observers. "I suppose that most people when they encounter me consider

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[95] Quoted in DeMuir, "Three Guys," 46,

[96] Ibid., emphasis in original.

[97] Ibid.; Wiebel, et al., *Backwards*, 16–17.

[98] Austin quoted in DeMuir, "Three Guys," 46.

[99] Bergman quoted in Wiebel, et al., *Backwards*, 60.

me to be pretty much of a radical, but I think that's because most people in this country don't spend much time figuring out anything anyway."[100] Whether or not Bergman and Austin are basically in agreement has to do with how they use terms like "politics" and "political." Pansey's understanding produces people and things as essentially identical to their types: one "is" or "is not" a revolutionary. Austin and his counterindividualists move through a world of associations without ever being reducible to any one or more of those associations. To put it in something resembling Bergman's terms: one has to "figure out" where one stands; one must actually produce one's position inside a determinate imagining of totality. I have been arguing that, if the Firesign Theatre's radiophonic comedy does not help listeners produce their position in "reality," it does provide a way of producing an appearance of the production of a spatiotemporal political as such, if only at the level of fantasy. In other words, if the Firesign Theatre's comedy is not about a real "reality," it can be about about the weaving of fantasy through an actual world occurring on many different levels.

Conclusion

The Firesign Theatre's LP records often sound like performances of contented middle-class tinkering—"If you do that, that's good." To the extent that 1968 was the moment of the whiter, college-educated middle-class, its failure meant something like an acceptance, begrudging or otherwise, of a modified utopia of the professionals—Austin's proud identification as a "working stiff" expresses ambivalent acceptance. The troupe's satirical depictions of a dystopian future where the "not groovy" are subject to "re-grooving," where children rebel by

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[100] Bergman quoted in Wiebel, et al., *Backwards*, 61.

going to school and where the police frame innocent people not by planting contraband but by stealing a person's "stash," could appeal to an ideology for which human relations are arbitrarily composed out of equivalent units.[101] Everything gets jumbled into new assemblages, but nothing really ever changes: where the opposition today would rather be groovy, drop out of school, and engage in their own lifestyle without fear of persecution, their children might want exactly the opposite; if so, they will essentially be just as "oppositional," just as opposed to something, whatever that might be; it will all be "the same difference." There is no "culture" as a living, breathing tissue of actual, particular, irreducible meanings to be suffocated by a social and moral order, only a long series of one-dimensional assemblages, each composed out of an otherwise immutable set of interchangeable materials.

This reading depends upon an inference: the troupe's satire produces as a nightmare the "realization of the dream" that the counterculture would become a "coherent culture"; it doesn't necessarily follow that all possible social forms are eternally the same. In the troupe's satires, merely superficial changes do nothing to address root injustices: the terms change, not the social relations, as if a countercultural map had merely been draped over the present.[102] Whether or not the troupe leaves open the possibility of radical social change can be taken as a separate matter.

But Pansey evidently made the inference, and I cannot say that she was entirely misguided in doing so. It makes sense to stand aside laughing when involvement changes nothing, even if it also makes sense given other circumstances. The collegiate character of the Firesign Theatre might indeed have been inflected for some observers by a feeling of upward

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[101] *Waiting for the Electrician*. See also my footnote above on the satirical routine I am citing here.

[102] DeMuir, "Three Guys," 40.

mobility grounded in the learned capacity to look at "society" as if from the lofty heights where everything is "one" eternal sameness and where the observer is apt to fall "prey to giddiness."[103] Those lofty heights are always within reach; the less someone knows about history, the more "abstract" their knowledge of history and the more accurate or "realistic" the otherwise preposterous narrative of an eternal present can appear. The usefulness of such a thought of history for a degraded "educational" system and for the industries which market products to the beneficiaries or victims of that system can hardly be overstated. For those whose college education had better prepared them to command the unpaid labor of the vast mass of humanity than to thrive as creative, critically minded individuals in a degrading capitalist society, the painful defeats of 1968 might only have made the imagining of society as an arbitrary assemblage that much more appealing.

Indeed, there are places in the tetralogy where the troupe seems to deliberately invoke the belief that social life is artificial in the sense of fake. Like Cincinnatus C., the hero of Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading* (translated into English in 1959 from the 1935 Russian original), George Tirebiter ultimately escapes a juridical quagmire simply by leaving it all behind as if it

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[103] "Whoever rises above everyone and from the lofty heights of rich honour sees how ill the common people fare, how, below him, an empire bursts into bright flames, how here the foam of the waves bursts into the fields, and there the anger of the heavens, with both thunder and lightning, strikes tower and temple, and what is refreshed by the night is scorched by hot day, and sees how his trophies go hand in hand with many thousands of corpses, he may (I admit) have many advantages over ordinary men. But, alas, how easily he falls prey to giddiness." The quotation is from a *Trauerspiel* by Andreas Gryphius cited by Walter Benjamin and insightfully translated by John Osborne. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (New York: Verso, 2009), 196. The German word for "giddiness," *Schwindel*, is also the word for "dizziness" and "vertigo." But it is almost as if Gryphius were waiting for Osborne's English translation. Certainly I was waiting for it: giddy is precisely the word to describe the Firesign Theatre.

were a little show.[104] Tirebiter's escape from the courtroom near the end of "The Other Side" is effected by a nearly effortless act of remembering or reassembling appearances:

> [Courtroom/auction sounds and speech can be heard throughout this dialogue]
> Peorgie: It's all a fake, Mudhead! They lied to me!
> Mudhead: Who do you mean, 'they?'
> Peorgie: You know, 'Them.'
> Mudhead: Name three.
> Peorgie: Well, there's the Pooper, and ...
> Mudhead: You.
> Peorgie: And *me*!
> Mudhead: Hey, whose movie is this?
> Peorgie: It's nobody's now, Mudhead, because I'm getting out!
> Mudhead: How you gonna do it, Peorge?
> Peorgie: I don't know.
> Mudhead: How did you get in here?
> Peorgie: Oh, darn! I don't remember!
> Mudhead: Well, where were you before?
> Peorgie: Before?
> Mudhead: Yeah!
> Peorgie: Right! I sold [*TV* Click!] the … [Peorgie's voice abruptly disappears.]

Peorgie's final line in this excerpt is one of several places in the tetralogy where speakers exercise some kind of special capacity to dodge the channeling of their circumstances: the *TV* Click! enters into the diegesis and whisks Peorgie away, but not without Peorgie squeezing in a

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[104] Vladimir Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading*, trans. Dmitri Nabokov (New York: Vintage International, 1989 [1935, 1959]). Perhaps significantly, Nabokov's hero bears the name of the ancient noble enemy of the plebeians.

final word ("the").[105] Peorgie suddenly realizes he can redeem his life simply by re-membering it, reassembling it in a way which better suits his purposes.[106] He is not absolutely beholden to his circumstances, and so it is no surprise that the *TV* Click! proves only partially effective. Cincinnatus C. and George Tirebiter both appear as *Übermenschen*, ready to seize the day as soon as they realize it is theirs to seize—and for a few decades after 1968, the world was in many

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[105] A George Tirebiter political ad on "This Side" begins immediately after a *TV* Click!: "-ot in any way want to put myself into a confrontatory position either with the United Snakes or with Them. And you can believe me because I never lie, and I'm always right. So WAKE UP! [*TV* Click!, begin sounds of baby crying] and take a look at your only logical choice: me, George Tirebiter." The *TV* Click! is followed by the sound of a crying baby, but it seems to have no effect on Tirebiter. (The *Big Book of Plays* transcribes the *TV* Click! in the middle of my transcription as "*slap and baby crying*." But the sound in question sounds to me distinctly like a *TV* Click! There is even some kind of hiccup in the track, suggesting that the clicker effects a switch between two channeled recordings of George Tirebiter. In this case, a script furnished by the *Big Book of Plays* seems to pare down some of the complexity and to resolve some of the ambiguity involved in the troupe's audible text.) A voice on the other end of the telephone in "Nick Danger" (*Two Places*) continues speaking in a rarified voice even after Nick Danger slams down the telephone receiver. Similarly, Peorgie's mother on "This Side" of *Dwarf* whistles the "Peorgie Tirebiter" theme song immediately after the Android Sisters finish singing it: an inhabitant of the diegesis seems to be able to hear "non-diegetic" sounds. The "channels" in a Firesign composition can be extremely porous.

[106] The jumbling of stereotypically "critical," "bourgeois" ideologemes in this brief excerpt is excessive, to say the least: ideology appears as it had for the eighteenth-century skeptic as a crafty illusion prepared by malevolent priests and exposed as such by the autonomous observer; a quasi-Hegelian distinction between Peorgie as "you" and as "me" is implied; Peorgie finds himself at the center of the universe, or at least of his own little movie; like the analysand on the couch, he is cured simply by remembering the origin of his troubles; there is even a touch of that elusive meeting of Marx and Freud in Peorgie's recollection of his own traumatic origin in the sale of something to someone. If we are supposed to read a measure of irony into this excess, it reads as the sort of irony which allows speakers to say what they want to say without needing to make a commitment. Pansey grounds my suspicion that members of the Firesign Theatre were overly credulous regarding their comfortable "progressive" ideology when she quotes Ossman: "Our message is kind of like Here Comes the Sun—things are going to be all right. It's an awareness that things are changing, and faith that tomorrow's going to be okay." Pansey, "Three Guys," 46. By speaking in a quotation from a song by the Beatles—like the ridiculous guru on *Electrician*—Ossman perhaps brings a degree of irony to his remark. But does this degree of irony diminish his expression of faith?

respects the whiter, college-educated professional's to seize. Such a narrative might have seemed considerably less appealing to people who believed that circumstances needed to be changed, rather than merely overcome by the empowered college graduate.

Pansey seems to have been most annoyed by the incongruity between the Firesign Theatre's whimsical mood and a historical situation where the students who were expected to buy the troupe's records, especially the international peers of those students, were being openly murdered in the streets.[107] Nor can we in hindsight miss a certain prescience in Pansey's remarks: when we hear Bergman, decades later, singing the praises of President Clinton, we see a specific instance of a connection which has elsewhere been drawn in general between the "individualism" of "the counterculture" and the "individualism" of the comfortable middle-class consumers who elected the major neoliberal reformers of the late twentieth century.[108] Today as I hear ostensibly "progressive," "democratic" politicians making impassioned pleas for us to "get back" to some imagined golden age of the so-called "middle class," I sympathize with Pansey's

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[107] According to some estimates, three hundred students were murdered in the Tlatelolco Massacre of October 2, 1968 alone. Ossman invokes the Kent State murders in Austin, et al., *Big Book of Plays*, 59.

[108] "I really rooted for Bill Clinton [b. 1946], because he was so much more like me, I think. He really is my generation. All of us counter-cultural McGovernites, kind of recognize each other." Bergman quoted in Wiebel, et al., *Backwards*, 63–64. Harvey, *Neoliberalism*, 41–43.

frustration.[109] Historians recognize no accidents—many contingencies, but no accidents—in the fact that the hegemonic white middle class knew exactly enough about "freedom" to keep itself fairly comfortable while supporting, actively and passively, a neo-imperialist order.[110]

How we read the troupe's actual involvement in their historical moment has to do with the distinction we make between the political and the aesthetic. In Pansey's reading, the Firesign Theatre appears too aestheticizing to be properly politically involved. I have instead attempted, in this chapter and throughout this dissertation, to think about the political and the aesthetic as belonging to distinct yet interdependent—relatively autonomous—levels or moments of actuality. In this reading we are looking not for a balance between the political and the aesthetic, but for an understanding of how the aesthetic becomes involved in the political and the political in the aesthetic. If there is a time for comedy and a time for "direct action," those two moments can occur simultaneously at distinct levels of actuality.

What is intriguing to me about the dialectic of the antiquated and the innovative in the Firesign Theatre is the way it seems to make something like the mediation of actions and consequences audible. Between radiophonic techniques and their incongruous effects, something like the future becomes a little more audible, if only as an imaginative, comic fantasy. If we can

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[109] One "liberal" presidential candidate in recent memory repeatedly used the phrase "get back" to describe her vision for the progress of "the greatest middle class in the history of the world." She leaves no doubt as to the reason why the path to the future must take the form of a return to the past: "we have an understanding of what works." "Hillary Clinton on 'The Late Show,'" entry posted October 28, 2015, http://nyti.ms/1OYji40 (accessed October 28, 2015). For Clinton's account of "what built [past tense] the greatest middle class in the history of the world," see her remarks quoted in Patrick Healy, "Democratic Debate Turns Hillary Clinton's Way After Months of Difficulties," entry posted October 14, 2015, http://nyti.ms/1QqpOy3 (accessed October 28, 2015).

[110] Harvey, *Neoliberalism*, passim, and especially chapter two, "The Construction of Consent," 39–63.

agree with Pansey that politics is where everything comes down, it is only because we maintain that politics is not located on a flat earth composed of definite, eternal positions.

Where is "the street" for us today? It is not in a recording studio—or in an archive—but that is not saying much. One cannot will revolution out of thin air, and that is precisely what people try to do when they put faith in the idea that certain modes of activity are automatically the "real" modes of political activity, as if waving one's arms while reciting the right words in the right place should magically produce the desired effect. Wherever "the street" is, it "is" there only to the extent that we actively produce it for ourselves materially and ideologically. The Firesign Theatre's dense radiophonic compositions, with their diverse levels and moments mediating "reality," provide one kind of aesthetic technique for producing something resembling a moving picture of the composition of a world. If after 1968 old "progressive" programs are badly in need of revision, that technique can appeal to us today, as we try to keep our whimsy exercised, no less than it might have appealed to those trying to get inside history circa 1971.

Conclusion Studying the Audible Text as Involved in the Political

A 1975 press release by Fantasy Records, the label responsible for a series of modestly successful Lenny Bruce LPs from the early sixties, foresaw a new career for an electronically resurrected Lenny Bruce:

> Bruce's current success is attributed to renewed interest in the comic by virtue of the successful film 'Lenny,' and also because of changes in the society itself which make his work, so long taboo, acceptable today with such comics as George Carlin and Richard Pryor paving the way for Bruce.[1]

Finding names like those of Carlin and Pryor alongside that of Dustin Hoffman's Lenny compels the basic question: whose Carlin? whose Pryor? With a dearth of criticism of the sort I have tried to practice here, opaque yet seemingly transparent claims about "changes in the society itself" can be grounded in equally opaque claims about the appearances of various comedians. We are all supposed to immediately "know" how Bruce, Carlin, Pryor, and social changes appear, and they are all supposed to appear progressive.

The press release's basic premise is valid: one or more ways had to be paved for Bruce, posthumously or otherwise. That paving necessarily proceeded not only by changes in society as they might have appeared for whomever but also by the shaping through particular listenings of particular appearances of Lenny Bruce. It was effected at least in part through active conflict—Hentoff, for example, explicitly concerned himself with the ways Bruce was perceived. In this regard, Bruce was not unique. Scott Saul, for example, has shown that the "becoming" of one of

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[1] Gretchen Horton, "Fantasy Records Press Release," typescript, April 15, 1975, Box 1, Lenny Bruce Collection, Brandeis University.

the most critically acclaimed stand-up comedians of our contemporaneity was shaped by the encounter of an immensely talented child of the Peoria red-light district with an adoring, affluent, whiter audience.[2] In at least two prominent cases, persons with backgrounds in "non-middle-class" circles have evidently experienced the Kafkaesque quality of our contemporaneity only as much through the old guard's persecution as through the progressive front's celebration. It is not enough to celebrate an ostensibly ever-widening range of performances. One has to learn particular ways of listening to particular texts. This is not to say that there has never been anything to gain from encounters between the middle class and its others—Saul argues cogently that there has been. It is to say that the affluent whiter middle class of our contemporaneity has been as apt to erase as to appreciate the difference it celebrates.

Researchers studying popular culture need to be able to read texts not merely as self-contained examples of some particular "thing" but as artifacts which themselves might have become involved in the making, for particular observers, of various aspects of an imagined totality of social relations, realistic or fantastic. The 1964 petition protesting the arrest of Lenny Bruce expresses a desire for a definite imagining of the political, one where Lenny Bruce as representative of a "vernacular" could be elevated to the circles of affluent, white liberals and where affluent, white liberals could participate in a "vernacular" of their own desiring. Whether particular signatories desired something else is something that has to be investigated. I have proposed one kind of method suitable to such an investigation. It is one thing for scholars to piously confess that every human characteristic is socially constructed rather than expressive of some inner "essence." It is something else entirely to ask about the actual production of

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[2] Scott Saul, *Becoming Richard Pryor* (New York: Harper, 2014).

substantial appearances in an antagonistic field of observers. Listening to recorded artifacts musically is at least a method for producing an appearance without first needing to be able to recognize it as proof of something we believe we already know.

A study which neatly defines its social groups can answer one question: "what does this definite type of person typically say or do?" I have instead been reading comedy LPs as artifacts involved in the making of social relations. Where I have talked about "types" of people, I have talked about them in terms of what they have been seen doing, not in terms of what they "are" already by themselves. Whether there were any really existing people who really did such things —whether there was really anyone thoughtless enough to be a "liberal" in the sense disparaged by Bruce, for example—is a separate question. And even if it could be proven that none of these types really existed, we would still be left to interpret the imaginings where these types were seen at work. A sociologist might be able to report that the affluent middle class seen listening to Lenny Bruce's "concert" was the same as the one seen listening for printable words. But in and through the stories people told about their contemporaneity, the two were seen behaving in varied ways—I counted at least two different audiences for Bruce the virtuosic violinist, one real and one fantastic. Appearances remain. Our opinions regarding appearances and the observers who saw them are influenced by our understandings of the real conditions where appearances and acts of observation went to ground, but we cannot explain appearances away by saying where they went to ground. When Mr. Vic's "common people" became "black people," something happened to the involvement of Jimmy Lynch's series of La Val records in the production and continuous reproduction of class and race in a racist class society. Mr. Vic's terms are comparable yet distinct. Being able to sort Taylor, his common people, and his black people

into definite sociological positions would tell us only so much about how various individuals involved themselves in the reproduction of the political during a transitional moment in the Black Freedom Movement. Similar points could be made about any of my other case studies. I am not so much interested in the question, "Which social type does 'this'?" as I am in the question, "What might 'this' have accomplished for whom in and through the reproduction of class society?" Whether and how my argument can be used to propose sociological types is not my concern.

Since Mr. Vic's descriptions of Jimmy Lynch's LPs both describe and find grounds in those LP records, I have advocated for what could be called a "formalist moment" in criticism. The appearances I have discussed here do not merely duplicate in visible form the modes of perception involved in the production of those appearances: appearances involve not only modes of perception but also the artifacts being perceived. In this sense, even though I have not been able to point at the "text in itself," I have not been able to make do without some kind of "thought of the 'text in itself.'" The strongest evidence I have that Elaine May's treatment of the tangled texture seemed different from Katharine Hepburn's is found in the audible texts themselves, or in the audible texts as I have described them. At least one observer, Taylor's son Tico Taylor, found that certain events productive of Lynch's play of spatiotemporal surface and depth were a waste of time: as Tico remembers it, his father would have preferred it if Lynch had skipped the songs and simply told one joke after the next. The strongest evidence I have that at least some observers heard those same events otherwise is the appearance I have produced for us by listening to the LP record. The formalist's audible text counts.

I have tried to account for it by elaborating a vocabulary for discussing three themes: sound as appearing or as productive of knowledge, medium as form, and texture as a political-aesthetic category. Readers should be able to expand, revise, and systematize my vocabulary in various ways as they use it to produce particular formal appearances. For now I will only enumerate some key terms in a semi-systematic fashion by producing a few of their interdependencies.

Although my discussion of the production of "appearances" has functioned throughout as a discussion of the "production of knowledge" in the loosest possible sense, some of my terms deal more explicitly than others with epistemological concerns. Jimmy Lynch's *Tramp Time Volume 1* functions as an archival record of vanishing motion for observers who know to listen for his spatiotemporal play of surface and depth. Having a term for what we are listening for helps us learn to listen. Lenny Bruce's impersonations can be described as epigrammatic rather than thorough because of the particular relationship they establish between references, referents, the speakers who make references, and the observers who "know" the referents or "recognize" them in the references. The thorough impersonation is such to the degree that it presents a "copy" of its referent; to really hear a thorough impersonation, the observer must have detailed prior knowledge of an original sound. The epigrammatic impersonation is not a less thorough version of the thorough impersonation: it produces its own audible object on the spot. The referent may still be important in various respects, but whereas the referent is always important in at least one specific respect for the thorough impersonation—it must supply an "original" sound to be "copied"—its importance for the epigrammatic impersonation is indefinite. The importance of Clyde McCoy for observers of Bruce's impersonation, for example, might have been the

clumsily ethnic name more than anything else. This is why observers can rightly approve some impersonations without ever having heard the original.[3] We would not accept that a person who has never heard the original can fully appreciate the thorough impersonation as such; the same cannot be said in the case of the epigrammatic impersonation. Thorough impersonations may appear as epigrammatic impersonations, and perhaps an epigrammatic impersonation could even appear as a thorough impersonation, but the two are incomparable objects, not points on a continuum between the thorough and the less thorough.

Two of my terms—the microphonic dimension and radiophony—have been used to grasp after the production of particular ways of knowing sound reproduction media formally and sometimes stylistically. What I am calling "formal" knowing can be distinguished from "stylistic" knowing with two examples. The microphonic dimension as heard on *Tramp Time Volume 1* does not appear to be stylized; it does not appear to be governed by any conscious rules. Many of the audible aspects I called attention to in my close reading of that LP might have been unintended. The microphonic dimension appears there instead as one of the contingencies governing an archival act. It nevertheless structures the formal appearance of the LP: *Volume 1* seems to call attention to its own archival act by seeming inadequate to the task; we hear the

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[3] Robin Williams's performance in *Aladdin* (1992), for example, had to appeal to small children who could not possibly be expected to have any prior knowledge of more than a handful of his referents. When Dennis in *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* does an impersonation of CCH Pounder for Mac, Charlie, Frank, and Dee, Frank approves. Dee objects that Frank, by his own prior admission, does not even know who CCH Pounder is. Frank reasonably responds, "I just assume she's a no-nonsense black broad from the precinct." Mac and Charlie enthusiastically affirm, "That's exactly right. That's exactly who she is." "The Gang Goes to Hell: Part 2," *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, Season 11, Episode 10, originally aired March 9, 2016. Of course we are expected to laugh at the gang's ridiculous racism and misogyny—CCH Pounder's importance for the gang is effected in and through their own bigotry. But we are also supposed to laugh at Dee because she is stubbornly wrong: Frank fully appreciates Dennis's impersonation, in fact this is the point which drives home the gang's racism and misogyny.

microphone as such when it seems to listen as a microphone rather than as we would listen if we inhabited the vanishing past. In the Firesign Theatre's tetralogy, by contrast, the same microphonic dimension sounds as a stylistic element in the sense that the performance itself traces the contours of that dimension—for example, honking clown noses recede steadily along the microphonic dimension. Formalist readings, once the jealously guarded domain of the lonely aesthete, can become involved in the production of historically possible appearances whether or not those appearances were perceived as "experiments into new definitions of form." The Firesign Theatre's radiophony appeals to the formalist's taste for the highly stylized; in that sense it is well-suited to the sort of study I have been conducting. But readings for audible form, if they are sufficiently attentive to the dialectic between formalizing and historicizing moments, also allow us to produce potentially important yet otherwise seemingly negligible details of audible texts which, like *Volume 1*, were evidently never intended to appear as pure form.

The terms for texture I have used here—tangled, splintered, layered—are all built around the dialectic of surface and depth I produced in my discussion of textural listening in chapter two. We can always listen in something like the way a spectogram listens, with an ear for pure surface. But other ways of listening are possible and, I have argued, sometimes desirable. I have been arguing that the surfaces of various audible texts might be heard as productive of various sorts of depth.[4] The splintered texture, for example, seems to make its hidden causes audible as silent. And even where a whiter middle class is seen showing a predilection for surface, different sorts of surface are possible. The layered texture produces one kind of depth of field composed of channels layered at its surface. The innovation, relative to the work of Hepburn and Tracy, of

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[4] See also Brian Kane's extended discussion of listening for "acousmatic sound," *Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

Elaine May's tangled texture concerned its distribution of a one-dimensional texture across the folds of a Freudian self. This paragraph enumerates these textures systematically in the sense that it relates them to one another with reference to a dialectic of surface and depth. But this is not a closed or even an especially orderly system, and I hope other critics will continue to elaborate vocabularies for texture.

I have focused especially on the ideological work performed by various audible texts. Lenny Bruce's jazz-like audible practice may have seemed productive of a particular kind of mobility. The capacity of the ear to hear sounds as textured, for example, has become involved in a variety of performances of life in determinate social or ethical relations. This dissertation has become involved in the production of "knowledge of" some of that variety. I have been asking how particular audible texts became involved in the production of temporalities, forms of personhood and interpersonal relations, and ways of observing and relating to history and its happening.

My research has not been informed by any systematic distinctions between different modes of the "production of knowledge" or between the different sorts of appearances produced by different sorts of "mechanisms"—for example, aesthetic, fantastic, sociological, ideological, theoretical, or scientific "modes of knowledge" or experiences (I am using the term "knowledge" in the loosest possible sense). How did Nichols and May's critic read what he called the Freud "level?" As a pedagogical illustration of Freud's map of psychic life? As an entertainment structured by that map? As a "reflection" of the condition of personhood? As "authentic art" which makes us, to quote Althusser, "*see*, *perceive* (but not *know*) something which *alludes* to

reality?"[5] What was the difference between "fantasy culture" in Bruce's autobiography and "culture" in his typescript draft? For whom? I have speculated on these matters in particular cases grounded in remarks by particular observers, but I have not referred my speculations to a system in the sense of any kind of "idealism." It is enough for me as a historian to be able to say that the appearance of the comedy LP might have become involved in the act of knowing or experiencing a multivalent world. Experience is not a transparent activity. We need to be able to take the time to produce possible appearances even before we determine how they might have cohered—how the knowledge Freud produces relates to the knowledge Elaine May produces, for example, or how Lenny Bruce's conception of "culture" relates to the conceptions of others.

Now that we have had an opportunity to consider the role of criticism not merely in the reception of comedy LPs but also in the production of appearances, the critical historian's responsibility should appear all the more pressing. Whether in the form of liner notes, reviews of LPs, or commentaries on the production of audible texts in general, all five of my main chapters showed observers saying things about how various recordings sounded. As was especially clear in the case of Lenny Bruce, the production of appearances can be an antagonistic affair. Critics have produced not only appearances but also rejected appearances. If popular criticism tends toward vacuity and fatuity, it is still worth taking seriously for the particular shapes it proposes and the particular difficulties those shapes cause. Even a critic who found himself disappointed by the banality of the printable content he himself celebrated in Lenny Bruce was so intent upon celebrating that printable content that he found no way out of the suffocating box he had

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[5] Louis Althusser, "A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre," in *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 152, emphases in original.

constructed for himself—the "magnificent" content not the form, but the content is inane, but the content not the form. That suffocating box is historically important, however ridiculous.

Why is it that, in circumstances as disparate as those of Lenny Bruce and Jimmy Lynch, the making of vernaculars for "middle-class" observers appeared for some to proceed by way of a focus on printable words? Not, why in general did the middle class produce a vernacular—a much broader and complex question than I can address here—and not, why did they focus on printable words, but rather, why were they seen focusing on printable words? "Middle-class" interest in the "national" standardization made possible by the printable was not new in the 1960s.[6] But why did it still seem like a characteristic of the middle class even when a group of affluent New Yorkers signed a petition in 1964 or when Victor Taylor began producing a series of party records in 1967?

The answer may have less to do with what any really existing middle-class observers actually saw than with the efficiency of printable words as seen from the standpoint of the people

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[6] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 2006), 22–36.

who finance and advertise comedy LPs.[7] Taylor had commercial reasons for wanting to be able to interpolate *Volume 1* into the blue record as genre, and words could be printed on an advertisement. Whether or not *Volume 1* sold well with middle-class readers of *Ebony*, Taylor could have had high hopes for the national reach of middle-class institutions when he published advertisements in that periodical. With great alacrity, children on a schoolyard can learn the tiny vocabulary which makes up the so-called "vernacular" of "adult" society—at the beginning of the 1970s, George Carlin counted no more than "seven dirty words." And once that vocabulary has been learned, participants in that vernacular can gain immediate recognition.[8] No fewer than eighty-nine affluent middle-class observers expressed some kind of desire in 1964 to participate

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[7] This interpretation would help explain why comedians worry that profanity yields "cheap laughs": the so-called "vernacular" seems already involved in a ruthlessly efficient production process. Such an understanding of the vernacular seems to be involved in a brilliant satire of upper-middle-class profanity featured in Season 2 of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, a show which features a number of celebrities playing fictionalized versions of themselves. Throughout the season, Larry David is trying to pitch a new television show with his colleague Julia Louis-Dreyfus. Julia wants the show to be on HBO. Larry, having just burnt yet another bridge with another network executive, tries to talk her out of it. Julia is adamant. "I want to be able to say 'fuck,'" she explains, before blurting out Lenny Bruce's infamous "ten-letter word" (see chapter one). "The Shrimp Incident," *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, Season 2, Episode 4, originally aired October 14, 2001. Julia—closely associated with the professional class through her portrayal of Elaine Benes on the iconic yuppie sitcom (1989–1998)—expresses her desire to participate in the vernacular. Simply expressing that desire out loud makes her sound ridiculous, as if the greatest freedom the affluent middle-class can imagine is the freedom to say "fuck." This effect is only exacerbated by an ironic element: a tawdry desire grounds Julia's desire to have a program on a prestigious, auteur-oriented network, the very network which broadcasts *Curb*—some might say a pretentious network ("It's not TV. It's HBO."). As elsewhere in both *Seinfeld* and *Curb*, much of the humor lies in an affluent, middle-class, self-important character's farcical pusillanimity as it is supposed to appear for affluent, middle-class, self-aware observers.

[8] In *Anchorman 2: The Legend Continues* (2013), the farcical hero Ron Burgundy bullies a little boy for wanting to name a pet shark "Crackers." If the audience worries about the harm Burgundy's childish bullying might cause the little boy, all worries are immediately resolved when the boy says, "don't be a dick about it." With one word, the boy demonstrates that he can hold his own in adult society.

in some way in some sort of "vernacular."[9] While their actual desires might have been extremely varied, one thing is certain: printable words provided an efficient way of participating; there were no complex ways of listening to be learned.

When Carlin asked for an administrative "list" to tell him which words he could or could not say on television, he was satirizing arbitrary censorship. In hindsight, however, what is especially striking about Carlin's bit is that it produces a vernacular as purely a matter of bureaucratic administration. This is peculiar. There were certainly other ways of producing a vernacular: Amiri Baraka's grandfather, with his concern about a "wasteful" class, evidently felt that there was more to it materially than the workings of an administrative class. If indeed the vernacular in our middle-class society has become more a bureaucratic affair than a thriving realm of human practice, we have reason to be less concerned today with censors per se than with the hegemonic social order which produces and celebrates its own penurious "vernacular." If, on the contrary, the making of a vernacular for whiter professionals or for whomever else has involved something more than a list of words, then we need to actively study that something. Either way we should be dissatisfied with histories which champion the celebration of a vernacular without examining the character of the production of a vernacular. It may be true that whiter professionals were trying to help a much larger segment of the population participate in "the national life" and that, abstractly speaking, this project was better morally—more democratic or liberating—than that of the waning WASP caste it superseded. Maybe. But it is certainly beside the point. A much larger and more diverse segment of the population was going to enter the national life of the "middle class" no matter how whiter professionals administered

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[9] See the Appendix, Signatories to a "Petition Protesting the Arrest of Lenny Bruce" (1964).

its entrance—in the last instance, widespread affluence was the work of capital's thirst for more labor and more elaborate divisions thereof during a period of material expansion. Moralists can rightly celebrate the general trend, but the administration has to be examined in its own characteristics.

The focus on printable words appears as one instance of the emphasis on "surface" we have repeatedly encountered in aesthetics associated with affluent middle-class observers—the "mirrors" described by Nichols and May's critics, the topological total sound-space of John Cage, the one-dimensional tangled textures found in entertainment associated with the affluent middle-classes, and the layered textures of the collegiate Firesign Theatre. What sometimes gets dressed up in the democratic language of "transparency" and "accessibility" can also be described as totalitarian: in this interpretation, the operative word in Sontag's term "one culture," for example, is "one."[10] Everything can appear on the surface when everyone feels they share, or are about to share, the same deep experience and knowledge. From the standpoint of this one culture, everything is absolutely flat: it "is" nothing more and nothing less than what it immediately appears to be. The point is then to make one's own experience and knowledge into the foundation of the universal society toward which mass-society as a quasi-democratic middle-class society is instructed to aspire. Everyone is to be placed on the same page. This is what democracy would look like to the person whose own position already seems triumphant—whether now or in the "progressive" future—the person already fully interpolated into the so-called "liberalism" of an imagined "middle class." The goal for such a democracy would be a

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[10] Susan Sontag, "Against interpretation" [1964], in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 1996 [1966]), 13–14; ead., "One culture and the new sensibility" [1965], in ibid., 304.

middle-class society made truly universal through "education." If the pure aesthetic surface or the printable vernacular could have appeared as if they were a finished "thing" readymade to be shared, they could have found a place in that sort of pseudo-democratic project.

The only way I know to produce oxygen in the suffocating actuality of middle-class aesthetic projects is through criticism.[11] The merit of Sontag's "one culture" is that she yet aspires to produce it through critical work, hard work to judge from the daunting list of essays she cites as exemplary—including works by Auerbach, Barthes, Benjamin, Frye, Francastel, and Panofsky. My interpretation of Nichols and May's tangled textures is pedantic: one must "know" something, however little, about Freud's map of the divided self in order to be able to hear May's performance as a performance shaped by that cartography. If this interpretation maps the surface of an audible texture across the divisions of a Freudian self, it only does so by referring to a Freudian "code." There will never be any guarantee that we are not simply reproducing artifacts as illustrations of what we already believe to be true. Being "open" to new artifacts gets us nowhere. Any chance we have of learning anything hinges upon our willingness to renew the dialectic of formalism and historicism I have practiced here.

For now at least, studies of the 1960s remain studies of our own stagnating contemporaneity. Beyond their involvement in my historical narrative, the appearances I have promoted here can still matter for us as performances which play whimsical games with circumstances abstracted from contemporary society. We can become more lively participants in

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[11] See Octavio Paz's remarks on the "universal context" discovered or invented by criticism in the essay "Sobre la Crítica," in *Corriente Alterna* (Mexico: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2009 [1967]), 42. For a more thorough defense of the category of the "universal" in left thought, see Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009); Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universal History*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

those games with a more critical sense of the range of alternatives. None of the recorded narratives I have discussed here depict unambiguously desirable outcomes. All of them can be described as "satirical" in the sense that they become involved in the production of at least one way of knowing contemporary society as ridiculous. What has interested me more than their satirical aspects, however, are the dynamic forms where particular voices triumph in and through a definite set of circumstances: the over-forty act young again in a dynamic space revolving around a novel sign; Lenny Bruce weaves an esoteric body of knowledge through the banal ephemera of consumer society; Ms. Lehmas stretches the interdependent limbs of her conflicted self across a situation involving a corporate office by speaking; the Tramp tramps, making triumphant bullshit out of the bullshit of a racist society; the act of composing a layered radiophonic future appears as such in and through the composition itself. The point of interest in cases such as these is not activity for the sake of activity or moral ambiguity. It is the changing appearance of an audible totality permeated and constituted by audible activities, and it is the imaginative, triumphant modulation of real and ridiculous social conditions. Musical terms might have provided people in the past and can provide us in the present with a way of observing, and in that sense producing, a whimsical happening which structures and is structured by its own shapes and temporalities. Politically, the sixties comedy LP remains a worthy object of critical study for its particular forms of musical play.

APPENDIX Signatories to a "Petition Protesting Protesting the Arrest of Lenny Bruce" (1964)

The list of signatories below, together with the professions and affiliations beside each name, has been transcribed directly from a "press release" by Allen Ginsberg's Committee on Poetry dated June 13, 1964, Box 4, Lenny Bruce Collection, Brandeis University. The list provides some information about the top tier of Ginsberg's Northeastern professional circles. For example: nearly ten percent of the signatories are described as affiliates of Columbia University; about fifteen percent are identified as editors of periodicals.

Woody Allen, entertainer

David Amram, composer

James Baldwin, novelist

Arnold Beichman, Chairman, Board of Directors, American Committee for Cultural Freedom

Eric Bentley, critic, translator, Drama Department Head, Columbia

Theodore Bikel, entertainer

Louise Bogan, poet

Bob Booker, producer

Robert Brustein, drama critic, *New Republic*, Associate Professor of English, Columbia University

Godfrey Cambridge, actor

Gregory Corso, poet

Malcolm Cowley, poet, critic, editor

Merce Cunningham, dancer

Severn Darden, actor, The Second City

F.W. Dupee, Professor of English, Columbia

Bob Dylan, folk singer

Jason Epstein, Vice President, Random House Publishers

Jules Feiffer, cartoonist

Lawrence Ferlinghetti, poet, publisher, City Lights Books

Robert Frank, photographer, moviemaker

Fred Coe, producer-director

Jack Gelber, playwright

Richard Gilman, Drama Editor, *Newsweek*

Allen Ginsberg, poet

Ira Gitler, Editor, *Downbeat Magazine*

Harry Golden, social commentary, newspaperman

Albert Goldman, Assistant Professor of English, Columbia, Music Critic, New Leader, TV critic, New Republic

Robert Gottlieb, Managing Editor, Simon & Schuster

Dick Gregory, comedian

Elizabeth Hardwick, novelist

Michael Harrington, social critic, author

Joseph Heller, novelist

Lillian Hellman, playwright

Cecil Hemley, poet

Nat Hentoff, jazz critic

Granville Hicks, literary critic

John Hollander, poet, Assistant Professor, English Yale University

Richard Howard, poet, translator

Irving Howe, Editor, *Dissent*

Peter Israel, Managing Editor, Putnams

James Jones, novelist

John Wilcock, columnist, *Village Voice*

LeRoi Jones, poet, playwright, editor

Alfred Kazin, literary critic

Walt Kelly, cartoonist

Alexander King, memoirist

Kenneth Koch, poet, Assistant Professor of English, Columbia

Paul Krassner, Editor, *Realist*

Irving Kristol, Editor, Basic Books

Tommy Leonetti, entertainer

Max Lerner, author, columnist, *NY Post*

Alfred Leslie, painter

Robert Lowell, poet

Dwight Macdonald, film critic, *Esquire,* Staff Writer, *The New Yorker*

Marion Magid, Assistant Editor, *Commentary*

Norman Mailer, novelist

Steven Marcus, Assistant Editor, *Partisan Review*, Associate Professor, Columbia

Jonas Mekas, Director, Film Makers' Cooperative

Henry Miller, novelist

Jonathan Miller, essayist

Reinhold Niebuhr, theologian

Paul Newman, actor

Frank O'Hara, poet

Peter Orlovsky, poet

Theodore Wilentz, 8th St. Bookstore, Publisher, Corinth Books

Arthur Penn, stage, cinema, TV director

William Phillips, Editor *Partisan Review*

George Plimton, Editor, *Paris Review*

Norman Podhoretz, Editor, *Commentary*

Robert Rauschenberg, painter

John Rechy, novelist

Theodor Reik, psychoanalyst

Jack Richardson, playwright

Barney Rossett, Publisher Grove Press

Meyer Schapiro, Professor Fine Arts Columbia

Robert Silvers, Co-Editor, *NY Review of Books*

Susan Sontag, author, critic

Terry Southern, novelist, screenwriter

William Styron, novelist

Harvey Swados, author, literary critic

Jerry Tallmer, Drama Critic, *NY Post*

Rip Torn, actor

Lionel Trilling, novelist, Professor of English, Columbia

Louis Untermeyer, anthologist, poet

John Updyke, novelist

Rudy Vallee, singer

Gore Vidal, novelist

Dan Wakefield, social critic

Arnold Weinstein, playwright

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