THEODOR ADORNO MEETS THE CADILLACS

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First you harmonize, then you customize.
—Wilson Pickett

In the summer of 1955, the Cadillacs enjoyed their first musical success with the modest regional hit “Down The Road.” They did not realize then that, as pioneers of the doo-wop style, they were part of the first wave of the rock ‘n’ roll revolution. Except for two minor national hits, the rest of their career was an accumulation of errors, broken promises, desperate searches for the right formula, and constant changes in personnel. Today they are a legend and a favorite among record collectors.

“Down The Road” appeared fourteen years after the publication of Theodor Adorno's classic diatribe against popular music. When Adorno was writing “On Popular Music” (with the assistance of George Simpson), the airwaves were filled with the music of the big bands—either in the swinging style of Tommy Dorsey or in the sentimental style of Guy Lombardo—music which, though somewhat different in sound and format, worked quite comfortably within the Tin Pan Alley system of songwriting that had dominated popular music since the turn of the century.1 In this essay and in his subsequent writings, Adorno never veered from his construction of popular music as nothing more than Tin Pan Alley or some jazzy derivative of it, even though his death came at least a decade after the birth of rock ‘n’ roll.2 At any rate, we can be sure that he never heard the Cadillacs.

This omission on Adorno's part has done much to damage the credibility of his work on popular music. Many in the present generation of culture theorists took part in the radical movements of the sixties, which turned to rock ‘n’ roll as their primary means of cultural expression and turned to the Frankfurt School for their first lessons in culture theory. Not surprisingly, these new theorists display an ambivalence toward popular culture that is virtually nonexistent in the work of Adorno, Marcuse, and the rest. Although they agree that the products of the culture industry play a crucial role in buttressing the domination of patriarchal capitalism, they insist that in the right circumstances these products can also be put to a subversive use. For many, rock ‘n’ roll's appearance at a particular juncture of class, generational, and cultural struggle has given it a preeminent role among mass cultural artifacts as an instrument of opposition and liberation.3 This explains in part why Adorno's work on popular music elicits more expressions of opprobrium from left-wing culture theorists than anything else produced by the Frankfurt School. It is usually rejected out of hand. There is the almost universal feeling that however correct Adorno may have been in his attack on Tin Pan Alley (most rock critics share his antipathy), the results of his analysis cannot legitimately be applied to rock ‘n’ roll. So in discussions of the politics of rock ‘n’ roll, Adorno's work is usually reduced to a place marker at one extreme of the spectrum of views. Critics mention it as an example of how excessive left-wing criticism of popular music can be, and then drop it in favor of a more balanced position.4

This is unfortunate. Despite its failures and excesses, Adorno's 1941 essay “On Popular Music” remains in my opinion one of the two or three most penetrating pieces on the subject: it addresses many important questions which are often neglected by those who tend to dismiss Adorno's work. Moreover, I think it can be shown that if Adorno's critique works against Tin Pan Alley, it also succeeds against rock ‘n’ roll. Rock theorists have accepted too uncritically the myth of the great political and aesthetic gap between rock ‘n’ roll and Tin Pan Alley. We need to take a fresh look at Adorno's questions, recasting his 1941 essay in a rock ‘n’ roll setting. This is where the Cadillacs and their doo-wop confreres come in. They constitute the court exhibit.

Adorno attempted to expose the politically and aesthetically destructive ways in which the capitalist mode of production affects popular music. For him it all came down to one thing. "A clear judgment concerning the relation of serious to popular music can be arrived at only by strict attention to the fundamental characteristic of popular music. From: Modleski, T. (Ed.). Studies in entertainment. Bloomington, IN: Indiana U. Press.
music: standardization. The whole structure of popular music is standardized even where the attempt is made to circumvent standardization" (p. 17). Adorno was not speaking of all kinds of standardization, only of that kind which has emerged with the capitalist industrial system.

In the broadest sense of the term, standardization is an almost universal fact of human production. At any given time or place, because of prevailing techniques, artifacts of the same kind tend to be produced in the same way, or in only a small variety of different ways. For example, at the turn of the nineteenth century, before the industrial revolution reached the firearms industry, gunsmiths had at their disposal the techniques and resources for constructing a wide variety of gun locks: the match lock, the wheel lock, the flint lock, and the percussion lock. Once the percussion lock was perfected, however, there were no longer any good reasons for producing the highly awkward, unreliable, and inefficient match lock, or any of the other competing forms. The percussion lock became the standardized form. Such standardized uniformities of practice and technique inform preindustrial music as well as manufacturing. It is sometimes said of Vivaldi that he composed the same concertos 500 times. Haydn was not averse to composing according to formula, nor were any of the anonymous contributors to the largely invariant tradition of the English folk ballad.

But what Adorno wanted to attack in the cultural sphere was not standardization in general. He was primarily concerned with two traits which only emerge in full force with industrial standardization: part interchangeability and pseudo-individualization, traits which are easily discerned in the large-scale manufacturing and marketing of such functional artifacts as the American automobile. For example, virtually any mechanical part from any 1956 Cadillac Eldorado (e.g., a carburetor) can be substituted for the corresponding part in any other 1956 Eldorado without disturbing the functional unity of the overall mechanism. Between the 1956 Eldorado and the 1956 Cadillac Sedan de Ville, the level of interchangeability is lower—the former was marketed as a classier car with greater horsepower—but most of the corresponding parts of these two cars are the same, as are the corresponding parts of lower-level Cadillacs and higher-level Oldsmobiles of later years. Interchangeability extends significantly, though not perfectly, beyond brand-name boundaries.

Interchangeable parts need not be qualitatively indistinguishable, though they usually are. All that is required is that the mechanism, after part substitution, continue to function in an integrated manner. For example, stereo speakers belonging to different systems may be interchanged, however much they may vary in design, size, and appearance, without disrupting these systems' ability to produce recorded sound. On the other hand, few pairs of pre-industrially crafted products have interchangeable parts. In the eighteenth century, the odds were exceedingly low that the lock of one hand-crafted gun could be successfully replaced with that of another to effect a functional fit with the former's stock and barrel. Precision machinery can be used to produce interchangeable locks and barrels; skilled hands and tools cannot. The eighteenth century gunsmith had to spend considerable time filing each lock-barrel pair to bring about a proper fit; thus, no two locks had exactly the same kind of fit to their respective barrels.

Pseudo-individualization is the indispensable capitalist complement to part interchangeability. The latter has to do with the inner essential mechanisms of industrial products, the former with their external trappings. The latter accounts for their basic similarities, the former for their apparent (and illusory) differences. Part interchangeability results from the drive to minimize the cost of production; pseudo-individualization results from the imperative to maximize sales. The system of advertising seduces us into believing that differences in packaging reflect differences in essence. Pseudo-individualization glamorizes style over the real inner content.

The 1956 Eldorado was the first Cadillac model to sport the famous tail-fin. To the mid-fifties consumer, all other Cadillac models paled in comparison, though their inwards were virtually the same. Not surprisingly, the rest of the Cadillac fleet followed suit with wholly revamped tail-fin models in 1957, though mechanically they showed little improvement. In that brief period, pseudo-individuality within the Cadillac line operated both synchronically (for different models in the same year) and diachronically (for the same model in different years). For working-class youth, the fifties Cadillac was the most glamorous car on the American market, its body style standing for elegance, power, flash, adventure, movement—indeed, for having it all without drudgery or effort. The Cadillacs—the rock 'n' roll group—turned to General Motors for permission to bask in the glory of the name, and other groups had to content themselves with the names of particular models: the Fleetwoods, the Eldorados, the Sevilles.

Yet one who chose the more expensive Cadillac over the Oldsmobile was paying primarily for differences in style rather than mechanical quality. Even the Cadillac's equally expensive competitors outside of General Motors—the Lincoln Continental and the Chrysler Imperial—differed from it mainly in external wrapping, not engineering design. The fact that the Cadillac and the Chrysler and Lincoln had few if any interchangeable parts was more an artifact of marketing than of technology: the automobile corporations wanted to be the exclusive sellers of spare parts for their own models.
Pseudo-individualization tends not only to disguise part interchangeability but also to distort it, thus transforming it into near-interchangeability or pseudo-noninterchangeability. Thus, the minute design differences in Cadillac and Lincoln carburetors, by subtly undermining interchangeability, further enhance the illusion of essential qualitative differences between the two makes.

III.

Adorno claimed that popular music is as constrained by capitalist industrial standardization as any mechanical product of the assembly line. Let us examine this analogy between text and mechanism.

Assuming that in each popular song it is possible to distinguish between the core (the musical skeleton) and the periphery (the musical embellishments), Adorno argued that in popular music the central core is either invariant or subject to part-interchangeability. The variant periphery is contrived either to appear like a variant central core or to disguise the invariance or interchangeability of the central core. "In popular music, position is absolute. Every detail is substitutable; it serves its function only as a cog in a machine" (p. 19). One may interchange rhythms, chord progressions, speeds of execution, melodic fragments, riffs, lyrical formulae, and various vocal and instrumental devices. Meanwhile songwriters search incessantly for the pseudo-individualizing "hook" which will make the song appear unique and organically whole. The hook is to songs what the fin was to the 1956 Cadillac Eldorado. For Adorno the "so-called improvisations" in jazz provided the "most drastic" (and deceptive) example of pseudo-individualization in popular music (p. 25).

Adorno believed that good "serious" music does not suffer from this defect. "To sum up the difference: in Beethoven and in good serious music in general...the detail virtually contains the whole and leads to the exposition of the whole, while at the same time it is produced out of the conception of the whole. In popular music the relationship is fortuitous. The detail has no bearing on a whole, which appears as an extraneous framework" (p. 21). As an example, Adorno cited Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. One may get the superficial impression of interchangeable parts insofar as the symphony follows the four-movement formula, with the third movement being a scherzo in ABA form. Nonetheless, according to Adorno, one could not lift this scherzo out of the Fifth Symphony and place it, say, in a Haydn symphony without dramatically altering its meaning, since it was constructed to lead subtly into the fourth movement. The meaning of the scherzo in this case is inextricably tied to its relation to the fourth movement (pp. 20–21). For Adorno it followed from this that while

in popular music the mere recognition of the form virtually guarantees full understanding, in serious music one does not achieve full understanding until one has struggled with the concrete interconnections of the text—recognition of the form is merely the first step. Industrially standardized popular music is predigested, serious music is not (pp. 32–33). Adorno pushed his thesis of industrial standardization in popular music to the very limits of plausibility. Industrial standardization for him operated not only within genres but also between genres, diachronically as well as synchronically, in the long run as well as in the short run. He saw no significant differences between swing music and the sentimental ballads of the late thirties, no significant development from the "hot" small combo jazz of the twenties to the cooler big band jazz of the thirties. In effect, he believed that nothing ever changes in popular music (pp. 26, 30).

According to Adorno, this dismal state affairs in popular music reflects and reinforces the deterioration of consumer taste within advanced capitalist society. The assembly line that produces the standardized automobile also produces a bored, numbed, and passive worker. Workers are as customized by the capitalist production system as the commodities they are hired to produce (p. 38). Industrial standardization in the culture industry both satisfies the consumption needs of bored, passive workers and contributes further to their passivity. Bored consumers need constant stimulation; therefore, the industry creates pseudo-individualized hooks in music and the constant illusion of novelty. Benumbed as they are, the workers have neither the inclination nor the capacity to struggle intellectually with the cultural products they consume. The products must come to them completely predigested. This need is met by musical homogeneity and part interchangeability; however, this uniformity must remain hidden if the illusion of novelty is to be sustained. But the stimulative power of each record palls very quickly, recreating the condition of boredom it was meant to relieve. The only antidote is the constant production of new recorded sounds (pp. 37–39).

In effect, "there is a justification for speaking of a pre-established harmony today between production and consumption of popular music" (p. 38). Industrial standardization reflects not only the requirements of production for the musical text but also the demands of consumption. It extends to the workers' leisure time the sort of control that capital has over their labor time.

IV.

Adorno's extraordinary claims made considerable sense in 1941 when he published "On Popular Music." It is well known that the
structure and musical content of Tin Pan Alley songs had hardly changed in the twenty years before the paper’s publication. The overwhelming majority of these songs were composed in the 32-bar AABA format. Most songwriters never deviated from the simplistic harmonic paradigms of Tin Pan Alley, or from the “June-moon-spoon” rhyme formulas. There were notable exceptions in the more unpredictable harmonic and clever lyrics of Cole Porter, George Gershwin, and Jerome Kern, though these were not sufficiently intricate and avant-garde to satisfy Adorno.

The rock ‘n’ roll revolution may have mercifully put Tin Pan Alley out of its misery, but it did not bring to an end the industrial standardization of music. This is especially clear in the work of the Cadillacs and other doo-wop groups.

Doo-wop is a vocal group style, rooted in the black gospel quartet tradition, that emerged on inner city street corners in the mid-fifties and established a major presence on the popular music charts between 1955 and 1959. Its most distinctive feature is the use of background vocals to take on the role of instrumental accompaniment for, and response to, the high tenor or falsetto calls of the lead singer. Typically, the backup vocalists create a harmonic, rhythmic, and contrapuntal substructure by voicing phonetic or nonsense syllables such as “shoo-doo-be-doo-be-doo,” “ooh-wah, ooh-wah,” “sha-na-na,” and so on.

For structural and harmonic guidance, doo-wop musicians relied almost exclusively on the tried-and-true paradigms and formulas that had existed for decades in the Tin Pan Alley and rhythm and blues fields. This is clearly a case of diachronic standardization. About 75 percent of the doo-wop songs were structured in the 32-bar AABA fashion typical of Tin Pan Alley; the remaining 25 percent followed the 12-bar AAB fashion typical of rhythm and blues. The blues-derived doo-wop songs adhered for the most part to standard blues chord progressions:  I (4 bars), IV (2 bars), I (2 bars), V (1 bar), IV (1 bar), I (2 bars). Those in the 32-bar format in most cases followed the simple chord progressions so familiar to children who learn to play duet versions of songs like “Heart and Soul” by ear: the I-vi-ii-V progression with two chord changes per measure. In 1955 the Moon-glowles, a doo-wop group, recorded “Sincerely,” a song which is structurally and harmonically little different from Larry Clinton’s 1938 recording of “Heart and Soul.” For Adorno they shared the same standardized core. Similarly, the Silhouettes’ 1958 doo-wop recording of “Get a Job” incorporates the structural and harmonic core of Big Joe Turner’s 1944 blues classic “Rebecca.”

It could be argued with equal plausibility that there is a high degree of synchronic standardization within the doo-wop genre itself. Most of the thousands of doo-wop songs composed during the late fifties closely resemble each other. But even their dissimilarities follow the principle of interchangeable parts. As an illustration, imagine a number of decks of cards, each of which represents a range of options within one doo-wop musical function. In one deck, the cards represent different doo-wop phonic syllables, in another different call-and-response patterns, and so on: different melodic fragments for the lead voice, different counterpoint fragments for the background voices, different rhythms, speeds, vocal embellishments, lyrical fragments (e.g., “Gimme some lovin’, some turtle-dovin’”), and gimmicks (a humorous bass voice, the sound of bells, a prepubescent singer). In most cases, one could create a credible doo-wop recording by simply picking one card from each deck. Thus, from any two doo-wop songs one could create two new songs by interchanging between them the strings of background vocal phonetic syllables (with proper adjustments in key signatures and rhythm). Imagine interchanging the “Shoo-Doo-Be-Doo-Be-Doo” s of the Five Satins’ “In the Still of the Night” with “Dum-Dum-Dum-Dum-Dum-Dum-Dum-De-Dum”’s of the Dell-Vikings’ “Come Go With Me.” Where such interchanges are not immediately possible, certain amendments could make them work. But this only indicates that with certain doo-wop songs, interchangeability applies only proximally or is transformed into pseudo-noninterchangeability. Some doo-wop songs are as similar as two different Cadillac models; others are as unlike as a Cadillac and a Lincoln. Standardization and pseudo-individualization nonetheless prevail in both kinds of cases.

What is true for doo-wop also holds true for other rock ‘n’ roll genres: rockabilly, heavy metal, funk, etc. Consider how punk has standardized the musical sneer. There is also some standardization between rock ‘n’ roll genres (doo-wop and surf music, punk and rockabilly). So Adorno’s analysis of popular music is not altogether implausible, and applies as well to the Cadillacs and the Sex Pistols as it does to Guy Lombardo and the Andrews Sisters.

V.

I have tried to present Adorno’s analysis of popular music in the best light, in order to eliminate the more facile and unfair objections usually leveled at it. Now I would like to discuss some of the failings of his theory. Adorno argued, successfully I think, that industrial standardization is an important feature of popular music, and must be taken seriously in any political assessment of the form. But he greatly exaggerated its presence, especially at the diachronic level. Secondly, he gave the wrong explanation for the music industry's
predilection toward industrial standardization. This misconception of the role of the music industry affects the validity of his political critique, so I will discuss it first.

Adorno was not sufficiently sensitive to the crucial differences between the production of functional artifacts (e.g., the automobile) and the production of textual artifacts (e.g., the rock 'n' roll record). Thus he was too easily led to assume that, on the production side, the conditions which require industrial standardization in the culture industry are similar to those which require it in the rest of capitalist industry.

In functional artifacts, part interchangeability is largely a consequence of the technology of the assembly line. In this system of production, every whole (e.g., the automobile) is assembled out of qualitatively different parts, each of which is taken at random from qualitatively indistinguishable batches. Of course, different competitive brands (e.g., the Cadillac, the Lincoln) will emanate from qualitatively different assembly lines. But as long as state-of-the-art technology is allowed to flow freely, it will tend to prevail in all firms of a given industry, thus leading to a convergence of production techniques: assembly lines for Cadillacs and Lincolns will differ only marginally and contrivedly.

Technology does not put the same constraints on the production of recorded musical sounds. If anything, it greatly expands the possibilities for variation. For example, rather than supplementing the acoustic guitar, the electric guitar simply added to the rich variety of timbres obtainable with guitars. Nor do the technical constraints of production explain why doo-wop recordings typically use the saxophone for instrumental breaks, why doo-wop songs are usually cast in a 12- or 32-bar framework, or why doo-wop groups did not seize upon the potential of experimental tape editing, a technique which was later exploited by avant-garde composers (e.g., Stockhausen) and adventurous pop performers (e.g., the Beatles).

Adorno was aware that assembly line technology has little to do with the industrial standardization of popular music. He took this as a sign of the backwardness of the music industry, where "the act of producing a song hit still remains in the handicraft stage" (p. 23). In order to locate the industrial source of musical standardization, he turned from the sphere of production technology to that of production and marketing organization, where the music industry had already reached an advanced level of "industrialization," that is, oligopolistic concentration and cartelization. The story he tells is a rather familiar one. When the music industry was competitive and decentralized, many standards of popular song competed until one won out momentarily (synchronic standardization). But once the industry became concentrated and oligopolized, whichever form of mu-
produced no more than a few thousand recorded takes. Thus, whatever the technological state of the culture industry, the assembly line is simply an inappropriate model for the production of texts-as-universals. This is not to say that the production of musical texts (as compositions or as performances) cannot be technically rationalized to maximize the power of management—such rationalization occurred, for example, in the Brill Building “song-writing” factory of the sixties. It does mean that it is and always will be a mistake to look to the techniques of mass production or the economics of market concentration for an explanation of industrial standardization in the culture industry. Whatever they are, the factors accounting for standardization in the production of musical texts must be significantly different from those which account for standardization in functional artifacts. Adorno’s analysis is undermined by his failure to attend to these discontinuities.

VI.

Adorno’s theory runs into further difficulties when we move from the sphere of production to that of consumption. Adorno maintained that the pseudo-individualized components of each recording must camouflage its commonality and interchangeability with other recordings. However, he failed to appreciate the fact that records accentuate their commonality and interchangeability just as much as they do their individuality. This state of affairs seems to result from the sui generis characteristics of the commercially produced text, characteristics to which Adorno was clearly insensitive.

I do not buy records like I buy cans of cleanser. If I like my first can of Comet I will be willing to buy another can of Comet that is qualitatively indistinguishable. But if I like my record of the Cadillacs’ “Down the Road” I will not go out and buy another copy of it. I will, however, want something of the same genre. For the music industry I fall into a particular market, and it will want to alert me to the presence of other such recordings. Direct advertising won’t work, as it does for Comet, since it would require that record companies make a different ad for each different recording—an excessive drain on resources. The solution for the recording industry is to devise each record so that it advertises itself, particularly when it is played on the radio. The record must tell me, before I change the dial, that it is really the sort of record I like. A doo-wop record will highlight its “doo-wopish” features very early and very clearly. At the same time, it will alert me to its “hook”—that is, to what makes it unique. Both the interchangeability and individuality factors will be equally highlighted.

The typical doo-wop record starts with an eight-bar introduction, without lyrics or lead melody, establishing its doo-wop character and harmonies while showcasing the background nonsense vocals that distinguish it from other doo-wop records. Of course, given the time constraints, the record must advertise its genre in a highly simplistic and cartooning manner. But the genre that the record denotes in self-advertisement is also the genre that it embodies. A record that advertises its genre in a caricatured way itself becomes a caricature of that genre.

Adorno often criticized the lack of nuance that accompanies standardization in popular music, but his failure to explain its uncamouflaged manifestations undermines his political criticism of musical standardization. It is probably due more to my being a hurried consumer than to a passive consumer that the record industry resorts to simplistic self-advertisement. However undesirable this situation may otherwise be, it is not obviously dangerous politically. Indeed, even on aesthetic grounds, one could conceivably argue that some of the best “hooks” (e.g., the background vocals on the Cadillacs’ “Speedo”) have a legitimate evocative power which few musical devices can duplicate.

But much of this is pure speculation. We know very little about the roots of musical standardization, especially on the psychological side, in part because the subject has been virtually neglected since Adorno’s first awkward attempts to make sense of it. In both its traditional and its industrial forms, standardization is such an important feature in folk, elite, and popular music (one notable exception being modernist experimental music) that it must be connected somehow to deep and entrenched psychological dispositions (whether socially or genetically acquired). In a surprising passage, even Adorno alluded to the conservativeness of the human ear whose musical preferences are shaped and rigidified by early childhood experiences—“the nursery rhymes, the hymns [one] sings in school, the little tunes [one] whistles on [one’s] way home from school... . Official musical structure is, to a large extent, a mere superstructure of this underlying musical language” (p. 24).

It seems that we must consider standardization not only as an expression of rigidity but also as a source of pleasure. How else do we explain the behavior of doo-wop collectors who scour through rummage sales and oldies record stores to add to their hundreds or thousands of like-sounding records? They take as much pleasure in the recognition of sameness as they do in the discovery of minute differences in recently acquired vintage doo-wop recordings. This pleasure resembles the “repetition compulsion” so characteristic of childhood behavior. Until these practices and pleasures are better
understood, we will not be in a position to make any reliable polirical and aesthetic assessment of musical standardization in either its traditional or contemporary forms.

VII

While industrial standardization is an important characteristic of popular music—especially on the synchronic level—Adorno's analysis seems mistaken in attributing it to a dominant role on the diachronic level. Indeed, since popular music appears frequently to undergo significant and even radical changes, we might well ask why Adorno was led to say that it never changes.

Adorno's position presupposes an essentialist conception of the musical text. As I have shown, he seems to have thought that one can objectively or ahistorically distinguish between the core and the periphery of any musical text. Here I think he was again misled by his industrial model. In any functional artifact defined in terms of its function (e.g., "vehicle"), one can easily distinguish between the core and the periphery. The core is indispensable for the carrying out of the function, the periphery is not. For the 1956 Eldorado, the motor was obviously part of the core, and the fans were part of the periphery. But for the musical text, either as published or as performed, there is no clearly defined function that enables us to distinguish between core and periphery. Depending on the musical conventions or traditions to which one appeals, one may arrive at any of several different judgments. Adorno approached popular music from the point of view of Western "classical" music; if we view popular music in terms of its own conventions, the line between core and periphery will be drawn quite differently.

Connie Boswell scored a hit with "Blue Moon" in 1935. The Mar- cels, a doo-wop group, did the same with their version in 1961. If we compare these two recordings from the vantage point of classical Western notation, as Adorno did, we will unhesitatingly conclude that they share the same core music, with the same melodies and chord progressions. This is another case of diachronic standardization. However, there are also very noticeable differences between the two recordings which might be of importance from another vantage point. Boswell gives us a muted torch song, while the Mar- cels do an upbeat number in which the soloist is constantly bombar- ded with an amazing variety of doo-wop sound from the backup singers. The melody and harmony may be the same, but the sounds are radically different. Correspondingly, the connotations are quite different, though the lyrics are the same. The first is a song of pining world-weariness, the second a let's-have-fun song, resplendent with the innocent (though vaguely threatening) enthusiasm of fifties teen pop culture. The first song conjures up images of art-deco nightclubs; the second song, images of urban street corners.

It all comes down to this. If we put melody and harmony in the core, and timbre and connotation in the periphery, we will see a radical sameness between the Boswell and Mar- cels recordings. If we put timbre and connotation in the core, and relegate melody and harmony to the periphery, we will see a radical difference. Western classical music focused on melody and harmony, whereas contemporary pop music focuses on timbre and connotation. Within the conventions of popular music, major changes in sound and connotation (e.g., the rise of rock 'n' roll) are considered to have much more revolutionary significance than changes in harmony.

How then are we to draw the line between core and periphery in popular music? A historical materialist would explicate change or advancement in a particular musical tradition in terms of its own conventions and practices, not in terms of some more favored tradition. To do otherwise is to open one's self to charges of ethnocentrism and elitism—exactly what happened to Adorno when he analyzed change in popular music. It would be absurd, for example, to conclude that traditional Western African music is backward because its harmonic and melodic schemes are considerably more elementary than those of European classical music. Harmony is simply less important in African music than are rhythm, vocal expressivity, and participation. An African ethnocentrist might well condemn European music for its lack of sophistication in the latter three categories. Adorno complained that popular music never went beyond the tonal system of the Romantic Age (Liszt, Tchaikovsky) and could never accommodate any of the new systems of atonality. But this is altogether beside the point. Because the conventions of popular music only partially overlap with those of classical music, one must also consider the conventions of Afro-American music which have always been operative to some extent in American popular music. The fact that popular music borrows from the musical traditions of classical music does not subject it to the standards of progress of the latter. In this century a number of "serious" Western composers (Cage, Stockhausen) have turned to Eastern music for inspiration. Are we to say that in borrowing from old forms of Eastern music Western music has proved itself to be 1000 years behind the latter?

VIII.

If we study popular music diachronically, in terms of its own conventions rather than those of an alien tradition, we will confront issues
soon sets in. In 1969, the industry and its consumers rediscovered the fifties. Producers scoured the countryside in search of former members of disbanded doo-wop groups and packaged them in “roots of rock ‘n' roll” TV programs complete with film clips purporting to show how revolutionary early rock ‘n' roll was and how stupid and repressed the establishment was that tried to suppress it. But even as the fifties rock revolution was glorified, it was being trivialized; the age of heroism was simultaneously portrayed as an age of utter innocence. While the media told us that we wouldn't be where we were if the doo-wop groups hadn't done what they did, they also reminded us that culturally we had long outgrown them and everything they stood for. Even when the media favorably mythologize their historical past, they depict it as distant and primitive. The music industry produces standardized and cartooned histories of the production and consumption of its own standardized and cartooned products—it gives us cartoons of cartoons. These matters require the sort of sustained investigation that Adorno failed to give because of his misconceptions of the dynamics of fashion changes within the music industry.

There is no easy explanation for the rapid turnover of popular music styles. It won't do to appeal to something as facile as planned obsolescence. The automobile industry in its heyday could plan obsolescence, because it had reasonable expectations that any model it produced would garner substantial (if not always profitable) sales—the crucial exception being the Edsel. Thus it could set new styles (and make the old ones obsolete) simply by introducing new models. The record industry works differently. Only 20% of all record albums break even or make a profit, and 60% of all singles are never played by anyone. Obviously, the industry cannot plan for obsolescence when it is uncertain as to which records will sell and which will not. If anything this uncertainty reinforces stylistic conservatism, since in such chaotic circumstances record executives tend to value stability.

Yet this hit-and-miss approach to record production leads quickly to genre exhaustion (and market saturation), and thus subverts stability. Between 1955 and 1959, approximately 125 doo-wop records appeared in the top 40. But for every doo-wop hit, there were hundreds of songs that failed. It is estimated that thousands of doo-wop groups were recruited from the streets to make records, many of which were released on long-forgotten record labels that lasted no more than two years. The Cadillacs were among the most successful of these groups, yet for each of their two modest hits they produced thirty failures. Thus, over a very short period of time, a very large number of qualitatively distinct doo-wop records were produced. Given the imperatives of self-advertising and cartooning, doo-wop,

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like most forms of popular music, was a highly simplified genre, not open to much variation, and soon the product was exhausted.

IX.

The central political question about rock 'n' roll today is: who creates the meaning of the rock 'n' roll record? Most rock critics, not surprisingly, fall under the sway of the 

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teur_ theory. According to them, rock 'n' roll meaning is created primarily by performers, songwriters, arrangers, and producers—that is, the artists most intimately involved in the production of recorded sound. The Birmingham School of Culture Theory in England has provided us with the only recent antidote to that approach. Dick Hebdige, for example, has argued that one cannot understand the meaning of any rock 'n' roll record without situating it within the youth cultures which most typically consume it. In effect, he is telling us that greasers, mods, hippies, and punks "rewrite" the recorded text they consume by recontextualizing it within their practices and rituals. The doo-wop style was not, in terms of its sounds and lyrics, intrinsically threatening to the mid-fifties parent culture. But because it was an important element of the rock 'n' roll revolution along with the music of Little Richard and Elvis Presley, and because rock 'n' roll was first associated with youth underclasses (blacks, greasers, and delinquents), doo-wop acquired a mythical veneer of sex and rebellion.

The Birmingham approach is certainly a refreshing alternative to the reviewers' constant glorification of the artist. Yet it has the same political effect, which is to legitimize rock 'n' roll culture. If either the artist or the consuming community is the primary creator of its meaning, then rock 'n' roll does have the liberatory power so often claimed for it.

Meanwhile, no one is addressing directly the question of the industry's role in the creation of meaning in rock 'n' roll, perhaps because of the difficulties involved. The music industry is really an elaborate complex of many industries—radio, TV, records, publishing, publicity—whose integration is difficult to conceptualize. It is considerably more difficult to articulate theoretically how this convoluted system contributes to the creation of rock 'n' roll meaning—one must combine political economy and semiotics, and there is no established way of doing so. Rock 'n' roll theorists who attend to political economy—and they are few—don't attend to semiotics.

This is where Adorno's work can be of service. With his theory of industrial standardization in music, he combined concepts of both political economy and semiotics, drawing on analogies between the industrially-produced functional artifact and the industrially-produced cultural text. He failed, however, in not being sensitive to the limits of the industrial model. Thus he exaggerated the extent of standardization in popular music, and arrived at the wrong explanations for its occurrence. He paid insufficient attention to sources of musical standardization lying outside the capitalist mode of production. His elitism led him to musical essentialism, and his modernism to a too uncritical stance toward the ideology of aesthetic rebellion and anti-standardization.

Nevertheless, we cannot let Adorno's intolerances and mistaken explanations deter us from attending to the important questions he has raised. No theorist who focuses on rock 'n' roll from the "reception" side claims that youth cultures are capable of completely re-vamping the meaning of the records they consume. The rock 'n' roll record cannot function for them as an alien object which they may interpret altogether independently of the codes of the dominant culture. There is no doubt that some semantic contribution of the music industry survives the youthful consumers' final rewriting of the rock 'n' roll recorded text. What is at issue is how much survives and whether it undermines the youth subculture's own political contributions. To use Barthesian terms, is the rock 'n' roll record primarily a "readerly" or a "writerly" text?

Perhaps nothing is as resistant to consumer reinterpretation as the standardized forms, sounds, and verbal devices operating at the conventionalized core of the popular song. Because of their intimate association with constant repetition, plugging, and self-advertisement, these standardized components probably evoke the entrenched codes of the dominant culture much more powerfully than do the non-standardized components. For example, most of the doo-wop songs that are clearly romantic and sentimental in the traditional Tin Pan Alley sense are usually cast in the 32-bar ballad form (with I-vi-ii-V harmony) so characteristic of Tin Pan Alley. The doo-wop songs cast in the blues AAB form are usually more upbeat, more ironic, or more lusty. Here certain standardized forms clearly call forth certain entrenched codes. Did the industrially-generated romantic and sentimental meaning of the doo-wop songs subvert or overcome the sexual and rebellious meaning produced by youth-cultural recontextualization?

There is in sum a constant struggle at the meeting point of production and consumption between the evocation of entrenched codes and the insinuation of alternative meanings. The tendency of the music industry is to employ in the production of musical texts devices, like standardization, that automatically call the dominant codes into play. Recent writers who have focused on reception in popular music have been insufficiently attentive to the power of these devices, and
thus have tended to exaggerate the semantic creativity of the consuming subcultures. I believe that a reappraisal of Adorno's work can contribute significantly to the removal of these theoretical deficiencies. To further our understanding of the complex political stances of rock ‘n’ roll, we must now engage Adorno’s productivist approach in a constructive dialogue with the more recent and fashionable reception approaches.

NOTES


4. See, for example, Simon Frith, Sound Effects, pp. 43–48.

5. This line of criticism was suggested to me by John Shepard in John Shepard et al., Whose Music? A Sociology of Musical Languages (London: Latimer, 1977).

6. See, for example, Dick Hebdige, Subculture.

7. See, for example, Steve Chapple and Reebee Garofalo, Rock ’n’ Roll is Here to Pay (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1977).