

Goldsmiths Research Online

*Goldsmiths Research Online (GRO)
is the institutional research repository for
Goldsmiths, University of London*

Citation

Graham, Stephen. 2021. Summer's Gone: Late Style and Popular Music. *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 146(2), pp. 315-333. ISSN 0269-0403 [Article]

Persistent URL

<https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/28031/>

Versions

The version presented here may differ from the published, performed or presented work. Please go to the persistent GRO record above for more information.

If you believe that any material held in the repository infringes copyright law, please contact the Repository Team at Goldsmiths, University of London via the following email address: gro@gold.ac.uk.

The item will be removed from the repository while any claim is being investigated. For more information, please contact the GRO team: gro@gold.ac.uk

Summer's Gone: Late Style and Popular Music

STEPHEN GRAHAM

Introduction

If late style is an identifiable aesthetic quality, what might late style in popular music sound like? This article uses the Beach Boys' 2012 album, *That's Why God Made The Radio*, to answer this question. It starts out by historicising the concept of late style along two main tracks, the intransigent and the serene, before analysing *That's Why God Made the Radio* and other examples of popular music, notably David Bowie's 2016 album *Blackstar*, through this bifurcated late style lens. It argues both that late style helps us to understand some of the particular ways that modern popular music has aged, as illustrated here by the strange, multiply 'late' arc of the Beach Boys, and that modern pop is well-placed to embody late style. This is due not only to its aging profile as a cultural tradition, which has inspired a variety of artistic responses, but also to the complicated knots of fantasy, nostalgia and death that have shaped its unconscious—in the Beach Boys' music as much as that of any other artist—from the very beginning.

1. Late style, and popular music

Late style has been seen as a shift in idiom that takes place late in an artist's life or work towards what Edward Said (riffing on Adorno) has called a spirit of 'intransigence, difficulty and unresolved contradiction'.¹ Adorno focuses his own account on the 'furrowed, even ravaged', 'bitter and spiny' late works that for him 'do not surrender themselves to mere delectation'.² In an essay on Wagner, Adorno zooms in on

¹ Edward Said, *On Late Style* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2007), 3

² Theodor Adorno [trans. Susan Gillespie]. 'Late Style in Beethoven', in *Essays on Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 564-568, at 564.

contradiction as a key marker of late style: he identifies the composer as ‘the first to draw the consequences from the contradiction between traditional forms, indeed the traditional formal language of music as a whole, and the concrete artistic tasks at hand’. This contradiction, Adorno thinks, ‘had already made itself felt, rumblingly’, in Beethoven, and indeed ‘in essential ways generated his late style’.³ In a famous phrase, Adorno elsewhere sums things up: ‘in the history of art late works are the catastrophe’.⁴

Other accounts of late style echo Adorno and Said’s emphasis on contradiction in the face of death or old age. Amir Cohen-Shalev sees late style art as ‘dealing with unresolved contradictions and offering a distillation of artistic perception and a dispensing with ornament in favor (sic) of essentials’. Cohen-Shalev locates these characteristics in the ‘reflexive, philosophical style’ of late Puccini operas such as *Turandot*,⁵ though we could equally identify them in Liszt, where austere, enigmatic pieces like *La Lugubre Gondola* and *Nuages Gris* use augmented and diminished chords, spare textures and, in the latter case, quartal harmony, to put tonal functionality and integrity in question. Margaret Notley shifts the frame of late style to what she calls ‘music-historic lateness’ in her discussion of Brahms’ late music. But Notley nevertheless likewise stresses the composer’s struggles with a central musical and cultural contradiction; in this case, the promotion of ‘striking harmonic effects and lyrical, self-contained melodies at the expense of a complex formal whole’ (which maps directly for Notley on to the late-nineteenth century tension between individuals and society).⁶ Finally, Anthony Barone speaks through earlier critics such as Wolzoger and

³ Adorno [trans. Susan Gillespie]. ‘Wagner’s Relevance for Today’, in *Essays on Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 584-602, at 588.

⁴ Adorno. ‘Late Style in Beethoven’, 567.

⁵ Amir Cohen-Shalev, ‘Sailing on seas of uncertainties: late style and Puccini’s struggle for self-renewal’, *International Journal of Ageing and Later Life*, 3(1), 2008: 80 and 78.

⁶ Margaret Notley, *Lateness and Brahms* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 73.

Dahlhaus about the 'dialectic of artistic subjectivity and objectivity' allegorised in Wagner's *Parsifal*, where for him we can likewise hear contradictory dualities that are 'inherent in the late-style concept – of decline and transcendence, of stasis and evolution'.⁷ As we can see, alongside contradiction and Adornian intransigence all of these descriptions circle around ideas of dissonance, disruption and distillation; these are further in evidence in late style interpretations of composers such as Britten, Schubert and Mozart.⁸ Late style works here serve as critical commentary on earlier works and music culture in general, often in a distilled or dissonant manner.

By contrast, figures such as Johann Winckelmann and Goethe wrote accounts of what would later be codified in the English language literature as late style, which focused in an organicist way on late work as a crowning expression of artistic senescence and old age (even if Goethe's late stage organicism rested as much on a sort of solemn transcendence as it did crowning glory).⁹ These accounts saw in late works what Said later described as 'reconciliation and serenity', 'harmony and resolution' and even 'a renewed, almost youthful energy that attests to an apotheosis of artistic power and creativity'.¹⁰ By these lights, late works such as *The Tempest*, Richard Strauss' *Four Last Songs* and Verdi's *Otello* achieved a sense of resolution that seems to contrast sharply with the 'formal ambiguity, expressive intensity and lessened attention to detail

⁷ Anthony Barone, 'Richard Wagner's "Parsifal" and the Theory of Late Style', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (1995): 50 and 53.

⁸ Kimberly Fairbrother Canton, Amelia Defalco, Linda Hutcheon, Michael Hutcheon, Katherine R. Larson, Helmut Reichenbacher, 'Death in Venice and Beyond: Benjamin Britten's Late Works', *University of Toronto Quarterly*, Volume 81 Issue 4, 2012: 893-908; Lorraine Byrne Bodley, 'A Place at the Edge: Reflections on Schubert's Late Style', *Oxford German Studies*, 44:1, 2015: 18-29; A. Hyatt King, 'Mozart's "Prussian" Quartets in Relation to His Late Style', *Music & Letters*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (1940): 328-346.

⁹ See Barone, 'Richard Wagner's "Parsifal" and the Theory of Late Style': 40-44, for an overview of Winckelmann's introduction of organicist late-style theory in *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* (1764), and Goethe's radical epistemological updating of the theory a few decades later.

¹⁰ Said, *On Late Style*, 3.

or to finished surfaces' that Cohen-Shalev thinks of as characteristic features of Adorno and A.E. Brinkmann's late style.¹¹

We therefore have two principal strains of late style thinking; Adornian contradictory intransigence and Goethian organicist resolution. A third strain, finally, sees late stage creativity flourishing basically uninflected by morbidity, death or eccentricity. This is illustrated by the late work of composers such as Elliot Carter and Leoš Janáček. Whilst this late productivity is surely an interesting phenomenon in itself its emphasis on unusually flowing and fluent, but stylistically typical, late work means that it doesn't necessarily offer anything to a discussion of *style*. As such it won't be addressed here.

Though there are clearly important differences between the two principal strains, in practice they often blur into each other in interesting ways. Beethoven's late works are exemplary 'late' monuments in this sense in how they express both intransigence and serenity - particularly for those of us looking back through centuries of a scumbling reception history that dulls radical edges. Key texts from figures such as Carl Dahlhaus, Maynard Solomon, Michael Spitzer and the aforementioned Adorno and Said connect Beethoven and late style.¹² They speak to the formal disunities and expressive ambiguities that run through pieces such as the fractured *Grosse Fuge*; to the curiously naked, concise and atomised conventions of the *Missa Solemnis* or shorter movements like the Presto from the Op. 131 string quartet in C# minor; and to the topically stacked, schizophrenic opening movement of the Op. 132 quartet in A minor.

¹¹ Amir Cohen-Shalev, 'Sailing on seas of uncertainties: late style and Puccini's struggle for self-renewal': 78

¹² Carl Dahlhaus [trans. Mary Whittall], *Ludwig Van Beethoven: Approaches to His Music* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Maynard Solomon, *Late Beethoven: Music, Thought, Imagination*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Michael Spitzer, *Music as Philosophy: Adorno and Beethoven's Late Style* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

Beethoven's late music has been read in this way as providing an 'image of shattered subjectivity', in the words of Susan McClary.¹³ But these texts also periodically slip into an organicist biographical frame that to some degree recuperates aesthetic strangeness via narratives of aging as a natural letting go in the face of death. In this way they use biography to blur together the Adornian and Goethian schools I've described. Solomon's book does this most explicitly and consistently, but Dahlhaus' critical and historical approach encompasses a careful consideration of the biographical subject.¹⁴

*

We can identify a number of basic critical premises running through our two primary strains of late style. The first is that late style and old age/death have invariably been closely linked by authors writing on the topic, as we've just seen in the example of Beethoven. In fact it is often taken as read 'that the work of the last few years of truly "great" creative artists is marked by a profound change of style, tone and content'.¹⁵ Even if the concept of artistic autobiography is complicated in a source such as Adorno, where the 'private individual' is 'the exponent and locus of social tendencies' rather than merely personal 'psychological arbitrariness',¹⁶ late age and late style – or what Said calls 'bodily condition and aesthetic style'¹⁷ – have fed off each other for centuries. This is natural enough, since there is a longstanding and perhaps unavoidable cultural bias that reads the artist through their work and vice versa. And of course in many cases this critical move makes for good copy: the story of Beethoven's increasing deafness and

¹³ Susan McClary, *Conventional Wisdom* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 119.

¹⁴ See in particular Dahlhaus, *Ludwig Van Beethoven: Approaches to His Music*, 30-42.

¹⁵ Gordon McMullan and Sam Smiles. 'Introduction', in *Late Style and its Discontents: Essays in art, literature, and music*, ed. Gordon McMullan and Sam Smiles (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1

¹⁶ Adorno. 'Wagner's Relevance for Today': 586.

¹⁷ Said, *On Late Style*, 1.

shifting psychological state towards the end of his life has long given listeners a vivid context for interpretation, helping them to relate to and understand Beethoven's late works in a way that treating them as purely abstract musical statements would not allow. It not only makes for good copy but also good sense: impending death inevitably exercises a huge influence on artists' creativity, and, since one's own death is often a source of unresolved tension and fear leads in many cases to art in which irresolution, contradiction and dissonance are important qualities.

But despite in many ways being inevitable, seductive and to some degree sensible, this late style critical yoking of life and art is also limiting in its creation of an hermeneutic circle where art can only ventriloquise its origins. I therefore honour but also go beyond the age/style link below. I take into account the profound influence experiences like loss of youth, illness and impending death can have on the production and reception of art, an influence that is especially pressing here given the aging baby boomer profiles of the musicians and fans being examined (more on this below). But I also disyoke age and style at certain key moments, identifying late style as being in operation at different points in artists' careers.

A second basic critical premise has been that late style has largely been applied in the realm of 'high' culture. This is evidenced in microcosm by the contents of the McMullan and Smiles book referenced on the previous page, just as it is by the lengthy discussions of Beethoven and other composers given above. Popular music has proved less amenable to the concept of late style; at least, that is, in terms of the post-world war two stream of modern popular music genres that have fanned out from blues, rock and soul since the 1950s. (Jazz and older popular song traditions of course have their own storied relationships with lateness and aging.) This can likely be attributed in part to modern popular music's almost mythic status as a form organised around the tastes and

habits of young people. This status can be seen across all sorts of cultural texts that emphasise the strong link between young people and pop music, from teen-focused films such as *Rock Around the Clock*, journalism such as Nik Cohn's *Awopbopaloobop Alopbamboom* and scholarly writing such as Andy Bennett's *Popular Music and Youth Culture*.¹⁸ Lyrics and imagery in songs such as the Who's 'My Generation' ('Hope I die before I get old') and, appositely, the Beach Boys' 'When I Grow Up' or 'Wouldn't it be Nice' are also typical in being written very much from the perspective of a young person looking forward to their life as an adult.

Of course, the march of time has problematised this almost default association of pop with young people. On the one side, a huge array of musical scenes, styles and even movements, from acid house to K-pop to grime and beyond, have developed largely out of the activities of young people. On the other, baby boomer popular music quickly began to age in the cultural transition from countercultural rock and pop to a post-Beatles, post-Summer of Love 1970s. This aging has continued apace in the decades since, with the music going through revival after revival and heading deeper and deeper into 'heritage' status, still infused with youth in its themes and energy but grey with age and time. We can therefore see an emergent tension between young and old, or, to put it slightly more expressively, time present and time passing, in later-stage modern popular music. This is the first context in which a popular music late style emerges. But we can also see a version of this tension as to some degree being 'baked in' to modern pop from its very beginnings. A youth profile in terms of theme and listener has been offset by nostalgia, myth and death fixations from the start, where nostalgia and myth connote a kind of present absence and death an anticipated absence. This is seen in the

¹⁸ Nik Cohn, *Awopbopaloobop Alopbamboom* (London: Vintage, 2016); Andy Bennett *Popular Music and Youth Culture: Music, Identity and Place* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2000).

Beach Boys' 'always already' dreaming, always already delusional fantasies of highschool sun, sea and surf, just as it is the so-called 'teenage tragedy' genre made famous by artists like Mark Dinning and the Shangri-Las. The haunting nature of 1950s and 1960s American pop music that's embodied in these examples is perhaps captured most vividly by David Lynch's ghostly reanimations of the form in shows and films such as *Twin Peaks* and *Blue Velvet*. Given all this, we can see modern pop as animated by unresolved contradiction and tension from the get-go. This is the second context through which to understand popular music as embodying late style.

*

These links between popular music and various aspects of aging and lateness have been somewhat underexplored in the scholarly literature, at least in the second respect. The aging profile of baby boomer modern pop has led some to focus on the relationship between pop music and age. Memoirs such as Phil Collins' *Not Dead Yet*, albums such as Bob Dylan's *Time Out Of Mind* (1997) and documentaries like *Scott Walker: 30 Century Man* (2006) all thematise the notion of aging pop stars.¹⁹ The death-focused reception of David Bowie's final album, *Blackstar* (2016), which was released two days before Bowie's death and based around topics such as illness, retrospection and death, is also noteworthy here. Scholarly texts have likewise interrogated ideas of aging and popular music, as seen in book such Ros Jennings and Abigail Gardner's *Rock on: women, aging, popular music* and Catherine Haworth and Lisa Colton's *Gender, Age and Musical Creativity*.²⁰

Whilst no one has yet applied the concept of late style to modern popular music in the kind of general and idiomatic way I am attempting here, there are interesting

¹⁹ Phil Collins, *Not Dead Yet: An Autobiography* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2017).

²⁰ Ros Jennings and Abigail Gardner, *Rock on: women, aging, popular music* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012). Catherine Haworth and Lisa Colton, *Gender, Age and Musical Creativity* (London: Routledge, 2016).

examples to take note of nonetheless. These have likewise arisen out of the aging profile of modern pop. Chief among them is Willemien Froneman's 'After Fame: A Micro-Ethnography of Popular Late Style', which provides 'an ethnographic account of aging and musical creativity in the everyday life of the then 90-year-old South African accordionist Nico Carstens'.²¹ Froneman's approach is intriguing in how it attempts to 're-enchant' late style by seeing it not (just) as an aesthetic category but also as a kind of perspective that artists adopt at different points in their lives. Though Froneman's tying of this perspective to old age and disability, like his creative shift of emphasis from a critical appraisal of style to an ethnographic narration of encounters with the material world as a process of self-fashioning, his fundamental gesture of imagining the frame of late style into both the lives and works of popular musicians is taken up in the current article. Of less direct relevance here is writing by Richard Elliot on what he describes as the 'late voice' in popular music and Nick Stevenson on David Bowie's supposed late style.²² Though interesting in themselves, neither of these texts engage deeply with late style in the sense meant here. Stevenson's account of Bowie's lateness is somewhat cursory, particularly when it comes to musical sound. Elliot's focus on the aging voice in popular music has something to say to my own account of aging voices and audiences as signifying lateness in the context of the Beach Boys, but any broader sense of late style as an aesthetic category either related or tangential to the age or relation to death of the artist, is absent.

²¹ Willemien Froneman, 'After Fame: A Micro-Ethnography of Popular Late Style', *Popular Music and Society*, Volume 41, 2018 - Issue 4: 424-439.

²² Richard Elliot, *The Late Voice: Time, Age and Experience in Popular Music* (London and Oxford: Bloomsbury, 2015); Nick Stevenson, 'David Bowie Now and Then: Questions of Fandom and Late Style', in *David Bowie: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Eoin Devereux, Aileen Dillane and Martin J. Power (New York and London: Routledge, 2015), 283-293.

Despite these significant examples, as Andy Bennett and Jodie Taylor have pointed out, 'the relationship between popular music and ageing continues to be a relatively thinly mapped field'.²³ We can expand on this in adding: the relationship between popular music and late style continues to be a thinly mapped field likewise. The lack of attention paid to late style within the context of modern popular music represents a notable lacuna, given both its increasing age and the animating and unresolved contradictions mentioned above. Pop has always been 'late', according to this line of animating contradictions; at least it has in its non-modernist, non-future orientated forms. In cases where biographical and explicit thematic lateness accompany its latent cultural lateness, pop's closeness to late style is even more pronounced. This late style pop is of course altered when compared to 'high' cultural examples. Adornian difficulty and intransigence is adapted here to a new register. But these alterations do not move the style beyond recognition. I argue instead that in music both by the Beach Boys and by other popular music acts, from Scott Walker to Sharon Jones, David Bowie to Johnny Cash, we can see strong and varied strains of 'late style' expression. Not only this, but also that the concept of late style can help us understand some of the ways that Anglo-American popular music has aged and is aging, thematising its own age and lateness in both resolved and resistant ways that are unique to the form, given its youth profile and spirit.

2. *Late style and That's Why God Made The Radio*

That's Why God Made the Radio (TWGMTR hereafter) was a landmark album for the Beach Boys. Released in 2012 for the band's fiftieth anniversary and constituting their

²³ Andy Bennett and Jodie Taylor, 'Popular music and the aesthetics of ageing', *Popular Music* (2012) Volume 31/2: 231-243, at 232.

first album of original material since 1992's *Summer in Paradise*, it united all the surviving original members – Brian Wilson, Mike Love, Al Jardine and David Marks – for the first time since the early-1960s. It also added long-time member Bruce Johnston and, below the line, Jeff Fosket, the latter of whom has been a key figure in both the Brian Wilson and Beach Boys touring groups going back to the 1980s, where he has supplied the falsetto and gossamer head voice so central to the Beach Boys vocal blend. In reaching number three on the Billboard 200, the Beach Boys' highest chart position for an original album in the US since 1965's *Summer Days (and Summer Nights!!)*, and in gaining what by then had been long-elusive (at least partially) positive critical notices, *TWGMTR* served as something of a commercial and critical rebirth.²⁴ And yet, it may well also be their last album proper. The longstanding conflict between Mike Love and Brian Wilson flared up again soon after the short 2012 anniversary tour in support of the album concluded, firstly, whilst, perhaps even more pressingly, all of the original members are now well into their seventies. As noted, the baby boomer generation of musicians and fans that is embodied in the Beach Boys and their audience has reached a point where old age and death are now increasingly pressing concerns, and where cultural pressures to 'age well', to stay active, productive and consuming, collide with more inevitably more complex and unresolved emotional reactions to growing old. All of this inflects my reading of the album as expressing late style: as these musicians and these fans deal with their own old age and inevitable death, it is natural that a sense of

²⁴ For examples of such reviews see Alexis Petridis, 'The Beach Boys: *That's Why God Made the Radio* – review', *the Guardian*, 31 May 2012, accessed 27 April 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2012/may/31/beach-boys-thats-why-review>; Will Hermes, 'That's Why God Made the Radio', *Rolling Stone*, 5 June 2012, accessed 27 April 2018, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/songreviews/thats-why-god-made-the-radio-20120425>; Randall Roberts, 'Album review: The Beach Boys' *That's Why God Made the Radio*', *La Times*, 5 June 2012, accessed 27 April 2018, http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/music_blog/2012/06/album-review-the-beach-boys-thats-why-god-made-the-radio.html.

irresolution and uncertainty might come to the fore. This, I argue, leads to a kind of split across *TWGMTR*, where death-conscious irresolution pairs up awkwardly with death-repressing nostalgia. In order to flesh this Adornian argument of intransigence out I'll talk through both 'sides' of the album in much more detail now, starting with nostalgia before coming to irresolution, placing the album into the context of earlier Beach Boys' music at a couple of key points as I go. I close the section by offering an alternative, non-Adornian reading of the album as a serene, organicist example of closure.

*

Like earlier albums, the thematic frame and musical style of *TWGMTR* seems at first glance to be typical for the Beach Boys; to fit neatly into the nostalgia-infused world of 'soaring vocal harmonies, infectious themes capturing the pristine innocence of an idealised era, and a danceable blend of classic rock 'n' roll with elements of doo-wop and jazz' that Philip Lambert has identified as archetypal for the band.²⁵ Beaches, oceans and summers run through the titles and lyrics, whilst sun-kissed, major-key vocal harmonies and driving pop-rock arrangements with unexpected touches characterise much of the style. This can be heard on tracks such as the doo-wop-inflected 'Isn't It Time', the AOR-flatness of 'Beaches in Mind' and the calypso-lilt of 'The Private Life of Bill and Sue'. Meanwhile, a slick, shiny, photoshopped Adult Contemporary sound, all gated drums, autotuned vocals and compressed and flattened winds and strings, dominates the album, creating a facsimile of youthful polish and sheen where earlier technological and musical limitations allowed the actually youthful 1960s Beach Boys music to evoke the real thing. This facsimile plays into the impression of death-repressing nostalgia mentioned above and explored further below. Wilson's

²⁵ Phillip Lambert, 'Preface', in *Good Vibrations: Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys in Critical Perspective*, ed. Philip Lambert (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), v-viii, at v.

production in these respects borrows much from Joe Thomas, with whom he had earlier collaborated on albums like *Imagination* (1998), and who co-wrote many of the songs here and even served as studio partner to Wilson.

All of this creates something of a hollow feeling, evokes pastiche more than passion. The lyrical backward glances and call-backs throughout the album, as for instance with the mention of ‘good vibrations’ in ‘Spring Vacation’ or the ‘just like yesterday’ of ‘Isn’t It Time’, don’t help in this regard. Neither do the music-stylistic echoes that resound across tracks two to nine (and, as with lyrical backward glances, more enigmatically on the other tracks). For example, the slightly mournful 6/8 rock of ‘That’s Why God Made the Radio’ recalls superior tracks like 1964’s ‘Warmth Of the Sun’ in its gait and its sound. It also does this through typically unusual Wilsonian harmonic colour, with an upper chromatic mediant modulation in the verse and a lower chromatic mediant modulation featuring in the chorus of ‘Warmth’, and a tritone modulation in the chorus of ‘God’ (the latter heard also in the first ‘Dove nested’ of 1971’s ‘Surf’s Up’). Or the soft-focus vocal ballad ‘Daybreak Over the Ocean’, which feels like a thinned out version of 1988’s ‘Kokomo’, which itself was a thinned out (though pleasing) facsimile combining many of the band’s most famous sonic signatures, from widely spread vocal choruses riding on top of chugging rhythms to beachy references to soft falsetto hooks to twisty and complex chord progressions.²⁶

This is all somewhat to be expected: self-cannibalising parody has been one of the hallmarks of post-1970s and post-Wilson Beach Boys, even if Wilson projects like *Orange Crate Art* (1995) and *That Lucky Old Sun* (2008) have featured much in the way

²⁶ Daniel Harrison’s 1997 article on the Beach Boys, ‘After Sundown: The Beach Boys’ Experimental Music’ surveys many of these tropes, particularly harmonic complexity, in Wilson’s 1960s music; in *Understanding Rock: Essays in Musical Analysis*, eds. John Covach and Graeme Boone (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

of unusual or original material. Even an earlier song like 'Do It Again', released on 1969's *20/20*, is emblematic in both music (surf rock pastiche) and words (girls, beaches, recovery of past times) of the backward-focus that has kept the band somewhat uniquely frozen in amber for decades.

But again, as with earlier Beach Boys music, there is much more than meets the eye on *TWGMTR*. This is most obvious in the wordless opening number, 'Think About The Days', and in the enigmatic three-song suite that rounds out the album. As we'll see in a moment, *TWGMTR* plays in these examples with nostalgia, self-reference and melancholy in ways that evoke earlier, similarly complex and downward-turning tracks like 'I Went to Sleep' (1969), 'Til I Die' (1971), 'Surf's Up', and 'Still I Dream Of It' (1976). But there is *also* more to the seemingly conventional, backwards-looking music of tracks two to nine, where the nostalgic pastiche is so barefaced, and the contrast between the youthful sun of the 'original' 1960s music and the sundowning aspect of the 'copies' so exaggerated, that they feel like eerie, empty simulations. The album in this sense features a push-and-pull between vacant, blankly smiling parody and melancholy, fragmented, even morbid (though always honeyed) explorations of death and ending. As Larry Starr has noted, the album is 'simultaneously nostalgic and a commentary on nostalgia'.²⁷ On the one hand, we have diverting throwbacks like 'Isn't It Time' or empty pastiche like 'Beaches in Mind'. Tracks such as these, as noted, feel almost like simulations of Beach Boys music, old faces cosmetically altered to look eerily young. On the other, with the opening song and the suite, we have unpredictable, fragmented and recursive forms; inconstant tempi; complex extended and altered chords and unusual

²⁷ Larry Starr, 'A Listener's Smile', in *Good Vibrations: Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys in Critical Perspective*, ed. Philip Lambert (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 242-262, at 256.

inversions; fragile tonics, tonal pairing, tonal ambiguity and unexpected or distant modulations; and wistful and mournful lyrics.²⁸

None of these elements are entirely novel in Wilson's music. Earlier concept albums such as *Smile* were built on suite-structures, for example, which were filled with fragments and marked throughout by both melancholy as well as joy. Harmonic and structural complexity, meanwhile, has run through Wilson's work from the beginning; Harrison suggests in this respect that 'even the least distinguished of the Beach Boys' early up-tempo rock 'n' roll songs show traces of structural complexity at some level; Brian was simply too curious and experimental to leave convention alone' (1997: 35). Harrison's discussion of modal mixture and chromatic modulation in the otherwise formulaic 1964 track 'Don't Back Down' is a perfect illustration of this point (36). Most apposite as a comparison here, however, is the aforementioned 2008 concept album, *That Lucky Old Sun*, a song-suite built around images and memories of Southern California. *That Lucky Old Sun* draws together wistful older material ('Can't Wait Too Long', which in the live performances of the album was accompanied by a montage of old images of the three Wilson brothers, Carl, Dennis and Brian), brief spoken word narratives ('Venice Beach' and 'Room With A View'), retro ballads ('Forever She'll Be My Surfer Girl') and emotionally complex backward glances ('Southern California', discussed below) to evoke richly coloured nostalgia filled with both longing for times passed and a yearning attempt to relive those times through pastiche. And yet, perhaps because this was neither a Beach Boys project nor a self-consciously 'final' album, the

²⁸ Tonal pairing, to be clear, is music organised 'not on one stable sonority, but on the tension between two tonal centers': Kinderman quoted in Rob Schulz, 'Tonal Pairing and the Relative-Key Paradox in the Music of Elliott Smith', *Music Theory Online*, Volume 18, Number 4, 2012. Fragile tonics, meanwhile, are tonics that are stated but whose normal hierarchical status is weakened somehow - in Wilson's case often through the use of elaborate extended tonic chords: see Spicer, 'Fragile, Emergent, and Absent Tonics in Pop and Rock Songs', *Music Theory Online*, Volume 23, Number 2, 2017.

pastiche is never quite as strong on *That Lucky Old Sun* as on *TWGMTR*. Similarly, the complexity and darkness of the melancholy is not as pronounced. As such, even though *That Lucky Old Sun* can be seen as a simultaneously revivalist *and* melancholy 'late' companion piece to *TWGMTR*, the latter album seems to me to be more apropos as an illustration of my thesis.

Having discussed the nostalgic, parodic side of the album, I'll now focus on the more obviously melancholic suite. The suite consists of three main songs, 'From There to Back Again', 'Pacific Coast Highway' and 'Summer's Gone', as well as the aforementioned 'Think About the Days', whose melancholy piano and wordless chorus deploys the opening chord progression of 'Pacific Coast Highway', and the unusual 20-second coda of atmospheric wind and reverb-heavy guitar of the ninth track, 'Strange World', which prepares the ground for 'From There To Back Again'. Each of the three main songs has its own mood, even as the suite as a whole feels continuous and interrelated. The lush sadness of 'From There to Back Again' (of which more in a moment) eases into the seemingly more content, serene valediction of 'Pacific Coast Highway'. The straightforward diatonic triads of the latter, though, bely complex feeling. This is achieved in part via some gorgeously staged choral harmonies and a creative use of space and silence to frame distinct phrases as self-contained. But the greatest impact comes from the subtly powerful downward modulation of a tone (anticipated within the first verse across lines one and two) and decrease in tempo that leads into the culminating second verse, which is delivered with a sturdy smile by Brian Wilson at the bottom of his late-stage range. These gestures turn us towards twilight thoughts in those closing lines, which are nevertheless belied in part by the smiling Wilson and by the bright, supertonic-tonic cadential choral close on the final word: 'Driving down

Pacific Coast, out on Highway 1, The setting sun...Goodbye'. 'Pacific Coast Highway' is built on a contradiction: mournful words set and sung with a smile.

Then we have the elegiac closing track, 'Summer's Gone'. This song makes use of a looping chord sequence – in this case, the elaborated doo-wop of Ima⁷, vi, IV⁶, V²⁹ – and a simple form of repeating verses with maudlin instrumental interludes (oboe here falling a little short of the comparable flutes), to call back both in terms of broader rhetorical album function and emotional feel to the famous *Pet Sounds* closing track, 'Caroline, No' (1966). But where 'Caroline, No' felt like a lament for lost youth, 'Summer's Gone' instead sounds like a funeral march terminating a psychological summer that in reality had long expired by 2012. 'Summer's Gone' rounds things out in contemplative, longing mood; Kirk Curnutt described it as 'a meditation on the group's own lion-in-winter senescence'.³⁰ The closing lines bear this out: 'We laugh, we cry, We live then die, And dream about our yesterday'.

The opening track of the suite, 'From There to Back Again', is worth diving into in a little more detail in order to demonstrate some idiosyncrasies. The table below illustrates the music's tricky and unpredictable segmentations of structure, intricacies of tonality and other notable details.

Table 1. Overview of 'From There to Back Again'. 'Form' largely refers to melody. Chords not listed in exact sequence.

Section	Form	'Home' Chord	Miscellaneous
A: 0'00"-0'43"	a, b, a1, c	C#maj9	Clipped piano, swooning Al Jardine voice, wind interjections of a key motif based on a 3rd

²⁹ Doo-wop chord progressions being a 'defining feature' of Wilson's songwriting, according to Philip Lambert; 'Brian Wilson's Harmonic Language', in *Good Vibrations: Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys in Critical Perspective*, ed. Philip Lambert (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 63-104.

³⁰ Kirk Curnutt, "'Brian Come Alive": Celebrity, Performance and The Limitations of Biography in Lyric Reading', in *Good Vibrations: Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys in Critical Perspective*, ed. Philip Lambert (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 3-30, at 9.

B: 0'44"-1'05"	d, e, d1, f	C#maj9	Wordless vocal chorus within texture, subtle shifts in chords, 3 rd motif on reverb guitar
C: 1'06"-1'28"	d2 (x2), g, h	C#maj9	'aaah' chorus motif and reverb guitar 3 rd motif as transition to cadential set-up for return of C#
D: 1'29"-1'52"	i, j, i, k	C#maj9	Higher lead voice, continuous vocal backing; emotional peak
E: 1'53"-2'17"	l, l	F#	Firmer quaver pulse, brighter harmonies suggest certainty, false close on C#
F: 2'18"-2'46"	m, m1, m1	cm7	Unprepared key shift, Wilson takes lead, harmonic rhythm and tonal ambiguity heightened
G: 2'47"- 2'58"	N	C#maj9	Transitional 'ba da da' refrain sets up return to C#
H: 2'59"-3'24"	o, o, o1, p	e#m7	Return deferred by mediant whistle + chorus outro; imperfect cadence resolved in intro of 'Pacific Coast Highway'

The table illustrates both continuity and variety across the densely packed 3'24" of 'From There to Back Again'. Repetition can be seen in the distinctive extended chords (most notably, C#maj9 and different minor-seventh chords) that run through many of the sections, as well as in the importance of what I've called the '3rd motif' (usually comprised of 2 repeated notes separated by a third) across sections A-C. There is also continuity in how different sections serve comparable structural functions within the song. For example, A, B and D can be seen as verses, C, E and G are transitional refrains, F is a kind of bridge and H is a coda. And yet at the same time, the fact that not one single section repeats; that conventional terms like 'verse' are used here only loosely; that the song traverses distant linear harmonic relationships (F# to C to C#); and that an exponential amount of melodic detail is included (as reflected in the Form column, melody lines contain minimal repetition, with Al Jardine's still expressive and even

boyish tenor moving through various leaps, honeyed descents and emotive peaks), tells us that variety is the order of the day.

'From There to Back Again' in this sense has the feel of through-composition. Each break in the structure is marked by a shift in texture and arrangement, chord sequence or key. Rich extended and altered chords – articulated all the better by being voiced largely in steady crotchet beats on piano, this tactic echoing earlier Wilson compositions such as 'Surf's Up' – create a dark, lush environment for the unspooling, plaintive melodies. These melodies, like earlier Wilson compositions such as the chorus of 1966's 'Don't Talk (Put Your Head on My Shoulder)', primarily sound out the extended notes of the chords, as for instance with the beginning D#-B#-G# over C#maj9 of 'From There to Back Again'. This technique anchors the song somewhat, given its density and variety, setting and setting into relief the out-of-time lyrics that speak elusively of lost emotion and of pastness:

'Why don't we feel the way we used to anymore' ...'You've been thinking 'bout some things we used to do. Thinking 'bout when life was still in front of you' ...'Through our compromise, paradise is just another place up on the wall. Through the common sense of it all. We had a lot to live, we gave it all. Through the consequence of the wine. Another place in time.'

The melancholy, internal fragmentation and emotional complexity of the suite, as well as the doubled ambivalence expressed in the contradiction between the suite and the other tracks' eerie, simulated sunniness, suggest something like Adornian lateness. *TWGMTR* can in this sense be seen as 'late' both for the way it creepily resurrects long dead sunny rock music *and* for the way it cuts against the grain in critiquing and moving beyond the style. It is therefore untimely in two complementary senses, which invoke in turn two aspects of Adornian late style; fragmented, death-focussed introspection and contradiction on the one hand, echoing Beethoven's jagged style in pieces like the *Grosse*

Fugue, and the unmastered conventions of empty pastiche on the other, echoing the vacant chirping of Beethoven movements like the Op. 131 Presto mentioned above.

This sense of late style may not be obvious in the approachable context of the Beach Boys but I would argue that such a reading makes sense given what was just mentioned about the contradictions across the album on the one hand and the depth of the melancholy in the suite and of the empty, naked pastiche in the other tracks of the other. Both of these latter features place the music in a curious position in relation to earlier Beach Boys music. That earlier music is being signified on here in the context of decades of accrued personal and cultural memory and in the face of old age and potential death (for the musicians and audiences).

Ambivalence or duality of related kinds indeed run throughout Beach Boys albums from the post-*Pet Sounds* era. This can be heard in the pop avant-garde Americana of 1967's *Smile* and *Smiley Smile* (the latter discussed by Harrison as a key illustration of the Beach Boys' 'experimental' music),³¹ as well as in the proto-late-style palimpsests of disappearance heard on albums such as *20/20* (1969), *Sunflower* (1970) and *Surf's Up* (1971). I would indeed make the argument that the whole 1967-1976 post-*Pet Sounds* and pre-*15 Big Ones* (1976) period of Wilson's work with the Beach Boys can be seen in terms of this strain of Adornian late style. Songs like 'Til I Die' refuse appearance and pop propriety as much as Wilson's troubled personal behaviour at this time did, whilst other songs, such as the aforementioned 'Do It Again', look back with increasing desperation and blankness to past success.

It's true that even earlier Beach Boys music palled its brightness with pathos and therefore duality, with a weeping sadness underpinning sunnier albums such as *All*

³¹ Harrison, 'After Sundown', 46-49.

Summer Long (1964), *Beach Boys Today!* (1965) and *Pet Sounds* (1966). But in order for music to embody lateness there should be a kind of intransigence to the expression, as noted in the first section, a kind of inflexible refusal to go along with conventional modes of pop smoothness and positivity. By those criteria, 1967-1976 Beach Boys music—notably the Brian Wilson-written tracks though not exclusively so, as can be heard for example in the overweening, oversweet nostalgia of Bruce Johnston’s ‘Disney Girls (1957)’, from *Surf’s Up*)—and *TWGMTR* are unique in Wilson’s oeuvre in existing in a late style frame. Something isn’t quite right in these examples; death hangs over proceedings, whilst buoyant pop expression struggles inside dead conventions or against darker emotions. Late style in this sense invokes an out-of-time and out-of-convention intransigence in speaking beyond when and where it should. That the Beach Boys can be seen to evince two periods of late style expression, incidentally, only underlines the band’s fascinatingly erratic relationship with pop conventions as well as providing a particularly fascinating example with respect to the central questions of this study.

*

But that’s not the whole story. Hearing *TWGMTR* as an Adornian mix of eerie simulations and melancholic reflections on death makes a great degree of sense. But it’s also possible to hear the music in a different register, to hear the genre retreads as successful revivalism and to hear the more fragmented suite as in keeping with earlier melancholic, reflective music on albums like *That Lucky Old Sun* and *Surf’s Up*. Framing the album in this way turns it into a powerfully whole statement of closure on the Beach Boys’ long career, a summation that reconciles different tendencies within the band’s work in an unprecedented way.

Such wholeness and reconciliation are achieved through continuities of theme, narrative and musical material both within the album and across the band's work. I've already alluded to the architecture that binds together 'Think About The Days' and 'Pacific Coast Highway', but there are other touches that give *TWGMTR* a fuller sense of integration. For example, the E-flat major of 'Pacific Coast Highway' emerges out of the Ab7 (=G#7) chord that ends 'From There to Back Again', via a ii-V wordless vocal cadence, whilst as noted the album's lyrics look back to earlier times throughout almost every song. And we can identify a number of echoes and resonances between *TWGMTR* and Wilson and the Beach Boys' career in a broader sense. The segmented, quasi-symphonic suite feel of *TWGMTR* harks back notably to *That Lucky Old Sun* and *Smile*, both of which albums as noted were built on a hybrid suite-song formal design, as well as to the messy but ambitious 1988 suite-track 'Rio Grande'. I've made a number of references to common Wilson tonal strategies found again on *TWGMTR*, such as extended and altered chords, unprepared modulations and inversions, tonal ambiguity and fragile tonics. To these we can also add tonal pairing, one of the key Wilson harmonic tactics alongside inversions and extensions (Harrison, again as noted, spends time exploring this aspect of Wilson's harmonic language). Examples here include 'From There...', which pairs C# major and C minor, and 'Pacific Coast Highway', which pairs E-flat major and D-flat major. This is just as 1964's 'Don't Worry Baby' paired E major and F# major, 'Girls on the Beach' E-flat major and E major and 'I Get Around' G major and Ab major; 1970's 'This Whole World' C major and B-flat major with sprinklings of A major and C# major; and 'Til I Die' G-sharp major and E minor/G major.

The emotional landscape of *TWGMTR* is also a familiar one in how it features sunny peaks alongside dark depths. The dusky mood of 'Summer's Gone', for instance, restages (albeit in more polished terms) the grand tragedies of songs such as 'Til I Die'

as well as the intimate disclosures of something like 'I Went To Sleep', both of which songs sat alongside much brighter music on their respective albums (*Surf's Up* and *20/20*). Specific motifs on *TWGMTR* also call-back to earlier ones, most notably the elegiac submediant-tonic-submediant '3rd motif' mentioned earlier, heard over Ima^j7-ii⁷ here in 'From There To Back Again' and in 1977's 'The Night Was So Young' (from *Beach Boys Love You*). Perhaps most appositely, the nostalgic longing of the *TWGMTR* suite recalls Wilson's 2008 torch dream, 'Southern California', from *That Lucky Old Sun*. That song's hypnagogic memories of the Pacific Coast ('Tried to slow down the motion, So it could move us again'), of singing harmonies and of waking up 'in history' aligns it closely with the similarly retrospective, late-melancholy of *TWGMTR*. Just, indeed, as its many musical backward glances do likewise, from its borrowing of the distinctive diatonic major to major-seventh chord a tone above modulation from *Pet Sounds*' 'Let's Go Away For Awhile' to the unprepared use of a parallel minor chord we hear in all sorts of songs, from 'Surf's Up' to 'Kokomo'.

All of these integrative touches suggest that a kind of wholeness is at play across much of *TWGMTR* and Wilson and the group's earlier work. In that sense, when comparing the suite from *TWGMTR* to things like the suites of *Smile* and *Lucky Old Sun*, we might start to see it not so much as intransigent or contradictory but rather in an organicist spirit of serenity or reconciliation. To see it as a kind of apotheosis that calls back to earlier work in integrating different tendencies and in this way serving as a kind of downy artistic transition to death. Yes, there is darkness, blank simulations and emotional complexity here worthy of the Adornian late style name but it would misrepresent things to suggest that that is the only way to hear this album. *TWGMTR* can therefore be seen in some respects as an example of serene, senescent late style

popular music, just as in others its eerie aspects and darker thoughts are thrown into sharper relief.

3. *The Aging of the New Music: Late style and popular music*

What has all this told us about the relationship between late style and popular music? In embodying the primary strains of late style, the intransigent and the serene, *TWGMTR* provides a useful illustration of the way in which 'late' popular music can function as critique or crown.³² And likewise of how aging popular music has to try and resolve the particular challenge of somehow addressing themes of death and dying in a form seemingly based on youth and living. With these observations in mind, we'll now broaden scope to examine other examples of potential late style in popular music.

First, examples of serene or reconciled late style. Despite the association of pop and youth just mentioned, the fact that modern pop now stretches across at least five or six decades means that, inevitably, a lot of careers and/or lives have been brought to a close. These exits have sometimes been neat and even graceful. The Beatles' *Abbey Road* (1969) is a useful case in point here, since the album was consciously constructed as an artistic goodbye letter (even if *Let It Be*, recorded before *Abbey Road*, was technically the final release from the band). The 8-song, quasi-symphonic medley on the second half of *Abbey Road* epitomises the serene valedictory gesture that the album as a whole represents. This suite acts as a kind of synthesis of the different personalities and backstories of the band. Liverpoolian scuttlebutt, ostentatious ballads, tubthumping singalongs, lysergic lullabies and serious rock are pressed into broader rhetorical

³² A slightly different case to these two would be third type of late style identified earlier. In popular music, we might point by way of parallel to the unflagging creative energies of Bob Dylan or Neil Young, where all sorts of styles and reference points are engaged in these artists' later years, or indeed to the Rolling Stones, who continue to sell out stadiums well into their seventies. This third late style, as I said, is interesting when looked at from the perspective of aging and creativity, but in terms of a study of late *style* doesn't offer all that much to analysis.

service across the medley, acting as a kind of ceremonial summary of the band's career. The medley then concludes with 'The End', a largely instrumental track that gives each band member a soloistic moment in the sun before finishing self-consciously with the famous line, 'And in the end, the love you take is equal to the love you make'. The *Abbey Road* medley leans hard into legacy, summing up and sending the band off in grand fashion (though in typically cynical fashion, the grandstanding effect of it all is undercut by the splicing in 14-seconds after 'The End' of a frivolous and unlisted 23-second final track, 'Her Majesty').

Johnny Cash is an even more germane example of reconciled late style. Cash's final six original albums (two of which were released posthumously), known as the *American Recordings* series, were produced in old age and, in the case of the final four, increasing ill-health. These albums featured a distillation of expression and a quiet, often brooding focus on themes such as pain, death and loss, as in Cash's famous covers of Nine Inch Nails 'Hurt' and Depeche Mode's 'Personal Jesus'. But they never veer into intransigence or discord. Despite evident personal pain the musical passage to death here is steady and smooth. More broadly, popular music here proves easily up to the challenge of bearing the weight of age and death, its historical inclination to less obviously serious subjects (or, at least, tones) melting away as its musicians move into various late stages of life and musical style.

Even closer to the spirit of late style integrative reconciliation and serenity would be the final albums of soul singer Sharon Jones (*Soul of a Woman*, 2017) and rock, blues and country singer Leon Russell (*On A Distant Shore*, 2017). Both albums were recorded in the final months of each musician's life and both likewise serve as celebrations of those musical lives. Jones' album invokes gospel devotion on tracks like 'Call On God', using personal resolve and musical fortitude in the face of death to

express a redoubled faith. Russell, meanwhile, summates his long career across *Shore*, directly facing death in the lyrics but cataloguing and distilling different aspects of his musical life across a diverse set. As Jim Farber noted in the *Guardian*, the album that resulted 'had a valedictory feel, as the songs ticked through the many styles Russell's earlier catalogue contained...The lyrics present music as an offering. Russell's final [album] distilled his lost life into a gift that fans can keep.'³³

Not all popular musicians have been artistically graceful or reconciled in the face of death or artistic closure. Many, in fact, have confronted and challenged death or obsolescence with artistic bitterness and resolve, making music which sits much closer to the intransigent model of late style than the serene one. David Bowie's aforementioned *Blackstar* is a key album in this respect, not only for the forcefulness in the face of death but also, as with *TWGMTR*, for its illustration nonetheless of how the intransigent and the serene can blur into one another.

Blackstar calls back to earlier experimental Bowie works, from *Outside* (1995) to 'Station to Station' (1976), in its abrasive and unpolished sounds, gangly forms and unusual lyrical references. Various aspects push it more firmly into a late style frame than those earlier works. For example, its self-conscious stance in relation to Bowie's career, which it gestures at through musical and, in the accompanying videos, visual references, from the Major Tom astronaut helmet of 'Blackstar' to the nod to the harmonica solo of 'A New Career in a New Town' (from 1977's *Low*) in 'I Can't Give Everything Away'. The album's proximity to and apparent consciousness of Bowie's death is also notable here. Lyrics such as 'Look up here, I'm in heaven', from 'Lazarus', 'The clinic called' from 'Sue (In a Season of Crime)', and 'Something happened on the day

³³ Jim Farber, 'Dying words: when musicians turn their last albums into self-eulogies', *the Guardian*, 13 November 2017, accessed 27 April 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2017/nov/13/dying-words-when-musicians-turn-their-last-albums-into-self-eulogies>.

he died' from 'Blackstar', a track with a seemingly heavily autobiographical video and a title that also refers to cancerous legions (the disease Bowie died from), seem to signify on Bowie's life and death. As do the skeleton in the 'Blackstar' astronaut helmet and the corpse-evoking head bandage and buttons-for-eyes that Bowie wears in the 'Lazarus' and 'Blackstar' videos.

Blackstar's music similarly moves in unusual ways, in this case connecting with 'late' misshapes in figures like Beethoven. Unorthodox shapes and sounds fill *Blackstar*, whether it's the detonated drum-n-bass of 'Sue in a Season of Crime' (that in itself calls back to his *Earthling* period) or the Nadsat trap of 'Girl Loves Me'. The grand 10-minute A-B-A1 structure and jumble of late-like sounds and references of the title track are worth describing in more detail. Nervy, crackling hi-hat, opaque lyrics and chromatic tonality bleed into open-eyed, mid-paced, warmly scored but dark-shaded reflection in the middle section. This then twists back to a reprise of the opening but with musical DNA (chiefly the pacing and pulsing) from the middle absorbed and integrated. Christopher Doll gives a useful precis of all this, describing the main sections (which he calls 'two songs in one') and pointing both to the track's musical complexities and lyrical enigmas:

The first song comprises a nightmarish mix of electronic and acoustic instruments, highly processed chant-like Phrygian melody set against Andalusian harmonies resembling those of Flamenco guitar music (Bm, Cm, Dm, Em, Am, with a tonal center of B), and very few (but repeating) words of a vaguely religious, ritualistic nature: "*In the villa of Ormen, stands a solitary candle...On the day of execution, only women kneel and smile,*" and the refrain "*In (at) the center of it all, your eyes.*" When we first hear this material, it takes the form of skittish electronica, but the reprise at the end establishes a rhythmic opposition to its earlier incarnation: staged with a different tempo and groove, the final section is relaxed rock, as if conveying consignment to a gloomy fate.³⁴

³⁴ Christopher Doll, 'David Bowie's Final Descent', *Musicology Now*, 18 January 2016, , accessed 27 April 2018, <http://musicologynow.ams-net.org/2016/01/david-bowies-final-descent.html>.

These various sounds and shapes from *Blackstar* merge with the death-themes and imagery already described to create an eerie impression of a present absence, of an absence suffusing the body and voice of someone still living (echoing the eerie simulations of *TWGMTR*). Bowie coils and curls his legacy through weird symbols and expressively pregnant sounds on the album in such a way as to evoke late foreboding and unrest. Popular music ages in this example in more unresolved, ambivalent ways than in Cash, Jones and Russell.

The lateness of *Blackstar* is therefore more intransigent than serene. But Bowie was not immune to such late serenity. Bowie's 2013 comeback album, *The Next Day*, featured a similarly self-conscious playing with signifiers from across his career – notably with its occlusion of the cover of *Heroes* (1977) on its own cover, with the referential visual imagery of a video like 'The Stars (Are Out Tonight)' and with mentions of Berlin (a city heavily associated with Bowie) in the lyrics of 'Where Are We Now'. This looking back works more in the serene mould than the intransigent one given the elegiac and graceful tone of much of the music. But as Stevenson notes, *Next Day* heavily features themes of desperation, death and dread likewise.³⁵ It is not solely serene. *Blackstar* might be seen in similarly conflicted terms – parts of the album suggest celebration and even exhilaration, filled as they are with creative vitality and wit. *Blackstar* hews closer to intransigence than serenity with its eldritch expressions, dark themes and periodic impenetrability. But it's not absent of such serenity, just as *Next Day* wasn't of intransigence. Such blurring of serenity and intransigence, as we saw with the Beach Boys and as we can see in other cases, for example with the mix of death-conscious, foreboding lyrics and leathery voice on the one hand and devotional, poised

³⁵ Stevenson, 'David Bowie Now and Then', at 288-289.

music on the other of Leonard Cohen's final album, *You Want It Darker* (2016), is not uncommon in late style popular music.

If Bowie's *Blackstar* presents a clear example of death-conscious work that acts as abrasive protest whilst also glinting here and there with celebration and serenity, many other albums have ploughed a similar funereal furrow without shading their dark with any significant light. It's perhaps unsurprising that many of these 'late' albums closely preceded suicide or disappearance. To wit, Joy Division's 1980 *Closer* (where lead singer Ian Curtis committed suicide shortly before release), the Manic Street Preacher's 1994 *The Holy Bible* (which closely followed the disappearance of guitarist and lyricist Richey Edwards) and Nick Drake's 1972 *Pink Moon* (the last release before Drake's 1974 suicide). *Closer* deals directly and harshly with themes of bleakness and pain in jagged post-punk sounds and forms on songs such as 'Atrocity Exhibition'. *Holy Bible* couches claustrophobic lyrics about anorexia ('4st 7lb') and capital punishment ('Archives of Pain') in powerful, driving hard rock. And *Pink Moon* paints a stark portrait in short, inward-turning tracks such as 'Parasite'. The darkness with which each of these albums seem to contend with ending and death, and the contradictions between pop accessibility and confrontational or difficult style that result, pushes them towards intransigent lateness. I'd also argue that, as with *Blackstar*, it's not just the closeness to personal tragedy that creates an impression of lateness around them: their stylistic awkwardness and tonal contradictions are vitally important in this regard too.

Coming back to my earlier point of disyoking style from age to some degree, we can finally look to other artists for examples of late style intransigence that in fact don't arise in any way out of impending death or ending. The latter period of Scott Walker's career can be seen as a long and vivid example of this. Emerging in the 1960s in the pop group the Walker Brothers, Walker's work evolved rapidly and deeply from that point.

It moved through baroque pop on late-1960s and 1970s solo albums, via experiments with abstraction, complexity and noise on albums such as the reformed Walker Brothers' *Nite Flights* (1979) and his own *Climate of Hunter* (1984), to extremities of disjuncture, sparseness and abrasion on solo albums and scores such as *Tilt* (1995), *The Drift* (2006), *And Who Shall Go to the Ball? And What Shall Go to the Ball?* (2007) and *Childhood of a Leader* (2015). A track like the droning and crackling 'The Electrician', from *Nite Flights*, was a clear portent of what was to come on Walker's later music, where the claustrophobic 5/4 guitar snarls of 'Cossacks Are' and the string cascades and literal meat-thrashing of Mussolini love song 'Clara', both from *The Drift*, were typical. Though the period of Walker's career I've been describing goes back many decades, when viewed in the context of Walker's broader oeuvre it makes sense to describe the difficult later-era work as a large-scale instance of late style music, as a case in which an artist has struggled against his legacy in producing music that kicks against expectation and form in obstinate and intense ways.

*

Having now covered a wide range of examples and varieties of late style popular music, we can identify a number of overarching themes. First, although late style and aging or death are often closely interlinked they are not mutually dependent; late style popular music here mirrors other forms of late style music. Second, as popular music has aged and/or faced endings of one kind or another, its musicians have explored different modes of response. In some cases they have resisted or interrogated death in pushing style and tone beyond conventional expectations. In others they have arrived at more reconciled, serene statements of artistic valediction. In still others these two modes have blurred together, intransigence and serenity acting in counterpoint across different registers. Such blurring might be expected; the commercial imperatives of

popular music mean that even in albums like *Blackstar*, the pull towards accessibility and wholeness proves difficult to resist. Indeed, across all of these examples, even the more intransigent ones, the commercial dimensions and norms of popular music inflect late style grandeur with lightness and relative listenability. And this brings us to a final overarching point; popular music's perennially latent lateness. In constructing an impossible, disappearing now, a young love or feeling that will both last forever and never exist, pop music deals in an emotional register that is always either out-of-time or contradictorily caught-in-time. This unsettling, knotty relationship to time, visible most notably here in the weirdness of the sunny young love of the septuagenarian Beach Boys but present across all our examples, becomes ever more so in the case of aging or ending popular musicians, whose efforts to incorporate themes of lateness into their work has to contend both with this unresolved knot or tension and with the broader commercial tension just alluded to. As we've seen, though as is still relatively underappreciated, these tensions have provided fertile ground for musicians making late style work that often goes both beyond and behind at the same time.

...

Abstract

The Beach Boys' 2012 album, *That's Why God Made The Radio*, is typically nostalgic, filled with seemingly sunny reminiscences and retreads that hark back to the 1960s. And yet other parts of the album look back in a more critical fashion, exploring unresolved melancholy through a rich musical language. What makes this even more complicated is the fact that it's possible to hear these two 'sides' of the album differently, for the retreads to feel like eerie simulations and the melancholy parts to align with earlier, similarly complicated Beach Boys music. This ambivalence embodies the album's dual relationship with what I describe as the primary strains of late style; Goethian serenity and Adornian intransigence. In exploring this contention and in applying late style to other examples of popular music, notably David Bowie's 2016 album, *Blackstar*, I argue that the late style lens helps to shed new light on popular music's increasingly complicated knots of nostalgia, aging and death.